RWJF Culture of Health Community Portrait

Tacoma, Washington
ABOUT THIS REPORT

The Sentinel Communities Surveillance project, conducted by RTI International in collaboration with the RAND Corporation, is sponsored by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation. The project, which began in 2016, will monitor activities related to how a Culture of Health is developing in each of 30 diverse communities around the country for at least five years. This community portrait follows from the initial Snapshot report for Tacoma, Washington, and provides insights into drivers of a Culture of Health in the community. The report is not intended to comprehensively describe every action underway in Tacoma, but rather focuses on key insights, opportunities, and challenges as this community advances on its journey toward health and well-being for all residents.

The information in this report was obtained using several data collection methods, including key informant telephone interviews, an environmental scan of online and published community-specific materials, review of existing population surveillance and monitoring data, and collection of local data or resources provided by community contacts or interview respondents. Interviews were conducted with individuals representing organizations working in a variety of sectors (for example, health, business, education, law enforcement, and environment) in the community. Sector mapping was used to systematically identify respondents in a range of sectors that would have insights about community health and well-being to ensure organizational diversity across the community. We also asked original interviewees to recommend individuals to speak with to include important organizations or perspectives not included in the original sample.

A total of 14 unique respondents were interviewed during winter 2018 for this report. All interviews (lasting 30–75 minutes each) were conducted using semi-structured interview guides tailored to the unique context and activities taking place in each community and to the role of the respondent in the community. Interviewers used probes to ensure that they obtained input on specific items of interest (for example, facilitators and barriers to improved population health, well-being, and equity) and open-ended questions to ensure that they fully addressed and captured participants’ responses and perceptions about influences on health and well-being in their communities. Individuals who participated in a key informant interview are not identified by name or organization to protect confidentiality, but they are identified as a “respondent.”

Information collected through environmental scans includes program and organizational information available on internet websites, publicly available documents, and media reports. Population surveillance and monitoring data were compiled from publicly available datasets, including the American Community Survey; Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System; and other similar federal, state, and local data sources.

We will conduct ongoing surveillance and monitoring activities in these communities through 2020 and report updated information on their progress, challenges, and lessons learned in improving health and well-being for all residents.

Data collection and monitoring thus far has revealed common themes among otherwise distinct communities. The next phase of this project will be cross-community reports that will examine common themes across subgroups of the 30 communities (for example, rural communities, communities experiencing large demographic shifts, and communities leveraging local data for decision-making). These reports will also be posted on rwjf.org/cultureofhealth.
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Introduction

In our Snapshot report of Tacoma, Wash., we described a midsized port community characterized by its environmental beauty and racial diversity. Tacoma is home to a joint Army and Air Force base, Joint Base Lewis-McChord, and contains part of an American Indian reservation, that of the Puyallup Tribe of Indians. Environmental contaminants and pollutants are major concerns for resident health: a rich history of industrial operations in paper manufacturing and copper smelting has created two Superfund sites (national priority sites for contaminant and toxic waste removal) within Tacoma, as well as lead and arsenic in both soil and water. Other health concerns highlighted in the Snapshot include access to mental health services, crime and violence, and striking racial inequities in educational attainment and income. The City of Tacoma has institutionalized the priority of equity-based policy within government agencies, and has a significant focus on community engagement.

In this report, we explore how equity rose as a priority among residents and ultimately was institutionalized at departments within the city and the local health department; examine the efforts to increase community engagement from all corners of Tacoma; and explore how cross-sector collaborations have translated issues from community concerns into action. We also examine Tacoma’s efforts to improve population health and build a healthier, more equitable community using the Culture of Health Action Framework to interpret and organize key
findings. The Framework prioritizes four broad Action Areas: 1) Making Health a Shared Value; 2) Fostering Cross-Sector Collaboration to Improve Well-Being; 3) Creating Healthier, More Equitable Communities; and 4) Strengthening Integration of Health Services and Systems. Within these areas, activities and investments can advance population health, well-being and equity in diverse community contexts. Using the Framework, we describe how Tacoma has leveraged its community engagement, interest in equity, and collaborative spirit to inspire and create change.

**CONTEXTUAL CONDITIONS**

With prime real estate right on the Puget Sound of the Pacific Northwest, Tacoma, Wash., located in Pierce County, is the third largest city in the state behind Seattle and Olympia. Nearly 40 percent of Tacoma’s 201,794 residents¹ are non-white, comprised mostly of Hispanic (12%), black (10%), Asian (9%) or two or more races (7%). In addition, part of Tacoma’s city border overlaps with the Puyallup Tribe of Indians reservation, though American Indians comprise only 1 percent of the population.²

Historic practices of discrimination, such as redlining and covenants that kept black residents from buying homes in certain communities,³ have contributed to residential segregation and other disparities that still exist related to health outcomes, educational attainment, and economic opportunity. The Tacoma neighborhood of Eastside suffered as a result of these practices and became ripe with crime and gang activity during the Great Recession. While disparities are improving, they are still present: Hispanic and black residents are more likely than white residents to have lower incomes (annual median income is about $35,000 for non-Hispanic white, $39,000 for black and $42,000 for Hispanic residents). The unemployment rate for black residents is double that of their white counterparts, and the rate for Hispanic residents is 1.5 times that of white residents.³ Positively, many of these disparities appear to be well understood by city leadership, who have operationalized equity awareness and instituted programming to promote equity.

For over a century, military jobs at Joint Base Lewis-McChord, and industrial jobs, especially those in the paper and copper industries, have been key drivers of Tacoma’s economy. Like other industrially grounded cities, Tacoma was hit hard by the Great Recession and experienced resulting up ticks in unemployment and poverty. Though rates have recovered somewhat over the past decade, poverty is still a problem for many residents: the poverty rate among all Tacoma residents (18%), is higher than Pierce County rates (13%) and even Washington state rates (16%). In addition, the homeless population across Pierce County increased by 37 percent from 2015 to 2016, and in March 2017, the Tacoma City Council voted to declare a homelessness emergency.⁴ Tacoma has also struggled with education outcomes: the public high school system attracted national news for its significant high school dropout rates. However, dropout rates are decreasing as a result of concerted efforts across the city.

Other priority public health concerns include gang violence and capacity to meet mental health needs. Prevention of gang violence has been a major focus of many youth-oriented nonprofits. In the area of mental health, a prevailing concern is a lack of capacity and resources to address current needs, especially since Tacoma lost two inpatient mental health care facilities, as mentioned in the Snapshot. According to a mental health sector respondent, there is a 120-bed psychiatric ward being built in one of the hospitals, but the challenge of inadequate support for community mental health and prevention remains.

**HISTORIC PRACTICES OF DISCRIMINATION ... HAVE CONTRIBUTED TO RESIDENTIAL SEGREGATION AND OTHER DISPARITIES THAT STILL EXIST RELATED TO HEALTH OUTCOMES, EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT, AND ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITY.**

While the economy has largely transitioned away from heavy industry, the environmental legacy of those former industries remains a defining part of Tacoma’s identity. The environment is recognized as an important community asset; however, Tacoma’s widely regarded environmental beauty remains threatened by the environmental pollution from heavy industry that still plagues the community today. Defunct smelting operations are leaking lead and arsenic, and 2.5 acres of Tacoma are part of two Superfund sites.⁵ The Tacoma-Pierce County Health Department reports that in Pierce County, 60 toxic chemicals, such as lead, ammonia, and benzene, are released by 36 large entities, such as industrial manufacturing and hazardous waste treatment centers. The health department reports that “immediate and long-term health impacts include cancer, liver and kidney damage, and damage to nerves, blood, heart, digestive, respiratory, and immune systems.”⁶ These environmental threats are an ongoing issue, but the activism and community engagement to protect both health and natural beauty that they have inspired is notable.

Community engagement, such as that around environmental concerns, is long practiced in Tacoma and is also formally supported by local government, most notably through eight Neighborhood Councils. Established in 1992, the Councils receive small amounts of funding from the government for local initiatives. However, respondents expressed concerns that Councils are not representative of the neighborhoods they are serving. Additionally, respondents noted that for community engagement generally, some of the major employers in the area are not particularly involved, including the hospitals, the Army base and the Puyallup reservation. We were not able to reach any of these stakeholders for this report.

Lastly, the implications of Tacoma’s proximity to Seattle are a growing concern, both economically and culturally. As workers from housing-squeezed Seattle and King County move in to Tacoma as “commuters,” more Tacoma natives are feeling the pressure of increasing rent and home purchase prices. Respondents spoke of a tension between the contributions that this commuter population makes to Tacoma’s economy by living there, and the resources and housing units they make unavailable to native populations. In particular, residents take great pride in the historic architecture in the city, which they
worry could be threatened by any development inspired by the Seattle transplants. However, there is still a feeling that Tacoma can avoid the realities of “spillover” communities from other states, such as Oakland, Calif. Respondents feel that Tacoma can work better for more residents, without changing its character, landscape, or culture as a result of people moving in order to commute to Seattle. As one respondent in the government sector said, they’re taking on the challenge of growing “in a way that stays true to Tacoma.”

COMMUNITY CAPACITY TO PROMOTE HEALTH, EQUITY, AND WELL-BEING
Tacoma’s community capacity to promote health, equity, and well-being is grounded in the efforts of the city government to prioritize equity; a focus on community engagement and collaboration; and a network of foundations that are working to improve quality of life and the natural environment.

Governance structures and legislation that prioritize equity. In departments across Tacoma’s city government, legislation has been passed and policies have been instituted to help drive improvements in health. For example, the health department passed a resolution to use a health-in-all-policies approach to evaluate resolutions before the board of health, and uses a Health Lens Analysis Tool to evaluate policies under consideration. Other city initiatives have focused on driving economic equity and community engagement, such as an increase in minimum wage and instituting paid leave for city employees.

In addition to legislative victories to drive community health and economic development, the city has two separate offices dedicated to equity, the Office of Equity and Human Rights (OEHR) at the city, and the Department of Health Equity at Tacoma-Pierce County Health Department, both of which have institutionalized their commitment to promoting equity. For example, OEHR, started in 2014, is working with police and residents to be fair and consistent, and includes a de-escalation component associated with youth and gang violence reduction efforts. They provide equity and human rights training to all city department employees, and this training is a requirement for all organizations that receive funding from the city.

A new team at the health department, comprised of staff from different city departments and across job categories, was created to promote health equity concepts throughout the organization in 2014. In addition, a new position was created: the Health Equity Coordinator, who is tasked with leading the Department’s Health Equity initiative, a move that demonstrates a clear financial and philosophical commitment to address inequities in health in Tacoma.

Environmental assets and supportive organizations. In addition to a commitment to equity, Tacoma, both through the city and private entities, has a demonstrated culture of environmental protection. Metro Parks Tacoma, an independent government agency, is an unusually engaged and highly influential department that manages an extensive park system, aims to enable abundant outdoor activities, and oversees neighborhood parks, community centers, athletic fields, piers, and other public spaces near the water. Metro Parks is a primary connector and collaborator in the region, and is involved in community planning meetings and activities, as well as in conversations and programming to use the parkland as an extension of learning and education activities.

This commitment to environmental promotion does not reside only within the government. The Puyallup Watershed Initiative (PWI) involves engagement of the private sector. PWI is comprised of over 100 organizations, agencies, community members, and businesses that come together with support from a local foundation to improve environmental conditions throughout the region. PWI includes Equity and Inclusion as one of their four guiding principles, and has collaborated with the OEHR to evaluate health outcomes as they relate to the vulnerability of certain populations and environmental factors.

Community engagement and representation. In 1992, eight Neighborhood Councils were established. Councils are each an independent, nonprofit, citizen-lead organization that lead neighborhood improvement projects and advise the city on neighborhood issues. Each of the Councils receives a modest budget from the city for discretionary spending on local initiatives. Councils employ various methods of engaging constituents, including neighborhood surveys and door-to-door canvassing. Staff are all-volunteer, and consist mostly of residents and some business owners, and are considered the “primary tool” of civic engagement in Tacoma. They have a small operational budget of about $4,000 per year, which the Councils have discretion on how to spend. There are also larger, $330,000, two-year grants available for special projects, typically used for municipal improvements, such as playgrounds or signage. While Councils are a great foundation from which to provide communities a voice and have supported small infrastructure projects important to these neighborhoods, multiple respondents expressed concern that Councils are not representative of all community voices. One social service sector respondent emphasized the importance of engaging non-white community members, stating, “We have to get into the communities... where we’re trying to get the feedback from, or to just get their engagement. We have to go to them and say, ‘Hey, will you host something at the Mexican taqueria?’” as an example of including diverse community voices by meeting with them where they are.

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SOCIAL SERVICE SECTOR RESPONDENT

Strong and collaborative philanthropy network. Tacoma and Pierce County benefit from a robust philanthropic network that emphasizes collaboration among grantees. For example, the Russell Family Foundation who helped start the Puyallup Watershed Initiative (PWI), provides day-to-day support in management, and has staff dedicated to PWI. There are also five foundations that were created through Metro...
Developing a Culture of Health

In Tacoma, local government has responded to the primary issues threatening resident health in three distinct ways: 1) institutionalizing citizen engagement through the Neighborhood Councils; 2) emphasizing equity through the two equity offices established within the city; and 3) creating systems and policy level changes. However, these efforts transcend government walls. The spirit of equity and engagement are shared values in Tacoma. These values have been integrated into city processes and are being transferred beyond city government to business and nonprofits to expand their impact and reach, such as making sure new and vulnerable residents have a seat at the table.

Building Collaboration Around Long-Term Collective Impact

Tacoma’s approach to collaboration has been informed by a shared awareness of city assets, most important among these—its beautiful, diverse, and accessible natural environment; commitment to collective action; and its multiracial and ethnic population. Collaborations have been assembled to combat spikes in community violence; homelessness; and to create effective action against industrial development—most notably, a methanol plant. However, several respondents noted that more action is needed around emergent problems, such as mental health treatment and high housing costs. Collaboration in Tacoma is exemplified in two areas, youth development and environmental activism, and is emerging in the area of mental health.

Collaboration to improve the lives. There are a number of collaborative initiatives, both, those that include city government and those that do not, which are aimed at improving the quality of life of Tacoma's youth. Tacoma Metro Parks, a strong, well-connected city office that has forged relationships with organizations and entities across sectors, is one organization leading the charge in efforts targeting youth. One standout accomplishment is their collaborative efforts with Tacoma Public Schools in establishing the Science and Math Institute, a one-of-a-kind public high school inside Point Defiance Park, where students gain access to the parks, woods, beaches and even the zoo as “classroom laboratories.” The teaching emphasizes experiential, hands-on learning.

Another youth-focused collaboration is Graduate Tacoma, a city-wide initiative, managed outside of local government, to increase the high school graduation rate by 50 percent by the year 2020. This initiative was started in 2010 after Tacoma Schools made national news for their 55 percent graduation rate, labeled as “Dropout Factories” in a USA Today headline. This initiative is dependent on cross-sector collaboration among after-school programs and summer camps, local businesses offering internships, local colleges, and college preparatory initiatives, with the goal to build a network of support, training opportunities and work for graduates. The network boasts more than 240 community partners from every neighborhood, spanning education, local government, business, faith communities, and more. The graduation rate among participants has increased every year since this initiative started, and now sits at 86 percent.

In addition to targeting educational development, there are collaborations focused on reducing youth involvement in gang violence. For example, the city government, in partnership with Comprehensive Life Resources, an organization of behavioral health care providers, established a program titled Rise Above Influence (RAIN). This was created in response to the City of Tacoma’s 2011 Gang Assessment, which exposed five neighborhoods with high gang activity, and identified middle school as a key period of gang exposure for Tacoma youth. The program is modeled after the U.S. Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention’s Comprehensive Gang Model, and is used in other cities like Chicago and Baltimore. According to a government respondent, in 2017, the group did an assessment of their own progress, and opted to improve the system by finding additional partners and expanding. The new program was to start summer 2018.

Partnerships to strengthen environmental activism. The Puyallup Watershed Initiative is a strong example of collaboration around a shared cause. As noted earlier, it consists of over 100 organizations, agencies and businesses that initially came together under the aegis of
The Russell Family Foundation (TRFF), which officially announced the start of the PWI by making a 10-year funding commitment at $1 million per year. However, TRFF intentionally left the long-term vision for the initiative relatively open and invited community partners to define their own agenda. TRFF convened a community advisory group to help design the building blocks of the initiative, and PWI became its own independent organization around 2011, with a focus on environmental clean-up and conservation. One example of work done under the auspices of PWI is a group focused on industrial stormwater that has engaged with Depave Puget Sound and the Pierce Conservation District in depaving efforts throughout Tacoma. One effort involved removing 15,000 square feet of pavement at Holy Rosary Church to make way for the more permeable surface of a sports field.¹⁴

In addition to bringing together many organizations and entities in Tacoma to tackle tough, important issues, the PWI creates collaboration opportunities related to protecting watershed and farmlands from overbuilding and pollution, all factors that negatively impact a community’s health. One environmental sector respondent shared a defining statement about the PWI effort: “I know that a lot of our partnerships and the key players are really folks that are looking at integrative strategies... to ensure that the people who are in our most populated area, and even in our rural areas, have what they need to live a healthy, full life.”

PWI has also pushed to integrate environmental issues into other ongoing activities in their network. In 2015, the city published a Health Equity Assessment. The goal of the report was to look at how health outcomes may or may not differ across resident demographics, such as race and income.²⁵ After the report was released, PWI was concerned that “the report didn’t include as many environmental factors as we would like to see, as an organization that is really looking at how to improve that aspect.” So, according to a respondent in the environmental sector, PWI created an addendum to the Health Equity Assessment report that “looks at people’s health outcomes as it relates to the vulnerability of certain populations and also environment aspects.” The addendum was disseminated across their network of over 100 organizations.

Police and behavioral health providers collaborate to address community mental health. Mental health was identified as a “priority area” in the 2016 Community Needs Assessment, particularly the lack of resources to meet community mental health needs. According to one mental health sector respondent, one effort underway is a collaboration between the Tacoma Police Department and a for-profit behavioral health provider, which is funding mental health professionals to be embedded in the police department to join police on calls “where the primary issue is behavior associated with mental illness, rather than criminality.” One nonprofit sector respondent stated, “The partnerships are being built; the communication lines are opened. Essentially the groundwork is being laid.” However, there is still a concern in the community about the lack of mental health capacity in light of recent facility closures.

**STRENGTHENING COMMUNITY OWNERSHIP THROUGH NEW CITY-LED PARTICIPATION STRATEGIES**

Tacoma has a history of organizing in the face of stubborn community challenges. There is a recognition of the importance of community and social support, and city-led efforts to help foster it. “We know social connections are one of the biggest protective factors, especially in low-income communities,” said one government respondent. “Developing ideas of how to improve your neighborhood with your neighbors and coming out to vote with your community—these are things that should have the co-benefits of improved social connections, increased feelings of civic engagement, and increased likelihood of participating in neighborhood councils.”

Neighborhood Councils. The city established eight Neighborhood Councils in 1992 to help raise awareness of neighborhood concerns and provide residents with a voice in municipal decision-making. The Eastside Neighborhood Council helps to advertise community events, such as the farmers’ market; convenes community members around certain topics or issues of concern; and organizes creek and park clean-ups. While the foundation of the Neighborhood Councils is strong, several respondents argued that the councils have not kept up with demographic changes in Tacoma neighborhoods, and do not truly represent constituents. One social service sector respondent argued for the need to take the community councils “out of the box” to engage new arrivals and growing multi-cultural communities.

City-led efforts to explore participatory budgeting. While Neighborhood Councils are considered the primary tool for community participation and engagement, there are also city-led efforts testing the use of participatory budgeting. This entails identifying the segments of the community whose voices may not be heard or recognized and engaging those groups to generate ideas and develop proposals around what they would do to address an issue within a specific budget. For example, in such a participatory budgeting exercise, the group might be given $20,000 to invest in a community. Then community members are asked to develop proposals which might focus on improvements to a park or better lighting in a section of the neighborhood or repairing...
a stretch of sidewalk. The goal for this approach is that the community can highlight issues that might not be readily apparent at the city level, or that might not be considered as relevant to neighborhood health from other perspectives.

One example of participatory budgeting in action is an effort the city has led through the Equity Office. According to a government respondent, they facilitated community input and a vote on how to deploy $150,000 designated for improvements to a city park. To gather input, the OEHR used a variety of communication tactics, including Facebook, door-to-door canvassing, hanging signs at the park of interest, and going to senior homes and other institutions near the park where they thought park users might reside.

Students and Parents at Each School were Prompted to Generate Ideas to “Decide How to Spend $25,000” That Was Flagged for Their School … 200 Proposals Were Put Forth.

Participatory budgeting was also conducted in three schools in Eastside, one of the health department’s “Communities of Focus.” As part of an innovation grant from the Public Health National Center for Innovations through the health department, students and parents at each school were prompted to generate ideas to “decide how to spend $25,000” that was flagged for their school. From this exercise, 200 proposals were put forth, which were condensed to seven proposals, which were then voted on by the students. At one school, proposals included a student lounge (the winner), flexible classroom seating, a school garden, painting the walls and lockers, and upgrading vending machines.6

A focus on community input and civic engagement. Community input has been central to the Tacoma 2025 Strategic Plan process. The document was created with input from community members about what they would like to see change and was passed by the city council in January 2015. According to a government respondent, it is intended to be a “living, breathing” document that will undergo periodic review. The plan has seven areas of emphasis: health and safety; human and social needs; economic vibrancy and employment; education and learning; arts and cultural vitality; natural and built environment; and government performance. The first step of the plan was to hire a staff member to carry out the plan who would take a collaborative approach. One government respondent described the approach to partnership as, “This is not the city giving you a mandate to do these things. It is the city saying ‘this is what our citizens told us, and on behalf of them, we’re asking you to help us to solve this problem,’ which is a much different conversation.”

The website, launching soon, is one demonstration of the emphasis on community engagement. One government sector respondent said, “I really want it to be an engagement website where people can go and talk about... the livability in the City of Tacoma, talk about what things are going on, [a space] for partners to be able to talk about their activities... and connect with people via social media and other formats.”

In addition to emphasizing community engagement to obtain feedback and to implement the plan, engagement is also embedded into the plan itself, through a focus on measuring voter participation. According to a government respondent, “My civic engagement measures are all about the number of people that vote. The number of people who feel like they can influence government. Does the leadership of the community reflect the community? Is it the same both, inside the city and in leadership positions across the city?”

City Policies and Systems Represent a Shared Value of Health Equity

Stakeholders across sectors in Tacoma recognize that serving a diverse population requires an approach that incorporates equity as a strategy, a long-range goal, and a standard for human resources to use in selecting leaders. Racial equity remains an important part of the vision, but respondents noted that equity policies must also consider age, income, and gender in communities and the governments and agencies serving them. Various agencies throughout the city are taking deliberate steps to address inequities through new policies and tools.

Both the health department and the city have passed resolutions to make equity a central part of the political decision-making process. For example, the health department operates using the health-in-all-policies approach with all resolutions that come before the board. As noted previously, the department uses a Health Lens Analysis Tool—a screening tool for each policy that the board considers. Criteria include an explicit analysis of what the policy is trying to accomplish; who has been consulted and who will be affected; and the potential intended and unintended social, economic and environmental effects.

“This Is Not the City Giving You a Mandate to Do These Things. It Is the City Saying ‘This Is What Our Citizens Told Us, and on Behalf of Them, We’re Asking You to Help Us to Solve This Problem.’”

Government Sector Respondent

Similarly, the Tacoma City Council unanimously passed a resolution in December 2017 for health and equity in all policies. A health department representative credits this to their “recognition that we needed to do health equity work in a much more intentional way,” and the establishment of a new Health Equity Coordinator position, a staff member who has worked to change the narrative around health and well-being. This is representative of a concerted effort by the city to make equitable social, economic, and environmental conditions that lead to health becoming a fully integrated part of the discussion when developing and testing policies. The city intends to also use the Health Lens Analysis Tool. While implementation of the Tool is going before council members.
Disseminating equity practices through data, training and technical assistance. The health department and the city government overall are spreading their equity practices beyond government walls as well. The health department is providing health equity technical assistance to community partners. For example, health department staff help partners access and process data, and guide their thinking about which particular economic, racial, or other groups are most affected within their area of interest. In this way, they can reflect on whether their intervention efforts are appropriately targeted. One example is an intervention focused on sexually transmitted diseases (STDs), where the health department helped the organization explore relevant STD outcomes data. The data revealed that the inequities were most profound in men who have sex with men. As a result, the organization shifted their strategies, their communications, and their outreach to better identify this population and more successfully meet their needs.

In another example, the Tacoma Human Services Department instituted a mandatory equity training class for anyone who receives funding from their department. The classes are growing: they conducted two classes in 2017, and have four scheduled for 2018. The classes focus on privilege, equity, and fairness. In addition to providing training for external partners, the initiative has compelled the city to consider its own diversity. One government respondent stated, “we look at our own city staff, and a report goes out to say okay, are we diverse? You can’t expect everybody else to be diverse [if] we’re not diverse.”

Developing a common set of equity-based goals and measures to address social drivers of health. Strategic planning efforts within the City of Tacoma have made equity a guiding principle. For example, Tacoma 2025, the Citywide Vision and Strategic Plan created by the City Council, is grounded in “four principles important to the community: 1) Opportunity, 2) Equity, 3) Partnerships, and 4) Accountability.”

Moreover, the plan generated goals aligned with social drivers of health: livability; economy and workforce; education; civic engagement; equity; and acceptability. According to a government respondent, each goal is comprised of six indicators, such as graduation rates, ability to get a livable wage job, and access and proximity to services. A government respondent explained that some measures were identified specifically for use as equity measures, such as percentage of the population paying more than 45 percent of their annual income on housing; graduation rates; and how well leadership reflects the community.

Another strategic planning process, the Human Services Strategic Plan for 2015 through 2019, was conducted in close collaboration with the external partners of Tacoma’s Human Services Department. This plan used data and Geographic Information Systems mapping of local conditions to provide context of the human service needs in the city. The data was then presented to a review panel made up of service providers and citizens for feedback in two “visioning sessions.” One conclusion that emerged from this community review was a need for the division to “work for racial justice and equity and to ensure the people of Tacoma are not excluded from the city’s decision-making process due to racism, homophobia, sexism, language barriers, cultural bias or other forms of cultural dominance.”

SUMMARY OF TACOMA’S EFFORTS TO BUILD A CULTURE OF HEALTH

Based on the Culture of Health Framework used to guide Sentinel Community data collection and monitoring in Tacoma, evidence indicates that there is progress in several areas to enhance residents’ health and well-being. For example, Tacoma has demonstrated that Fostering Cross-Sector Collaboration to Improve Well-Being is a useful tool in establishing a Culture of Health. There are notable successes in this area, such as the diverse participation in the Puyallup Watershed Initiative to address environmental issues and the implementation of the Whole Child Initiative, with the help of multiple foundations and education systems. Through efforts starting with the city and expanding through the private sector, Tacoma has also demonstrated effort in Making Health a Shared Value, by encouraging and measuring community engagement in strategic planning processes, using participatory budgeting exercises, and establishing and funding Neighborhood Councils to provide neighborhoods with a voice and a means to make municipal changes. Lastly, through a city-wide focus on equity, Tacoma has demonstrated a push to Create Healthier, More Equitable Communities that is grounded first in a system-level understanding of inequities, and a close examination of how policies and structures can and should address such inequities.
FACILITATORS TO A CULTURE OF HEALTH

Engaged approach to governance and equity. Equity is institutionalized at the city level and has been actively incorporated in formal tools of governance, including budgeting and policy formulation.

Culture of community-wide collaboration. Tacoma's history of collaboration, starting with the creation of the Neighborhood Councils 26 years ago and evolving to include participatory budgeting efforts, are all essential to the inclusion of the voices of vulnerable residents and new residents.

Outdoor environmental assets. Surrounded by natural beauty and grounded by a strong and engaged Metro Parks department, Tacoma is rich in environmental assets that stakeholders have capitalized upon to support health and well-being.

Shared purpose to protect environment. There is a shared commitment to protect the environmental assets. This commitment has catalyzed collaborative initiatives, youth educational programming, and provides a template to other collective action efforts.

Use of data to motivate change. Stakeholders in various sectors have relied on indicators of well-being, from graduation rates to human service needs, to identify community priorities and better direct resources.

BARRIERS TO A CULTURE OF HEALTH

Pressure from neighboring Seattle. This pressure includes “Seattle commuters” moving in and driving up housing prices in particular, but little action or planning has occurred to address these concerns. This can have an impact on resource allocation for health, as well as possible impacts on the sense of community that has long driven collective action in Tacoma.

Lack of fully representative community participation. While there is community representation, there are concerns this participation is still not reflective of the full constituency, and people of color and low-income individuals are often not involved.

Industrial legacy and environmental pollution. Though the environmental impact is tempered by ongoing activism and programming to address the issues, the pollution remains a central issue and a constant struggle for Tacoma residents.

Current capacity challenges to addressing mental health needs. While partnerships are being initiated to tackle the burden of mental health issues in the community and new facilities are in the works, a fundamental lack of inpatient mental health capacity is perceived as a current challenge.

Emerging Community Themes

Within Tacoma there is an overarching commitment to equity and seeking community input in government processes and beyond. This is marked by legislative victories, such as resolutions for health in all policies in the local government and county health department. However, the impact on outcomes remains to be seen, especially with regard to equitable participation. Tracking the impacts of these policy changes will be essential moving forward to ensure that they are successful in getting diverse voices to the table. Exploring equity efforts at the grassroots level, outside of city government, will be important for understanding the reach of this equity focus.

There have also been some successful collaborations that have tackled specific issues, such as graduation rates, the strategic planning process for Tacoma 2025, and environmental victories through the Pullayup Watershed Initiative. These collaborations are a strong foundation for continued success as attention is turned to other issues of importance to the community, such as the lack of resources for addressing community mental health needs.

What’s Next

Tacoma has placed a notable and explicit emphasis on equity. Tracking the related initiatives, such as those from the Office of Equity and Human Rights and the rollout of Tacoma 2025, will be essential to understanding if these efforts are having their intended impact at improving outcomes for the traditionally marginalized.

A collaborative culture is also a long-standing asset in Tacoma, though two of the most influential stakeholders in the city, the Army Base and the Pullayup reservation, do not appear to be very engaged in community improvement efforts. Collaborations could evolve to leverage these two entities. Partnering with major employers may be essential, given concerns about the potential economic and housing-related pressures from “Seattle commuters.”

Given the priority to address mental health needs from the Tacoma Community Needs Assessment, monitoring the impact of the new psychiatric ward, the police and behavioral health provider collaboration, and any other emerging efforts will be important. Similarly important will be exploring the response to the “homelessness emergency” that was declared in the city.

It should be noted that we were unable to reach health care system respondents for this examination, and nonhealth care respondents’ views on the health care systems were mixed, some noting troubled pasts, and others noting involvement in health-oriented coalitions. Thus, future analyses would benefit from more discussion of health care system issues and contributions specifically.
References


