

Community Conversations for Healthy Investment

Purpose

The Georgia Health Policy Center (GHPC) at Georgia State University (GSU) engaged community stakeholders in conversations about healthy communities, social determinants of health, and potential solutions. Work would be focused on continuing engagement, which identified a complex network of health issues stemming from structural socioeconomic inequities, and explored investment in urban farmers of color as a strategy to foster healthy community development across multiple domains.

Adaptation

The project has produced lessons for TFA and regional health equity strategy, as well as lessons for adapting the work during the COVID-19 pandemic. The project was to be conducted by GHPC, in consultation with TransFormation Alliance members and leaders, for a six month contract period from January through June, 2020. Ultimately, the contract end was extended through October due to delays, and then through the end of December as a result of project adjustments COVID-19. Phone calls, virtual meetings, social media, and distanced interactions replaced planned meetings and events. Nonetheless, valuable information was exchanged, resulting in new policy guidance, and direct economic benefits.

Urban Farmer Engagement

GHPC planned to design and facilitate at least one workshop on tax abatement for urban farms. Additional sessions would be planned as needed.

Adapted process: In February 2020, we held a workshop for regional urban farmers, to provide information and technical assistance in applying for the Georgia Conservation Use property tax exemption. This exemption could save farmers thousands of dollars each year, supporting their essential role in food sovereignty, ecological sustainability, economic equity, and community connections. The workshop brought together 18 farmers, several health equity partners, and representatives from the county tax office. We assisted three farms with their applications, and one with a grant application. A flyer was created to promote and facilitate use of the tax exemption. We also stayed connected with growers and co-ops to understand their needs and challenges during 2020 and share resources.

Results: At least one farm had received the tax exemption, reducing their tax burden from over \$2,000 to just \$21. Several farms also received small grants, business, and recognition from TransFormation Alliance and its members. One grower participated in a virtual panel on land, urban farming, and equitable and sustainable development.

Community Health Advisors

At the beginning of the project, GHPC planned to reconvene a small group of community residents who met from September 2018-May 2019 in order to guide the health equity lens of TFA activities.

Adapted process: We transitioned plans for workshops and community meetings to calls, emails, and online connection; connect over social media; and support community connections that were formed in this time.

Results: Discussions were held individually with five social enterprises. Since many were engaged in the urban farm and food system, they had experienced both challenges and opportunities in 2020. Overall, awareness of the lack of resilience in the food supply chain increased, along with conversations about racial and social justice.



Strategic Planning

GHPC planned to use stakeholder input and its own health policy expertise to support TFA, its members, and other key stakeholders in promoting resilient, healthy, equitable communities through their actions, strategies, and policies. GHPC and TFA were also interested in engaging health systems around these strategies, coordinating with funders, and connecting partners.

Adapted process: It became higher priority to address immediate needs in health, income, food systems, collective trauma, risks to people sheltering in unsafe homes, and access to opportunity during recovery. At the same time, health systems and health departments were overwhelmed with the COVID-19 response and unavailable for new partnerships. As a result, much of this work focused on connecting to funding opportunities, pursuing more equitable funding policies, and supporting connections between partners that arose to address immediate challenges in terms of pandemic resilience and racial justice.

Results: We assisted a non-profit agricultural organization with grantwriting. Additionally, we collaborated with other TFA members to analyze, highlight, and communicate about racial and social inequity in current grantmaking.

Other Consultations, Convenings, and Communication

As this project was opportunity- and stakeholder-driven, GHPC facilitated or participated in additional convenings relevant to advancing awareness of and investment in urban farmers of color. GHPC participated in TFA member meetings and events, and engaged directly with other members as appropriate. Most of these sessions were virtual. Other outreach included:

- Delivering a health equity presentation to youth leadership academy participants
- Establishing social media channels for sharing lived experience of environmental and social determinants of health
- Connecting TFA with the Murphy Crossing Coalition to better address equity issues in the reissuance of the Murphy Crossing development request for proposals
- Elevating the conversation around health equity in pandemic response and recovery

Words of Wisdom

There is an ecosystem of community-centered organizations, predominantly Black and Brown led, which function as a cooperative economy within the larger economy, based on historical relationships, mutual support, and reputation as well as financial exchange. Investing anywhere within this system has a multiplier effect, because the funds and capacity will be distributed within it as much as possible. Some organizations are playing key roles in building capacity and facilitating self-development. This system should be a priority for community development: community centered organizations are connected in such a way to understand and address issues in comprehensive, liberating, self-sustaining ways.

There is unrealized potential for these systems to address health, equity, and resilience. The social enterprises within the systems need better access to grants and capital, markets, and supportive policies. Institutions such as TFA can humbly serve as a connector between these organizations and the community development complex, policymakers, and more, amplifying the value and benefits, facilitating connections, advocating for policy change, and collaborating on evaluation or other desired services. This includes making the capital and grants pipeline much more available to micro businesses, small nonprofits, and new organizations, with phased terms and funding amounts. It also means evaluating parts of the system to demonstrate success to funders and policymakers, and provide feedback to organizations. We can work to transform policies to better support the system, and connect to legal and financial resources that may facilitate use of social enterprise tools.

