

Healthy & Strong

How the Camden Health & Athletic Association is shaping the future for Camden's youth

Nearly a decade ago, as Camden worked to address ongoing challenges in public safety and education, a new vision began to emerge – one focused on strengthening the city by investing in its residents, especially its youth.

What emerged from that vision was the Camden Health & Athletic Association (CHAA), a citywide initiative that has since redefined youth development in Camden through sports, mentorship and health access.

“Sports are one of the most effective forms of prevention we can invest in,” says Camden City Mayor Vic Carstarphen. “When kids have structure, when they’re committed to teams and engaged in sports, it’s transformative. It’s been that way in the city for as long as I can remember.”

Camden Health & Athletic Association was officially established in 2016 as a private nonprofit organization committed to enhancing youth sports programs and health initiatives in the City of Camden. CHAA’s mission is to provide Camden youth ages 4 to 17 with citywide opportunities in a wide range of athletic activities. Since its inception, the program has helped more than 1,000 Camden kids take part in organized athletics like baseball, football, basketball, soccer, golf, track and field, and wrestling.

Backed by an initial \$1 million investment from The Cooper Foundation, The Norcross Foundation and AmeriHealth

New Jersey, CHAA launched with the stated goals of increasing access to athletic and health programs, keeping young people active and healthy – all while strengthening the community.

“At its heart, CHAA is about giving children in Camden the same opportunities any kid has in the nearby suburbs within the county,” says George E. Norcross III, Chairman of Cooper University Health Care, who spearheaded the program. “When I was a kid, sports programs were thriving. But over the decades, as Camden unfortunately declined, a lot of those organizations disappeared across much of the city.”

Norcross envisioned more than just reviving youth sports – he saw a chance to tie it directly to youth health and wellness.

“Pre-Covid, I had the idea to create a Health and Athletic Association – including health, because I was convinced that many kids in Camden weren’t getting proper physical examinations at a young age,” he says. “Most health certificates are pretty limited – just something that says whether Johnny or Mary is able to play soccer, or whatever the sport may be. I wanted to go beyond that.”

In partnership with Cooper, CHAA provides full health screenings as part of enrollment as well as nutrition education, concussion protocols and healthy living education.

“By doing that, we’d be able to identify significant health issues that a child in Camden might be facing,” says Norcross. “And through Cooper, we could step in



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Centerville Youth
Athletic Association
Courtland Smith



and try to help them and their families in any way possible.”

The program ran successfully for years. But then came the pandemic.

“Covid obviously shut everything down,” says Norcross. “Now, we’re in the process of re-energizing and refunding the program.”

Back and better than ever, CHAA now supports over 30 youth sports and health programs operating at the community and neighborhood level throughout Camden. By partnering with local organ-

izations, community centers and schools, CHAA has built a robust infrastructure that empowers young people to play, grow and thrive.

“The athletic program is just another way of providing the community and its residents with what they deserve – the same opportunities and experiences that people in suburban towns enjoy,” says Norcross.

But, he says, providing year-round recreational and competitive sports programming can be challenging. Equipment, uniforms, park access, transportation and

registration fees can create barriers for families. CHAA, with the help of community partners, philanthropic funders and local government, has worked to remove these obstacles.

“There’s no financial barrier with us,” says Norcross. “The cost is either minimal or zero. We make sure that every child, and every family, has the opportunity they deserve.”

These health and athletic programs are just one more piece in this puzzle – giving kids in the city somewhere safe



and productive to be, he says.

“We played sports year-round as kids, and it kept us in a good place – kept us out of bad situations,” says Norcross. “We learned to support and contribute to the programs, and we became part of something bigger: a team, with camaraderie and discipline. A lot of our coaches were pretty tough – they pushed us hard – but that helped shape who we were. Every kid should have access to an experience like that.”

The organization has also benefited from broader investment in Camden’s infrastructure.

“Camden City improvements originally started with what we saw as the two most fundamental issues: public safety and public education,” says Norcross. “And while neither has fully reached the ultimate goal – zero crime and academic excellence across the city – Camden is well on its way.”

Other Camden City projects directly benefitted from this mission. Many of Camden’s athletic facilities were in urgent need of improvement, particularly for outdoor sports, which lacked safe and competitive spaces for kids to play. While schools had an abundance of indoor basketball courts, other sports often went without adequate infrastructure.

Recognizing this gap, significant investments were made to revitalize parks and fields and schools across the city. One standout example is the \$5.3 million renovation of Elijah Perry in Centerville, part of a broader effort that saw tens of millions of dollars allocated by the county to upgrade parks and playgrounds throughout the region.

“First and foremost, the upgrades significantly improved safety, providing a secure environment for our young athletes to practice and compete,” says Courtland Smith, who leads Centerville Youth Athletic Association, one of CHAA’s partner programs. “With quality fields and amenities, our young athletes can train and compete at a higher level, which is essential for their development.”

But for Smith, creating better facilities is just one piece of a larger commitment – one rooted in mentorship, leadership and giving back to the next generation.

“At this age, children are like sponges – they are eager to learn and absorb the values and skills that will influence their future,” says Smith. “Structured sports programs provide a supportive environment where



“They want to know there’s leadership that cares about them, that their coaches and mentors are invested in them.”



young athletes can develop not only their physical abilities but also essential life skills.”

These are the kinds of lessons that stay with kids for life – teamwork, accountability, resilience and the sense of belonging that comes from being part of a team. High-quality coaching is essential to this process, adds Smith.

“It goes beyond just teaching athletic skills – it involves training coaches to be effective role models and mentors,” he says. “When coaches are well-trained and equipped to support their players both on and off the field, they can significantly impact their personal growth and overall character development.”

That is the kind of impact where athletics can shape not just athletes, but entire communities, says Carstarphen.

“Sports unite neighborhoods,” he says. “They teach values – lifelong values. They inspire kids to aim higher.”

And, he says, they also bring neighborhood organizations together. CHAA’s

impact has been amplified through a wide network of partnerships that unite public, private and nonprofit organizations.

Working closely with Camden County and numerous local partners, CHAA has built a collaborative model that unites efforts across the city. Former Eagles quarterback Ron Jaworski has played a significant role through his nonprofit, Jaws Youth PlayBook, while organizations like Cooper University Health Care, the Philadelphia 76ers, American Water and the Camden County Metro Police Department have all contributed resources and support. Camden Community Partnership has also been instrumental, along with the Sixers Youth Foundation, which has helped expand access and exposure to youth sports.

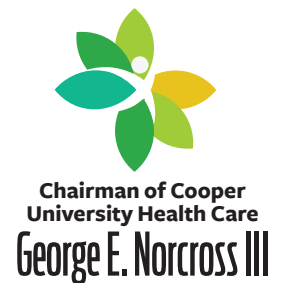
In addition, professional athletes have been brought in to engage with the kids. At the center of it all, CHAA serves as the coordinating hub, aligning partners under a shared mission to support Camden’s youth through athletics and health.

“I feel good about the work we’re doing – especially the collaboration,” says Carstarphen. “The partnerships we’ve built have really been the glue that’s brought everyone together – local and state stakeholders, foundations – it’s given us a





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platform to invest in things like uniforms and equipment, much of it supported through fundraising.”

At the very least, he says, programs like this send one important message to kids in Camden: The city cares about them, and they should care about their city in return.

“Kids want to feel good about what they’re doing,” says Carstarphen. “They want to know there’s leadership that cares about them, that their coaches and mentors are invested in them. When you provide access, when you provide equipment, when you

create safe spaces for them to play – families see that. And like I always say, it builds trust and confidence in the community.”

Athletics aren’t just a pastime – they are a launching pad, Carstarphen adds.

“The lessons you learn on the court or the field – those are life lessons,” he says. “Teamwork, accountability, discipline – those things shaped me. The dedication and work ethic I developed through sports have helped define who I am today as the Mayor of Camden.”

As the program moves forward, CHAA and its partners are focused on sustainability and impact.

“CHAA’s structured funding model can provide long-term stability and growth for programs like ours,” says Smith. “By having a predictable and sustainable source of financial support, we can plan for the future, expand our offerings, and ensure that the program continues to serve the community for years to come.”

“My personal hope for the future of youth sports in Centerville and Camden are centered around strengthening local programs,” he adds. “I hope to see con-

tinued growth in well-organized leagues that keep kids engaged in positive activities, bringing with it a sense of community and teamwork.”

The Camden Health and Athletic Association is more than an athletic organization – it’s a network of support, a platform for growth and a symbol of what’s possible when a city invests in its children. With over 30 programs, a citywide footprint and a vision that merges health, sports and community, the Camden Health & Athletic Association is building not only athletes, but future leaders.

“We want our kids, our coaches, and our community to know that there are people who truly care – people who are committed to the growth of youth sports and the future of our city,” says Carstarphen.

CHAA, he says, is just one extension of the city’s broader efforts to improve quality of life.

“Whether it’s through housing, business development, workforce programs – it’s all connected,” says Carstarphen. “Just like in sports, it’s about building a stronger Camden.”