

Groundwork USA Green Space Actions Pilot Evaluation

Report Brief

With funding from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, Groundwork USA contracted with a third-party evaluator, Harder+Company Community Research, to develop a Theory of Change and design and test a participatory pilot evaluation for its Green Space Actions.

In the summer of 2018, five Groundwork Trusts piloted several evaluation tools designed to test elements of Groundwork USA's new Theory of Change. The goal of the evaluation pilot was to build a set of sustainable evaluation methods and tools for ongoing evaluation of Groundwork Trusts' Green Space Actions and get feedback from a set of Trusts on the evaluation tools developed.

Project Overview and Methods

Groundwork USA and Harder+Company Community Research identified three key evaluation questions to be addressed through this pilot:

1. *What are the facilitators and barriers to community improvements in health and equity?*
2. *How have GWUSA green space actions contributed to improving the health and equity of communities?* Six outcomes from the Groundwork USA Green Space Actions Theory of Change related to improving health and equity were selected to be measured:
 - a. More equitable access to quality green spaces
 - b. Increase in practice of healthy habits among community members
 - c. Strong social capital
 - d. Shared leadership and decision-making
 - e. A new generation of environmental and civic leaders
 - f. Supportive cross-sector alliances
3. *How do GWUSA's three strategies of Changing Places, Changing Systems, and Changing Lives, mutually reinforce one another to promote health and equity?*

Five Groundwork Trusts were selected by GWUSA to participate in the pilot evaluation based on interest, diversity of project types, varying length of time in operation, and capacity to participate during the project period. Each pilot Trust selected one specific Green Space Action as the focal point for the pilot evaluation. The five Trusts and their selected project were: Groundwork Lawrence (MA), O'Connell South Common Park; Groundwork Rhode Island, GroundCorps LandCare Program; Groundwork RVA (Richmond, VA), Manchester Climbing Wall; Groundwork Richmond (CA), Unity Park; and Groundwork Hudson Valley (NY), Van der Donck Park along the Saw Mill River.

Trusts were tasked with piloting four new evaluation tools:

- A community survey
- A stakeholder interview guide
- A trust leadership interview guide
- A resident/community partner focus group guide

Over a two month period, the five Trusts collected 121 community surveys in English and Spanish, 6 focus groups with a total of 37 participants, 23 stakeholder interviews and 14 Trust leadership interviews. The data were analyzed by the Harder+Company evaluation team and examined both at the cross-site level and the individual Trust (i.e. site-specific) level. Key findings are highlighted on Page 2.

Community-level impacts

Nearly half of survey respondents (49%) reported visiting the green space action in their community on a daily or weekly basis. On average, respondents reported that it takes 12.8 minutes to walk to the green space action from their homes. The majority (89%) feels safe visiting the project during the day, but only 33% report feeling safe visiting the project at night.

Across the three Trusts that piloted the community survey, survey respondents gave high ratings to their local Groundwork green space action’s contributions to increasing equitable access to quality green spaces, the growth of social capital in their community, and increasing their own practice of healthy habits (Exhibit 1). In general, they also rated shared leadership and decision-making in their community highly, though 80% indicated they had not given input on the Groundwork green space action in their community before or while it was being built.

Exhibit 1. Green Space Actions Contributions to Health and Equity Composite Scores

| Outcome | Definition | Composite Score (out of 5) |
|--|---|----------------------------|
| Green Space Action Impact Score | 10 item scale, measuring perceptions of the positive effects of the Groundwork Green Space Action in the community. | 3.7 |
| Strong Social Capital Score | 5-item scale, measuring perceptions of community members’ ability to come together for the good of the community to achieve common goals and preserve shared values | 3.6 |
| Increase in the Practice of Healthy Habits Score | 4-item scale, measuring perceptions of the impact of the Groundwork Green Space Action on the practice of healthy habits among community members | 3.7 |
| Shared Leadership and Decision-making | 4-item scale, measuring perceptions of the general practice of shared leadership and decision-making in their community (<i>i.e. not in context of the Groundwork Green Space Action</i>) | 3.7 |

An important note, however, is that none of the composite scores listed in Exhibit 1 was significantly correlated to how closely a respondent lived to the Green Space Action, suggesting that proximity to quality green space alone is not enough to influence these outcomes.

Focus groups and interview participants described Trusts as engaged with the community in shared-leadership and decision-making during the development of a project, but less so in sustaining engagement once a project has been built and/or activated. The challenge of sustained engagement, often due to lack of resources, also came forward as barriers to community improvements in health and equity during interviews with Trust Leadership.

I think another way we could probably get stronger in the future is to have [community engagement] on an ongoing basis vs. right before a project starts or when you're initially seeking input for a project.

–Trust Leadership Member

Participant-level impacts

During focus groups, young people working with Groundwork to build or steward green space actions reported a variety of improvements in the practice of healthy habits, including improving their eating habits, losing weight, quitting smoking and increasing physical activity.

Young people working with Groundwork also reported that the experience afforded them valuable career development opportunities, building their confidence and experience as the new generation of environmental and civic leaders. Trust Leadership similarly reflected this during interviews, citing their work in connecting youth to employment opportunities in environmental sector; inspiring youth to find environmental job opportunities; teaching youth about green spaces, raising awareness, understanding and appreciation for nature; and building leadership through education about the history of their communities.

This program actually is what drove me towards to stop smoking cigarettes because when we first started we were working outside so I started working and people were saying "How could you smoke cigarettes when you're supposed to be an environmental company?" so that slowly I just stopped smoking.

—GroundCorp Focus Group Participant

Systems-level impacts

There was strong consensus among Trust Leadership and Stakeholder interviewees that Groundwork Trusts are skilled at building supportive cross-sector alliances and forging strategic partnerships.

Trust leadership members highlighted how Groundwork often sits in the middle of important constituent groups in a community who sometimes don't understand each other and have different and sometimes competing interests, but Groundwork is able to convene and act as a neutral party in supporting important work to move forward.

Internally, Groundwork Trusts are not all on the same page about what systems-change means for their organizations, nor the degree to which they see it being realized in their work. Older Trusts are more comfortable with Changing Systems having been added to the Groundwork traditional "tagline" of Changing Places, Changing Lives, noting that it resonates with their approach to the work. Newer Trusts identify systems-change as a future goal or area for growth.

[Groundwork] has worked tirelessly to build and maintain relationships with the city, with the BIDs. I think they've done a great job of doing outreach to every layer, from community groups to government organizations to business owners.

—Stakeholder
