

Local Place-Based Initiatives in Hillsborough County, Florida

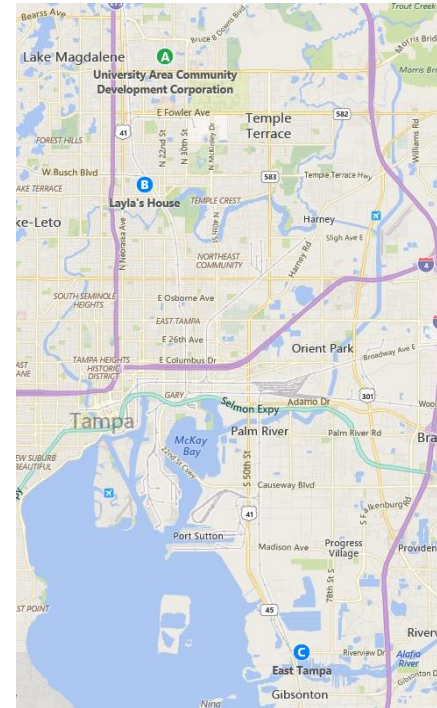
University of South Florida Early Childhood Comprehensive Systems (ECCS) Initiative Evaluation Team

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Methods

The Early Childhood Comprehensive Systems (ECCS) Evaluation Team conducted three local site visits in areas of Tampa, Florida: The University Area Community Development Corporation (UACDC) in University Area; Layla's House in Sulphur Springs; and the sites and partnership of Corporation to Develop Communities (CDC) of Tampa, Family Support and Resource Center, and REACHUP Incorporated in East Tampa. Aspects of the community that were noted included both physical and social characteristics, such as residential areas, geographic population, condition of local schools and hospitals, grocery stores, sports and recreational facilities, and other community facilities. The overarching goals of the site visits and windshield tours were to observe the overall quality of these community centers and their respective neighborhoods and to better understand the partnerships and strategies employed by local initiatives. A group discussion was held with the ECCS Evaluation Team to reflect on relevant findings of the three site visits, as well as noteworthy thoughts and concerns of the surrounding neighborhoods.



Community Site Visits

The University Area Community Development Corporation (UACDC):

The University Area was the first local site visited by the ECCS Evaluation Team. The Tour of UACDC was provided by Mike Trepper, MSW, Director of the Prodigy arts for youth program. The community center is bordered by East Fletcher Avenue/North 22nd Street/Fowler Avenue/ Bruce B Downs Blvd. in North Tampa, Florida. This is an area characterized by low income, scarcity of community resources (e.g. healthy food vendors, parks), and high crime rates. Almost 95% of all individuals in this area fall below the federal poverty line (<http://www.uacdc.org/index.php/about>).



Due to UACDC's location in a primarily low-income community, there is a large discrepancy in housing standards and living conditions compared to other areas of Tampa. The homes and businesses are in disrepair, and trash and debris are prominent in the area. Another major limitation of this region is the lack of secure housing. The area also has high residential mobility along with poor housing quality, and thus is sometimes referred to as "Suitcase City" because people are constantly moving in and out of the area. One of the team members noticed both quality of housing and the residents' economic situation:

“There’s an obvious discrepancy between those who have more and those who have less. So, I would say that upon getting into that neighborhood, you can see that there’s people that are maybe struggling in comparison to others, not necessarily all of them but there’s just certain characteristics of the area that point to that.”

The low rates of home ownership and residential stability also impact student enrollment in the neighborhood school. According to the community representative, in most elementary and middle schools in the area, student enrollment is less than half by the end of the academic year. This takes a toll on grades, readiness, and educational attainment levels.



The goal of UACDC is to provide residents with critical social services, recreational activities, and adult education in order to improve economic and social well-being in the community. The center has programs targeted for all age-groups, ranging from arts and crafts for children, teaching English and Spanish for adults, and movie nights for entertainment for all. The UACDC aims to hire residents of the community in order to understand community wants and needs, and to keep community members engaged and active. The group agreed the UACDC was designed “... to develop some sense of community.”

Sulphur Springs - Layla’s House:

The tour of Layla’s House (<http://cfctb.org/services/laylas-house/>) was provided by Raven Burrell, MPH, Parent Educator. Layla’s House is an early childhood family support and resource center located on East Eskimo Avenue and North 15th Street in Sulphur Springs. The Sulphur Springs community, bordered by Rowlett Park to the east, Florida Avenue to the west, Busch Blvd. to the north, and the Hillsborough River to the south, is one of Tampa’s neighborhoods that experiences challenges such as



high rates of poverty, poor housing quality, pedestrian inaccessibility, and food deserts. Due to children entering school unprepared and sometimes unsuccessful (as indicated by the neighborhood school academic ratings and standardized assessment scores), Layla’s House was created to improve childhood learning. Layla’s House, part of the “pipeline to success,” was created as a part of the Neighborhood of Promise initiative, which believes that “every child will succeed if provided with the appropriate resources and support”.

The family support and resource learning center offers many services to children and their families, including developmental workshops, literacy programs, language acquisition courses, and parent support groups. The primary goal of Layla’s House is to eradicate poverty by continuing the growth of education, particularly focusing on improving health and learning conditions for children that are 0-5 years of age. Even with “a handful of



staff”, Layla’s house is able to partner with additional organizations to host many different programs such as Baby Café and Little Amigos that are tailored for children’s development, in order to ensure they succeed in school. In addition, Layla’s House created a community garden to promote among the residents a sense of unity. During the reflection discussion group a member stated “That’s the nice thing about gardening – in community gardening is everyone is just focused on the vegetables... it unites everything.”

East Tampa:

The Windshield Tour of East Tampa was provided by Dr. Deborah Austin of REACHUP Incorporated and Ms. Evangeline Best, a lifelong resident of the neighborhood. East Tampa is an area which is bordered by Hillsborough Avenue to the north, 40th Street to the east, Interstate 4 to the south, and 15th Street to the west. In spite of being an area with high rates of poverty, this historically African American neighborhood has one of the highest rates of home ownership in Tampa, totaling almost 46%. One team member noted the difference between Sulphur Springs and East Tampa stating:



“That’s why you can see a difference in the neighborhood of Sulphur Springs [versus] East Tampa. If you have more people paying into the tax pot, you have more funds to be able to distribute to beautify and maintain the area as opposed to Sulphur Springs, [in] which there might be a decent amount of homeowners but they potentially don’t even live there because they’re renting out the homes.”

East Tampa achieved designated as a historical neighborhood and that is why preserving homes and small businesses is very important to the community members. The overall appearance of East Tampa is clean and pristine compared to the other areas visited; houses and businesses are freshly painted and yards of the small, modest homes are landscaped. The team noticed “there was a lot of work done to address the life and the appearance of the neighborhood... a lot of fresh paint.” Community members seemed to be conscious regarding the appearance of the physical and built environment, and therefore maintaining buildings and protecting art is a necessity among members of the community. The main source of community development income in East Tampa is property tax, compared to reliance on grants in most other low-income neighborhoods, giving the area more disposable income for community-initiated improvement projects.



During the windshield tour of East Tampa, the community representative pointed out that “everything a person would need” is nearby and easily accessible through local small businesses. Residential areas, schools, corner grocery stores, and churches were plentiful in comparison to the geographic size of the region. East Tampa seemed to be the most all-encompassing (has facilities and businesses that cater to all community members) and also the most developed compared to the other windshield tours.

Lessons Learned for ECCS

These three local site visits were beneficial in contrasting different regions of Tampa, as well as gaining perspective to apply to the ECCS initiative in both Liberty City, Miami and New Town, Jacksonville. Both physical and social characteristics of these local communities were observed, and applied to ECCS. Physical characteristics that were noted included the type of infrastructure, number of schools, hospitals, and grocery stores, and residential areas. Social characteristics included community development centers and what activities they offered, events in the area, and overall participation of community members.

An important aspect that was mentioned during the team's reflection discussion regarding these visits was the importance of visiting these local place-based initiatives at multiple points over time. Each of these three areas were only visited one time by the evaluation team. In order to gather valid and accurate data, configuring how many people are utilizing the services and what activities are offered on a regular basis at these community centers as well as surrounding areas, would be beneficial. For this to occur, the sites need to be visited more often by the evaluation team.

Raising awareness that these community-based initiatives exist and are available for all community members, is also another integral factor to consider. Community members are not always aware that these services are free of charge, therefore they do not always use the services offered. For example, ECCS team members noted that certain centers lacked community member participation and were rather empty. A solution that could be targeted towards raising awareness would be hiring community residents to help get the word out. Community engagement is key in building trust, keeping members active, and effective communication. Most of the local place-based initiatives had community members working in their facility to keep them involved. This was also a way for community departments to realize community member's needs and find solutions accordingly.

One final aspect that should be considered for ECCS is that multiple factors influence health and well-being. Most of these facilities had activities ranging from education to fitness to entertainment, showing that these centers were comprehensive. Community leaders recognized the importance of social determinants of health, involving themselves and their partners in addressing issues such as economic opportunity, affordable housing, neighborhood safety, and food access in addition to their role in early childhood and maternal and child health promotion.

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