

# Taking the Lead on Air Pollution

## Heinz Endowments Initiative Raises Awareness & Support for Cleaner Air

### ■ Pinpointing the Problem

Pittsburgh's air is cleaner than it has been in decades, yet its air quality still ranks as one of the unhealthiest in the country. While the highly visible soot and smoke of Pittsburgh's industrial past are gone, the region remains burdened with high levels of fine particulate matter, ground-level ozone (smog), and toxic air pollutants that are often nearly invisible. The relatively clear skies of today's Pittsburgh contribute to residents' perceptions that air quality is a low priority. Yet particulates, smog, and air toxics pose a serious health threat with links to increased risks of respiratory and cardiac diseases, stroke, birth outcomes like premature birth and low birth weight, cancer, and early death.

Between 1995 and 2011, southwestern Pennsylvania-focused [The Heinz Endowments](#) awarded \$32 million to improving air quality, but concluded that its investments had not had the degree of immediate impact the region needed. An Endowments-funded study in 2011 confirmed the region's air quality was still among the worst in the country. It also found that a major portion of its pollution was from local sources, meaning the region had the power to make its air much cleaner. Later in 2011, the Endowments launched the [Breathe Project](#) to raise awareness of the issue and empower the community to reduce air pollution.

### ■ Engaging the Public

Alongside its traditional grantmaking role, the Endowments began directly engaging businesses, organizations, and the general public. An extensive media campaign sought to create widespread understanding of the region's air quality challenges. Focus groups helped hone messaging to emphasize themes like regional pride, collaboration, and past successes, over ads centered solely on pollution issues. Meanwhile, to businesses and community groups, the Endowments stressed that solving the region's complex air pollution problem required all community stakeholders to participate.

Nearly 170 companies, nonprofits, foundations, and government groups have signed on as coalition partners, transitioning the Breathe Project from an Endowments program into a solid collaboration effort supported by all key sectors of the community. The Breathe Project's growth has helped attract more philanthropic support from other foundations serving southwestern Pennsylvania to deepen and accelerate the work.

After an initial phase, the Endowments turned to a group of coalition leaders for guidance and oversight, but continued to staff the project. Since then, the Breathe Project has worked to set clean-air goals and a timeline for achieving them, hosted programs to highlight air quality work in the region, supported air quality improvement projects, increased public awareness using social media, and helped nonprofit groups coordinate strategies, draw on collective strengths, and increase their effectiveness.

### ■ Moving Forward

The Endowments continues to support legislative and legal efforts to curb air pollution through its grantee groups. Future Breathe Project work aims to conduct more research, develop technology to build on public health and air quality data in the region, expand the Breathe Project coalition and engage coalition partners more fully in clean-air work, and identify and implement targeted air quality improvement initiatives.

To the Endowments, the Breathe Project has proved to be a valuable vehicle for mobilizing concern and action on air quality in the Pittsburgh region. By clearly defining the problem, providing empirical evidence, and inviting an all-hands-in approach, the Breathe Project created the opportunity for allies across sectors and communities to collaborate on a shared vision for a healthier region.

To learn more visit:

[The Heinz Endowments' Environment Program](#)

[H Magazine profile on the Breathe Project](#)