

Project Summary

The St. Lucie Upward Mobility Project is an initiative of St. Lucie County intended to boost mobility from poverty and ensure that prosperity is shared by all residents. Through this project, the County Core Team partnered with a diverse set of community stakeholders to address inequities in economic and social outcomes and respond to the community's needs. This work focuses on the priority areas of housing stability; education and literacy; financial well-being and income; and healthy and opportunity-rich neighborhoods.

A VISION FOR UPWARD MOBILITY

The St. Lucie County Core Team's vision for this work is centered around uniting residents, community advocates, elected officials, government agencies, nonprofits, businesses, service providers, and educators in developing opportunities and promoting the equitable growth and upward mobility of all residents. The Core County Team has engaged these many entities and residents to participate in selecting priorities for creating the Upward Mobility Action Plan along with establishing the goals and strategies required to implement the plan. The team has strived to develop a plan that is relevant, sustainable, resilient, and based on data, and that can evolve with the changing needs of the community.

WHO IS INVOLVED?

St. Lucie County convened a Core Stakeholder team, made up of community leaders and service providers, who created three advisory committees based off of the three Mobility Metrics Drivers. The Core Stakeholder Team and the advisory committees helped create the community engagement plan with

ST. LUCIE COUNTY GOALS

HOUSING STABILITY

Increase short and long-term housing stability and the overall health and well-being of the families in St. Lucie County.

EDUCATION AND LITERACY

Improve early literacy outcomes for adequate learning in primary and secondary schools and into adulthood.

FINANCIAL WELL-BEING AND INCOME

Bring awareness and accessibility to jobs that pay a living wage by increasing education, fostering partnerships, and removing barriers to success.

HEALTHY AND OPPORTUNITY-RICH NEIGHBORHOODS

Citizens live in neighborhoods that are physically and environmentally safe and provide reasonable access to services.

the goal of holding a series of data walks. The data walks were a way to engage residents and obtain community feedback on the data and priority areas that the Mobility Action Plan will address.

UPWARD MOBILITY INSIGHTS

Members of the St. Lucie County Core Team used a process that centered the voices and perspectives of county residents to guide the priorities for the Upward Mobility project. The team hosted four data walks during which community stakeholders reflected on the Mobility Metrics and local data to identify which metrics the Mobility Action Plan should address through the strategic actions. This process led to the selection of four priority areas as most pressing for St. Lucie County.

- **Housing stability:** The lack of affordable housing hinders upward mobility by undermining financial security and creating a feeling of powerlessness. Housing data in St. Lucie County show that residents with extremely low incomes experience high rent burden, with an average 71 percent of their income being spent on rent. Further, compared with similar counties, St. Lucie has the highest share of public-school children in 3rd through 12th grade who experience homelessness during the school year. Such housing instability undermines financial stability, hinders people's sense of belonging, and can contribute to unemployment and financial insecurity in adulthood. By increasing housing stability, St. Lucie County can improve residents' financial success as well as their sense of being powerful and valued in their community.
- **Education and literacy:** Early-grade literacy skills are the foundation for school success and for the ability to learn and earn in adulthood. Early education data from St. Lucie County's school districts indicated racial disparities in third-grade literacy. Furthermore, only 49 percent of St. Lucie students show kindergarten readiness, which implies that social and cognitive development and preparation are lacking as students begin formal schooling. Ensuring equitable access to community resources and opportunities will help improve disparities of literacy scores at the third-grade level and improve kindergarten readiness.
- **Financial well-being and income:** Compared with other counties in Florida, St. Lucie's median income is middle to low, and great disparities exist in the median income among Black residents (around \$37,000), nonwhite Hispanic residents (around \$46,000), and white residents (around \$53,000). Nearly 16 percent of children in St. Lucie are experiencing poverty, and nearly half of county households struggle to cover the cost of living. Although the unemployment rate is only 3.8 percent, the average job in St. Lucie pays less than the cost of living. These conditions mean families in St. Lucie struggle to pay daily expenses, let alone to plan for their futures.
- **Healthy and opportunity-rich neighborhoods:** Environmental trauma and exposure to crime can have adverse effects on personal development, health, and decisionmaking that undermine individuals' upward mobility. Among comparable counties in Florida, St. Lucie has the highest air quality with the least exposure to toxins harmful to human health. St.

Lucie County has a rate of exposure to both violent and property crimes (230 and 1,600 incidents per 100,000 people) similar to that of its peer counties. Community engagement efforts solicited feedback from St. Lucie County residents that prioritized improvements in local transportation, because transportation was identified as a key factor undermining community access to school, day care, and other mobility-supporting infrastructure.

KEY STRATEGIC ACTIONS

HOUSING STABILITY

- 1 Provide training and assistance to increase housing stability
- 2 Create Community Hubs to provide wraparound services and raise awareness of available resources
- 3 Hire and/or train local Community Navigators who will advise residents on the criteria necessary to qualify for varying programs and services

EDUCATION

- 1 Improve kindergarten readiness and third-grade literacy scores

FINANCIAL WELL-BEING AND INCOME

- 1 Businesses, workforce training organizations, the school district, and colleges collaborate on training and apprenticeship programs to include at-risk youth
- 2 Provide training and support for local, small, and minority-owned businesses, especially in underserved neighborhoods
- 3 Expand opportunities for childcare for families who might not otherwise qualify for existing services

HEALTHY AND OPPORTUNITY-RICH NEIGHBORHOODS

- 1 Increase broadband access in underserved neighborhoods and redevelop neighborhoods through the retrofit of greenways, trails, and sidewalks
- 2 Improve public transportation access to jobs, schools, parks, and other essential destinations
- 3 Collaborate with local law enforcement to build mutual trust and create safer communities

WHAT'S NEXT?

The St. Lucie County Core team will convene an oversight board consisting of one elected official each from the County, the City of Fort Pierce, and the City of Port St. Lucie; one community member; one junior senior high school student; and one representative from each mobility driver workgroup. The Mobility Action Plan Oversight Board meets a twice a year to discuss the budget for the overall plan, review the progress of each strategic action, and report their findings and any anticipated budget changes to the stakeholders. The St. Lucie Core team will also ensure that stakeholders responsible for the completion of each strategic action adhere to the reporting guidelines outlined in the Mobility Action Plan.