



Tree Equity Handbook

A Practical Guide to Closing the Canopy Gap Between Neighborhoods

ACTIVITY 3.2

→ Community Insights

Toolkit 3: Coalition Action Planning

Issued November 2025



Activity 3.2: Community Insights

Toolkit 3 Overview:

Coalition Action Planning

Achieving Tree Equity is a crucial — and enormous — undertaking. By diligently engaging community voices to build a unified strategy, your coalition can move confidently toward its goals, one step at a time.

Begin with community engagement planning to ensure all perspectives are thoughtfully included from the start. Next, conduct a comprehensive Tree Equity Needs Assessment to evaluate the state of the urban forest, assess current approaches to equity and community engagement, and review existing activities and policies. With that groundwork laid, you can formulate a Coalition Action Plan that operationalizes your goals and reflects the community's needs, priorities and contributions.

Activity Map

→ [Community Engagement Plan](#)

Community Insights

→ [Tree Equity Needs Assessment](#)

→ [Coalition Action Plan](#)

Community Insights



Overview & Basic Steps

Local knowledge is data. Engage with community members to uncover perspectives that can only be observed by people who live in or have a deep understanding of the community. This information is crucial for refining priorities. It provides powerful evidence to deepen the rationale for the work.

Before starting this activity, you might need:

- Priority neighborhoods identified using Tree Equity Score → [Activity 1.1](#)

Instructions

- 1 Use your community's Tree Equity Score data to identify priority neighborhoods (see [Toolkit 1](#)).
- 2 Hold “semi-structured” conversations to gather insights from community members in priority neighborhoods. Complete one **Community Insights Worksheet** ([page 6](#)) for each interview, survey, focus group, etc.
- 3 Summarize your findings from conversations in step 2 using the **Neighborhood Profile Worksheet**. This worksheet will help you identify key insights and common themes from all the community members you've spoken to. (*Note: If you are gathering insights from multiple neighborhoods, fill out one Neighborhood Profile Worksheet for each neighborhood.*)
- 4 Share your findings with the coalition core team and back to participants, and use the data you've acquired to either maintain or adjust the priority rankings of each neighborhood.

Suggested Time: 4–6 weeks

Level of Difficulty: Challenging

Participants: 2–4 individuals with community engagement expertise; review by coalition core team

After you complete this activity:

- Use the information to inform your Tree Equity Needs Assessment. → [Activity 3.3](#)
- Develop a community-informed Coalition Action Plan. → [Activity 3.4](#)

TOOLKIT 3: Community Insights | Activity 2 – WORKSHEET 1



Collect Community Insights

Respect community members' time and expertise.

- Be clear about the purpose and intentions of your engagement.
- Do your best to meet each person where they are so they can participate more easily.
- Be clear that each person has the option to decline to participate.
- Ask what each person would like to see as an outcome of sharing their expertise.
- Prioritize the relationship over the information.
- Get written permission to share personal quotes and anecdotes.
- Follow up with a thank you as soon as possible.
- Allow your interviewees the chance to amend the information they provided.
- Share the Neighborhood Profiles with the people who have provided input when the project is completed. When you do, be clear about how the Neighborhood Profiles will be used and what you hope to achieve.

Pick the right format.

You will get the best results from one-on-one conversations — whether an in-person meeting, a phone or video call, a canvassing visit or an informal conversation that develops naturally when out in the field. Adjust the setting and structure of your discussions to suit community members' needs and preferences. You can also solicit feedback in group settings, such as smaller focus groups or community workshops.

Talk to enough people.

Once you have interviewed several people, you will begin to hear recurring themes. Your goal is to interview enough people to reach saturation on those themes. This might be achieved in just a few conversations, or it might take more than a dozen. Research shows this process will usually not exceed more than 20–30 conversations.

“Semi-structure” the conversation.

Use the main conversation prompts in the **Community Insights Worksheet** ([page 6](#)) to get an overview, then revisit topics where you want to dig deeper. You can use the additional discussion prompts on page 26 to guide your more detailed discussion points. Ask follow-up questions like:

- “What’s your perspective on...?”
- “What else?”
- “Any other reasons for...?”
- “Tell me more about...”
- “Can you elaborate on...?”

Remember this is a human conversation, not an interrogation! Make sure your interviewees feel comfortable sharing their thoughts, ideas, questions and concerns. Develop a rapport and focus on building a relationship rather than simply gaining information.

Practice active listening.

Arrive prepared to listen and learn. Be curious and respond outwardly with genuine and open-minded interest. Resist the urge to educate! You are here to learn. Encourage your interviewee to talk for the majority of the time.

Check your assumptions.

Consider how your lived experience, privileges and knowledge base influence how you make decisions and how you approach new information. Practicing self-awareness will help you keep an open mind to differences and be more empathetic to other perspectives. Don't be too attached to certain expectations or try to steer the conversation toward specific results. You may learn surprising and unexpected insights that inspire new questions, creative solutions and stronger outcomes.



When you hear a position, dig deeper for underlying interests.

People tend to express their needs through positions — suggestions or demands that are presented as the best (or only) way to solve a problem. These often come as statements like, “I want [X] to happen” or “For this to be successful we have to do [X].” When you hear a position, try to understand the underlying interests — needs, desires, concerns or fears — behind it. This will open the door to creative problem solving when multiple stakeholders have different initial positions but shared interests, and can lead to more durable solutions.

The best way to understand the interests that drive positions is to ask “Why?” For example:

- “Can you share why that’s important to you?”
- “Can you help me understand why...?”
- “I’m hearing your concerns about [X]. Can you break that down for me?”

Be empathetic and signal your curiosity. Find out how people feel about an issue and why their position is important to them.

Community Insights Worksheet

Fill out one worksheet per conversation. See discussion prompts on the next page for more specific questions and follow-ups that can help guide your discussions.



Block Group ID

Neighborhood Name

Conversation Format

(One-on-one interview, community meeting, focus group, etc.)

Name(s) of Conversation Participant(s)

How does the tree canopy in this neighborhood compare to other areas in town?

What do you think influences the amount and health of trees in this neighborhood?

Continued on
next page.

Community Insights Worksheet (Continued)



What personal experiences or observations do you have about how trees (or absence of trees) impact your quality of life?

Do you believe your neighborhood needs more trees? Why or why not?

Any concerns about adding, caring for or protecting trees in this neighborhood?



Volunteers at American Forests' tree planting event with GreenBiz 2020 attendees with Microsoft employees in Phoenix, AZ

Discussion Prompts

Use these suggested questions and clarifications to guide your conversations. Greater specificity from community members will give you more useful data.

How does the tree canopy in this neighborhood compare to other areas in town?

- Does your area have enough trees? Why or why not?
- How healthy and cared for are trees in your area?
- How do trees affect your everyday life or your kids' everyday life?
- How do you like the parks near your home? Do they have enough trees and greenery?

What do you think influences the amount and health of trees in this neighborhood?

- Historically, have you noticed any changes in the trees in your area? Why do you think those changes have occurred? (Economic reasons, environmental reasons, etc.)
- What kind of tree care have you observed in your area?
- What is your experience with organizations or programs wanting to plant or remove trees?

What personal experiences or observations do you have about how trees (or absence of trees) impact your quality of life?

- How do you feel about the trees in your community?
- How do the trees in your community affect your well-being? Your mood?
- Do trees in your community have cultural significance?
- What do trees mean to you? What role have they played in your life?
- Can you share any favorite personal memories about trees in your area?
- Can you recall if trees have ever helped you or your family stay cool on hot summer days?
- How well are you able to keep your home cool in the summer?

Do you believe your neighborhood needs more trees? Why or why not?

- Are there places in your community that need more trees? Where?
- Are there places in your community where tree care is needed? Where?
- In your opinion, do you think the area you live in would benefit from more trees? Why or why not?
- What existing challenges or conditions could trees help address for residents of this area?
- Do you believe tree planting in this neighborhood aligns with broader community goals or values? How so?

Any concerns about adding, caring for or protecting trees in this neighborhood?

- Are there any specific issues or considerations you think should be kept in mind when discussing tree preservation or planting?
- Have you had any concerns about who is caring for the trees in your area and how they are being cared for?
- Do you have any other concerns about the lived environment in your neighborhood? This could include heat, safety, noise, air quality, water cleanliness, extreme weather or something else.

How To Use the Information

The insights you collect through this exercise will be valuable tools to your coalition going forward. Review each **Community Insights Worksheet** ([page 6](#)) to highlight key insights and common themes, then summarize your findings using the **Neighborhood Profile Worksheet** ([page 10](#)).

Any themes you identify will be critical for refining coalition priorities and meeting stakeholders' needs. Themes can also inform backbone messaging for your outreach and engagement strategy.

These insights can also provide powerful, data-driven evidence to help communicate community support and the rationale for the work. Insights and figures from these profiles can strengthen funding requests or project reports. Individual interviewees' statements can become powerful testimonials to use in presentations, marketing materials, media pitches and grant reports. (Be sure to obtain written permission to use community members' words in your communications.)

With your newly gained tools and insights, you can make a strong data-driven plan for Tree Equity in your community.

See next page for the fillable neighborhood profile

Groundwork Rhode Island Capstone Planting
Pawtucket and Central Falls, Rhode Island



TOOLKIT 3: Community Insights | Activity 2 – WORKSHEET 2

Neighborhood Profile Worksheet

Synthesize the information gathered in all Community Profile Worksheets in a given neighborhood and summarize key insights, quotes, themes and concerns here. Complete one Neighborhood Profile Worksheet per neighborhood.



Block Group ID	Neighborhood Name								
<p>Tree Equity Score</p> <table border="0"> <tr> <td>Tree canopy cover</td> <td>Children and seniors</td> </tr> <tr> <td>People of color</td> <td>Health burden</td> </tr> <tr> <td>People in poverty</td> <td>Linguistic isolation</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Unemployment rate</td> <td>Heat disparity</td> </tr> </table>		Tree canopy cover	Children and seniors	People of color	Health burden	People in poverty	Linguistic isolation	Unemployment rate	Heat disparity
Tree canopy cover	Children and seniors								
People of color	Health burden								
People in poverty	Linguistic isolation								
Unemployment rate	Heat disparity								
<p>How does the tree canopy in this neighborhood compare to other areas in town?</p>									
<p>What do you think influences the amount and health of trees in this neighborhood?</p>									

Continued on next page.

Neighborhood Profile Worksheet (Continued)



What personal experiences or observations do you have about how trees (or absence of trees) impact your quality of life?

Do you believe your neighborhood needs more trees? Why or why not?

Any concerns about adding, caring for or protecting trees in this neighborhood?

Recommended priority ranking of this neighborhood based on local knowledge

Highest

High

Moderate

Low

None



Activity 3.2: Community Insights

Toolkit 3: Coalition Action Planning

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