

TRANSFORMING COMMUNITIES INITIATIVE

Healthy Montgomery, Silver Spring, Md.

Funded by Trinity Health, the four-year Transforming Communities Initiative (TCI) supported eight communities to build capacity for — and successfully implement — policy, system, and environmental (PSE) change strategies. Each collaboration — involving a lead community organization with a full-time TCI-funded program director, the local Trinity Health hospital, and other partners — received grant funding and technical assistance and participated in peer learning opportunities. This site profile, prepared by the cross-site evaluation team at the Georgia Health Policy Center in partnership with the local partners, outlines the work and impact supported by TCI between 2016 and 2020.

The Partnership

The Healthy Montgomery Transforming Communities Initiative (TCI) had a mission to address key drivers of community health impacting Montgomery County with the goal of reducing obesity and promoting tobacco-free living. The initiative prioritized the communities of Germantown, Gaithersburg, Long Branch, and Takoma Park due to pockets of high poverty and large racial and ethnic minority populations experiencing health inequities. The reach and impact of TCI's PSE work was countywide. The Institute for Public Health Innovation (IPHI) served as the backbone and convener for the TCI partnership. The partnership is composed of TCI subawardees, including several county departments and coalitions. TCI funding and technical assistance helped to spur the partners' collaborative efforts across projects. Throughout the TCI project, partners strengthened their relationships through trust building and collaborative work. By the end of TCI, partners were working on projects both inside and outside the scope of TCI.

In the first years of TCI, the Eat Well Be Active (EWBA) Partnership — a subcommittee of the county's Healthy Montgomery community health needs assessment and improvement process — provided input and guidance on TCI. Healthy Montgomery experienced leadership and structural changes and was not convening in the last years of TCI. The TCI partners continued their collaborative work under the direction of IPHI.

Healthy Montgomery Partners

- Holy Cross Health
- Montgomery County Department of Transportation
- Montgomery County Department of Health and Human Services
- Primary Care Coalition
- Montgomery County Food Council
- Montgomery County Public Schools
- Institute for Public Health Innovation
- Community Science
- American Lung Association

"[TCI] brought together partners that had never worked together in quite this way before. ... [T]hey might have sat on different task forces together, but this was a space that was created for them, that I think elevated their work and their opportunity to work more deeply with each other."






Approach

Healthy Montgomery TCI's approach included funding partners as subawardees through a competitive request for proposals (RFP) process, providing capacity-building for subawardees to implement strategies, and facilitating collaboration by convening stakeholders and making key connections between partners.

Areas of Impact

The TCI partners focused primarily on school-based wellness, food insecurity, Safe Routes to School, and Tobacco 21. In the first two years, Healthy Montgomery TCI also explored opportunities to strengthen nutrition and physical activity practices in family childcare settings. This work lacked fundamental support from key system partners at the time and was not pursued under TCI. Holy Cross Hospital continued some work in this area separately from TCI.

- Healthy Montgomery allocated around **50%** of their funds to support the program director and project team staff support, an evaluator, and communications consultant along with Learning Institute travel costs for partners and administrative costs.
- Healthy Montgomery conducted an RFP process to disburse **50%** of funds through subawards.
- Healthy Montgomery leveraged more than **\$1.3 million** in matching funds derived from **83%** cash and **17%** in-kind contributions from TCI partners, health care systems, local business, and philanthropy.

DOMAIN	YEARS	PROGRESS AND OUTCOMES INFLUENCED BY TCI-SUPPORTED WORK
 Public School Wellness	1–4	Montgomery County Public Schools (MCPS) implemented local school wellness councils in 102 schools, reaching 81,016 students, and developed a School Wellness Toolkit that guides schools on how to create a local school wellness council.
 Safe Routes to School	2–4	TCI funded assessments and an SRTS story map that shows pedestrian safety needs and recommendations. MCDOT, MCPS, and some local school wellness councils partnered to incorporate SRTS into school wellness plans. Eight schools implemented SRTS, reaching 7,013 students.
 Food Insecurity: Food Council	2–4	The Montgomery County Food Council used TCI resources to develop and implement a five-year Food Security Plan. The council hired a full-time manager and developed a Community Advisory Board to inform their work.
 Food Insecurity: Food is Medicine	2–4	The Primary Care Coalition implemented the Food is Medicine program to integrate food insecurity screening into routine clinical care and to refer patients to food assistance. The Food is Medicine program screened 3,453 patients for food insecurity and connected around 2,500 families with food assistance.
 Tobacco	2–4	Maryland Tobacco-Free Coalition engaged youth advocates and a media campaign to garner support for Tobacco 21. Maryland passed a Tobacco 21 law in April 2019. In Montgomery County, 263 students submitted 92 individual and group entries to an anti-vaping video contest. A TCI-funded communications consultant will turn the winning submissions into a bus ad, social media graphics, and video ads in multiple languages.



Public School Wellness

Healthy Montgomery's school wellness work centered around building local school wellness councils (LSWCs). The Institute of Medicine (IOM) recommends that local school districts and schools maintain active wellness policy councils to support healthy food environments and promote physical activity. An LSWC is an action-oriented advisory group that focuses on the health and well-being of students, staff, and families in a school community. The LSWC implements the district wellness policy and leads other health-related initiatives.

The work of each LSWC is coordinated by a wellness champion, a member of the school staff who demonstrates an interest in student wellness and is willing to lead their LSWC.

The Montgomery County Public School District's director of school wellness and a TCI-funded LSWC coordinator led the efforts to implement LSWCs across the district. A pilot program kicked off during the 2017-2018 school year at 15 elementary schools within TCI priority communities. These schools received resources on school wellness policy implementation, including promising practices and lessons learned. Since launching this initiative, this strategy has seen significant growth; there are now 102 schools with LSWCs:

- LSWCs completed assessments and developed school improvement plans. LSWCs reported a high level of commitment and progress toward implementing wellness strategies, developing wellness goals, and conducting fundraising efforts for future wellness activities.
- The Institute for Public Health Innovation worked with the district to develop an RFP process for schools to apply for minigrant funding to support LSWCs. Forty-four schools received close to \$59,000 to support activities related to nutrition, physical activity, school gardens, and mental health.
- In collaboration with the Alliance for a Healthier Generation and Kaiser Permanente, TCI funded a trauma-informed care training for 90 attendees, including LSWC champions, teachers, and administrators.
- MCPS developed and released a School Wellness Toolkit that provides best practices and guidelines for the district to establish additional LSWCs and continue advancing the strategy.

"TCI funding spurred the wellness councils further than they would have gone without it. ... [T]o see how [the schools] are talking about wellness and resilience and mindfulness is a really positive change."



Safe Routes to School

IPHI provided consultant funding and technical assistance to the Montgomery County Department of Transportation (MCDOT) to conduct route assessments and brought together the department and school district to coordinate planning and community engagement efforts, with a focus on schools in priority TCI neighborhoods:

- MCDOT conducted route assessments for TCI priority schools and used the information to create a public, interactive, online story map that provides information about pedestrian and bike safety conditions around four schools.
- In collaboration with the school district, LSWCs, and school administrators, MCDOT identified SRTS education activities to integrate into the school wellness plans.
- MCDOT launched a communications campaign to educate students on pedestrian and cycling safety through social media, a website, a booklet, and an arts competition.

The Safe Routes to School strategy work reached **7,013** students in **8** schools. Data collected at one school indicated an increase in students walking and biking to school from **7.8%** in 2018 to **10.7%** in 2019.



Community Food Access: Montgomery Community Food Council

The Montgomery County Food Council (Food Council) worked with county government agencies and partner organizations to implement a wide range of activities related to the county's five-year Food Security Plan, including understanding of barriers to providing food assistance and nutrition services (from provider and client perspectives) and strengthening referral and resource-sharing relationships among community partners. TCI funds allowed the Food Council to hire a full-time food security program manager and expand their outreach and communications activities:

- The Food Council now regularly convenes 30 food assistance providers and 100 community partners in the Food Recovery and Assistance Working group to increase service coordination among food security providers. Participants have reported that the meetings facilitate networking and information-sharing and provide valuable knowledge and resources.
- The Food Council developed and maintains FoodStat, a tool to track key indicators of need, access, and resources and a county food assistance directory.
- The newly established Community Advisory Board, composed of 13 residents from around Montgomery County, helps to inform the Food Council's work and engages in a variety of activities. Last year members received a community engagement training from IMPACT Silver Spring and an advocacy training from the Office of Community Partnerships. This year, members have met with county council members and state and federal legislators as part of a Maryland anti-hunger delegation and testified on a Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) bill in Annapolis.
- Forming the Community Advisory Board, which in part was funded through TCI, allowed the Food Council to integrate the community's voice into their work. Board members provided direct input, participating in meetings and supporting the Food Council on policy and advocacy issues. For example, one board member testified in the state legislature on the importance of programs like SNAP to address food insecurity.

The Montgomery County Food Security Plan outlines strategies and recommendations for reducing the number of food-insecure individuals in the county through coordinated efforts of community nonprofits, businesses, and agency partners.

The Food Council's efforts are estimated to reach **83,700** residents (**8%** of the county population) who are food-insecure.



Community Food Access: Food is Medicine

The Primary Care Coalition (PCC) of Montgomery County and a group of community partners established the Food is Medicine program to bridge the gap between local safety net health systems and food access. The program includes processes and system infrastructure to screen and refer patients to food assistance resources with a goal to reduce the burden of diabetes and other chronic illnesses:

- PCC conducted focus groups with food assistance beneficiaries to better understand how people use the food assistance system, their experiences, and their interest in volunteering.

The Food is Medicine program screened and referred **3,709** patients to food assistance providers, and around **71%** of referrals tracked were successfully connected to food assistance.

- PCC implemented screening and referral processes with six clinics, and the Care for Kids system (low-income child health coverage).
- In partnership with the school district, PCC implemented a screen and intervene process at school-based health centers. The health centers incorporate a food access questionnaire into their well child visits and electronic medical records.
- The Maryland Community Health Resource Commission awarded PCC additional grant funding to expand the Food is Medicine program into neighboring Prince George’s County.



Tobacco

The American Lung Association and the Maryland Tobacco-Free Coalition led the TCI Tobacco 21 advocacy work. The partners trained youth advocates, developed communications and media campaigns, and coordinated letter-writing campaigns. In Year 4, after Tobacco 21 passed, the TCI work turned to a local focus on an e-cigarette prevention campaign:

The Tobacco 21 law in Maryland reaches **783,802** youth aged 15-24.

- The Maryland Tobacco-Free Coalition met monthly and coordinated advocacy efforts. Two key strategies included engaging high school youth as advocates and extensive media and communications work. A communications consultant developed a social media toolkit for coalition members, coordinated press releases and media opportunities, and developed targeted online media campaigns to increase attention to and awareness of the legislative activities. Healthy Montgomery TCI reported hits and pickups in various media outlets including the Baltimore Sun, local television, and publications HealthDay and U.S. News & World Report.
- The Tobacco 21 coalition garnered the support of key, influential sponsors in the state House and Senate, influenced the Democratic Caucus to make it a priority of the caucus and sponsor the bill, and gained the support of the Black Caucus, who also made Tobacco 21 a priority. The Maryland legislature passed the Tobacco 21 bill in April 2019, and it was signed by the governor in May 2019. The policy went into effect Oct. 1, 2019.
- In Year 4, the Montgomery County Department of Health and Human Services and Montgomery County Public Schools launched an anti-vaping contest that challenged students in sixth to 12th grade to submit a public service announcement (PSA)-style video. Two hundred sixty-three students submitted 92 individual and group entries, and a TCI-funded consultant is helping to turn the winning submissions into a bus ad, social media graphics, and PSAs in multiple languages.

COVID-19

The structures and relationships that the partners built through TCI enabled them to be in a strong position to effectively respond during the COVID-19 emergency. While some work (primarily events and outreach) was postponed or cancelled, partners shifted their efforts to remote strategies or pivoted to help address immediate needs such as food assistance.

“The work and the funding that TCI provided to the Food Council let them build up their infrastructure and really dive into moving food security forward in Montgomery County. And I think that set them up really well [when] the pandemic hit. ... They were already seen as big players. They already had everything in place. They had their connection to make food security happen.”

The pandemic and its effects on school operations stopped many of the LSWCs' activities and limited their ability to support students. Nonetheless, MCPS was able to shift the focus of the work to providing direct food assistance to families and supporting online wellness activities during the pandemic. While the COVID-19 emergency led to cancellations of planned outreach and research activities for SRTS, MCDOT was able to leverage TCI support to expand online awareness efforts. The Food Council played a critical role in coordinating the county's food security response during the crisis, and TCI funding was key in their ability to support the county government during the pandemic. PCC provided food assistance and helped immigrant families navigate benefits. Healthy Montgomery was able to raise an additional \$225,000 in cash match contributions to further support the community response to the global pandemic.

Key Insights from TCI

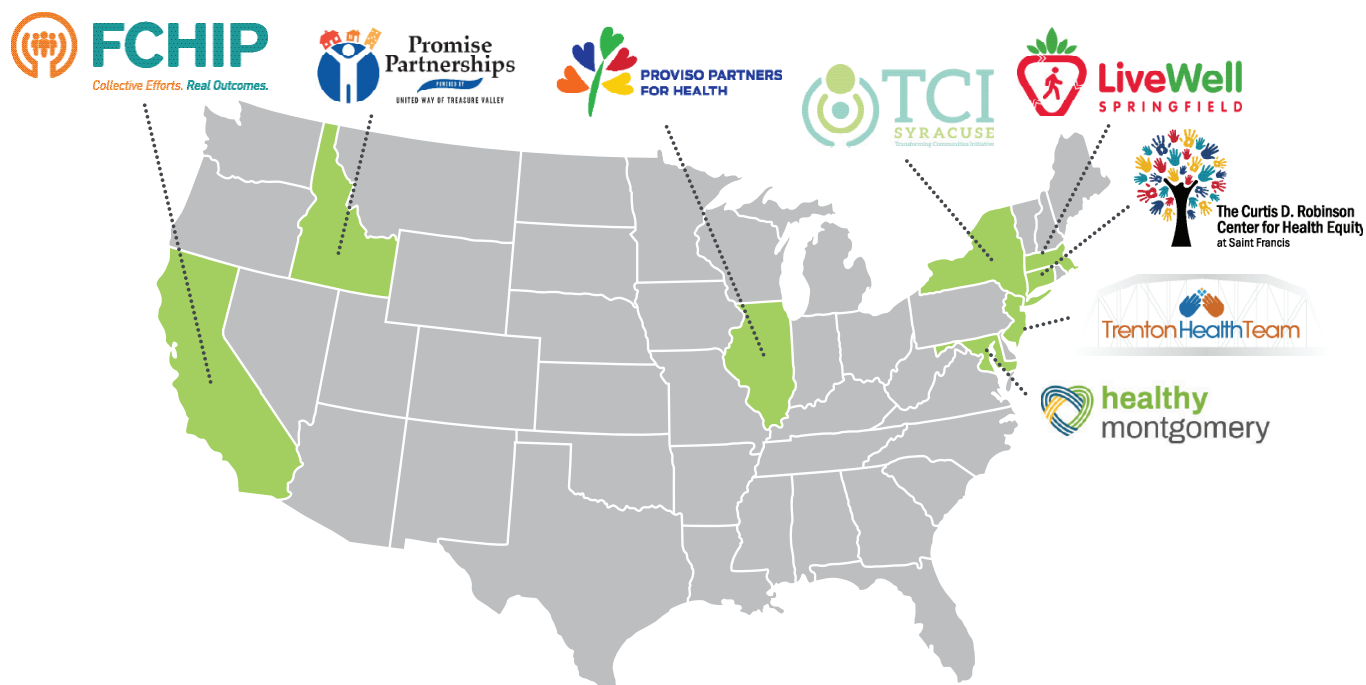
For the Healthy Montgomery partners, TCI provided both funding and structure to strengthen and formalize their collaborative work. Throughout the course of the project, partners benefited from having an increased understanding of and connection to county resources, dedicated capacity-building funding, and thinking more broadly about their mission and partnerships. Key learnings include recognizing that alignment takes time and that it is important to stay flexible and be ready to pivot when working with large systems and policies:

- Activities to bring together the TCI community through the national grantee meetings contributed to create a sense of collective effort. The TCI focus on partnership-building and collaboration also helped local stakeholders to learn more about available resources in Montgomery County and strategize to better leverage this collective capacity.
- Dedicating funding for technical assistance, evaluation, and communications support ensured that partners had access to resources to assess, enhance, and disseminate the impact of their work. These resources allowed partners to document successes and challenges as well as to disseminate information about the progress and contributions of their work.
- Technical assistance from Community Catalyst built knowledge and capacity in community engagement and equity and encouraged partners to think more broadly about the work. Partners acknowledged that to be successful in this work, they must expand beyond their usual partners and work with organizations and people outside of their sectors.
- For policy and system change, understanding context, players, and timing can have a big impact on success. By building foundational relationships with key stakeholders and an understanding of the political field, TCI partners were able to move policies like Tobacco 21 forward when the time was right or to pivot to a new path where there was political will to make change happen. Working with large systems — including school districts — requires close partnership with a system leader and patience in navigating the layers of governance.

Looking Ahead

With TCI ending, IPHI will no longer convene TCI partners. Although TCI has ended, the work of the partners continues, as does the need for continued support and partnership. Each of the partners is working to develop plans to continue, sustain, or expand upon the TCI work. The biggest challenge facing the partners is finding alternate funding sources for the work, especially given funding priority shifts due to COVID. Partners are advocating to incorporate the work into the regular county and school district funding streams and working to identify new sources of funding.

About the Transforming Communities Initiative



Trinity Health launched the Transforming Communities Initiative (TCI) in 2016 to provide grant funding and technical assistance to hospital-community partnerships. Between July 2016 and June 2020, these partnerships worked on a range of initiatives including tobacco prevention and reduction, public school wellness, early care centers' policies and practices, community food access and nutrition, built environment policies and infrastructure to improve walkability and safety (Complete Streets), breastfeeding policies, and economic development. Partnerships also built community capacity and strengthened local coalitions.

TCI technical assistance was provided by [ChangeLab Solutions](#), [Community Catalyst](#), [Public Good Projects](#), [Campaign for Tobacco Free Kids](#), and the [Georgia Health Policy Center \(GHPC\)](#).

GHPC — in close collaboration with local evaluators — conducted the TCI cross-site evaluation to assess partnership development and collaboration, as well as policy, systems, and environmental change reach, implementation, and impact. Data sources included key stakeholder interviews, TCI partner collaboration surveys, and project documents including site annual reports, meeting notes, site visits, and observations. Quotations in this profile are from stakeholder interviews and partner surveys.