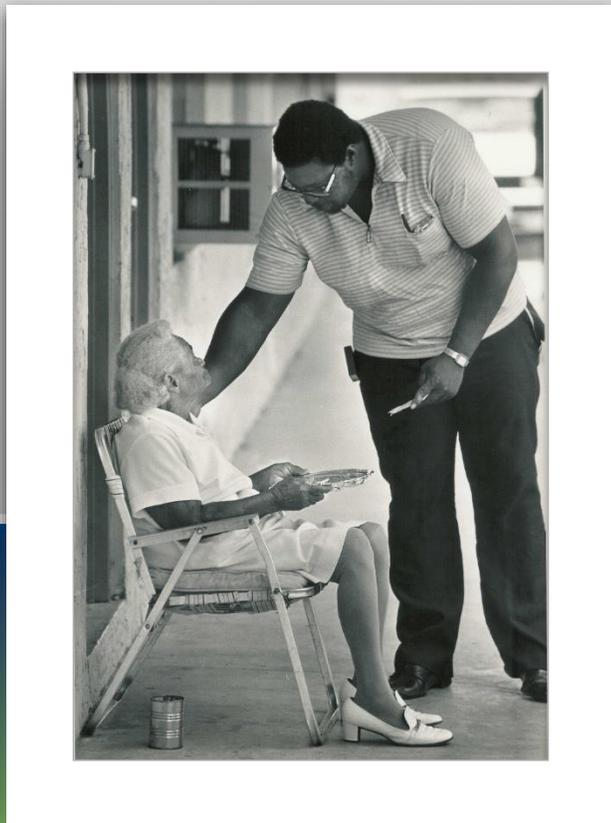




“We Are Here”

From Personal Narratives to Collective Insight

Applying SenseMaker® in Palm Health Foundation’s
Healthier Together Communities



**EXECUTIVE
SUMMARY**

Executive Summary

Palm Health Foundation began collecting personal stories from community residents in 2018 in order to better understand the communities, connect youth with their local history, give communities a voice, and develop activities to improve health and well-being. Recognizing the complex web of factors that influence health outcomes, the foundation used the SenseMaker® tool and methodology. The tool allowed residents to play a central role in assessing, evaluating, and responding to the challenges in their neighborhoods.

Beginning in the fall of 2018, youth in three communities in Palm Beach County, Florida, gathered stories from older residents and participated alongside local leaders in detailed story reviews. Their reviews led to insights into how residents view their neighborhoods and the life events that affect their well-being. With funding from Palm Health Foundation, communities were able to design and implement a variety of interventions directly informed by each community's stories.

The Communities

Three communities in Healthier Together, a community-led initiative launched by Palm Health Foundation in 2014, participated in the project: **Delray Beach**, **Boynton Beach**, and **the Glades** (Pahokee, Belle Glade, and South Bay). These communities have experienced extreme social and economic challenges that contribute to poor health outcomes.

PROJECT STAGES

The We Are Here project was the first of many initiated by Palm Health Foundation to use SenseMaker, a tool and methodology developed by Cognitive Edge, which made it possible to collect and interpret stories from hundreds of people.

The first stage of We Are Here involved (1) **adapting the tool** to fit the foundation's research questions. This meant designing a story prompt along with follow-up questions.

The next three stages form an ongoing cycle of learning and action:

- (2) **Story collection:** gathering stories, or "micro-narratives"
- (3) **Sensemaking:** convening community members and local leaders, reviewing stories, and identifying patterns and themes
- (4) **Safe-to-fail actions:** developing and implementing portfolios of low-risk interventions or "probes" to nudge the system in a desired direction

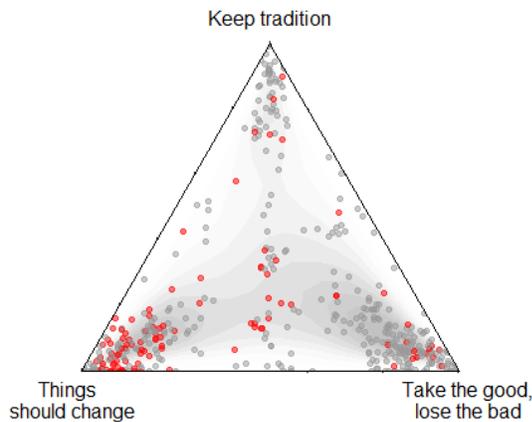


The Questions

To better understand Healthier Together communities, Palm Health Foundation developed the following **story prompt**:

Please tell us about an important moment in your life that would help someone understand what it's like living in your neighborhood.

stories interpreted as negative are highlighted in the visual, a pattern emerges (see the following visual). Most negative stories entail the lesson that “things should change.”

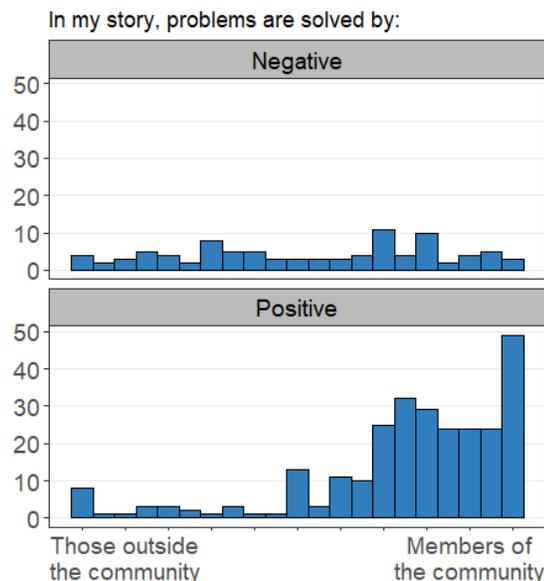


Stories interpreted as positive in tone were those in which:

- **Solutions** came from the within the community.
- The community is **stable** (as opposed to volatile).
- The community has **control**.

Further, according to storytellers, most stories taught that we should “always look ahead to **the future.**”

The following histograms show that positive stories often involved solutions by members of the community.



Looking Beyond Patterns

While patterns can yield valuable insights, stories outside the patterns or stories considered rare are also valid sources of information. This is possible through cross-referencing the data visuals with stories. Using SenseMaker, one or more stories represented in a visual can be selected, and the full stories are displayed.

Stories outside obvious patterns offer an avenue for **weak signal detection**, a process that involves identifying potential trends as they’re emerging. Although an event may be rare, its impact can be permanent and life-altering. Stories may also illustrate the possibility of small shifts in the dominant pattern (a.k.a., the “**adjacent possible**”).

Community Insights

After reviewing the stories and discussing the issues and ideas they noticed, workshop participants discussed what the stories meant to them. They identified **four top themes** and framed these according to the kind of stories they want to see less of versus the kind of stories they would want to see more of. In this way, participants and local leaders honed their vision for the future of their neighborhoods.

Fewer stories about...	More stories about...
Retaliation, disrespect and fear	Compassion, respect and appreciation
Resources that aren’t useful, broken promises to communities, not paying attention	Resources, promises kept, being an advocate for the community
Negative role models, lack of peer support	Positive role models, positive peer support and acceptance
Lack of values, no hope	Values of friends and family helping residents through adversity

“The emphasis, then, is not on ensuring success or avoiding failure, but in allowing ideas that are not useful to fail in small, contained and tolerable ways. The ideas that do produce observable benefits can then be adopted and amplified.”

– David Snowden,
Founder of Cognitive Edge

Safe-to-Fail Actions

In response to the themes identified in the stories, participants in the sensemaking workshop came up with **multiple, small-scale activities** that communities were able to implement, including Community Cookout for a Cause in Delray Beach, a kickball party and barbeque in Boynton Beach, and a festival in the Glades. These events contributed to social connections and goodwill among residents.

Creating portfolios of safe-to-fail interventions that include both small- and large-scale, well-established, and experimental approaches, allows communities to be **responsive** to changes in the system. The capacity to do this was already in place before the project began. In 2019, Healthier Together offered numerous mini grants to local non-profits organizations and individuals with promising ideas for helping the community.

The mini grant process and We Are Here project together **laid the groundwork** for an approach that developed in 2020. When a new set of stories from the same communities revealed the devastating impact of the coronavirus pandemic, Palm Health Foundation established the Neighbors Helping Neighbors fund. This fund supported the development of safe-to-fail actions by giving communities the ability to respond quickly and directly to stories as they came in.

Improving Health in Complex Systems

We Are Here **tested a new approach** for understanding and responding to community health and well-being. Often, research and evaluation on social conditions (like those contributing to poor health outcomes) centers around summaries of survey data. While this data is informative, it's based on assumptions about the social systems under study—namely, that they are relatively simple, orderly, and predictable.

Instead, communities and the countless factors that influence their health and well-being form what are called complex systems. **Complex systems are inherently unpredictable.** The same event can lead to different outcomes depending on the overall state of the system. Small events can lead to big changes, or big events can result in little change. The complexity inherent in communities throughout Palm Beach County informed the design of We Are Here.

A Decision-Making Framework

SenseMaker is rooted in complex systems thinking and is typically paired with a decision-making tool called the **Cynefin framework**, which can help organizations translate insights into action. This framework identifies four

Q: How can communities improve health outcomes when the impact of interventions is unpredictable?

A: By understanding how change occurs in complex systems, leaders, evaluators, and funders can help systems shift toward desired conditions. The goal is not to solve problems but to manage complexity, empower communities to respond to changes in their environment, and allow solutions to emerge.

contexts: clear, complicated, chaotic, and complex. The issues and themes identified during sensemaking may fall into any of these four contexts. A fifth, disorder, represents uncertainty about the type of context. In clear contexts, cause and effect are simple

and straightforward. In clear or complicated contexts, effective strategies are those that have worked well in the past. In contrast, in complex contexts, effective strategies involve experimentation, monitoring, and responsiveness.

PROJECT OUTCOMES

We Are Here was a pilot project and proof of concept that led to the following outcomes.



A Compass for Leaders

The project offered a new way for communities to ensure their **voices are heard**. Local leaders have used the stories to guide discussion and decision-making.



Dialogue

The sensemaking workshop inspired an open dialogue between **youth and adults**, something needed in communities coping with generational trauma and distrust.



Youth Engagement

Youth who gathered stories learned about the **history and strengths** of their communities. They became more interested and invested in the future of their neighborhoods.



Collaboration and Connection

The project contributed to the social cohesion, collaboration, and civic engagement among community members and organizations in Palm Beach County.



Capacity for Effective Action

The sensemaking workshop prompted the development of low-risk, safe-to-fail actions. The project, together with the mini grant process, **laid the groundwork** for Neighbors Helping Neighbors, an approach that allowed communities to respond quickly and directly to stories shared during the coronavirus pandemic.



Growth and Continuity

We Are Here transitioned into **subsequent SenseMaker projects**, including the COVID-19 story collection project launched in the spring of 2020 (see phfshares.org). These projects have built upon the strengths of We Are Here and advanced the foundation's approach to evaluation and social change.

The SenseMaker tool and methodology has made it possible for community members to participate more actively in assessing and responding to the challenges facing their neighborhoods. While evaluators ordinarily assign meaning to raw data, communities supply the meaning for their own stories, and collectively, they review and interpret the stories directly. The stories yield detailed insights not possible with summarized data. Through this ongoing sensemaking process, with the necessary funding and resources, residents are able to develop solutions and improve health and well-being throughout their communities.