

CREATING A “SAFE AND HEALTHY CORRIDOR” TO ENCOURAGE PHYSICAL ACTIVITY, BETTER HEALTH, AND A RENEWED SENSE OF COMMUNITY

Trenton Transformation: A Safe & Healthy Corridor



BOLD

Establishing a corridor where a coordinated effort results in dramatic and vital change represents a bold vision for transformation



UPSTREAM

Working to address the neighborhood environment and infrastructure, with an aim to make the healthy choice an easier choice for residents in order to reduce the onset of chronic diseases



INTEGRATED

Working collaboratively across sectors, including healthcare, education, government, nonprofit, faith-based, and business



LOCAL

Reviewing local data and knowledge of on-the-ground needs and opportunities



DATA-DRIVEN

Using local data to design the intervention and monitoring outcomes relative to stated goals and objectives

POWERED BY

The **BUILD HEALTH** Challenge®

IN PARTNERSHIP WITH



COMMUNITY IMPACT



200+ people attended Brunswick Ave Day each year



415 customers served at farmers market



30 participants in each T-Recs event/ more than 40 T-Recs events total

It's natural for children to want to play, spend time outside, and explore their neighborhood. However, many kids in public housing face unseen stress due to high rates of crime, lack of playground or designated play structures, and poor access to healthy food options. This stress often gets in the way of their ability to be physically active and just have fun. This was the case for Brian. He was young when he moved to the Donnelly Homes in Trenton, New Jersey, and was not comfortable interacting with anyone. At first, when the T-Recs mobile recreation vehicle - a retrofitted bread truck filled with recreation equipment that provides fun physical and social games - came to his neighborhood, Brian would not engage. He would tell the T-Recs team, "I just moved here, and I don't have any friends." The T-Recs team members told him they would be in his area every Wednesday and that they would be his friends. Eventually, Brian began to participate weekly, and as he did, he began to come out of his shell. Now, Brian is the first person to start playing outside, and encourages other kids and even adults in the neighborhood, to join in the fun. One Wednesday, the team asked him about the new friends he has made and Brian replied, "I have you and everyone in this program. Thank goodness for wonderful Wednesdays!"

It has been amazing to see [the kids] with huge smiles as they play games and build friendships – Jim Simon, Isles Inc.

BACKGROUND

Trenton, New Jersey, has experienced a high concentration of chronic and environmentally-driven health issues for several years. In 2013, the Trenton Health Team (THT) completed a comprehensive, Community Health Needs Assessment (CHNA), asking residents to identify their top health concerns and priorities. After looking at quantitative statistics, and conducting several interviews with members of the community, five priorities emerged: obesity/healthy lifestyles, substance abuse/behavioral health, safety and crime, chronic disease, and health literacy and disparities. In addition to these priorities, the report identifies

a number of other issues that impact and influence health across the city: HIV/AIDS and Hepatitis C, teen pregnancy and poor birth outcomes, sexually transmitted diseases, lead poisoning, asthma, and transportation.

Many of these issues have their roots in the physical environment of the city. Trenton's violent crime rate is four-and-a-half times that of New Jersey as a whole. Community members also face a high concentration of vacant and abandoned properties. As the THT report points out, "A relationship exists between crime and health, as safety concerns cause stress leading to subsequent emotional, mental and physical issues and disparities beginning in childhood and throughout adult life."² These issues make residents wary about exercising or relaxing outdoors. At the same time, Trenton has also been identified as a food desert with 17% of city households regularly lacking enough food to eat. The USDA's Economic Research Service shares that, "This lack of access contributes to a poor

The results of these analyses illustrate the complex healthcare crisis in the city of Trenton—a crisis that stretches beyond the exam room, through the streets, and into the workplaces, schools, parks, shelters, homes and hearts of residents who could represent the face of any urban area in the United States.¹

¹ <https://trentonhealthteam.org/wp-content/uploads/THT-CHNA-2013-July.pdf>

² <https://trentonhealthteam.org/wp-content/uploads/THT-CHNA-2013-July.pdf>

diet and can lead to higher levels of obesity and other diet-related illness, such as diabetes and heart disease.”³

Trenton is also a very diverse community with 35% of the population speaking a language other than English at home. While this is an asset in the community, it also means that residents report feeling overwhelmed accessing the English-based healthcare system from time to time.

“Our zip code may be more important to our health than our genetic code.” — Dr. Lavizzo-Mourey, University of Pennsylvania professor and former CEO, Robert Wood Johnson Foundation⁴

A CROSS-SECTOR, MULTI-PARTNER APPROACH

To address these challenges and help realize the potential of Trenton, THT launched a “Safe & Healthy Corridor” initiative with community members and partners from across the city and with support from the BUILD Health Challenge® (BUILD). Since 2006, THT has been harnessing the collective power of leaders, partners, and community members to transform health in the city, with a focus on expanding access

to high-quality healthcare and promoting public health. The THT Community Advisory Board (CAB), which includes representation from more than 100 behavioral, social service, educational, and faith-based organizations, is integral to its work and successes in the city.

Two years [with the BUILD Health Challenge] is not a lot of time to create lasting systems change. We had existing strong partnerships that could be leveraged ... since we had a good relationship with our partners from the start, we were able to start working almost immediately. — Matthew Broad, Trenton Health Team

For the BUILD project, THT coordinated with the city’s two acute care hospitals - Capital Health and St. Francis Medical Center - as well as the Trenton Department of Health and Human Services, Isles (a community-based nonprofit focused on fostering self-reliant families and healthy, sustainable communities), and Rutgers Cooperative Extension. THT also established a BUILD Steering Committee including representatives from a broad swath of the city’s family-serving and housing agencies, including Trenton Public Schools, RPM



Development Group (an affordable housing developer), Trenton Housing Authority, and Snipes Farm and Education Center.

By working in partnership across sectors, limited resources can be better allocated and new funding becomes available. Over time these partnerships become institutionalized, creating lasting systems change. — Matthew Broad, Trenton Health Team

The collaborative’s first order of business was to decide how to focus its efforts to improve health outcomes in Trenton and where in the city to target resident mobilization and services. “Safe and Healthy Corridor” partners identified Brunswick Avenue, a residential and business section

³ <https://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2013/11/131105081527.htm>

⁴ <https://trentonhealthteam.org/wp-content/uploads/THT-CHNA-2013-July.pdf>

of Trenton's North Ward. This became a primary area of focus because, while significant health issues are present there, as in most of Trenton, the area has many assets which can support the program. These assets include community-based organizations with activities and efforts primed to support advancement of community health already in place. The corridor also has a number of schools and parks, plus faith-based and healthcare organizations serving community members.

In designing the project, partners drew on existing activities and resources to accelerate and maximize impact. For example, the Transforming Communities Initiative, a multimillion-dollar, four-year population health effort funded by Trinity Health, focuses on policy, systems, and environmental change aimed at reducing childhood obesity and tobacco use. The TCI project provided data and a core group of partners for advancing the BUILD Health work. Isles conducted a city-wide inventory of vacant properties in 2014 and updated this work for the Brunswick Avenue corridor, where it mapped vacant homes and also completed assessments of parks (current use and renovation needs) and the state of public lighting. The BUILD project also used the city's Trenton250 Master Plan as a guide and focus for alignment.

A COMMUNITY ASSET-BASED APPROACH TO MAKING HOLISTIC CHANGES

More than 200 people attended Brunswick Avenue Day, the kick-off event for the BUILD project. The event was also a way to solicit community input on how to improve health and well-being. The second Brunswick Avenue Day also attracted more than 200 participants. THT and its partners conducted a community survey about the ease of getting to parks, overall safety and security, and whether the neighborhood is a good place to live. The majority of residents said it was easy to get to parks and that they could rely on neighbors for support - but they felt it was unsafe to walk around and were less likely to exercise or enjoy the outdoors because of their security concerns. Overall, residents identified their top three priorities for making Brunswick Avenue healthier: good schools, low crime/safe neighborhoods, and a clean environment. In relation to the CHNA findings, this meant that the team was focusing its efforts on three of the six priorities outlined: obesity/healthy lifestyles, safety and crime, and chronic disease.

Partners committed to addressing these challenges while leveraging the existing assets of the city. The team collaborated

with partners to improve safety and reduce chronic disease through revitalization and development of green spaces, nutrition education, new physical activity opportunities, and increased healthy food access through a new farmers market. Their goal was to create an environment where residents and visitors feel safe and people are more likely to walk, bike, exercise, and interact with others. As Eric Schwartz, executive director of Capital Health's Institute for Urban Care, shared, "The vision is for patients to be able to walk down the block ... if they want to exercise, get healthy foods, or come to the doctor ... they can just walk out of their house, walk down the street, meet neighbors, engage with the community, and come and get really high-quality healthcare. It's the opportunity for people to feel comfortable in the community."

Our experience shows that improving public spaces, making them safer and more inviting, and providing for creative activation helps engage residents while promoting physical activity — Isles, Inc. team member

EARLY OUTCOMES - INCREASING PLAY AND PHYSICAL ENVIRONMENT

While work to change the environment and health of neighborhood residents takes time, the team has already experienced several early wins. Specifically, initiatives to involve families in recreation and community events have done extremely well. The first Brunswick Avenue Day was so popular among residents that they have since asked for more events, particularly those with activities for kids. In response, Isles brought its T-Recs mobile recreation truck to MLK park on a weekly basis. T-Recs is a mobile recreation truck that comes with sports equipment, games, arts and crafts, music, hammocks, tables, chairs, and tools for exploring nature. T-Recs has become very popular, and continues in all seasons (indoors during winter months). Approximately 20-30 children and adults participated in activities each time they were offered. Based on its popularity, frequency of this event was increased to twice a week with additional locations now part of the schedule. Matthew Broad noted, “This January, Isles began bringing T-Recs services to the afterschool program at Donnelly Homes, a public housing complex, every Wednesday. It has become a huge success with the kids that live there. They even have a name for our Wednesday activities. They call it “Wonderful Wednesday.”

When kids see all of the new things going on, they want to get involved, help out, and participate. — Mia McRae, Martin Luther King Elementary teacher

Changes have also included improvements to physical spaces. Last summer, Isles installed a parklet at the intersection of Brunswick Ave and North Montgomery St., as part of their beautification efforts along the corridor. These parklets have created a dialogue at city hall regarding pop-up activities and the use of vacant lots and spaces. This intersection is also one of the target intersections for the team’s tactical urbanism project.

Tactical urbanism is an approach that uses low-cost, temporary interventions to change the feeling of a physical space. For example, interventions could include streetscape improvements like an installation of a new bench, paint to make a crosswalk colorful, or creating a mural that will visually calm traffic. Specifically, Michelle Ruess, Director of Communications of the THT noted, “Similar ‘streetscape’ or ‘tactical urbanism’ projects in other cities have successfully slowed traffic and improved pedestrian safety by vibrantly highlighting crosswalks and slightly narrowing traffic

lanes.” Another important element is the engagement by residents. For these efforts, the community engaged in design, implementation, and evaluation. Specifically, residents participated in a paint-by-numbers exercise to draw attention visually to a particular intersection.

Art projects like this instill pride in the neighborhoods, and are important for rejuvenating those who have been beat down by the harsh realities that can come with living in urban cities — Mayor Reed Gusciora



Overall, the objective of this effort is to start prioritizing strategies like “street calming”⁵ in key areas such as intersections in front of schools. In order to continue the important tactical urbanism efforts, the team has received additional funding to work with an urban planning, design, advocacy, and research firm. Together, they hosted a successful community workshop, and designs from that engagement are being implemented with the help of a graffiti artist.

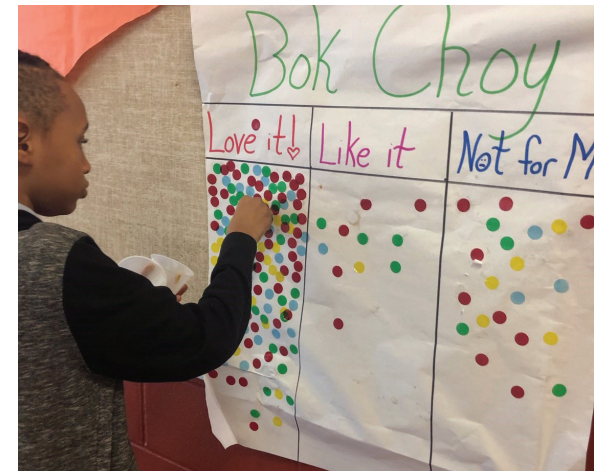
Complementary efforts are also underway to beautify and clean up the corridor that leverage small, but meaningful projects. The Clean & Green crew, part of the Clean & Green initiative (managed by Isles) that maintains and beautifies parts of East Trenton, continued litter pick-up, reporting of illegal dumping, and vacant lot maintenance in targeted areas. As a result of the Clean & Green and beautification work, the team sees more residents willing to assist in keeping their neighborhood clean as a model of good behavior for others.

Leon Rainbow, a local artist, along with volunteers will paint intersections near North Montgomery St. and Southard St., with a message for drivers to slow down and watch out for pedestrians. “We’re so used to seeing art on walls or canvasses. It’s going to be an interesting perspective to see all those bright colors and the design under our feet. I’m hoping the street mural gets people to slow down.”⁶

Documenting and recognizing instances of community pride also helps provide additional positive reinforcement for residents in their efforts.

EARLY OUTCOMES - NUTRITION

Early improvements have also involved access to healthy foods. Isles coordinated the T-Recs activities with the summer meals program at MLK park, and maintains school gardens to provide nutrition education to students on a regular basis. Play Soccer Nonprofit International has also provided twice-weekly soccer at Donnelly Homes in conjunction with the summer meals program. The team also successfully launched the Battle Monument Farmers Market last summer. Patients at several local health-care centers and clinics were given \$5 vouchers they could redeem at the market for fresh produce, and over the six weeks, the market served 194 customers. The market was also integrated with health offerings: on the first and third week, a nurse



was available to provide blood pressure screenings for residents who came to the market, and a dietitian did a “Walk and Talk” on diabetes and healthy eating.

Trenton Public Schools is hosting a Parent Conference focused on health and wellness affecting student performance in school. Since MLK Elementary is located within the Brunswick Ave Corridor, the BUILD project manager will be hosting a workshop at the upcoming parent conference. The BUILD project manager has been a part of the District Wellness Council for the past two years and has experience working in a number of Trenton Schools. His workshop will cover healthy school nutrition, the importance of daily physical activity, and healthy eating. To demonstrate the importance of health, wellness, and nutrition in schools, the District Wellness Council

⁵ ‘Street Calming’ is a system of design and management strategies that aim to balance traffic on streets with other uses (<https://www.pps.org/article/livememtraffic>)

⁶ https://www.trentonian.com/news/rainbow-takes-his-art-to-streets-with-trenton-health-team/article_db18cd1e-baa2-11e9-9af7-0f547728df27.html

raised the idea of a soccer tournament as a fundraiser. While in the past, many schools in Trenton have sold unhealthy foods such as pizza, cookies, and donuts to raise money for class trips, graduation, and other extracurricular activities, this initiative looks at using exercise and recreation to raise funds. With over 50 participants, the schools raised over \$3,000; the tournament will now serve as a model healthy fundraiser for other schools in the district. The event even got local media attention.

As a result of gardening support and related education, the team is already seeing improvement in both students and adults. For students, there is an increased preference for fruits and vegetables, increased physical activity, and increased recognition of different fruits and vegetables, as well as a deeper understanding of nutrition concepts. For adults, they see increased physical activity, increased consumption of produce, and an improved sense of well-being overall.

POLICY AND GOVERNMENT WORK

Beyond the immediate changes the team has made implementing community-led, low-cost solutions, the collaborative has been working with government on larger systems-change initiatives as well. This process has had challenges - street improvements have been very slow to materialize, for example - but progress is happening. Efforts like tactical urbanism



have helped show the importance of improvements, and have encouraged the city government to move forward on projects involving street improvements. The team also worked with Isles to do a careful assessment of property and park conditions in the corridor. The partnership helped guide an application for a park, which was ultimately successful. In addition, two parks in the target geography will receive upgrades this spring-summer season.

The team also hosted a Trenton Complete Streets Steering Committee meeting to discuss a number of Complete Streets initiatives. Complete Streets is a nationwide initiative that has a multitude of goals including improving the safety of non-motorized transportation, reduced costs and environmental burdens, and creation of more livable communities. During the meeting the team discussed the new Complete Streets Model Policy, which includes equity and green infrastructure which will hopefully be adopted by the New Jersey Department of Transportation.

LOOKING FORWARD

There are plans to convene partners after the grant period has ended, to continue to advance the BUILD agenda. The team has secured and supported additional grants to further aspects of the work. These include improving parks and recreational spaces, tackling complex housing issues, and pursuing increased access to fresh, affordable food for city residents. Partners plan to continue supporting Capital Health and their neighborhood revitalization efforts as well as RPM Development's new affordable housing project on Brunswick Avenue. This effort was supported through a low-interest loan commitment from Trinity Health and links health and wellness services to support its future residents. THT is also committed to collaborating with Trenton Housing Authority on its HUD-funded ChoiceNeighborhood project, if awarded. The partnership will continue to support the Department of Recreation in implementing Mercer at Play at both Martin Luther King Jr. and Lipinski Park, and will continue to support school and community gardens along the corridor.



The Build Health Challenge® is contributing to the creation of a new norm in the U.S., one that puts multi-sector community driven partnerships at the foundation of improving health for everyone.

BUILD is a national program designed to support partnerships between community-based organizations, health departments, and hospitals/health systems that are working to address important health issues in their community. Each community collaborative addresses root causes of chronic disease (also commonly referred to as the social determinants of health) in their local area by leveraging multisector partnerships, and working with their local community. To date, BUILD has supported 55 projects across the U.S. over the course of three award cycles.

BUILD's second award cycle (2017-2019) was made possible with generous support from of a group of national and regional funders: buildhealthchallenge.org/about/our-partners/

To learn more about BUILD, visit buildhealthchallenge.org.

BUILD HEALTH CHALLENGE SITES

- First award cycle
- Second award cycle
- Third award cycle

