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The Columbus Dispatch

Do neighborhoods really matter?

Families Flourish uplifts residents by moving them into communities with better schools, housing and jobs!
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generationally, we're impacting a lot of people," Klaben said.

What's in a neighborhood?

Once people are able to live more stably — without fear of eviction or for their family's safety — their stress levels decrease, they feel more in control of their lives and are able to plan for the future, Reece said.

"The first building block of Families Flourish is getting them in a good housing unit in a neighborhood that's safe, which then sets the stage for all of the other improvements they see later," he said. "That shift really sets folks up in terms of putting them in a productive space where they suddenly can attend to long-term needs because they're not in crisis mode anymore."

The program also highlights the importance of social support, Reece said. He said participants build deep relationships with their coaches and fellow participants and are able to gain a sense of community they may not have found before.

Families in the program might have moved around a lot in the past or experienced homelessness due to unstable housing, Reece said.

Shenyne Jones moved from the city's East Side to Whitehall when she joined the program in April 2023. Since then, the 30-year-old mother has found a community of fellow mothers and people she can talk to who can relate to what she's going through — especially during frequent walks around their neighborhood with their toddlers in tow.

"It's built-in friends," Jones said of the two other women who are also part of Families Flourish and who live in her apartment complex. "Now, I don't even have to find them."

Though the suburbs often have better schools and community resources, many people in the Families Flourish program are moving within the city of Columbus, Reece said.

Families choose from available neighborhoods and apartments, and some move just a mile or two into a better city neighborhood still within the outer belt, he said, but within a better school district.

"A little move can make a tremendous difference in terms of feelings of safety and the resources you have access to," Reese explained.



While sitting in her Bexley apartment, Jameka Humphries holds a sign that reads "I still remember the days I prayed for the things I have now." She is part of Families Flourish, a one-of-a-kind program that provides rental assistance and financial, career, education and life coaching to families for three years.

DORAL CHENOWETH/COLUMBUS DISPATCH

Planning for the future

The families in the program are impoverished and want to improve their lives, but feared falling off the benefits cliff before taking part in Families Flourish, Reece said. Some may rely on government-funded child care, housing or other social services and have had to turn down promotions in the past in order to keep these benefits because the little extra they'd earn still wouldn't cover such services.

Families Flourish circumvents many of these challenges, Reece said.

When participants increase their income, for instance, they don't face losing the rental assistance the program gives them like they may if they used a Section 8 housing voucher, he said.

"It's giving them the space to grow without the threat of 'You're going to lose this,'" Reece said.

Instead of living day-to-day or week-to-week, participants can plan months out since the program lasts three years, he said.

Jones wants as many other people to benefit from the program as she has.

"I recommend it to anyone who is

"It's gotten me out there in places I never would've been before."

Shenyne Jones

Talking about Families Flourish

wanting to help themselves and just doesn't know how," she said. "It's making yourself accountable."

Jones signed up for every program available through Families Flourish and keeps a vision board — which is a collage of images, pictures, and affirmations of her dreams and desires — that she made during one of the sessions in her kitchen. There are photos of places she wants to travel, the words "whatever you need will come to you," and reminders that she's not alone and to ask for help. She said it keeps her accountable to herself and her dreams.

What's next for Jones? Graduating with a bachelor's degree, she said, and saving up to buy a house. But, for now, she's glad she is part of Families Flourish, which also helped her start her own bookkeeping and personal budgeting business. Her life coach worked through her personal goals with her and made them measurable with steps.

"It's gotten me out there in places I never would've been before," Jones said of Families Flourish. And it taught her that "It doesn't hurt to try."

dking@dispatch.com
@DanaeKing

Ford pumping the brakes on DEI efforts

Latest company to alter diversity initiatives amid pressure from activist

Jessica Guynn
USA TODAY

Ford Motor Co. told employees it will no longer participate in an annual survey from an LGBTQ+ advocacy group and would not use quotas for minority dealerships and suppliers, the latest company to make changes to its diversity, equity and inclusion initiatives as corporate America faces growing pressure from a conservative activist whose anti-DEI campaign is gaining momentum.

"We are mindful that our employees and customers hold a wide range of beliefs," Ford CEO Jim Farley wrote in an internal email shared with USA TODAY by Robby Starbuck. "The external and legal environment related to political and social issues continues to evolve."

Ford said it will no longer take part in the Human Rights Campaign's Corporate Equality Index and "best places to work" surveys. It also opened its employee resource groups to all workers. It was unclear how extensive the changes were to Ford's overall DEI policies and programs.

Ford declined to comment.

Starbuck turns to his nearly 600,000 X followers to generate outrage and put pressure on corporations.

Several companies, including Tractor Supply, John Deere, Harley-Davidson and Jack Daniel's whiskey maker Brown-Forman, have made changes to DEI programs after scrutiny from Starbuck.

Farley sits on Harley-Davidson's board; John Deere CEO John May sits on Ford's board.

Starbuck said he was investigating Ford's DEI policies before the carmaker's announcement. This week Starbuck claimed credit when home improvement chain Lowe's scaled back its DEI initiatives.

"This isn't everything we want but it's a great start," Starbuck wrote on X.

Human Rights Campaign President Kelley Robinson said the organization



Ford Motor Co. said it will no longer take part in the Human Rights Campaign's Corporate Equality Index and "best places to work" surveys. "We are mindful that our employees and customers hold a wide range of beliefs," CEO Jim Farley wrote in an internal email.

JEFF FAUGHENDER/LOUISVILLE COURIER JOURNAL FILE

"could not be more disappointed to see Ford Motor Co. shirking its responsibility to its employees, consumers, and shareholders."

"By failing to support women leaders, employees of color, and LGBTQ+ employees, Ford Motor Co. is abandoning its financial duty to recruit and keep top talent from across the full talent pool," Robinson said in a statement. "In making their purchasing decisions, consumers should take note that Ford Motor Company has abandoned its commitment to our communities."

Lowe's and Ford adopted preemptive changes before Starbuck rallied his social media followers to boycott the companies.

"We're now forcing multibillion-dollar organizations to change their policies without even posting just from fear they have of being the next company that we expose," he said.

Starbuck told USA TODAY he does not release details of his campaigns ahead of time, but "incremental change"

like at Ford "will not affect our focus on pursuing larger change."

In a nation riven by cultural issues around race, gender and family, Starbuck belongs to a new wave of agitators pressuring corporate America to back off commitments to DEI, climate change and issues affecting LGBTQ+ people.

Emboldened by a Supreme Court decision last year banning affirmative action at the college level, conservative activists like anti-affirmative action crusader Edward Blum and former Trump administration official Stephen Miller have taken aim at the private sector with a wave of legal challenges against companies, government agencies and nonprofits.

Publicly, most business leaders who made commitments following the 2020 murder of George Floyd in Minneapolis say they remain dedicated to DEI. But privately, they are scrutinizing DEI investments and backing away from initiatives like hiring targets that conservatives claim are illegal quotas.

Fellowships and internships that once were open only to historically underrepresented groups are now increasingly open to everyone. A growing number of companies have dropped mentions of diversity goals in shareholder reports. Some even list DEI as a "risk factor" in regulatory filings.

Diversity advocates say business leaders are trying to steer away from the nation's cultural fault lines while continuing to embrace DEI initiatives that are popular with many consumers and employees.

Driving that shift is the charged political climate in the run-up to the 2024 election.

If he wins the White House, Republican nominee Donald Trump has promised to reverse the Biden administration's "woke equity" programs.

Ohio Sen. JD Vance, Trump's running mate, introduced a bill — the "Dismantle DEI Act" — that would end all federal DEI programs and funding for government agencies and contractors that have DEI programs.

Americans increasingly say they want businesses to stay out of public policy. Fewer than 4 in 10 U.S. adults (38%) believe businesses should take public stances, a decline of 10 percentage points since 2022, according to a recent survey from Gallup and Bentley University.

The only groups to express majority support for businesses taking public stands are LGBTQ+ adults (55%), Black adults (54%) and Democrats (53%), the Bentley-Gallup Business in Society Report found.

In this volatile political environment, Starbuck sees himself as a corporate watchdog. He frames his campaign as getting politics out of business.

He credits his success to targeting brands with broad appeal among conservatives that he says have fallen "out of alignment" with their customers.

Tractor Supply, his first target, ended its DEI programs while the other companies did not make wholesale changes.

"When a company does a full turnaround like Tractor Supply, then we very strongly support people rewarding those types of companies," Starbuck told USA TODAY.

How Families Flourish identifies neighborhoods

The nonprofit uses a special mapping system to select where families can excel

Families Flourish moves families from low-resourced neighborhoods to places in the area with better schools, jobs, transportation and health care. But how does it select those communities?

It starts with a map created by the Ohio Housing Finance Agency and the Kirwan Institute for the Study of Race and Ethnicity at Ohio State University.

The map indexes communities by "opportunities."

The tool considers and scores a community on its access to jobs, grocery stores, green space, health outcomes, transportation and schools, said Amy Klaben, president and CEO of Families Flourish.

Then, Families Flourish uses the map to select properties and work with landlords to rent to its participants in very high, high and moderately ranked neighborhoods.

Once selected, the nonprofit group continues evaluating neighborhoods, Klaben said. Communities are then narrowed down by the market rent price. For a community to be home to Families Flourish participants, market rents must be under \$1,650, she said.

Families Flourish also looks at the schools and how far housing is located from COTA bus lines, she said.

What neighborhoods does Families Flourish help families move to?

Families Flourish offers selected families two-bedroom apartments in neighborhoods in these communities:

- Bexley
- Big Walnut
- Blacklick
- Columbus
- Dublin
- Gahanna
- Grandview
- Hilliard
- Licking Heights
- Lewis Center
- New Albany
- Olentangy Local
- Reynoldsburg
- Sunbury
- Upper Arlington
- Westerville
- Worthington

Who can be a part of Families Flourish and how?

Those interested in being a participant in the three-year program must be:

- Either a single parent or a couple, in which both parents raise the child or children
- At least 18 years of age
- The parent of one to three children, ages 13 and under, with no more than four people in the household
- Raising children who are eligible for Medicaid
- Experiencing housing insecurity in a lower opportunity area in central Ohio
- Earning a household income between \$30,000 and \$45,485 for a family of two; \$30,000 and \$51,150 for a family of three; or \$31,200 and \$56,815 for a family of four
- In school or working if adults
- Able to access a job without a car or have personal transportation
- Willing to meet with a life coach and attend programs monthly for three years if an adult
- Willing to move to a community with a participating landlord

dking@dispatch.com

@DanaeKing

Families Flourish by the numbers

- Founded in 2016
- The first 10 families started the pilot program in 2018 and finished in 2022
- Graduates of the first group raised their incomes by an average of 58% or \$17,000
- More than 1,500 families applied to get into the first three classes
- Almost two-thirds of applicants met some definition of homelessness
- Families are in the program for three years
- Most of the head of households for the families are in their 20s
- Sixty-three families are currently in the program

Information was provided by Families Flourish.



Jameka Humphries jokes around with son Jayden Jones at Maryland Elementary School in Bexley. Beside her is Jayden's father, Brandon Jones. DORAL CHENOWETH/COLUMBUS DISPATCH

Continued from previous page

ben, citing Harvard University research.

But the adults in that study didn't see an income increase from just making the move into a new neighborhood.

So Families Flourish also helps families budget better through financial coaching, move up in their careers with career coaching, and strengthen their personal relationships with life coaching. Participants also meet monthly to learn more about the four pillars of the program: financial capability and stability, improved health outcomes, education and career goals, and housing stability.

The majority of families involved in the first two inaugural groups reported improved economic standing within a year of being in the program, said Jason Reece, evaluation director for the program and a city and regional planning professor at Ohio State University. "That surprised us," Reece said. "We didn't see these gains until families are two or three years into the program (in the pilot)."

Families are averaging around \$9,000 in increased income for the 30 current families, who are in their first year or two of the program, Reece said.

Families Flourish, previously called Move to PROSPER, is mostly privately funded. Its total expenses in 2023 were \$881,108, and it is funded by private donations and grants, but not with any city or county funds. It has received state grants, and there was also an earmark in the 2024-2025 state budget for a total of \$1 million over the two fiscal years.

But Coleman sees potential for the program to get public dollars from the city and Franklin County in the future.

"You don't see results like this in programs these days," he said. "It's off the charts, and it's immediate."

"We should use every tool that's available to us to improve the quality of life of the residents of our community," Coleman said. "That's our job, and if it means doing something a little differently, then that's OK."

Though the nonprofit receives hundreds of applicants, Families Flourish limits each of its three-year classes to 15 families. Since the pilot ended, four groups have started, and the group is serving 63 families now. Nine have graduated. The next group is set to begin in September.

"Families Flourish is a tiny piece in a larger solution," Reece said.

'Perfect for you'

Families Flourish has been a life changer for Jameka Humphries and

"The mission of Families Flourish is to create a more equitable community for families. We want to touch everything that a family needs to be empowered and to help their children become who they're meant to be."

Amy Klaben
President and CEO
of Families Flourish



Map

Scan this QR code to see how a new neighborhood can improve a family's standard of living.

On the cover

Illustration by Jason Bredehoeft/USA TODAY NETWORK; photo by Getty Images

her 9-year-old son, Jayden Jones.

"It was like a stranger putting a note under your door with \$1 million and telling you to change your life," said Humphries, 39, who started the program in October 2022.

Since joining the Families Flourish, Humphries has moved from Columbus' South Side to Bexley, extracted herself from an abusive relationship with the help of her life coach, and increased her work hours and income since she can now find safe child care for her son. She has three jobs: one with Impact Community Action as a neighborhood advocate, another as a home health aide, and a third working at Fairwood Elementary School as a family ambassador.

She created a program for young pregnant women and pitched it to the city. She is hoping to work with the city to make her program, called BLAQUE Moments, a reality, and help young mothers with skills and items they need.

She also enrolled Jayden in Bexley City Schools, where he's excelling after being behind a grade level in his old school. He just started fourth grade.

The new life the two have built is just a few miles from their old one, but in many ways it's also worlds away.

"It was like one of those programs you'd make up in your head if you could think of something perfect for you," Humphries said.

Now, Humphries said she's a better mother, has a broader support system, enjoys the Bexley community, and has the mental space and energy to reach for goals she wasn't able to previously.

Sitting by the window in her second-story apartment, Humphries has a decorative sign that reads, "I still remember the days I prayed for the things I have now."

"I never thought I'd live in Bexley a day in my life," Humphries said.

Though a nonbeliever at first, Coleman said he's been "blown away" by the results and transformation of the families, such as Humphries', who have been a part of the program.

Among its many benefits, Families Flourish helps communities create housing that's accessible to all, Klaben said. The group does this by partnering with landlords to rent to its participants.

"The mission of Families Flourish is to create a more equitable community for families," Klaben said. "We want to touch everything that a family needs to be empowered and to help their children become who they're meant to be."

"It's a small program but over time,

Continued on next page



Jameka Humphries volunteers at the field day at Bexley City Schools' Maryland Elementary School, where her son, 9-year-old Jayden Jones, attends. The family relocated to Bexley as part of Families Flourish. DORAL CHENOWETH/COLUMBUS DISPATCH

What's in a neighborhood?

See what a Columbus program, research shows

Danae King
Columbus Dispatch
USA TODAY NETWORK

When former Columbus Mayor Michael Coleman looks at the city, he sees metaphorical gates dotting its landscape.

Some of the gates — around affluent neighborhoods and suburbs such as Bexley, Clintonville and Dublin — keep people out, he said. Others, around less advantaged communities like Northland and the Far East and South Sides, keep people in.

A one-of-a-kind, Columbus nonprofit group, Families Flourish, is tearing those gates down by moving families from economically struggling parts of the city to safer, quieter and better resourced neighborhoods or nearby suburbs, he said. But it's not just a city versus suburb move. More than half of the participants still live in the city of Columbus.

"You can change a family's life, a person's life, almost immediately by putting them in a new neighborhood," Coleman said.

During the three-year program called Families Flourish, participating families also receive rental assistance, life coaching and other supports so that they can prosper in their new community, earn more money and have access to better education for their children.

Coleman, who has been in public service since 1991, spent much of his 16 years as Columbus' mayor from 1999 to 2015 dedicated to improving neglected neighborhoods. He said he did so guided by the knowledge that people living in high-poverty areas tend to fare worse in education, earnings, health and criminal involvement than people who live in wealthier neighborhoods. Yet even he wasn't a believer in the Families Flourish model at first, he admits, because it seemed counter intuitive to the work he was doing to lift whole neigh-

borhoods up.

But Coleman has come to the realization, he said, that it's necessary to improve entire neglected neighborhoods, which can take decades, while also helping families living in them find opportunities before their children are grown.

So where people live really does matter, Coleman said, and the results of the Families Flourish program that was started in 2016 prove it.

The first group of graduates raised their annual incomes by 58%, or about \$17,000 on average, and nearly all reported their overall physical and mental health improving during the course of the program.

Families also reported lower stress, their children achieving better grades in school, more stable and quality housing, and improved opportunities overall.

"You can change a family's life, almost immediately by putting them in a new neighborhood."

Michael Coleman
Former Columbus mayor

Moving up

Each part of Families Flourish is based on different research, said Amy Klaben, the nonprofit's president and CEO.

Where a child grows up or an adult lives can determine a number of factors of their life's chances, including how successful they'll be, how healthy they are and how much money they will earn during their lifetimes, she said.

Families who had a Section 8 voucher — a coveted federal rental subsidy for low-income families — and moved into a better neighborhood saw their child's income increase by an average of \$300,000 over their lifetimes, said Klaben.

Continued on next page



Sheyenne Jones holds son Aaron Harris Jr. outside the Far East Side apartment that they moved into after joining Families Flourish in April 2023. DORAL CHENOWETH/COLUMBUS DISPATCH



Jameka Humphries, pictured here in April 2023, offers son Jayden Jones a snack in the Bexley apartment she found through the Families Flourish program. BARBARA J. PERENIC/COLUMBUS DISPATCH