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TCI Re-envisioning Study: Moab Community Report



College of Humanities & Social Sciences
Transforming Communities Institute
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About the TCI Re-envisioning Study

Transforming Communities Initiative, now known as Transforming Communities Institute (TCI), was founded in 2014 by faculty in the Department of Social Work at Utah State University. TCI aimed to conduct research in and for the community while teaching the next generation of social work leaders to be data-driven and civically engaged.

After several years of successful projects and changes in Utah communities, a need existed to re-examine the mission and strategy of TCI. Recently, TCI faculty leadership petitioned USU to advance from an initiative to an institute, with confirmation in February 2022. As part of this growth process, TCI was reimagined through a community-engaged research project to ensure relevancy and maximum impact in Utah communities.

The project was a mixed-methods study that sought to understand 1) the social challenges and resources of Utah communities and 2) ways in which TCI may integrate more fully into communities to meet their needs and expand on their strengths. Survey and focus group data were collected from community decision makers and non-profit leaders who work in Blanding, Brigham City, Logan, Moab, Price, Tooele, and Uintah Basin. The present report shares the survey and focus group findings from the Moab area.

Survey Findings

For the Moab community, there were 16 Community Decision Maker respondents and 42 Nonprofit respondents. The mean age of Decision Maker participants was 44.50 (SD= 11.65), while the mean age for Nonprofit participants was 43.86 (SD=11.80). The mean time working in the community for Decision Makers was 18.21 (SD= 16.68) and 13.56 (SD=8.16) for Nonprofit participants. About 75% of respondents were female. All Community Decision makers identified as white, and 81% of Nonprofit respondents also identified as white. Just over half (56.3%) of Decision Maker participants earned a college degree, while most of the Nonprofit participants had an advanced or professional degree (75%). When asked about yearly household income, most participants in both groups reported earning between \$50,000 to \$74,999.

For Decision Makers, 81.3% somewhat to strongly agreed that community members have a strong voice in their community; however, that number drops to 52.8% for nonprofit respondents. Over 75% of both decision maker and nonprofit participants report seeing USU as an asset to their community. However, while 63.9% of nonprofits said they felt connected to the USU campus in their area, that number dropped to 31.3% for Decision Makers.



*subtracting the overall satisfaction score from the importance scores



Focus Group Findings

In the focus group for the Moab area, there were six participants: one government official; two healthcare workers; and three nonprofit workers. The three topics that the group chose to discuss were issues related to housing, jobs, and childcare.

Housing

Like other communities across the state, Moab is facing a challenging housing market with little affordable housing options. The participants indicated that industries across the spectrum, but especially those in the service (e.g., teachers, nurses, police) and hospitality (e.g., resorts and restaurants) industries, are struggling to recruit and maintain workers because they do not have places to live. A few group members shared that short-term rentals (e.g., AirBNBs) have contributed to the low housing stock. These short-term rentals prove problematic, as one participant expressed that:



“...a lot of housing has gone to overnight rentals. I think everybody knows that. You know if you’re renting your place for 100 bucks or 300 bucks a night that’s a whole lot more than you can make with one family or one individual... I had a friend of mine who bought a camp trailer. She was living in her car, and she could have died from a dental abscess, was hospitalized, was living in her car, bought a camper trailer...there was no place to put her camp trailer. So, she lived in my driveway with no utilities until something opened up...” (Participant 6)

Other contributing factors, as shared by the group, include people from out-of-town or state purchasing second homes for vacation as well as seasonal workers who are willing to pay more for rentals. Further, a few participants noted that the local government’s poor planning has also fed into the housing challenges of Moab, such as zoning rules and lack of incentives for developers to build affordable housing units or single-family homes.

According to participants, the work to address lack of affordable housing options and homelessness is left to community or nonprofit agencies, like Housing Authority of Southeastern Utah, the Moab Community Land Trust, and Community Rebuilds. These agencies fundraise and apply for and receive federal and state dollars to build homes directed at low-income residents. However, there are some trials related to the work of these agencies, such as a few residents buying affordable housing units and then selling for a much higher price later or turning them into short-term rentals. While this type of instance happens occasionally, it happens much less than public discourse would indicate. Participant 1, who is a government official, addressed this concern from the group:



“...I think that they’re looking really long and hard at the types of deed restrictions and other mechanisms that would make it fair for a homeowner but also sort of disincentivize that type of activity...” (Participant 1)



Jobs & Childcare

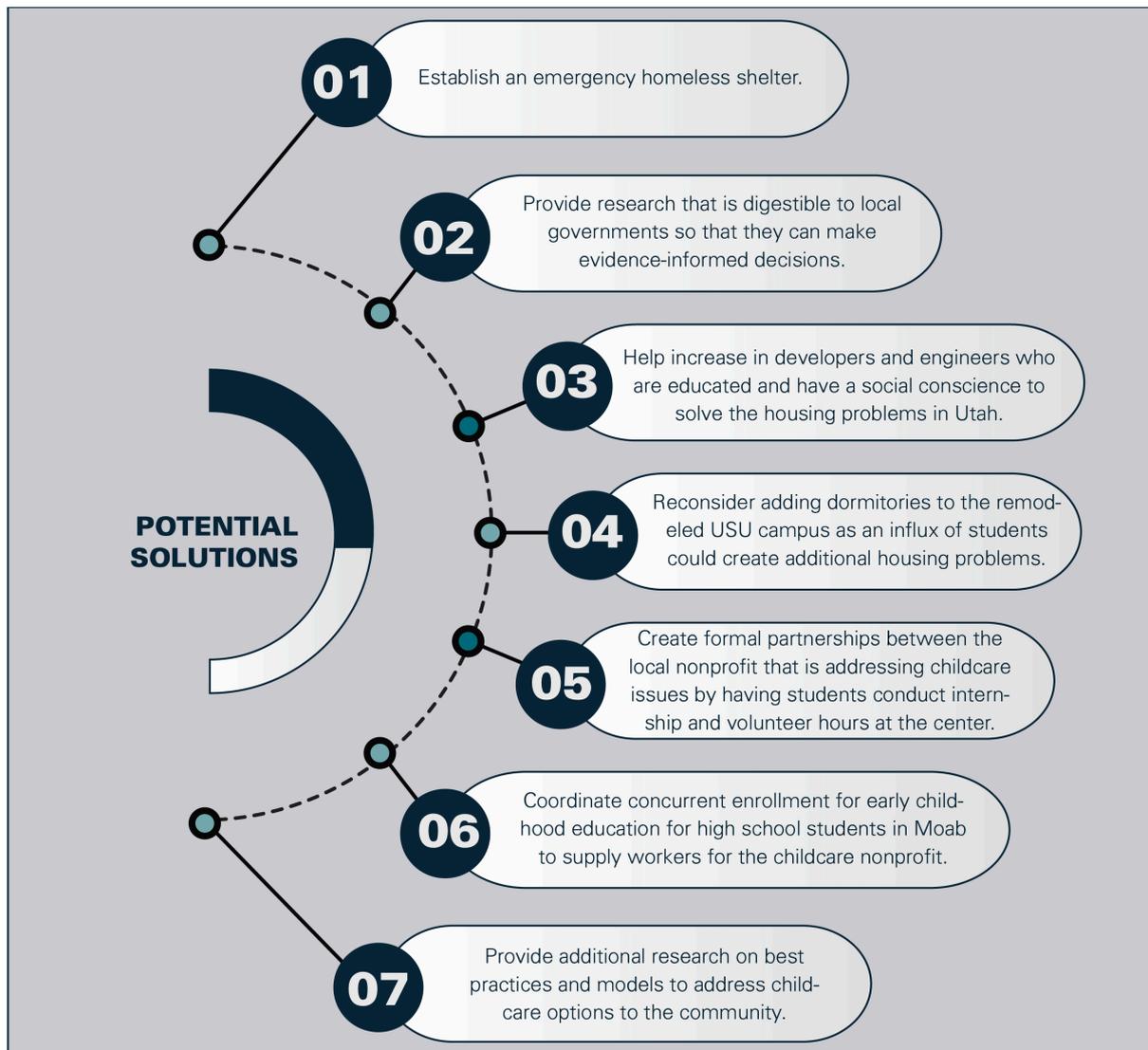
Much of the jobs available in the Moab area are tourism or hospitality-based, which do not pay high wages. While there are a few higher paying opportunities (e.g., Park Services, healthcare), Moab needs an influx of economic development to support the rising costs of housing and other basic needs. One of the major limitations noted by the government participant in the group is the lack of high-speed internet. Without quality internet connectivity, larger corporations will not relocate or promote remote positions in the Moab area. Another key issue with smaller employers in the area is the lack of benefits provided.

“...we convinced organizations and businesses to essentially offer paid time off to visit the Free Health Clinic so that, if these organizations aren’t able to offer health insurance because they don’t have a workforce over 50, they don’t have a permanent workforce, they can just send them to us and get services free. But, unfortunately, we are ultimately a free health-clinic we have volunteer providers.” (Participant 4)

One participant surmised that the lack of housing and childcare options is also connected to the economic development issues. If their community had affordable housing and childcare options, people would be more apt to take a lower-paying position because they could afford to live. While the county now has free preschool and kindergarten, those children who are not school-age often do not have places to go while parents are working.

Potential Solutions Proposed by Communities

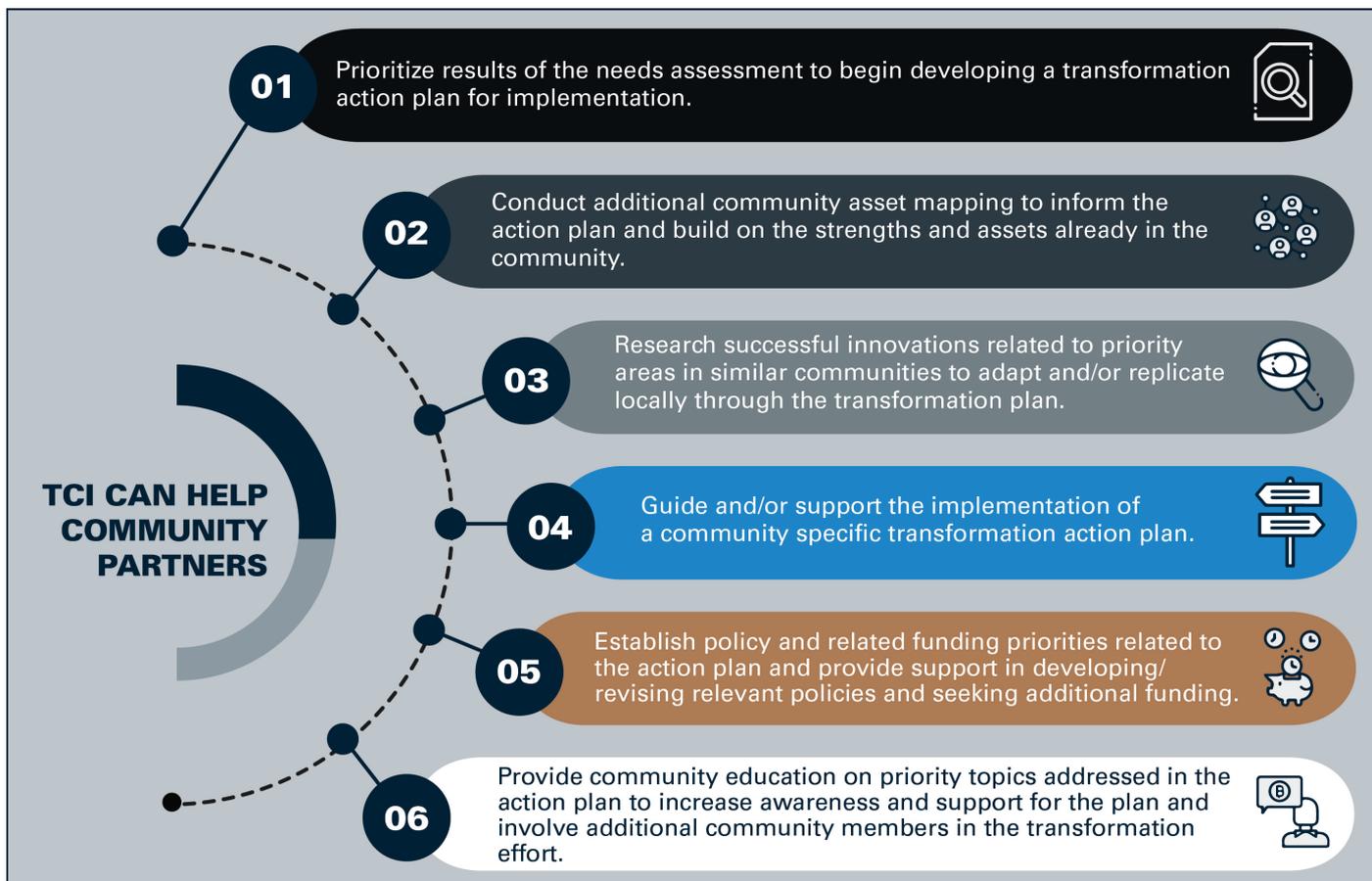
Participants discussed potential solutions and ways that USU, TCI, and other entities could help address challenges in the Moab area.





How TCI Can Help

At TCI, we are committed to working with and supporting our community partners through all stages of transformation. This includes working with key stakeholders from initial assessment to implementation of innovative ideas, all the way through to evaluating transformation outcomes. We are interested in providing our community partners with actionable suggestions on how they might apply the results of the most current round of community assessments to advance transformation activities at the local level. Below are several ways that TCI can support key stakeholders to build on the results of this report to cultivate change in their communities:



As community partners consider the next steps for their communities to take in creating meaningful change, TCI is ready to collaborate intentionally and effectively to improve community-identified key outcomes. Together, we can build vibrant, strong, resilient, and inclusive communities where all Utahns can thrive.

To read the full report of the TCI Re-envisioning study, please visit:

<https://chass.usu.edu/social-work/transforming-communities-institute/>

To connect with TCI, reach out to our director, Dr. Jayme Walters, at jayme.walters@usu.edu or 435-797-7693.