

TRANSFORMING COMMUNITIES INITIATIVE

Syracuse, Syracuse, NY

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

TCI Syracuse was formed after Trinity Health's announcement of their Transforming Communities Initiative (TCI). A group of key organizations came together to work on a shared mission, vision, and collective set of goals and projects aimed at benefiting city residents. By influencing policy, systems, and environmental changes, TCI Syracuse envisions an engaged, invested, and collaborative community in which residents, local businesses, and other organizations work together to create and sustain a healthy community through healthy eating and active living initiatives.

TCI Syracuse focuses on the city of Syracuse, specifically on the Near Westside and Northside neighborhoods, where there are high socioeconomic needs that correlate with poor health outcomes. As a Designated Refugee Resettlement Community, many refugees are relocated in the Northside neighborhood. These two neighborhoods have a population of 74,827 and have a very different racial and income breakdown compared to the county. The population is 58% white, 22% Black, and 7% Asian, and 11.5% of the population identifies as Hispanic or Latino.

The backbone responsibilities for this collaborative have been split between CenterState CEO and St. Joseph's Health (SJH), with CenterState CEO housing the program director and St. Joseph's Health serving as the fiscal agent and providing project oversight.

Syracuse Partners

- St. Joseph's Health
- CenterState Corporation for Economic Opportunity
- Northside Urban Partnership
- HealtheConnections
- Lerner Center for Public Health Promotion at the Maxwell School at Syracuse University
- Onondaga County Health Department
- Near Westside Initiative
- Peacemaking Center's Community Impact Team
- Tobacco Action Coalition of Onondaga County

"I think the greatest success is the fact that we were able to form an actual coalition, a functional group of partners who were excited and ready to work more collaboratively."

Approach

TCI Syracuse was formed at the beginning of TCI and, in many ways, was shaped by the TCI grant structure. As the partners worked together to accomplish the TCI grant objectives and build a successful coalition, they evolved from a group of independent organizations to a more cohesive unit, creating an opportunity to leverage their collective strength to pursue a more health equity-focused agenda for future efforts.

- TCI Syracuse issued subawards to partner organizations with **51%** of funds.
- TCI Syracuse tracked more than **\$4.25 million** in matching funds, including local commerce and business organizations, public health, community-based organizations, academic institutions, and foundations.
- TCI Syracuse used about **20%** of their TCI funds to support their program director.

TCI Syracuse was able to stretch the resources of TCI by aligning complementary work among partners across a number of strategies in a broad approach to community transformation in two high-needs neighborhoods over four years in Syracuse: the Near Westside and Northside neighborhoods.




"We were able to focus on resident leadership development and advocacy, whether it was through the Near Westside, or the approach that Northside UP took with a human center design work around the women's wellness space and having the women in the community be there every step of the way, from start to finish."






TCI Syracuse engaged TCI technical assistance strategically and worked most closely with Community Catalyst for coalition-building and strengthening community engagement efforts. A notable impact of TCI Several stakeholders discussed the positive influence these deeper relationships had on the work through staff and leadership transitions and sustainability planning. Community engagement became a cornerstone to TCI Syracuse's community transformation approach, which has been credited for building trusting relationships between TCI partner organizations and the Near Westside and Northside neighborhoods that will support the sustainability of current work and increase the possibility of future transformation efforts.

Areas of Impact

"I think that is something that we were able to do through TCI, start to be a little bit more innovative and show people that you can do things differently."

Most of TCI Syracuse's strategies continued from Year 1 to Year 4, with two new strategies beginning in Year 4 (food policy council work and participatory budgeting). TCI played a supportive role in each of these strategies — providing expertise, funding, visibility, and other resources that allowed local organizations to implement the strategies. As one of two communities to host a Learning Institute, TCI Syracuse was able to share their community work with seven other TCI sites.

| DOMAIN | YEARS | PROGRESS AND OUTCOMES INFLUENCED BY TCI-SUPPORTED WORK |
|--|-------|--|
|  Tobacco Prevention | 1 – 4 | A Tobacco 21 policy was passed in Onondaga County effective 2017, and the New York statewide Tobacco 21 policy became effective in November 2019. <i>Estimated reach: 19,363 students</i> |
|  Early Care and Education | 1 – 4 | 10 schools engaged, wellness committees formed at eight schools, installed (or are in the process of installing) walking trails at seven schools, and pop-up play events and active toy check-out engage residents in communities. <i>Estimated reach: 5,937 students</i> |
|  Public School Wellness Policy | 1 – 4 | Worked with five schools. City of Syracuse plans to formally study Safe Routes to School and change systems to facilitate future projects. <i>Estimated reach: 705 students</i> |

| DOMAIN | YEARS | PROGRESS AND OUTCOMES INFLUENCED BY TCI-SUPPORTED WORK |
|--|-------|---|
|  Built Environment | 1 – 4 | Facilitated the development of 2 community spaces that encourage physical activity — Women’s Wellness Center and Performance Park, funded by \$1.35 million in private funding. <i>Estimated reach: 29,006 residents</i> |
|  Community Food Access Corner Store Initiative | 1 – 4 | 12 corner stores engaged to offer and promote healthy options; 1 mural to promote healthy food painted outside a corner store. <i>Estimated reach: 96,179 residents, including 3,548 students</i> |
|  Breastfeeding | 3 – 4 | 27 breastfeeding rooms were created throughout the community in organizations and community spaces, and a successful social media campaign to normalize breastfeeding was run, with 2 organizations adopted breastfeeding policies. <i>Estimated reach: 12,038 women</i> |
|  Food Policy Council | 4 – 4 | Convened stakeholders and supported the establishment of the Syracuse-Onondaga County food policy council, developed a website, and created and maintained a map of emergency food distribution sites <i>Estimated reach: 464,140 Onondaga County residents</i> |
|  Participatory Budgeting | 4 – 4 | Held 8 meetings to engage community stakeholders and residents interested in a participatory budgeting process to find alignment for current and future work. |



Strong Tobacco-Free Policies at the Local County and State Level

TCI Syracuse’s tobacco efforts from the beginning focused on passing Tobacco 21 legislation at the county and state levels and reducing advertising and sales of tobacco products to minors. TCI Syracuse supported the reconstitution of the Tobacco Action Coalition of Onondaga (TACO) as the primary partner addressing tobacco policy, which incorporated strengthening the coalition, community outreach and education, communications and social media campaigns, and communicating with elected officials and decision-makers. This work was described as somewhat likely to have occurred without the support of TCI, including program director support, funding, and technical assistance. During TCI, TCI Syracuse:

- Developed targeted messaging to county legislators that included educational mailings and packets, in-person meetings, presentations at public hearings, letters to the editor, letters of support from local organizations, and two public service announcements that aired in November and December

2017. Local media picked up on the campaign and published 32 earned media articles. The campaign successfully convinced lawmakers not to include a military exemption and changed three legislators' votes from no to yes to pass Tobacco 21, which went into effect in January 2018.

- Assisted TACO in their Point of Sale initiative, where they geocoded and generated maps of tobacco retailers within 1,000 feet of a school, hospital, or library. These maps were presented to the Point of Sale coalition to inform their policy work.
- TCI Syracuse also partnered with the Lerner Center of Public Health Promotion on an observational study of all Syracuse City School District (SCSD) properties. In all, 36 buildings were observed in April 2019. The study demonstrated that 69% of TCI-area school locations were missing tobacco-free signage. As a result, TCI Syracuse purchased 490 tobacco-free signs for all SCSD buildings. Signs included comprehensive messaging around all forms of tobacco use, including vaping, and are available in Spanish.



Nutrition Policies and Practices in Early Care and Education

Enhancing nutrition policies and practices in Early Care and Education settings focused on site-by-site nutrition policy adoption and implementation among childcare centers. TCI Syracuse worked closely with the Onondaga County Health Department (OCHD) to build relationships with centers by providing assessments; training on best practices and policies on nutrition standards, mealtime practices, and nutrition education; and technical assistance (TA) in implementation. During TCI, TCI Syracuse:

"[TCI Syracuse] touched on so many different things with so many of our partners, like working on nutrition policies. Every time you get another organization in to adopt a policy, there's another one right behind it that you're working with."

- Provided training on best practices, policies, and procurement, with three centers implementing written nutrition policies
- Provided support to centers in the form of TA and minigrants
- Evaluated each site using a standardized assessment (GO NAPSACC) conducted at baseline and annually, which showed all centers implementing more nutrition best practices over time
- Installed a teaching garden
- Observed 78% of centers improve nutrition best practices

"Development of a comprehensive health and wellness policy to support best practice and systematic implementation of associated activities is time well spent in that it provides an opportunity to enhance the quality of services provided to children and families."



Wellness Policy and Physical Activity Guidelines in Syracuse City School District

As the primary TCI partner working on school wellness, OCHD focused on increasing the number of physical activity best practices implemented at priority schools through environmental and practice changes. TCI Syracuse's school wellness work included surveys and assessments, engaging district and school staff to improve infrastructure, and implementing and strengthening a pre-existing school wellness policy. During TCI, TCI Syracuse:

- Conducted surveys and building assessments, which were used to inform school-level strategies and develop action plans
- Engaged teachers and wellness champions and formed wellness committees
- Built capacity in schools by providing training, TA, and minigrants

- Provided the WellSAT report to the district wellness committee to support strengthening district wellness policy language, which the district adopted in May 2019
- Supported environmental changes (playground, climbing wall, indoor walking trail, school farmers' markets)



Safe Routes to School Principles

The OCHD and HealthConnections worked with the City of Syracuse Department of Planning and Department of Public Works to implement Safe Routes to School principles by engaging parents and teachers, auditing and mapping routes, purchasing equipment, and increasing signage. During TCI, TCI Syracuse:

- Conducted best practice research, parental surveys, and walkability assessments and audits
- Held educational meetings with school leadership, teachers, and parents
- Purchased bike racks and locks
- Collected baseline active transit data, mapped route networks, and observed pilot routes for use;
- Designed, identified placement for, and installed signs along two pilot safe routes, with two schools launching safer routes and three more schools installing signs in 2020
- Facilitated systems change in the city of Syracuse to formally study and facilitate Safe Routes to School



Multigenerational Wellness Spaces

TCI Syracuse's work to improve the built environment focused on creating multigenerational wellness spaces that will provide access to physical activity and nutrition resources in the Near Westside and Northside communities by engaging residents in the design and program planning for the Northside Wellness Space (in the Northside community), Performance Park (in the Near Westside community), and activating vacant parks and public spaces through pop-up play events. During TCI, TCI Syracuse:

- Hosted nine pop-up play events that reached nearly 350 adults and children in the Near Westside
- Engaged the Near Westside and Northside communities in design and planning activities
- Commissioned an architectural design and an Alternative Markets study to establish feasibility, demand, and scope of work
- Developed conceptual plans based on community input and feedback gathered through prototyping activities and interviews with key stakeholders
- Managed the permitting and construction of Performance Park and the Northside Wellness Space, with construction completed on Performance Park
- Planned for the sustainability of the Northside Wellness Space by securing funding to build the space out and cover costs for three years and establishing the YMCA as the operator and service provider

Over four years, TCI Syracuse worked to secure funding for, engage residents about, design, and move through permitting and construction two spaces in the community: Northside Wellness Space (in the Northside community) and Performance Park (in the Near Westside community). Both spaces did not exist before TCI and will provide much-needed access to physical activity in the community at no, or little, cost to residents.



Environmental Changes and Policies to Support Breastfeeding

As the primary TCI partner working to create environmental changes and policies to support breastfeeding, OCHD focused on partnering with community-based organizations, health care facilities, county offices, childcare centers, and others to normalize breastfeeding, provide breastfeeding-friendly rooms, and support the adoption of breastfeeding-friendly policies. During TCI, TCI Syracuse:

- Purchased and installed equipment, furniture, and signage to establish breastfeeding rooms
- Conducted post-construction and annual assessments
- Launched a marketing campaign to reinforce messaging around the importance and normalization of breastfeeding, which made 289,958 impressions and received 974 ad clicks, linking to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's page on breastfeeding information
- Supported the adoption of breastfeeding-friendly policies



Access to Healthy Foods

TCI Syracuse worked to increase access to healthy foods by focusing on procurement, placement, and advertising for healthy food in corner stores located in ZIP codes 13203, 13204, 13206, and 13208. During TCI, TCI Syracuse:

- Conducted store assessments and examined the capacity for selling and storing fresh, healthy foods, signage, and interest in changing procurement and sales practices —
 - Assessments show five (out of nine) stores selling more healthy products than unhealthy products near the checkout counter
 - More stores began displaying healthy ads and selling healthy foods
- Provided support to corner stores in the form of minigrants, TA related to best practices, and public promotion of their efforts
- Supported the adoption of healthy corner store policies
- Piloted a produce delivery program in partnership with a local pharmacy
- Partnered with one store and a nearby elementary school to paint a mural of healthy foods on the side of the store
- Observed that stores receiving TA as part of the program showed an increase in the produce available, healthier ads, and healthier foods near the checkout counter

"[Long-term] I see policies that help support a local food economy, and help address some of the food desert areas in the community. I see the farmers thriving, and not starving, in our more rural areas of the county. [I see] people coordinating better and collaborating with important players in our legislature, and different levels of government, in a way that hasn't been done here before."

In addition to the healthy corner store initiative described above, TCI Syracuse participated in the creation of a local food policy council, the [Syracuse-Onondaga Food Systems Alliance \(SOFSA\)](#), to address food systems issues during the final year of the TCI grant. In response to a series of local convenings around food and food systems issues, during which many community stakeholders expressed interest in exploring the formation a council to address multisector challenges in the food space, HealtheConnections hired a consultant from Johns Hopkins Center for a Livable Future to assess the local landscape and capacity for a council and provide TA and recommendations for next steps.

A local facilitator will continue this work by coordinating partners and meetings and exploring the structure and sustainability of a food policy council that aims to address local issues related to food production, access, distribution, and nutritional health in Onondaga County. Before the end of TCI, six organizations had provided formal letters of support for SOFSA.



Design and Use a Participatory Budgeting Process

Community residents are often excluded from giving input and making decisions around how policies and resources are invested in their neighborhoods, particularly around social influencers of health. In Year 4, TCI Syracuse began designing a participatory budgeting (PB) process in which community members would participate in decisions about how to spend funds to address a community need. The PB workgroup includes TCI Syracuse, St. Joseph's Hospital, local philanthropies, the city of Syracuse (certain departments), and other key community stakeholders, and they are working on connecting with other groups interested in this process (e.g., the school district). PB is a democratic process where community members make decisions on how part of a public budget is spent. A typical PB cycle takes a year and involves community engagement in designing the process, brainstorming ideas, developing proposals, voting, and funding and implementing the winning projects. During the final year for TCI, TCI Syracuse:

Participatory budgeting is a democratic process where community members make decisions on how public funds are spent. Community members brainstorm ideas, develop proposals, vote, and fund the winning projects.

- Convened a group of local leaders to share that TCI Syracuse was interested in making a small investment in seeding a PB project
- Hired a consultant to complete a landscape analysis of the current community organizing infrastructure in the Near Westside and Northside neighborhoods, receiving the final report in May 2019

"I think that the work that TCI expanded into in Year 4 was among the most valuable activities and they weren't part of the original work plan. So I, I love that they did that."

COVID-19

The COVID-19 pandemic slowed down or halted many of TCI Syracuse's projects. While they were able to strategically reallocate resources to advance some pre-existing efforts, with the potential for immediate and long-term impacts (i.e., SOFSA), others, like the implementation of PB, remained in limbo based on the nature of the process and heavy reliance on in-person activities. Some projects, like those related to work in the schools, were close enough to completion for the year that implementation efforts were not as negatively impacted by closures as the evaluation was. A key difference in the status of PB, however, was that the project was already running six months behind due to delays in the contracting process between the hospital and the partner organization leading the facilitation. This was a main barrier in advancing the project to a point close to completion by the time they had to pause and reassess due to COVID-19. Since they reached the stage of idea generation and collection before the impact of the pandemic, they will likely repeat/refresh this stage to include project ideas that consider the community's needs in a post-COVID environment.

Key Insights From TCI

TCI Syracuse created a network of partners that ultimately helped influence policy and practices within the community while navigating the local political and social landscape. By including organizations across the spectrum from grassroots to grasstops, TCI ensured that residents' voices would be heard by key decision-makers and stakeholders in various systems.

During the course of TCI, the TCI Syracuse team learned to adapt and make necessary modifications to their work based on community needs and feedback, evaluation, and unexpected challenges. While navigating an often-nonlinear process, some key takeaways were:

- The value of a human-centered design approach to projects — identifying and engaging community champions to help drive the work and creating a strong feedback loop.
- The value of planning and the importance of setting expectations on all sides — emerging community needs did not always align with the scope of work partners had been funded to accomplish. When there are not clear expectations, restrictions in the programmatic focus area and scope of work vs. balancing the importance of addressing real-time community needs can be a challenge with limited resources.
- Projects take time because it is imperative that we move at the “speed of trust.” Meaningful community engagement and resident buy-in can be a long and nuanced process.
- Empowering residents to lead the work is critical for long-term sustainability. Investing in the people and providing them with resources to work alongside service providers promotes more effective and authentic engagement. More hands are needed to make the work light. Kitchen table talks, small informal gatherings at community members' homes, and similar activities are helpful for engaging and meeting people where they are.
- Diverse, and at times unconventional, partnerships can be powerful. Identifying opportunities for, and improving, communication among organizations doing similar work and leveraging resources can lead to a larger collective impact in the community.

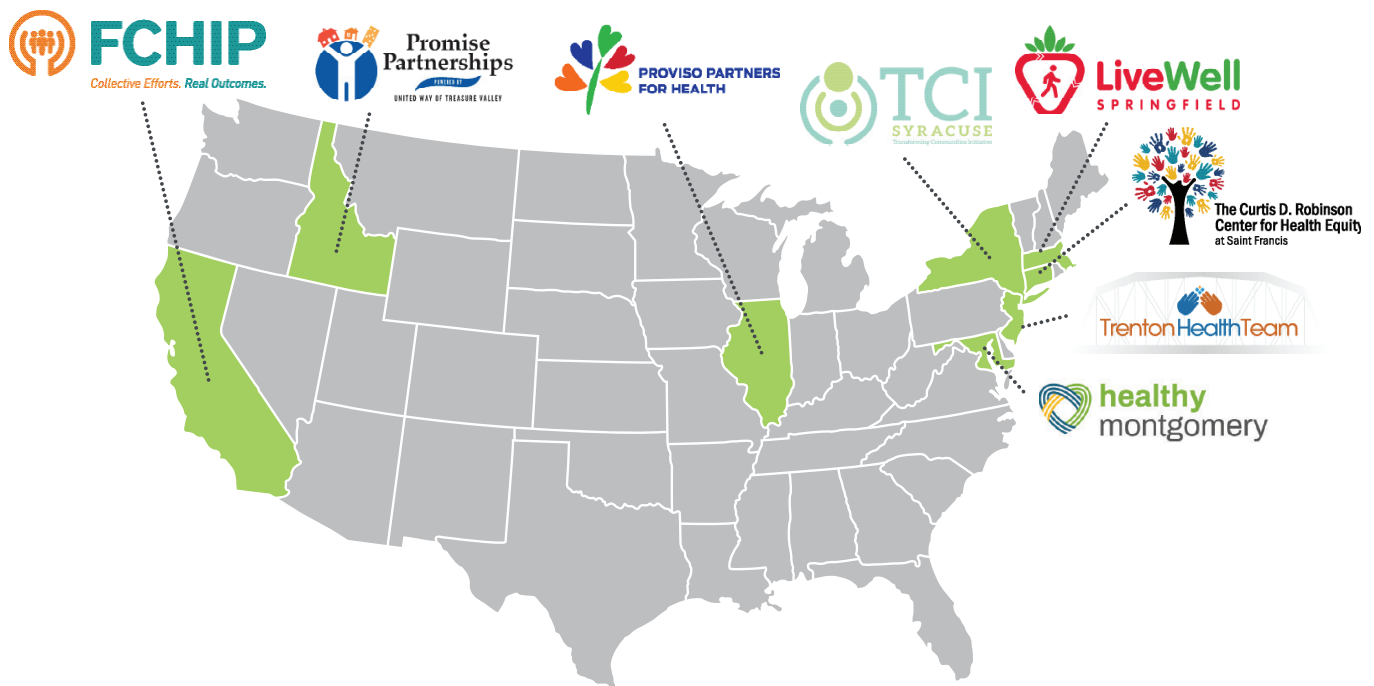
Looking Ahead

TCI Syracuse engaged local consultants in their sustainability planning process, which reviewed TCI Syracuse's origin, vision and mission, history, and opportunities to continue the community-based public health work beyond TCI funding. The purpose of this process was to create a mission model, strategy, and road map for TCI to move forward. The planning process engaged TCI Syracuse's program director and partners and included a review of TCI Syracuse's project portfolio, current funding opportunities, and comparable health care collaboratives.

In this process, TCI Syracuse established that a health equity focus, neutral backbone organization, target funding, and the program director's expertise were all priorities in the future of TCI Syracuse. With several value propositions and sustainability scenarios proposed, TCI Syracuse was poised to begin to explore the feasibility of identified sustainability options when TCI was transformed to focus on COVID-19 relief.

The sustainability work of the coalition in Year 4 also included coalition members actively pursuing opportunities to partner with other initiatives to leverage collective resources and expand positive impact in the community, while also working to establish and legitimize new collaboratives focused on specific systems change (i.e., SOFSA). While many TCI projects are embedded in partner organizations and will likely continue without the formal TCI structure, the path to sustainability for the participatory budgeting process and TACO are not as clearly defined as they are not embedded in any partner organization or funded by external grants.

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.