



New York City Housing Authority
Capital Projects Division | Design Department

CONNECTED COMMUNITIES INITIATIVE

Strategic Plan Executive Summary

January 2020
Prepared by Karp Strategies
Summarized by NYCHA



CURRENT

MISSION & VALUES

The Connected Communities Initiative, launched by the New York City Housing Authority (NYCHA) in 2017 and managed by NYCHA's Capital Projects Division (CPD), was created to comprehensively address community connectivity all across NYCHA's portfolio. Specifically, the Initiative aims to connect residents to opportunities and resources within and beyond the border of their developments by elevating NYCHA's urban design practices and activating its public space. By placing connectivity at the fore, the Initiative's mission is to build healthy, sustainable, equitable, and accessible NYCHA communities both physical and social - that improve resident quality of life and connection to one another and surrounding neighborhoods.

As initial efforts to embed and scale connectivity across public housing campuses gain momentum, the Initiative strives to firmly establish connectivity as a core tenet of NYCHA and any urban design partnerships that NYCHA undertakes. Organization-wide recognition and operationalization of connectivity as a value-add would cultivate greater collaboration, consistency, and transparency within the Authority as well as in communications and procedures with external partners.

PURPOSE OF THE STRATEGIC PLAN

The Strategic Plan offers a five-year roadmap of actions and tools to strengthen and elevate Connected Communities from a pilot initiative to a fully integrated philosophy of practice within NYCHA. By focusing on achievable objectives in the short-term, the Strategic Plan aims to build a foundation that positions the Initiative to achieve far-reaching, long-term outcomes.

This Strategic Plan comes at a time of innovation, experimentation, and leading-edge thinking throughout the Authority, focusing on improving current processes, leveraging existing resources, and engaging in partnerships for urban design improvements. The robust community-based design and engagement processes utilized by Connected Communities and its partners can serve as frameworks for future NYCHA projects to decentralize decision-making and elevate both resident leadership and the contextual history of communities across the five boroughs. By leveraging existing Connected Communities partnership models, the Strategic Plan aims to operationalize the practice of cultivating lasting relationships across agencies and sectors.



METHODOLOGY

In May 2019, as a result of funds granted by the Helmsley Charitable Trust, Connected Communities teamed with Karp Strategies, an urban planning and community-economic development consulting firm, to lead the development of a strategic plan. The process consisted of the following:

- **Baseline research and current data collection** about the Initiative. Research regarding financial systems, partnership models, interagency protocols, and implementation scenarios of urban design improvements surfaced strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats in the current NYCHA and Connected Communities ecosystems.
- **Interviews with NYCHA resident and staff leaders, and from key Connected Communities partner organizations**, including Green City Force (a core Farms at NYCHA partner), Opening the Edge, led by the Design Trust for Public Space; Crime Prevention through Environmental Design, led by the Mayor's Office of Criminal Justice; and Partnerships for Parks. The interviews surfaced comparative patterns and recurring themes, as well as opportunities and challenges crucial to the Initiative when formalizing its organization.
- **A Theory of Change workshop and model**, led by Karp Strategies, to map out the current state of Connected Communities and the change-making processes needed to achieve the Initiative's long-term goals. This workshop with Connected Communities leadership staff and partner stakeholders led to refine guiding principles, identify goals, and the conditions necessary for action.
- **High-level mapping analysis of select NYCHA campuses** to identify patterns of connectivity and/or isolation, and to identify criteria for future prioritization of programs or community assets by Connected Communities.
- **Participatory Action Research (PAR) workshops and evaluation**, a participant-driven research methodology in which NYCHA residents and Connected Communities staff took a leading role in developing the tools to evaluate the Initiative's outcomes, and in collecting and producing the data or findings.
- **Development of the Strategic Plan** that comprehensively integrates learnings and findings surfaced throughout the process into a streamlined document that offers clear implementation pathways for interagency protocols, partnerships, resident action, and funding opportunities.

FUTURE

THE INITIATIVE'S THEORY OF CHANGE

A Theory of Change (TOC) articulates the change an initiative seeks to make in the world. It is both a process and a product that outlines the strategies and preconditions necessary for an organization to achieve its longer-term mission. As noted in the Methodology, Connected Communities undertook the TOC process with relevant stakeholders, resulting in the adjacent outcome described in the adjacent graphic.



Connected Communities partners collaborating at the TOC workshop (Karp Strategies)

MISSION

To build healthy, sustainable, equitable, and accessible NYCHA communities - both physical and social - that improve resident quality of life, and connection to one another and surrounding neighborhoods.

IN ORDER TO/FOR



NYCHA MUST



PROBLEM STATEMENT

The current lack of physical and social connectivity at NYCHA campuses inhibits intra-resident and resident-community interaction, negatively impacts public health, increases perceptions about lack of safety, and heightens feelings of isolation.

RESOURCES

NYCHA, current Connected Communities partners, NYCHA Tenant Association, local CBOs, NYC agencies, existing NYCHA campus events



STRATEGIC APPROACHES

The following strategic approaches are intended to frame actionable next steps that Connected Communities can take to develop and formalize the Initiative, its operations, its partnerships, and the way it measures success:

- 1 | **Initiative Implementation: Standardizing the Protocols & Changing the Culture**
- 2 | **Partnerships: Working Across Departments, Agencies, and Sectors**
- 3 | **Residents & Communities: Engaging with Context in Mind**
- 4 | **Evaluation: Determining Success & Adjusting from Learnings**

They stem, in part, from the Theory of Change, as well as from interviews and background research. The recommendations below focus on achievable and aspirational steps over the next five years (each action is accompanied by a prospective timeline for completion).

Timeline Legend

-  Short-Term (<1 Year)
-  Mid-Term (1-3 Years)
-  Long-Term (3-5 Years)



01 | INITIATIVE IMPLEMENTATION

Standardizing Protocols & Changing the Culture

In order to change the culture at NYCHA surrounding the importance of connectivity, the Initiative needs a strong foundation of protocols and procedures to assert itself and clearly communicate a central message.

1.1 Cultivate existing and new champions with authority

Maintain and increase buy-in from NYCHA leadership about the importance of connectivity considering other competing priorities. Bolstering champions from the top, and across different departments, will not only help to change culture but ensure that the change survives beyond any one leader. Suggested preliminary actions to realize this objective include:



Prepare an accessible suite of materials for stakeholders (including media and resident/staff engagement) that use data and compelling narratives to communicate (A) the foundational nature of connectivity for health, safety, and the success of public housing, (B) that Connected Communities is a design approach for capital projects throughout the agency, and (C) how allies can support the Initiative.



Hold a series of targeted meetings at regular intervals, including (A) with the new Chair, and the departments within External Affairs (both Intergovernmental Relations and Communications), (B) with NYCHA leadership like regional asset managers and resident association leaders, and (C) with informal and formal leaders to meet and track the Initiative's progress.



Bring donors and partners on site visits to witness successes and the tangible results of their support.

1.2 Prioritize projects that have the greatest impact

Devote resources to or partner with projects that are likely to be built and/or those that support the design approach of Connected Communities. Proof of concept is one of the most powerful ways to build support and secure funding in the longer term. Suggested preliminary actions to realize this objective include:



Compare Connected Communities' principles against CPD's "key projects" list to ensure that significant capital projects are in line with the design approach.



Leverage existing networks for meetings with new or dormant partners.



Collaborate with NYCHA departments to determine factors of connectivity (i.e. programming) that may live outside CPD, to ensure their success.



Formalize the decision-making process by developing questions for potential partners to determine viability, including secured funding, project timeline, insurance requirements, and partners.

1.3 Leverage legal agreements to operationalize values

Continue to deploy and streamline legal agreements for partners to operate on NYCHA grounds. Formalizing and simplifying legal agreements removes barriers to entry. Suggested preliminary actions to realize this objective include:



Continue to develop close working relationships with key staff in the Legal Department, ensuring that if one person leaves, advocates for and those knowledgeable about the Initiative remain.



Work with the Legal Department and Real Estate to build connectivity-promoting design, programmatic, and engagement requirements into Permanent Affordability Commitment Together (PACT) and new construction requests for proposals (RFPs).



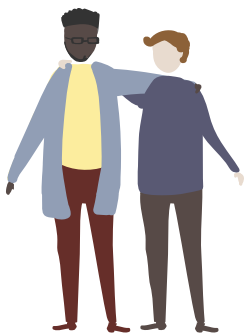
Continue to use the License Agreements previously developed, and iterate on them to ensure ease, promptness, and effectiveness.

1.4 Centralize Connected Communities as a design approach within the Capital Projects Division and Community Engagement and Partnerships departments

Devote resources to staff members who can focus on advancing connectivity-based projects while leveraging partnerships. Suggested preliminary actions to realize this objective include:




Leverage the Fund for Public Housing, or its successor, as an additional source for diversified fundraising, development, and administration. This public/non-profit model has proven effective through other agencies.



1.5 Standardize communications in and outside of NYCHA

Create communications protocols that detail how connectivity will be messaged across the Authority. Publicizing the importance of connectivity will be critical to winning supporters. Suggested preliminary actions to realize this objective include:

- 
 Develop a communication plan to guide intra-and inter-agency communications regarding Connected Communities' work. Specifically, schedule meetings with elected officials invested in this type of work.
- 
 Identify other opportunities to sit on steering committees outside of NYCHA where Connected Communities promotes its message and proactively learns about new projects.



Connected Communities boards to engage residents at Family Day (NYCHA)

02 | PARTNERSHIPS

Working Across Departments, Agencies, and Sectors

Connected Communities critically operates in partnership with other New York City agencies, non-profits, and between different Authority departments. With this model projected to continue, The Initiative needs a roadmap to work with numerous actors to implement holistic change.

2.1 Leverage and build on cross-sector partnerships

Intentionally pursue new private sector, public sector, and non-profit partnerships at multiple levels that will leverage expertise towards new funding and capacity building. Suggested preliminary actions to realize this objective include:



Maintain existing relationships with cross-agency and cross-sector partners, checking in every quarter or every six months to understand shifting priorities and/or possible projects.



Host or present at professional development events that bridge the knowledge gap between different departments within NYCHA, and other agencies.

2.2 Prioritize learning & listening with NYCHA Operations

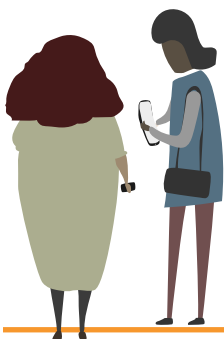
Focus on adapting the culture and processes of the Operations division to integrate connectivity, as opposed to decision-making that prioritizes quick problem resolution instead of strategy. Suggested preliminary actions to realize this objective include:



Create an open line of communications between Connected Communities and Operations staff to listen to field staff about how design impacts their job. In the first few years of this Plan's implementation, engagement should build working relationships. In the long-term, this work should result in changes to protocols/procedures.



Host professional development and learning opportunities such as workshops, webinars, and lunch and learns at borough-level meetings for NYCHA Operations leaders working in the field on a day-to-day basis.





On-the-ground caretakers at Eastchester Gardens (NYCHA)



As Connected Communities implements urban design projects, conduct post-construction evaluations with Operations staff to determine if and how this work has affected their day-to-day jobs.



Take deliberate action to cultivate supportive procedures with Operations that respect the competing priorities of team members and celebrate contributions, ensuring they are included in high-visibility project events.

2.3 Leverage existing relationships to develop projects

Continue developing projects and working on internal protocols with the strong agency and CBO partners that are already established. Suggested preliminary actions to realize this objective include:



At the beginning of each project, create a brief project charter that clearly defines roles between team members, and communication protocols to focus on content and execution.

S Develop on-boarding documents for use by different types of partners. For example, public partners may understand public procurement intimately, while non-profit partners may excel in engagement.

M Use best-in-class protocols already created by agency partners. Examples include HPD's surveys, and health evaluations from the Department of Health and Mental Hygiene.

2.4 Be proactive, not reactive

Stay apprised of agency projects in order to strategically plug into those with the most potential impact for connectivity. Suggested preliminary actions to realize this objective include:

S Formalize a clear message that can be used with agency departments about the value add of including a relevant project under the Initiative's umbrella.

M Implement a standing agenda item for meetings with the Legal Department to share requests for licensing agreements that involve planning for or implementing physical work on a site.

M Synchronize with CPD to track relevant opportunities for capital projects within NYCHA and citywide in order to plan for future investments.

M Prioritize building key relationships at City Hall and with external funders to make the case for Connected Communities across the city, and to identify opportunities based on where funding will be allocated.



Pomonok residents after a Kaboom! playground build (NYCHA)



NYCHA staff planning for the future of connectivity (NYCHA)

03 | RESIDENTS & COMMUNITIES

Engaging with Context in Mind

One of the Initiative’s central tenets is to grow resident leadership and agency, and to acknowledge the expertise that exists within communities. To foster locally grounded efforts, NYCHA must increasingly vest relevant decision-making with residents.

3.1 Meet people where they are

Design engagement processes that respect residents, employing multiple methods for residents to be heard or to participate in ways they feel comfortable, and acknowledging the mistrust some residents feel towards the Authority and design efforts today. Suggested preliminary actions to realize this objective include:




Consult local experts, including Resident Associations, service providers, or CBOs, on outreach and engagement methods. Where budget and timeline allows, co-design processes with these experts.



-  Engage residents at appropriate times in a project’s lifespan when feedback can realistically result in change that residents are able to see. Engaging early in the process also allows project teams to understand and respect contextual history and culture as projects move forward.
-  Clearly communicate project constraints and trade-offs, including timelines and budgets. Setting realistic expectations builds trust and often results in more achievable projects.
-  Ensure engagement is iterative and responsive to resident needs. Establish clear design parameters while leaving space in timelines and budgets to adjust for a strategy pivot in engagement.
-  Employ multiple platforms and avenues for resident and community engagement in design efforts, including myriad times, spaces, engagement types, and engagement lengths.

3.2 Make decisions local

Foster local leadership and provide support to NYCHA campuses that lack resident leadership via training programs and incentives. Local decision-making and involvement must come from residents who are empowered to engage on a peer-to-peer level. Suggested preliminary actions to realize this objective include:

-  Build on existing trusted relationships with community leaders, like the Resident Association at Pomonok Houses, or through cluster meetings.
-  Explore potential partnerships with organizations that have resources to build resident capacity and invest in resident leadership for planning and design processes. NYCHA’s Resident Economic Empowerment and Sustainability (REES) department can similarly serve as a platform for residents to connect with local organizations and employment opportunities towards relevant projects.
-  Host listening sessions or experience shares at priority campuses to understand resident needs in advance of any capital improvements.





Local partner, Green City Force, helps develop urban farms (NYCHA)



Align Connected Communities partnerships and engagement activities with work led by NYCHA's resident-facing departments (Community Development, Family Partnerships, Health Initiatives, Resident Engagement, and REES). Tapping into established partnerships and resident opportunities will lead to a more comprehensive understanding of campus dynamics, and who the appropriate local stakeholders are.







Find synergy between articulated resident interest and capacity, and the priorities of funders or City projects. Matching the needs of users with realistic opportunities will both drive design from the bottom up and build community trust when projects are realized.



3.3 Balance activations addressing short- & long-term goals

Support a mix of projects that will address immediate resident concerns with those that work towards more nuanced connectivity objectives. For all stakeholders, Connected Communities' projects must illuminate the way in which good design improves quality of life. A mix of activation types - with short- and long-term benefits - will increase trust in NYCHA. Suggested preliminary actions to realize this objective include:

-  Host service projects that beautify public spaces and explain the connection to the Initiative's mission. Encourage community partners to join in. These events will build awareness and recruit new champions.
-  Undertake early projects that address resident concerns about physical and environmental disrepair, like trash overflow areas. In so doing, explain the direct link between these improvements and connectivity.
-  Balancing short-term activations, continue to work on projects that will have long lasting effects on social cohesion and physical connection.
-  Acknowledge and record any additional concerns that are surfaced by residents that may be outside of the original project scope. When possible, leave flexibility in project resources to potentially pivot towards addressing these concerns.



Hester Street engages residents around a NYCHA led pilot project

4 | EVALUATION

Determining Success & Adjusting from Learnings

The aforementioned approaches are only as good as their ability to work for both NYCHA staff and residents. Connectivity is not a static thing but rather a transforming concept that changes with residents' needs in their built environment. To gain and maintain success, Connected Communities must implement evaluations to compare cause and effect.

4.1 Measure impact and collect feedback

Use evaluation tools and garner feedback from partners and residents on a regular basis. Analyzing these indicators will show where efforts are working and where they need to be shifted. Suggested preliminary actions to realize this objective include:



Annually assess one to two practices for iteration, and prioritize those that contribute to the Initiative's funding or relationship building in communities.



Discuss feedback with different levels of NYCHA staff and residents to transparently communicate (A) how change is happening in a positive way, (B) what things are not yet occurring, and (C) if change is happening in a negative way, what actions are being taken towards resolution.



Deploy evaluation tools on a regular basis, whether biannually or annually, or on a project-by-project basis.



Establish formal and informal monitoring processes with partners, including agencies, residents, or CBOs to learn valuable information and create buy in for success.

4.2 Change the narrative around safety and security

Expend additional effort to study safety and security, beyond the evaluation tools previously-described. Reversing perceptions of lack of safety will not only remove barriers between communities and NYCHA residents, but will promote connection within campuses. Suggested preliminary actions to realize this objective include:



Compare campus safety data against city trends. Partner with the Mayor's Office of Criminal Justice to evaluate whether campus safety is increasing or decreasing at the same rate as the city.



Facilitate honest conversations about why residents may not feel safe in their campuses, even though statistics may indicate otherwise.



Partner with the Public Safety division to have residents conduct safety audits at targeted campuses to judge this facet of their built environment. Audits may occur before and after projects occur, or simply as a way to baseline perceptions.

4.3 Continue making the case for and promoting Connected Communities

Employ the data collected through evaluations to continue to make the case for connectivity. Our opinions are often swayed by data, and the more Connected Communities is able to connect design interventions to positive health or socioeconomic outcomes, the more the Initiative will gain traction. Suggested preliminary actions to realize this objective include:



Update Connected Communities' core suite of materials as-needed. Balance quantitative and qualitative information to ensure accessibility and interest.



With data collected, generate positive press on behalf of NYCHA about Connected Communities' progress. Work with the Communications department and funders to identify the right outlets and journalists with whom to build ongoing relationships.



Investigate and share best practices from housing authorities across the country and the world. Compare Connected Communities' information and lessons learned to these examples in order to continue innovating.



Employ data in grant proposals and to raise funds for Connected Communities.



CONCLUSION

The Connected Communities Initiative’s overarching mission is to build healthy, sustainable, equitable, and accessible NYCHA communities - both physical and social - that improve resident quality of life and connection to one another and surrounding neighborhoods. In this way, the Initiative has a unique and feasible opportunity to capitalize on emerging work at the intersection of public health, design, and planning in order to break down barriers, create dynamic spaces, and showcase the innovative thinking occurring at NYCHA. To do this, Connected Communities must first change the culture at the Authority in order to realize benefits for residents and adjacent communities.

This Strategic Plan is intended to provide a set of actions, created in collaboration with Connected Communities leadership staff and partner stakeholders, to do just that, including improve current processes, leverage existing resources, and create and maintain partnerships for urban design improvements over the next five years. The Plan should promote models of success that inform and catalyze current and subsequent design and community-based initiatives throughout and across NYCHA campuses. It should be treated as a living document, subject to course corrections along the way.

To operationalize this Plan, Connected Communities leadership should prioritize those actions that are immediately feasible and can then be parlayed into subsequent endeavors once the Initiative achieves greater sustainability and formality. This kind of sequencing is critical, especially for actions that will require additional resources and collaboration with other divisions, agencies, organizations, and individuals. Annual reviews of progress against each of the four strategic objectives, as well as a concerted mid-term assessment of the strategy in Year 3 and a major review in Year 5, should be conducted to evaluate the effectiveness of the current Plan in meeting its objectives.

Through the successful implementation of this plan, the Initiative will strengthen and elevate itself from a pilot initiative to a fully integrated philosophy of practice within NYCHA - ultimately further cultivating connectivity, positive health, and well-being throughout NYCHA communities and the City of New York.



ENDNOTES

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