



THE KEY COMPONENT IN CHESTER UPLAND YOUTH SOCCER'S DECADE-LONG GROWTH IS ITS DEDICATION TO ITS MISSION: STRENGTHENING THE COMMUNITIES IT SERVES BY MENTORING YOUTH, ENGAGING FAMILIES, AND PROMOTING HEALTHY LIVING.

GROWING LOCAL

CHESTER UPLAND YOUTH SOCCER

CRYSTAL FOUNTAIN

There was a puzzle piece missing within Chester, Pennsylvania. Despite being a suburb of Philadelphia, the city of Chester appears far from it. Though already lacking resources and funding, the underprivileged city found another need that hadn't really existed in the early 2000s: a need for organized soccer and safe spaces for kids. Chester Upland Youth Soccer found the missing piece. Since then, youth involvement has increased – so too has community engagement.

Each year, more than 500 kids enjoy the activities and opportunities Chester Upland Youth Soccer has to offer. Whether it's through after-school programs, mentorship, or social-emotional learning, Chester's youth have access to opportunities that its neighboring communities have had all along. The key component in Chester Upland Youth Soccer's decade-long growth is its dedication to its mission: strengthening the communities it serves by mentoring youth, engaging families, and promoting healthy living.

Since its inception in 2012, Chester Upland Youth Soccer has engaged more than 30% of Chester's 5 to 18-year-old population. The community has embraced Chester Upland Youth Soccer, but its growth has had its fair share of bumps and bruises along the way.

"Throughout the organization's history, we have suffered inconsistent funding, and that has posed many challenges in both program execution and future planning," shared Jeannine Fallon Anckaitis, executive director of Youth Development United and Chester Upland Youth Soccer.

It's no coincidence that a community plagued with inequities and lacking resources is also the same community where underrepresented populations reside.

Other circumstances also interfered with Chester Upland Youth Soccer's ability to serve its kids effectively. That is until the organization successfully identified other opportunities to be a community resource outside of the sport itself.

"COVID also presented a lot of uncertainty, but we actually managed to expand services as a result of the pandemic. We of course canceled our

Spring 2020 season but instead distributed 1,000 Active Summer Fun Kits in an unprecedented program. During the 2020-21 school year, we responded to Stetser Elementary School's request to provide midday soccer sessions once a week for over 100 additional students in grades 1 through 3. We offered art classes and STEM experiment demonstrations via Zoom during school holidays, and have now built 'School Holiday Zoom Camp' into our ongoing offerings," Fallon Anckaitis shared.

Akin to its partners like Eastern Pennsylvania Youth Soccer, Chester Upland Youth Soccer places the priority of the kids first. It's about being a reliable resource in the community for kids to feel safe and grow. This aspect is particularly important in Chester, where inequities, poverty, and crime are frequently higher than in other U.S. cities.

Acknowledging barriers or inequities are aspects Chester Upland Youth Soccer frequently identifies

while ensuring its kids have an equal opportunity to be involved. Some initiatives, like Soccer Saturdays, offer weekend events for kids to look forward to. What's unique is that kids have an opportunity to participate regardless of the event's location. Many of its Soccer Saturdays events are held at different locations throughout the city to ensure transportation issues – or a lack thereof – don't prevent a kid from being involved. The organization's social awareness doesn't stop there. The special event programs even offer benefits like free lunch or other post-soccer activities like movie night.

These initiatives are successful because the community and its volunteers want participating young athletes to succeed.

"For spring 2022, we have welcomed to our staff members of the Delaware County Community College men's [soccer] team, we always work with students from Widener University, and some of our program alumni have come back to volunteer with our organization," said Fallon Anckaitis.

It's apparent many of Chester Upland Youth Soccer's staff are genuine in wanting to do right within their communities. Even Fallon Anckaitis mentioned that Eastern Pennsylvania Youth Soccer clubs like FC Delco,

Springfield FC, Aston Soccer Club, and Nether United Soccer Club have provided meaningful support to the children in the Chester Upland Youth Soccer program. Many of these partnerships willingly come in the form of fundraising initiatives. One fundraising initiative, the Crossbar Challenge (spearheaded by Delco FC), engaged about 150 families and raised more than \$6,000 for Chester Upland Youth Soccer. The funds raised will extend Chester Upland Youth Soccer's reach in ensuring access is presented to under-served communities within the area.

The organization is hopeful that other local clubs under Eastern Pennsylvania Youth Soccer and beyond are interested in establishing partnerships to ensure equitable access is provided to all athletes.

Inequities shouldn't prevent kids from participating in sports and being involved in their communities. Working with organizations like Chester Upland Youth Soccer acknowledges the need that soccer is a positive outlet in the community. So long as the need for soccer and the lack of safe open green spaces exist, Eastern Pennsylvania Youth Soccer will continue advocating for the success of organizations like Chester Upland Youth Soccer to ensure communities throughout eastern Pennsylvania are served.

