

Partners for Places Project Lessons Report

Project Name: *Save Our Sons Jobs Project*

- **Year Complete:** 2019
- **Local Government:** City of Knoxville, TN
- **Local Foundation:** Cornerstone Foundation of Knoxville; East Tennessee Foundation

Project Purpose

To align partners in Knoxville to advance opportunities for youth of color to succeed more equitably in local green and traditional economies.

Key Lessons Learned

Lessons learned about tools and tactics through the project that other sustainability directors could use to advance their work.

- Youth Engagement Opens Doors: Grant activities exemplified the power of youth peer-to-peer engagement as an agent of change. Once activity centered upon strengthening employment pathways through peer learning for young adults, particularly young adults of color, but this theme also emerged in the CEO Summits, which engaged high school students alongside business leaders. The student participants noted that youth involvement with area boards would help both students and boards understand the key issues impacting each other, and proposed “youth ambassadors” in both private and public industry to alert peers to employment opportunities, industry trends, and other such information. Similarly, efforts by the Change Center to eliminate transportation barriers to employment for boys and young men of color led to broader efforts to connect older adults of color with employment opportunities as well.
- Adopting a Racial Lens Takes Commitment: Despite setting a clear starting framework that established the importance of addressing racial equity, there were regular conversations within the City’s Internal Equity Committee on the question of “why race?” The persistent tension embodied in this question indicated the deep challenges of both truly understanding (and not just assuming) that addressing racial inequity can address other types of inequities and also addressing (especially in an institutional setting) racism head-on, which, in the south, can be an uncomfortable topic. Ultimately, Government Alliance for Race Equity (GARE) training for departmental leaders helped establish a more widespread common understanding of “why race?” and has ultimately set the framework for longer-term racial equity work. A lesson learned is to host this type of professional training early in internal efforts.
- “Friendly” ≠ “Equitable”: Multiple activities discussed the local culture as being “friendly, but not necessarily welcoming.” This was an important distinction particularly born out of the CEO Summits

(where companies shared their difficulties in retention because minority employees are unable to quickly connect with key resources, people, or amenities) as well as in the City’s Equity Committee. Such discussions identified a need to strengthen cultural and professional relationships and the amenities of Knoxville as a whole, not just within organizations.

Lessons for developing a collaborative process between a local government sustainability director and local place-based foundation(s).

- **Partner Coordination is Critical:** With many different efforts related to economic opportunity for youth of color happening throughout the community, coordination between groups is critical to maximizing impact. The City’s Save Our Sons program and the Change Center have actively worked to bring partners (of this grant and beyond) together to foster a spirit of collaboration between initiatives. Having staff dedicated to this type of coordination is very helpful; grant partners leveraged funding in Year 1 to bring on board a Masters of Social Work student at the University of Tennessee that supported grant activities and actively helped coordinate between partners. Grant partners are also in the process of scheduling a post-grant “A-Ha! Summit” to reflect further on opportunities to continue coordination beyond the term of the grant.

Additional Information and Resources

Read more about the City of Knoxville’s Save Our Sons program [here](#) and continuing activities through project partner, The Change Center, [here](#).