



Somos Neighbors

Strategies for Use and Sustainability

Where we live plays a role in *how long we live*, and average life expectancy in Bexar County’s longest-lived neighborhoods is 18 years higher than in its shortest-lived neighborhoods. In partnership with [The Health Collaborative](#) and The University of Texas Health Science Center at Houston (UTHealth) [School of Public Health in San Antonio](#), Community Information Now ([CI:Now](#)) created the [Somos Neighbors](#) project and website to shine a light on that disparity, show how local neighborhoods are both alike and different, and help community residents unite as neighbors to close that 18-year gap. “Somos” is Spanish for “we are” and is a familiar word to most San Antonio-area residents.

Without thoughtful and deliberate effort, though, even the most useful and compelling data tool will not be discovered or used. CI:Now built into its workplan strategies to engage the community around Somos Neighbors and the life expectancy gap. Those strategies have evolved over time and will almost certainly continue to do so over the minimum three-year online life of the data tool. In the hopes that local experience can benefit other communities interested in adopting the tool or doing similar work, this brief outlines the high-level strategies CI:Now is using to maximize Somos Neighbors’ relevance, use, and sustainability and offers examples for each strategy.

Publicity and media relations

Because this brief was developed very shortly after Somos Neighbors was launched, most examples here focus on launch-related publicity, but ongoing publicity for the tool will be critical to Somos Neighbors’ use and sustainability.

Launch event

CI:Now held a Somos Neighbors launch event with the assistance of an event planning firm contracted with grant funds. The team was fortunate to be able to bring as keynote speaker [Tonika Lewis Johnson](#) from Chicago, creator of the [Folded Map](#) project that was partial inspiration for Somos Neighbors. Although the event was later opened to the general public, the initial round of invitations focused heavily on two groups: leaders of local neighborhood associations and leaders of organizations and governance bodies that have significant influence over the factors CI:Now found to be strongly correlated with average life expectancy at the census tract level.

The latter list included city, county, and state elected officials and local funders, healthcare providers and health related-organizations, the city’s housing authority and housing providers, the transit authority, early childhood service providers, educational institutions and related organizations, workforce and economic development organizations, and key city departments.

The target audience for the launch event in any community should be driven by local data and community dynamics. Who has the power to change the policy environment and neighborhood conditions that negatively impact life expectancy, and who has the power to block those efforts? Both should be invited.

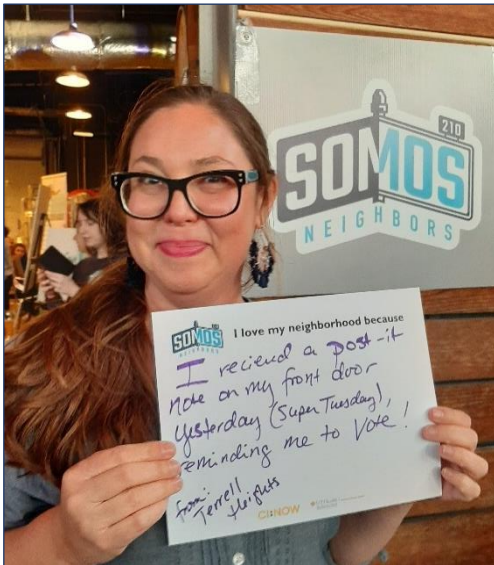


Tonika Lewis Johnson, creator of Folded Map

CI:Now invested in a photographer, custom signage, and promotional materials for the launch event, and worked with NOWCastSA, a local online news nonprofit, to videotape the event. Print materials in English and Spanish are included in the Somos Neighbors Toolkit. That Toolkit and the event video are linked from the [Somos Neighbors page](#) on CI:Now's website. With the assistance of a consultant who has worked in local media, CI:Now developed a media list, a media advisory, and a press packet. The media advisory was sent about 10 days prior to the event; the press packet was available at the event and was distributed afterward.



Community health workers from The Health Collaborative's Grow Healthy Together Pathways Community HUB at the Somos Neighbors launch



That press packet and a growing list of media coverage are also available via the [Somos Neighbors page](#) on CI:Now's website. Beyond this media coverage, once the COVID-19 crisis has lessened, CI:Now and its partners will likely be able to talk about Somos Neighbors on Texas Public Radio's The Source program.

Finally, Somos Neighbors encourages community residents to upload photos of their neighborhoods, focusing on what they love about living there. The primary goal of this functionality was to give residents better say in how their neighborhood is represented, as existing quantitative data tends to capture only a neighborhood's needs and challenges. However, CI:Now sees photo upload as a means of community engagement as well, inviting them to be part of the work. "I love my neighborhood because" sheets are another effective way to help people tell the story of their neighborhood.

Integration with community initiatives

One of the best ways to ensure that a data tool remains relevant and sustainable is to integrate it into other local initiatives that already have community support, momentum, and a track record of sustainability.

Local planning and visioning efforts

Making the data tool useful to local planning and visioning efforts is one way to increase the use of the tool and the data and action ideas it offers. Among many initiatives, CI:Now's longtime partner The Health Collaborative spearheads the local community health needs assessment and community health improvement plan. The community health improvement planning process, which began ramping up around the same time as the website launch, will incorporate Somos Neighbors as community participants work to identify priorities, target social determinants of health, and understand relationships among different issues.



SA2020 Civic Engagement Meet Up

San Antonio is the only large city in the U.S. with a community-developed vision for the future, an independent nonprofit driving progress toward that vision, and more than 160 multi-sector partners actively aligning to the vision. SA2020, the nonprofit, continues to invite CI:Now to showcase Somos Neighbors via its own community activities. CI:Now had a Somos Neighbors table at SA2020's first Civic Engagement Meet Up and will talk about the project in an upcoming episode of the SA2020-hosted [The Story Goes podcast](#) on local PBS affiliate KLRN.

CI:Now is currently working with other community organizations to explore ways that Somos Neighbors can support other community planning, and that work will continue. One example of is the VIA Metropolitan Transit Authority's *VIA Reimagined* 10-year plan, which is part of its larger *Vision 2040* plan. Somos Neighbors data can help show which neighborhoods have the greatest need for better public transportation and which neighborhoods can most likely benefit from it. Although the link between public transportation and life expectancy may not be obvious, good public transportation helps people connect with preventive care, educational opportunities, and higher-wage jobs, all of which are correlated with longer life expectancy at the census tract level in San Antonio.

Integration with other community initiatives

Somos Neighbors is expected to be valuable to other community initiatives beyond planning and visioning. Trainings are one example: Somos Neighbors and the life expectancy gap will be folded into the curriculum of The Health Collaborative's community health worker training academy, and the City of San Antonio's Public Works Department has incorporated Somos Neighbors into its Equity 101 staff training. Other city departments are exploring the tool and considering following suit.

Few integrations with other kinds of community initiatives have been planned so far, as this brief was written only about two weeks after the Somos Neighbors launch and during a period of extensive event cancellations and social distancing to slow the spread of the COVID-19 coronavirus. Activity related to this strategy will ramp up later in 2020, though, and continue over time. Others interesting in adopting Somos Neighbors or doing similar work will be able to find information about those activities on CI:Now's website.



This work was supported by the [Urban Institute](#) through funds provided by the [Robert Wood Johnson Foundation](#). CI:Now thanks them for their support but acknowledges that the findings and conclusions presented here are those of CI:Now alone and do not necessarily reflect the opinions of the Urban Institute or the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation.