

# URBAN STRATEGIES MEMBER PROFILE

## Urban Strategies Incorporated



Organization type: Fair Housing and Human Capital Development Organization

<b>Location: headquartered in St. Louis, Missouri</b>	<b>Population<sup>1</sup>: Low- to Moderate-Wealth Families</b>																
	<table border="1"> <caption>Racial and Ethnic Composition</caption> <thead> <tr> <th>Race/Ethnicity</th> <th>Percentage</th> </tr> </thead> <tbody> <tr> <td>African American</td> <td>71.4%</td> </tr> <tr> <td>More than one Race</td> <td>15.8%</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Other</td> <td>6.5%</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Hawaiian or Pacific Islander</td> <td>0.7%</td> </tr> <tr> <td>American Indian or Alaska Native</td> <td>0.6%</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Asian</td> <td>0.4%</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Caucasian or White</td> <td>4.5%</td> </tr> </tbody> </table>	Race/Ethnicity	Percentage	African American	71.4%	More than one Race	15.8%	Other	6.5%	Hawaiian or Pacific Islander	0.7%	American Indian or Alaska Native	0.6%	Asian	0.4%	Caucasian or White	4.5%
Race/Ethnicity	Percentage																
African American	71.4%																
More than one Race	15.8%																
Other	6.5%																
Hawaiian or Pacific Islander	0.7%																
American Indian or Alaska Native	0.6%																
Asian	0.4%																
Caucasian or White	4.5%																
<b>Size</b>	<b>Year Founded</b>																
<p>Supports <b>35,000+</b> low- to moderate-wealth families across the U.S., including <b>51,000</b> school-age children.</p>	<p>Urban Strategies, Inc. was founded in <b>1978</b>.</p>																



### How does USI work toward desegregation?

Segregated neighborhoods and schools are the result of decades of discriminatory policies, urban development, and economic segregation. Urban Strategies, Inc. (USI) is a national non-profit organization with extensive experience in the design and implementation of place-based community and economic development strategies in communities undergoing comprehensive neighborhood transformation. USI executes strategies to address housing segregation, improve educational performance in high poverty schools, support economic empowerment, and provide individualized family support.

USI uses various multi-layered strategies, resources and tools to address the long-term impacts of segregation, poverty, and community disinvestment. These include partnering with local and national organizations to funnel economic resources into disinvested communities, increase access to homeownership opportunities, provide financial capital to jump start business development in under-served communities, facilitate the mobility of families with vouchers who wish to move as a result of community development, support growth and diversity in underperforming neighborhood schools, and collaborate with district leaders to advance educational equity.

<sup>1</sup> USI. (2021). Addressing Social Determinants and the Culture of Health: 2021 Impact Report.

---

“Decades-old discriminatory housing policies have had a lasting effect in the neighborhoods where we work. The children, families and communities we serve have experienced complex, multi-generational, and substantial disparities in education, health, income, wealth, and upward mobility. We deliberately work at the intersection of housing and education by partnering with school districts, neighborhood schools and cross-sector partners to drive equitable educational outcomes for children and communities.”

—Tyronda Minter, Vice President, Education Initiatives, USI and Annie E. Casey Fellow

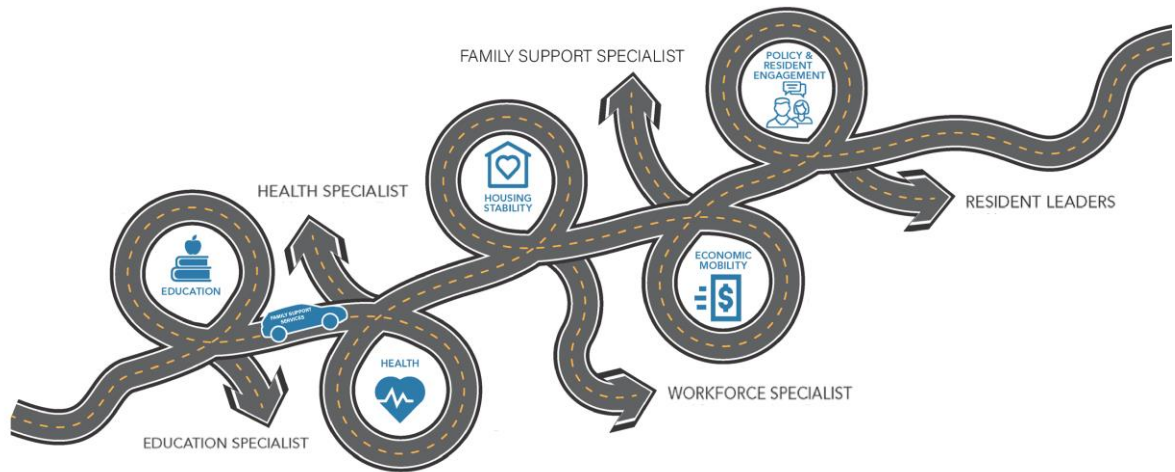
---

**Place-based Approach.** USI addresses segregation by applying a place-based approach that promotes inclusive neighborhood, economic, and human development. USI implements adaptive strategies and applies dynamic processes and action steps to remain flexible and modify based on local context when understanding and meeting community and family needs. For example, during housing redevelopment in identified neighborhoods, USI provides support to families and students navigating the relocation and mobility process. After the development is complete, USI then supports families’ transition back into their original neighborhoods if they so choose. In their role on various [Choice Neighborhood Initiative projects](#), funded by the U.S. Department of Housing & Urban Development (HUD), USI supports over 35,000 families with low to moderate incomes as they navigate housing choices and relocation in 41 communities in 28 U.S. cities.

**Elevating Community Voice.** USI recognizes that the most critical voice in community transformation belongs to residents and local stakeholders, and success is not sustainable without it. USI’s *community engagement* process ensures that solutions are responsive to community members’ priorities and concerns. They work to understand community needs by listening to residents and partnering with them before, during, and long after community redevelopment. USI engages resident leadership to understand historical context within each community, and they build trust by engaging community members in traditional (i.e., flyers, door knocking, phone calls, etc.) and non-traditional (skip tracing, current technology and social media, etc.) efforts to assess neighborhood conditions and identify services that resident families need.

**Family Support.** USI understands that when families have access to services that improve their physical, mental, and economic well-being, they can thrive. USI’s **family support services** strategy (see Figure 1) blends *community engagement* and *cross-sector partnerships* to offer services and programming to households in the community being served. This document spotlights ways that USI uses cross-sector collaborations to address desegregation in its housing-education initiatives. USI’s family support services strategy begins with a comprehensive assessment of each family to identify needs, assets, and goals related to housing stability, income and employment, health, and education. Based on expressed needs communicated through the assessment, target adults and out-of-school youth sign up to work closely with a culturally responsive, trained, skilled USI social work professional (family support specialist). Parents and heads of household can work with the family support specialist to develop a family-centered Family Development Plan (FDP) which includes goals related to housing stability; housing choice; and the educational, health, and social needs of each dependent or in-school youth. The family support specialist also develops an Individual Development Plan (IDP), a flexible but time-sensitive roadmap to achieving the individual’s aspirations. The IDP identifies employment, education and health goals, and related supportive service needs. An intentional focus on deliberately supporting the educational needs of the children in the family, ages 0-18, is a part of the family support strategy.

**Figure 1. USI Family Support Services**



Through USI’s family support services, **workforce specialists** connect adults with workforce development programs to find and retain employment. In the relocation process, **education specialists** provide families with children the necessary support to attend school on time and consistently, fill in gaps in their education, complete student enrollment or transfers, and help navigate resources and opportunities within and outside of their schools. **Health specialists** increase access to health care and health resources for residents and work with local health care providers to deliver comprehensive health and behavioral health care services. Ultimately, integrated support services and resources along with stable housing can contribute to families’ economic mobility. USI’s [Community Development Financial Institution \(CDFI\) fund](#) also contributes to economic mobility. The USI CDFI provides business loans at favorable terms for new and emergent entrepreneurs and locally owned businesses run by families living in community revitalization areas. This creates a pipeline to affordable credit and capital and enables community members at USI project sites to participate community revitalization as business owners, entrepreneurs, and change agents.



### **Spotlight on cross-sector collaboration**

Community transformations require coordinated efforts across many sectors including housing, transportation, infrastructure, and education. As a result, USI engages a range of local organizations in *cross-sector partnerships*. USI serves as a coordinating entity working with local businesses, service providers, schools, and city officials. Cross-sector collaboration is vital at every stage of USI’s work, from visioning and planning to conducting needs assessments, developing policies and practices, and implementing and evaluating projects. As Tyronda Minter explains, *“To promote housing and education integration we work to reduce the disconnection between multiple service systems by leading systems alignment efforts between housing organizations and school districts.”*

**Leveraging Housing and Education Partnerships.** USI collaborates with partners to craft strategies for neighborhood revitalization as part of neighborhood-wide transformation projects that may take 6-10 years or longer. For example, USI serves on a number of the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) [Choice Neighborhoods Initiative \(CNI\)](#) grants and has started early implementation as a grantee on one of the U.S. Department of Education under the [Promise Neighborhoods \(PN\) program](#) grants. The CNI program helps redevelop HUD-assisted housing or distressed housing in under-resourced communities; and the goal of the PN program is to ensure that all children and youth have access to high-quality schools and strong family and community support systems. USI was recently selected by the Winston-Salem/Forsyth County Schools District to serve as the stakeholder engagement partner for its [Department of Education's Fostering Diverse Schools Program](#). USI will be listening to 8,000 staff, parents, caregivers, guardians, and students to hear their perspectives on school attendance zones and socioeconomic diversity as district leaders consider potential changes to attendance boundaries.

Tonya Atkins, USI Operations Director says, *"Cross-sector collaboration, especially with school leaders, is integral to USI's community and human development approach."* The Choice Neighborhoods Initiative, Promise Neighborhood program, and Fostering Diverse Schools program provide examples of how USI collaborates with other entities to address structural community change. They build and implement comprehensive revitalization plans that address neighborhood conditions and human service needs across all sectors, working with partners such as public housing authorities, city government officials, institutions, foundations, real estate developers, property managers, business owners, school administrators, and community members.

## Approach to Collaboration

As a [collective impact](#) organization, USI works collaboratively with cross-sector partners that have distinct roles and operations. Formalizing roles and responsibilities with partners and developing processes that guide relationships, communication, and accountability exemplify USI's approach to establishing shared understanding and coordinating collective efforts. For example, USI works closely with local housing authorities, developers, city government, funders, and the public school system. USI also partners with local nonprofits and faith-based organizations that advance programming in health, economic mobility, and education.

Partnerships are guided by data from **community needs assessments** and conversations with community members and local organizations. For example, in the River West project in Tulsa (see callout box below), USI hosted community meetings and focus groups to build a partnership with community members and understand their priorities and concerns. This process helped USI generate community buy-in for implementing the revitalization plan, and it also guided USI in determining which partners could help address community members' concerns. Similarly, in a Choice Neighborhood Initiative in Winston-Salem (Cleveland Avenue Homes), the community engagement process helped the USI team recognize that they needed to bring an education partner on board, such as the local university. This community-driven approach anchors USI's responsiveness to identified needs.

Partnerships are typically formalized through memoranda of understanding (MOUs) that define roles and responsibilities at different phases of the project. MOUs help sustain working relationships even when organizational leadership changes. As noted by Ms. Minter, *“We have written documents in place to honor our organizational relationships, so that when school leaders change (i.e., superintendent), we are able to say, ‘Look you know, it is not just about the person, but it is about the commitment of the organization to supporting families and children.’”* MOUs often evolve to include other documentation such as data-sharing agreements. Often, partnering organizations engage in both formal and informal resource sharing. Formal resource sharing includes exchanging funds, data, staff time, and other material resources. Informal resource sharing, which aids in building a more layered understanding of community context and history, includes sharing promising practices and engaging in collective problem-solving.

## Cross-sector Collaboration to Strengthen Family Support Services in Tulsa, Oklahoma

The Tulsa Housing Authority (THA) and the City of Tulsa have been awarded a \$50 million Choice Neighborhoods Initiative (CNI) grant from the U.S. Department of Housing & Urban Development (HUD) for the Envision Comanche plan. This is the second CNI grant award for THA and the City of Tulsa; both were awarded a \$30 million CNI grant in 2018 for the River West redevelopment, now in its fourth of six phases. Under both grants, USI serves close to 500 eligible families combined. USI ensures that families and children are connected to high-quality resources related to economic mobility, health and wellness, and education through cross-sector collaborations:

- USI partners with local job training and workforce development providers to address employment barriers identified by residents and increase earned income and labor force participation. Average annual household income for residents has risen from \$8,811 in 2018 to \$20,097 in 2022 – a 128% increase. Also, 41% of adult residents are employed, representing an 8% increase from 2021. Adult residents reporting inadequate income to support basic needs has decreased by 48% since 2018.
- USI partnered with organizations such as the Tulsa Health Department to expand options for health care services and improve residents’ access to healthy foods, mental health supports, and recreational facilities. In 2 years, USI increased participation in health and fitness programming from 8% to 37%. Also, 86% of target residents for USI programming are now connected to a primary care provider, an 18% increase from 2018.
- USI provided case management and relocation support for all families, including placing families in alternative homes during neighborhood revitalization and supporting their return to the new mixed-income River West apartments.
- USI has been working with Tulsa Public Schools to increase children’s participation in high-quality early learning programs. The school district created a dashboard to collect data on outcomes such as student attendance, grades, and disciplinary actions to further inform USI’s strategy.



## Cross-sector collaboration models

Because USI is familiar with the systems in which partners operate, the organization can develop collaboration models that are unique to each partner while maintaining alignment with broader initiative goals, leadership roles and responsibilities. USI uses a variety of cross-sector collaboration models. Some relationships are informal cooperative efforts that occur without structured documentation and deliverables; some are more formal, non-financial cross-sector collaborations; and others are more contractual in nature with specified deliverables and financial commitments.

---

“Typically, service providers are doing good work in silos and are independently serving the community. What [USI is] able to bring to the partnership table is its social capital, moral capital, intellectual capital, reputational capital, and funding capital. These resources aid in our ability to serve as an effective collective impact organization as we convene cross-sector partners to wrap resources around a target population. We can review data to tell us how this population is doing, put our heads together and analyze that data to come up with some powerful strategies for supporting children, families and communities.”

—Tyronda Minter, Vice President, Education Initiatives, USI and Annie E. Casey Fellow

---

**Service Provider Networks.** USI develops place-based Service Provider Networks (SPNs) which include key partners that can help accelerate results. The SPNs function as a network of organizations that provide services in the areas of health, education, and economic mobility. Local USI staff connect with these organizations to coordinate service linkages for families and children based on their needs. The group implements strategies informed by data, and continually reviews outcomes to identify and address gaps in needed services and share lessons learned. Collaboration with these providers is supported through non-financial MOUs that outline the value of services provided.

**Communities of Choice.** USI facilitates collective action partnerships to disseminate key learnings and ideas across projects. For example, USI developed the Communities of Choice Forum to connect Choice Neighborhood Initiative grantees from across the country and help them share best practices and receive mentoring support. USI hosts a bi-annual national convening that brings hundreds of practitioners together to strengthen this professional learning community.

**Contracted Partners.** Partnership agreements with contracted partners set terms and conditions for services to be delivered and are formal and legally binding. For example, as the lead grantee for the Promise Neighborhoods program, there may be instances where USI offers funds via sub-grants to a partnering organization. The process for sub-granting is driven by resident needs to advance progress toward desired outcomes and is an example of another area where residents can actively engage in the decision-making process. In this process, USI ensures that the residents engaged in the process are reflective of the population served.



## What factors support progress on cross-sector collaboration?

**Established relationships.** In addition to using MOUs and data-sharing agreements to cement partnerships, USI contributes to the sustainability of each partnership by signaling to local stakeholders that – unlike temporary community programs that come and go – USI is “here to stay for as long as necessary.” As Ms. Minter puts it, “[T]he emphasis here is on transformational, not transactional relationships.” The organization has identified “communication, collaboration, and continuous improvement” as key ingredients to maintain relationships. This ultimately positions USI as a reliable presence in communities beyond the length of a grant. Regular meetings help maintain these relationships and offer the necessary structure to support partners as they operationalize data-sharing agreements and MOUs. Ultimately, USI establishes credibility by promoting consistent communication and commitment to long-term relationships. Ms. Minter explains that “regular ongoing communication is not just about reporting out but really problem solving together, really listening to one another. Really thinking about and being honest about what are our adaptive challenges.” USI’s long-term engagement with partners builds trust in the communities where USI works and strengthens cooperation and collaboration from community partners.

**Decision-Making Processes.** USI has developed easy decision-making channels to support collaboration and consensus building. Some of its partners have decision-making processes that are more bureaucratic. Harmonizing these approaches enables USI and partnering organizations to take action on co-investment funding opportunities that require a quick turnaround time.

**Adaptive Leadership.** USI works with partners to address technical and adaptive challenges. Technical challenges, for example, include troubleshooting around shared data storage and management. This requires addressing issues around protocol, regulations and rules. Adaptive challenges, on the other hand, depend on dynamic, people-focused solutions. Adaptive leadership requires authentic collaboration, flexibility, open-mindedness and resilience. For example, with school leaders, USI initiates conversations about how the cognitive biases, mental models and mindsets could impact

### Cross-Sector Collaboration to Braid Housing and Education Funding in St. Louis

In partnership with the City of St. Louis, St. Louis Public Schools, and other providers (e.g., mental health providers, workforce development), USI has successfully served 239 families and 512 children over six years through a federal HUD Choice Neighborhood Initiative (CNI) grant. The CNI program leverages significant public and private dollars to implement locally-driven strategies that support neighborhoods with distressed public housing or HUD-assisted housing through a comprehensive approach to neighborhood transformation. To support sustainability and scale, USI secured a \$20.8M Promise Neighborhood (PN) Grant from the Department of Education to significantly improve educational outcomes for students in selected neighborhood as well as improve neighborhood schools. The goal of the PN program is to ensure that all children and youth have access to high-quality schools and strong family and community support systems. Through these opportunities over 1,400 children and their families are receiving coordinated housing and education supports that include a pipeline of evidence-based solutions along a cradle to career pathway.

educational outcomes. In these instances, partners must agree to embrace changes that challenge the status quo.

**Hiring locally.** USI hires people locally to implement strategies. *“Connecting with people who live, work, play, and worship in the communities where they live is important to us,”* says Ms. Minter. Staff members bring their professional lens to the work, as well as their lived experiences. For example, to support the needs of families living in Cleveland Avenue Homes in Winston-Salem, USI hired a team of local family support specialists to help each family create goals and outline steps for achieving those goals. Because the specialists are from the community they serve, they are better able to build trust and understand the needs and desires of the families they work with. Their personal experiences helped them develop and implement case management services more effectively.

**Reliance on data.** USI takes a “data walk” with partners. A data walk is an opportunity for partners to examine all available demographic information about children and families in USI households to identify their challenges, understand why the challenges exist, and determine strategies to address their needs. For example, when working with Winston-Salem Forsyth County Schools, USI uses data to inform strategy development and implementation to promote kindergarten readiness, math and reading proficiency, and timely graduation. The data drive the direction of the partnership. Ms. Minter explains, *“[Partnership] looks like quarterly meetings with the school district where the superintendent is a part of the leadership team hosting conversations about tactical planning based on what the data is looking like for that target community. So, if we're partnering and we see from the data, for example, that our students are failing because they're chronically absent, then what kind of strategies can we put together in partnership to address this issue?”* Data also inform collaborative decision-making about the types of solutions needed. For example, after reviewing data for River West indicating residents’ concerns and needs, USI staff identified that their lead economic mobility partner had a program already developed. This helped them shift gears and create one specifically for Choice Neighborhood Initiative residents.

The data that USI uses to inform decision-making not only include demographic information to develop an understanding of the population being served, but it also includes initial education, health, housing, and employment outcomes. USI gathers this information by leveraging pre-existing data and

## Cross-Sector Collaboration to Foster Diverse Schools in Winston-Salem, North Carolina

The Winston-Salem/Forsyth County School District selected USI to serve as its community engagement partner as a part of a grant received from the Department of Education, Fostering Diverse Schools Program. Currently underway, USI is engaging 5,000 parents, guardians, and caregivers across Winston-Salem in a process designed to center their perspectives about how to create more diverse schools. Specifically, USI will ensure that the voices and perceptions of those that rarely participate in community engagement processes are intentionally lifted - this includes hearing from low-income parents and guardians receiving housing assistance. For the past few years, partners have regularly participated in monthly housing and education cross-collaboration calls to discuss partnership activities and outcomes. Upper-level school administrators, such as the district superintendent, regularly discuss housing and redevelopment efforts in the region with housing partners.



data infrastructure from partners, including test scores and student educational outcomes from school districts. Additionally, household surveys are conducted to supplement the data collection process. USI uses this information to analyze outcome disparities within the community and to formulate strategies that effectively address existing challenges. Each community has its own [data dashboard](#) on the organization's website which highlights key outcomes measured by USI.

## What are the challenges to making progress on cross-sector collaboration?

***Changes in leadership.*** Although the use of official agreements can support partnerships through leadership and staffing changes, leadership transitions can still disrupt organizational relationships and change the level of cooperation given by partners. New leaders may have different goals that do not align with those of USI. Staff can find it challenging to invest time and resources in regular communication to maintain relationships when staffing changes at partnering organizations.

***Time-Consuming.*** Building and managing relationships can be tough, particularly when organizations are already stretched thin and operating with limited time and resources. Accordingly, USI foregrounds these efforts by being clear about why investing time and effort in the relationship is critical and benefits organizations and ultimately the target population.

### ***Aligning different models of thinking and alternate approaches to the work.***

Collaboration across diverse sectors and different partners can be challenging when partners have differing perspectives about the problem, possible solutions and roles. Addressing differences requires “*knowing when to drive and when to be the passenger,*” shared Ms. Minter. Often, as the backbone organization for initiatives, USI collaborates with partners to define the “*boundaries, the authorities, the roles, and the task - otherwise known as ‘the BART’ - that each organization takes up on a specific initiative,*” Ms. Minter explains. These efforts help balance the partnership as collaborating organizations work toward shared goals.



## Lessons learned

- **Cross-sector collaboration** promotes desegregation and integration efforts by considering the problems and solutions from multiple viewpoints and through multiple mechanisms that can be mobilized across housing, education, and economic sectors. Partners with existing relationships in the community should be included in early planning stages. Understanding that the capacity to build consensus and make group decisions enables leaders to align their actions and move work forward to achieve results.
- **Formal agreement** is critical for documenting mutual goals, performance measures, roles, responsibilities, lines of authority, tasks, communication channels, and co-investment opportunities. Formal documentation about how the partnership operates provides clarity and transparent communication across all partners and ensures continuity despite leadership changes.

- **Effective backbone support** is a critical condition for cross-sector collaboration and collective impact developed as a part of community transformation initiatives. Early-on, partnering organizations should define the boundaries, authorities, roles, and tasks for each partner.
- **Community-identified priorities** and service needs should help determine the direction of partnerships. Buy-in from community members is important for achieving the goals of community revitalization efforts.
- **Data** should inform the development of cross-sector partnerships and decision-making. Data sharing across partners can support collective data interpretation and ensure a shared understanding of problems that partners address collaboratively. Be results based and data-driven with clear targets that allow partners to assess progress and change course.
- **Community and stakeholder engagement** should be prioritized. Active outreach to residents to include them as equal partners in intervention efforts, rather than as “recipients,” increases the effectiveness and sustainability of desegregation and integration efforts.
- **Adaptive leadership** involves addressing challenges that require open-mindedness, flexibility, and resilience. It requires intentionally building in time and space to level-set and invest in developing a shared understanding of values and principles that ground desegregation and integration work.