# North Carolina Case Study: Voices for Health Justice 2.0

## Black Women's Health Collective

In 2023, Action North Carolina's (Action NC) Race And Gender Equity Initiative established the Black Women's Health Collective (BWHC). The Collective was designed for individuals living in the Durham, Cumberland and Mecklenburg counties, who have either professional or lived experience in organizing, healthcare, soul care, mental health, integrated health care and cultural organizing. Members of the Collective come together under the shared goal of broadening access to healthcare for women and women-identified people who live in geographically, financially or otherwise marginalized communities. The Collective's initial stated approach toward this goal focused on data collection via community listening sessions and on the expansion of relational infrastructure via the development of a "Purplebook", or a directory listing vetted culturally competent women's healthcare providers within the three counties. During early conversations the team also discussed plans to work on the development of a 2035 vision and agenda for Black women and girls and to contribute to work on a state "Momnibus"[1] bill. To achieve these goals the BWHC planned to partner with various area organizations, including a local mental health care practitioner.

### *Voices Project Network*

Since its beginning the BWHC has positioned itself as an anthologist in the area, collecting hundreds of stories about community needs and interests related to women's health from community members through various listening sessions and educational events. The collective sees this work as part of its overall power-building strategy. As staff shared, continuing to collect these stories is "*a critical component of maintaining the body of our work.*" The collection of these stories intentionally serves the purpose of building connections and increasing individual-level motivations around working to improve access to healthcare for Black women and birthing people, something which BWHC measures using an ICH-developed tool. This work also informs the direction of the Collective's approach. For example, these sessions helped identify challenges regarding accessibility to doula support and provider reimbursement, which will be primary areas of focus for BWHC moving forward.

Through these listening and learning sessions with the community, BWHC recognized that in addition to the advancement of relational infrastructure through their work on the development

[1] The Momnibus Act is a federal package consisting of 13 individual bills that aims to address the maternal mortality crisis, with particular focus on reducing inequities in Black maternal health outcomes. Some states have introduced their own Momnibus bills, including North Carolina. NC's bill focuses on maternal mortality prevention through grant programs, implicit bias training for health care providers, outlining the rights of perinatal patients, and supporting lactation consultant training.

of the Purplebook, the community, particularly the elderly community, is interested in the development of built infrastructure. Accordingly, the Collective has expanded their long-term goals to include the construction or acquisition of a physical location:

> *At one of our very first listening sessions, it was mostly elders, and they were like, '… there really needs to be an actual building. We need a building that will allow us to be able to come bear, we know that we'll be safe, we know that we'll be seen and heard know that we'll be safe, we know that we'll be seen and heard…', That was not anywhere on our immediate or even probably couple-year-out timeline, but folks were very, like, strongly advocating for that. So, it's like, okay. -Grantee*

While the inclusion of a physical space as one of the BWHC's goals represents a directional change in approach, it is complementary to the Collective's main goal of broadening access to healthcare for marginalized individuals.

The anthology work mentioned above feeds directly into the BWHC-led collective visioning for 2035 work. In preparation for their community visioning event, BWHC conducted a thematic analysis of the stories shared during the listening sessions and used these insights to develop focus areas for group discussion. During the event, BWHC led their community through a process to document community strengths and skills and to co-develop actionable strategies to achieve better health outcomes by 2035 for Black- identifying women and girls.

Finally, in regard to its goal to contribute to a state Momnibus Bill, BWHC and others have made a strategic decision to temporarily put this work aside given the results of the 2024 national election, and the Collective's perception that the bill is unlikely to pass. Instead, BWHC will continue its work to connect and build momentum to support ongoing political work under Action NC's Race and Gender Equity Initiative. As BWHC Leadership explained:

> *So as we are having the listening and learning sessions and women-identifying folks and girls are bubbling up, one, the idea is to take root into their own communities, but then, two, their willingness to work on bodies of work that are adjacent in our race and gender equity space…I think we have to figure out a way to make those transitions or those connections in a smoother way. -Grantee*

As part of this base building work, BWHC continues to engage in collaborative political efforts, such as the statewide Black Maternal Health Lobbying day at the North Carolina General Assembly in April 2025, which the Collective had a part in planning. While their participation in lobbying days is not funded through Voices, this important work supports the overall goals of the Collective.

### *Community tending*

As a complement to its insight gathering work, BWHC provides mutual aid and scholarship to its community. Most recently, BWHC held the first of a series of mutual aid events at a local cafe in Durham. By intentionally eliminating a registration requirement, the event created an open and welcoming environment where participants could share coffee with community members, learn about BWHC's work and leave with a Visa card to address their immediate needs. Additionally, BWHC offered a mini-grant to a  birth worker in training. Following an open call for nominations on social media, they selected a local birthworker who works to connect practitioners with underfunded and under-resourced communities. Together, these low barrier supports help to build community, expand BWHC's footprint and provide timely support for individuals to meet their basic needs.

### *Leadership tension*

The efforts described above were suddenly and unexpectedly threatened during the spring of 2024, when BWHC Leadership discovered that their parent organization, Action NC, had taken funds that were designated for the BWHC work and re-allocated these funds to different projects without consulting BWHC. This occurred in the context of a long-simmering conflict over resistance to the scheduled retirement of a long-serving executive director, the promotion of the BWHC leader, Naomi Randolph, as the new executive director, and a subsequent shift in strategic direction of the organization.

Although BWHC remained deeply committed to their work, and experienced various successes, the misuse of BWHC project funds impacted the project work. It limited the project's ability to solidify partnerships, compensate staff, and execute project goals. It also forced the project team to shift their focus and time towards development activities and put a hold on its planned visioning work. Although this occurred in a very specific circumstance in the history of Action NC, both the TAs and the State team believe that North Carolina's financial situation is reflective of the larger funding landscape where resources are scarce, as described by one of the TAs,

> *The movement field has a resource deficit and in some cases a resource misalignment. Donor fatigue has set in and groups are trimming back, or going into the red to avoid trimming back as revenue has slowed tremendously. -TA provider*

Both state partners and TAs also recognize that this situation is both racially-informed and reflective of what is so often the reality at the micro level for Black women working in the non-for-profit space. As one of the BWHC Leads explains, *"This is what Black women leaders face all the time, and it is wrong"* (Ongoing TA Meeting Notes). These experiences also appear to be influenced by the history of the state labor movement, one in which Action NC leadership was deeply involved prior to the movement's decline. This movement favored white male organizing

strategies, agendas, and leadership and these traditions continue to impact current affairs.[2] In an effort to distance itself from this restrictive legacy, Action NC's new interim leadership intends to re-center its organization while safeguarding BWHC's work and funding.

### *Sustainability & collaboration with TA teams*




Image 1. Black Womens' Health Collective Logo – Developed October 2024

As part of its larger sustainability, BWHC has invested time and energy into building a brand identity and increasing its recognition among community members. In the Fall of 2024, BWHC worked closely with a graphic design team hired by Community Catalyst to develop a logo and brand colors. The logo, seen on the left, features an image of a Black woman with a head scarf and prominent gold earrings in the foreground and pastel markings in the background that represent a "water element". The logo is symbolic of '*timelessness, unapologetic Blackness, flight, pride, power and forward momentum*'. In early 2025, the Collective initiated a "*marketing push*" on Instagram, with its inaugural post being a love offering in the form of a playlist to Black women. BWHC continues to use social media to connect with the community, share resources and information, encourage civic action and to increase brand recognition. BWHC's Leadership feels that this brand identity building work is particularly important in light of Action NC's recent financial misconduct, which may have negatively impacted internal and public perceptions of the organization.

Another key component of the BWHC sustainability plan is its "Rest as Ritual" initiative. This initiative consists of a series of curated, restful experiences, such as crafting events and spa visits, designed to create space for physical and mental relaxation and to sustain and support BWHC staff. BWHC Leadership describes this initiative 'as an offering to their community as well as to themselves', acknowledging that the value of rest is often downplayed or overlooked in their work. Lastly, by intentionally centering wellness for those engaged in the work, BWHC positions this initiative as a form of resistance to the urgency created by capitalism and white supremacy culture in which they operate.

Finally, in regard to sustainability, fundraising remains a significant part of the work BWHC does and is at the center of its sustainability plan, something which reflects the larger socio-economic climate and resource deficit that many organizations are currently facing. BWHC has worked with their TA providers on a number of grant applications and is actively seeking additional funding to support their ongoing work. Once again, this work is especially critical due to the misuse of Voices project funds by Action NC.

[2] This information was provided by Voices Project Consultant, Richard Healy.

## Spotlight: Art Fellowship Work

One of BWHC's more recent partnerships is with a local photography artist, Jamaica Glimer. The Collective is working with Jamaica as part of a Voices Art Fellowship Program spearheaded by Catalyst's Gabriela Nelson, that brings together local artists and Voices Project Teams, as a way to realize the "*link between art and movement building*". As part of this funded collaboration, Jamaica worked closely with the BWHC Community to codesign and produce a multimedia art piece that celebrates Black women's wellness, serves as a tool for future advocacy and sharpens BWHC's organizational story. Beyond the artwork, the fellowship served as a catalyst for deeper engagement. Through this work, BWHC grew meaningful relationships with key community members, fellow cohort participants and the Coordinator, Gabriela.

## Lessons Learned

BWHC has significant strengths, most notably, its commitment to lifting community voices, its strong working relationships, and its community footprint. These strengths will help them to continue their work towards broadening access to healthcare for Black women living in the state of North Carolina. From an evaluation perspective, the case study of BWHC is particularly interesting since it helps us answer evaluation questions about power building strategies being used by Voices teams in their projects and the TA experience across Voices grantees.

What stands out most about BWHC's work is the depth of its intentional community engagement and the care behind its planning. BWHC leadership paints a vivid metaphor of a slow, deliberate tilling process, a model that prioritizes preparation of the 'soil' of the community in order to yield a fruitful and sustainable harvest. This metaphor describes both the pace and anticipated outcomes of their work. BWHC's story banking and visioning work are central to their approach, and alongside their base building work form part of a larger community engagement strategy. This strategy centers community buy-in and ultimately works to build collective power by aligning community priorities with internal strategic action and decision making. The impact of this approach is reflected in the previously mentioned example, where BWHC utilized a structured process to collect community stories in order to inform new priorities and direction for its work. This model of building community consensus through story banking is consistent with work being done in other Voices Case study states, where strategies to gather insight are also being used to elevate community perspectives, align priorities and strengthen collective visioning efforts as a foundation for sustained power building.

The case study of BWHC also provides an example of how grantees utilized the newly designed, more flexible Voices TA model, which aimed to offer grantees greater choice in how they engage and utilize technical assistance. In this case, BWHC leveraged resources and technical assistance outside of their regular TA structure. They strategically prioritized direct engagement

with the Art Fellowship Coordinator, building a deep and enduring relationship. This led to the creation of a multi-media art piece designed to help tell their organizational story and serve as a tool for future advocacy.  BWHC also prioritized work with a Catalyst-funded graphic design TA with the goal of developing tools to increase their brand recognition. This use of graphic design TA reflects a focused investment in organizational identity, as well as a deliberate effort to optimize staff time and ease internal workload. Similar to other case studies, BWHC's unique usage of TA support demonstrates the value of a flexible TA model that allows grantees to engage resources that are most compatible with their organizational goals.