



Innovating the Future of Youth Soccer: *How a Cohort of Soccer Programmers Is Driving Impact through Innovation*

Innovating the Future of Youth Soccer

INTRODUCTION

In December 2016, the U.S. Soccer Foundation modified its Program Grant approach to partner with organizations that exhibited qualities relevant to thematic sports-based youth development categories. The first category focused around innovation and non-traditional soccer programming, whereby the Foundation sought to fund “organizations that are doing things a bit different from your standard soccer program.” Grantees received three-year grants of \$10,000 - \$30,000 per year.

In the fall of 2018, the Foundation partnered with UpMetrics with the intention of providing tools and services to understand the impact of each grantee’s innovative programming. In addition, this initiative would provide the U.S. Soccer Foundation with data to tell their story about innovative grant-making, and share best practices regarding innovation with the greater sports-based youth development community. UpMetrics created this white paper to summarize their findings.

In the spring of 2020, the COVID-19 outbreak began, and the world changed. The U.S. Soccer Foundation and its grantees changed with it. Uniquely positioned to respond quickly to changing circumstances, the five grantees adapted their programs to continue to serve their participants and to meet the immediate needs of the greater community.

Moreover, these organizations were in a uniquely strong position to respond quickly to the changing circumstances as a result of the innovation that is at the core of their daily operations and cultures. Correspondingly, UpMetrics expanded the focus of this white paper to include the unique innovations introduced by each grantee in response to COVID-19.





A Word about Innovative Grantmaking

While the focus of this white paper is to highlight the innovative organizations that received this grant, it is important to note that the U.S. Soccer Foundation is taking a unique approach to grantmaking as well.

The Innovative and Non-traditional Soccer Grant allows each organization to direct the conversation and illuminate the unique innovation that is happening in their program. In addition, the grant allows the awardees to purchase equipment or cover operating expenses. A flexible grant of this nature is an uncommon practice in philanthropy, as it empowers the awardees to determine how to use the money.

UpMetrics is proud to partner with the U.S. Soccer Foundation as they lead the philanthropic sector with innovative approaches to grantmaking.





Innovating the Future of Youth Soccer

INNOVATIVE AND NON-TRADITIONAL SOCCER PROGRAM AWARDEES

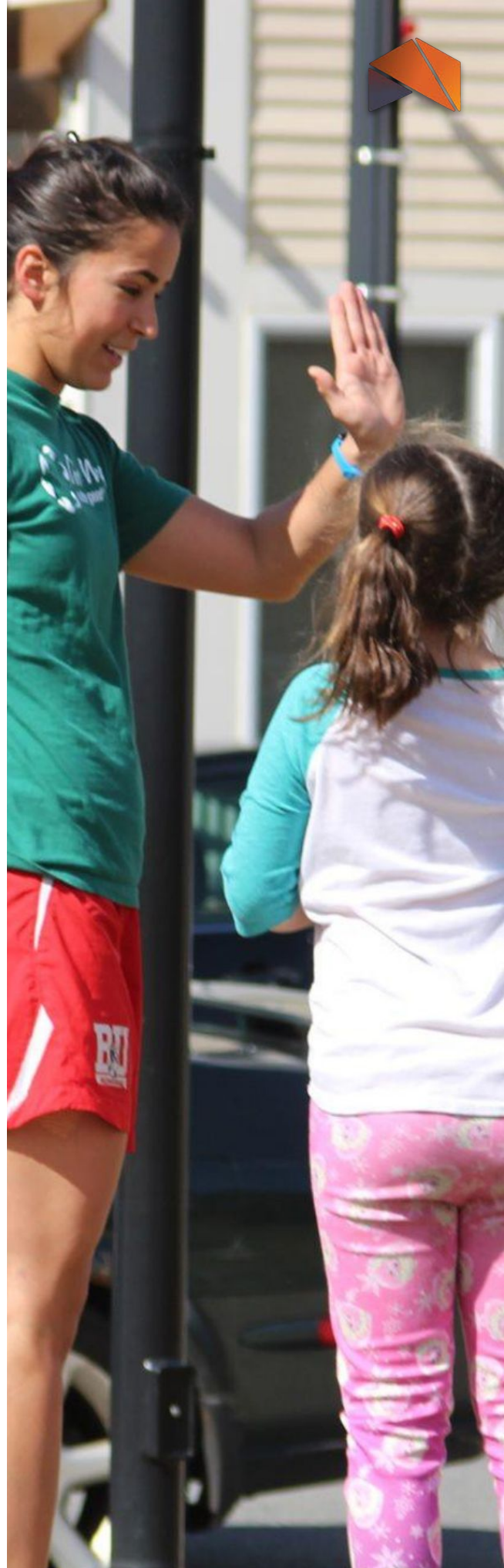
The following five organizations were awarded the 2017 Innovative and Non-traditional Soccer Program grants.

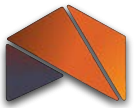


This white paper will highlight each of these grantees' specific innovative practices and also outline their key impact data points.

"The U.S. Soccer Foundation identified the grantees in this portfolio due to their continued drive to innovate within their sphere of influence. We are excited to share their methodology and results to highlight the unique ways sport for development organizations continue to transform the field through innovation and improved solutions."

-Sarah Pickens, Associate Vice President of Programs, U.S. Soccer Foundation





Catholic Charities Community Services

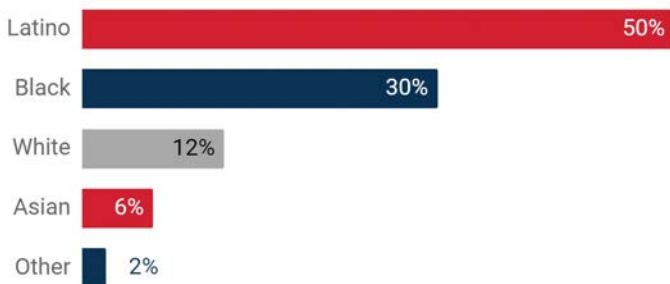
NEW YORK, NY

Catholic Charities Community Services (CCCS) of the Archdiocese of New York provides a range of services and programs for children, youth, and families, and is a leading provider of quality immigration legal assistance in New York City. Through their Unaccompanied Minors Program (UMP), they offer specialized and robust services to immigrant and refugee youth. Developed by a former unaccompanied minor, La Union FC is a soccer program designed to recruit and serve immigrant and refugee youth in East Harlem already involved with CCCS's legal immigration services.

Created in response to a need for supports beyond the legal representation and case management services that already existed, La Union FC engages participants twice a week throughout year-round programming with the purpose of developing social-emotional learning and life skills amongst immigrant youth who have experienced traumatic and stressful events. The program was launched in collaboration with South Bronx United, a soccer-focused youth development organization, and Kids in the Game, a training program for after-school coaches, and is hosted by Our Lady Queen of Angels Elementary School in Harlem.

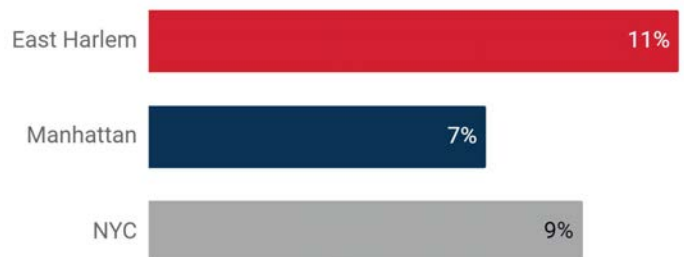
East Harlem Community Profile

Race/ethnicity breakdown



Unemployment rates

% of East Harlem residents over 16 y/o unemployed*



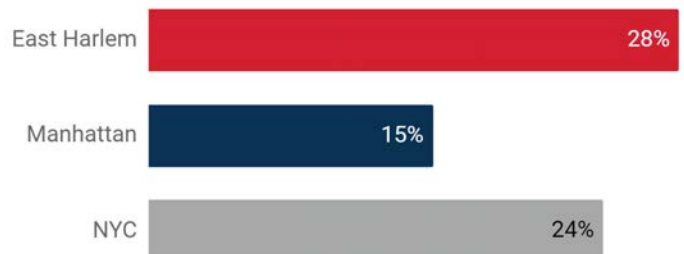
Rent burden

% of East Harlem residents that are rent burdened*



Health

Obesity Rate among East Harlem adults*



*Source: NYC Dept of Health and Mental Hygiene, 2018 East Harlem Community Health Profile



Catholic Charities Community Services

NEW YORK, NY

INNOVATIVE PRACTICES

Providing mentorship and essential services

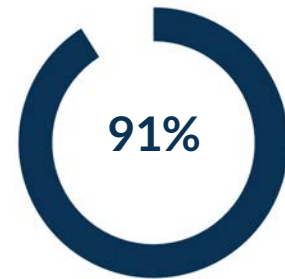
La Union FC allows CCCS to engage with youth who are facing challenging circumstances, and in doing so, build trust that is necessary for staff to mentor and teach life skills. Staff teach players life skills related to soccer and socialization, including leadership, teamwork, listening, learning to handle both victory and defeat, and persevering in the face of challenges. La Union's teen players practice these life skills at each training session and during match-ups. In addition, the staff is able to leverage the program to check in with participants and ensure they have access to other crucial services that CCCS can provide, such as access to health insurance, medical and psycho-social services, and support through the legal enrollment process.

Creating community amongst participants

La Union FC practice sessions provide a safe space for players to make new friends. Participants in La Union FC share that the program allows them the opportunity to build relationships with others who are facing similar challenges, and in doing so, receive important emotional support and keep them coming back since ongoing participation is crucial to the impact of the program. In addition, the opportunity for kids to see real examples of other kids who have persisted through the difficult legal process is an important source of hope for these young children.

Leveraging established community partners

In partnering with other community organizations in East Harlem, CCCS was able to establish trust and provide a quality experience. For example, in partnering with Kids in the Game, they were able to hire well-trained coaches from the community and who are bilingual in Spanish and English.



of program participants live in East Harlem or the Bronx.

4 sessions

On average, participants attended 4 practice sessions across 9 weeks of programming. Over half of all youth attending 4 or more practices.



of participants returned after attending their first practice.

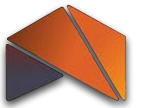


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The program was started to give these kids a chance to play soccer and to provide them with a safe space during an otherwise stressful time. These kids are facing difficult, long legal proceedings, and it is easy for them to lose hope. We've seen that children who participate in the program are more engaged with their lawyers. This is more than just soccer; it's giving kids a sense of hope and the strength to see their cases through.



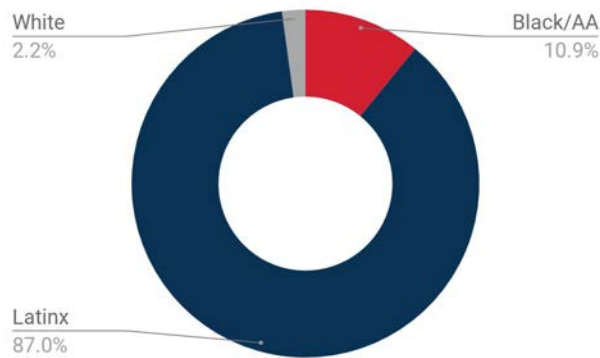
-Anthony Enriquez,
*Director of Unaccompanied Minors Program,
Catholic Charities Community Services*



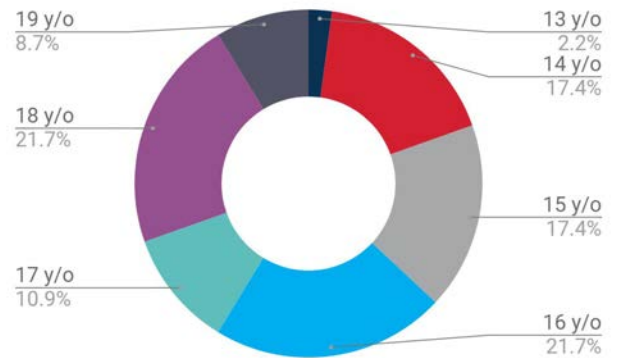
Collaborative Solutions for Communities

WASHINGTON, D.C.

Collaborative Solutions for Communities (CSC) is a DC-based organization committed to helping families and neighborhoods realize a brighter future through engagement and social services support. In 2015 the CSC soccer program, the Cosmic Wolves, was launched with the intention of keeping young males ages 14-21 off the streets and out of gangs and crews. Through relationships with community schools and other street outreach programs, CSC receives referrals for youth who are already involved or at high-risk for involvement in gangs. 25 youth per year are invited to participate in the program which runs four sessions a week throughout the year – two soccer practices and two self-development sessions. The educational sessions focus on an array of life skills including leadership, diversity, conflict resolution, communication, and nutrition and health. Competitions across schools are held on the weekends.



Student demographic breakdown
AA= African American



Student age breakdown





Collaborative Solutions for Communities

WASHINGTON, D.C.

INNOVATIVE PRACTICES

Intentional positive youth development

CSC complements soccer practices with educational sessions using the High School Health Curriculum (HSHC) to ensure students are receiving important life lessons as part of the program. This curriculum incorporates lessons to practice communication, develop leadership skills, and build self-efficacy. The CSC coaches, who hold licenses from the US Soccer Federation, also address participants' nutrition, fitness, and mental health.

Strategic referral process

CSC participants benefit from a comprehensive youth violence diversion program. In addition to the services and supports included in the soccer program, participants receive recommendations for additional referrals for CSC services including wrap-around family support services, workforce development, and community capacity-building. These recommendations are informed by thoughtful processes implemented in schools that help to coordinate school-based activities and a solutions-based approach for when incidents occur.

Using data to make progress

CSC tracks progress towards a number of organization-wide goals including eliminating participants' gang involvement, increasing participants' academic performance, and encouraging a healthy lifestyle for participants. The CSC soccer program staff collects data through pre and post program assessments. In the specific area of gang involvement, staff receive an alert every time gang-related activity happens in the DC area. These alerts allow them to immediately support any of the participants and immediately offer services to individuals and families.

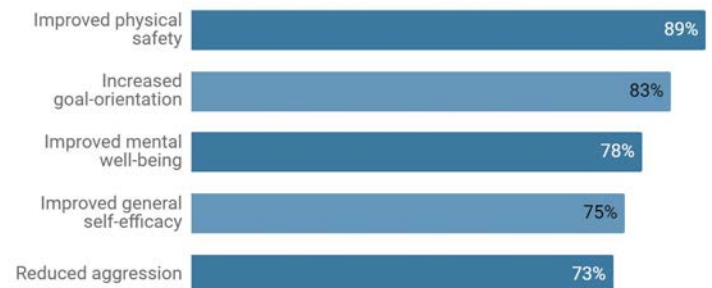
High School Health Curriculum Survey results

HSHC evaluates important life skills such as character-building, healthy habits, goal setting, and more. This chart shows improvement from the start to the end of the season (2018/19).



Youth Well-being Survey results

The Youth Well-Being survey evaluates overall social, emotional, and physical well-being. This chart shows improvement from the start to the end of the season (2018/19).





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The key to the success of this program is that it is built around the participants' natural love for soccer. Participants show up every day because they love to play. None of the young men involved in this program were involved in gang activity. That speaks volumes to the effectiveness of this program.



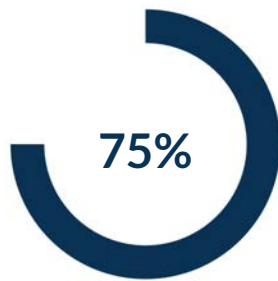
*-Rosemarie Downer, Ph.D.,
Evaluation Consultant,
Collaborative Solutions for Communities*



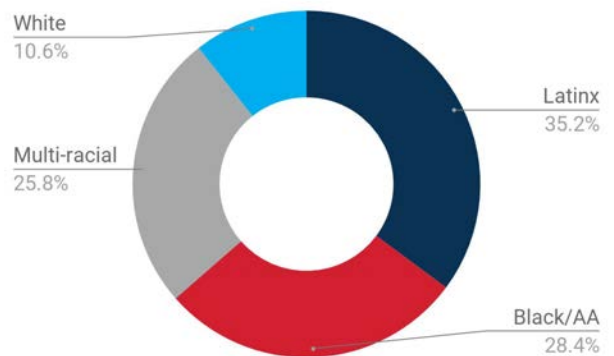
Doc Wayne Youth Services

BOSTON, MA

Founded in 2002, Doc Wayne’s mission is to fuse sport and therapy to heal and strengthen young people with mental health needs. Doc Wayne operates at 24 sites throughout the Greater Boston area, serving 400 children weekly at housing developments, public schools, and after-school programs. Individual treatment plans are developed for each participant and progress towards them is documented throughout the year. While playing soccer, their Chalk Talk® program uses a curriculum incorporating social-emotional learning and life skills that offers traditional outpatient therapy reimaged through the lens of sport. Clinicians are coaches and offices are gyms, fields, and other comparable safe spaces.

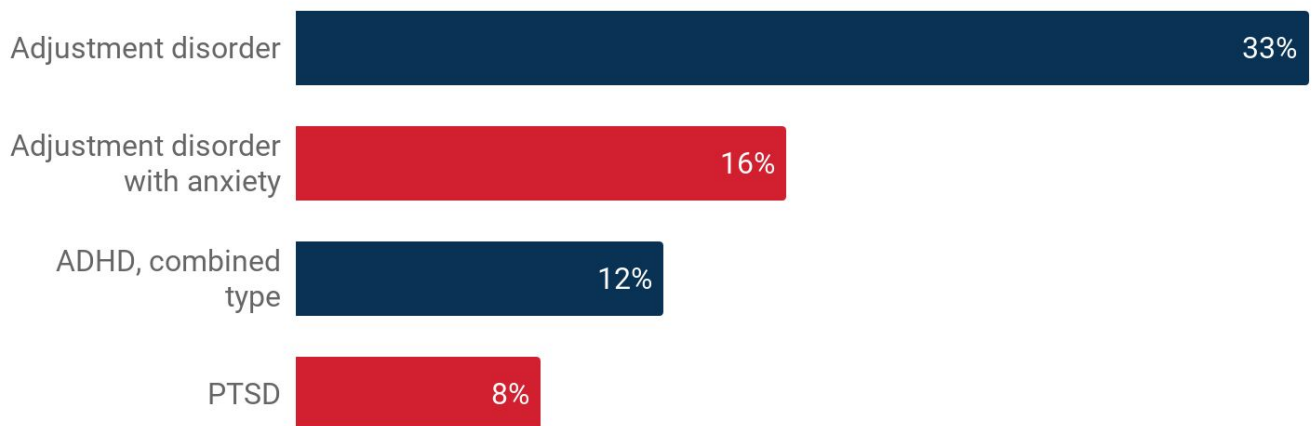


of students are youth of color.



Student demographic breakdown
AA= African American

Doc Wayne works with youth that have been diagnosed with mental health concerns, the most common of which are:





Doc Wayne Youth Services

BOSTON, MA

INNOVATIVE PRACTICES

Sports-based group therapy

Chalk Talk® engages youth by harnessing the power of team sport. Students, ages 5-18, participate in weekly group therapy sessions which focus on a variety of social-emotional learning and life skills. Groups are made up of 8-12 students and led by a licensed clinician and a Master's level intern. One major component of every Chalk Talk® group therapy session is the "check-in" at the beginning of the session. Youth huddle in a circle to share how their day/week is going. Coaches may ask students to rate how they are feeling on a scale of 1-10, and oftentimes, coaches may give a sport-themed prompt such as, "What is your touchdown (something good) and your fumble (something not so good) of the day?"

Creating Champions curriculum

Doc Wayne's Creating Champions curriculum translates dialectical behavior therapy into sport-based language equipping clinicians with skills to teach on the fields. These curriculum skills are taught through check-ins, intentionally designed soccer drills, modeling, half time stories, live coaching, and processing. The curriculum uses youth-friendly language to ensure youth and families can connect to the material, and encourages students to share what they learn with the greater community.

Allowing students to understand progress

While Doc Wayne is required to measure progress with evaluation tools, the organization also wants students to own their progress. Doc Wayne clinicians collaboratively write treatment goals with youth and families, using "I" statements to encourage youth voice, and are trained to focus on describing goals in ways youth can comprehend. Coaches meet with students and families regularly to review progress.

Building relationships

Doc Wayne helps youth build healthy and trusting relationships.

% of participants that reported positive change in relationships... (2017/18)



Bold and empathic leaders

Through sports-based group therapy, Doc Wayne is helping students both find their voice and build empathy.

% of participants that reported positive change in... (2017/18)

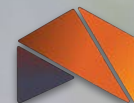


Engaged learning

Through trusting relationships, skill building, and processing challenging life situations, Doc Wayne increases our students' ability to engage in learning.

% of participants that reported positive changes in... (2017/18)





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There is a lot of stigma around mental health, but when mental health is incorporated into a soccer program it is more accepted. In this way, the power of sport has the ability to heal our students, while also strengthening the greater community as a whole.



*-Rebekah Roulier,
Chief Operating Officer,
Doc Wayne Youth Services*



Girls Leading Girls

SAN FRANCISCO, CA

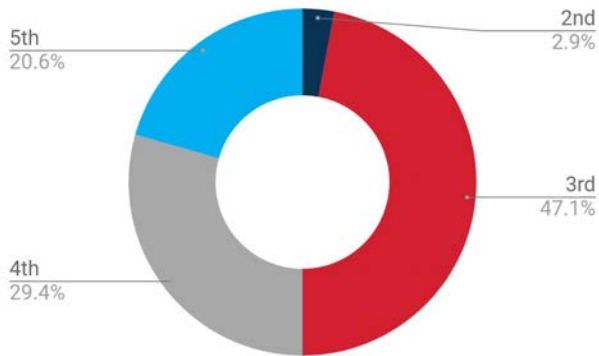
Started in 2014 to serve all girls, Girls Leading Girls is a San Francisco-based nonprofit organization that trains young women in leadership and life skills through soccer. Girls Leading Girls offers a wide range of programs for girls ages 5-18, including after-school programs, club soccer, summer camps, and international trips. These programs cater to the unique needs of girls, helping them thrive and succeed as leaders. Essential to the Girls Leading Girls program is that all of the coaches and staff are women. The organization is building a system of training, motivation, team governance, and game strategy that fits girls' needs – and differences.



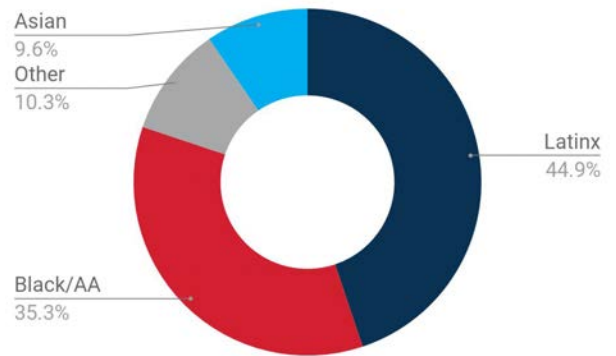
100% of soccer coaches are women.



95.6% of program participants identified as women of color.

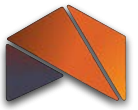


Student grade level breakdown



Student demographic breakdown
AA= African American





Girls Leading Girls

SAN FRANCISCO, CA

INNOVATIVE PRACTICES

Led by women, for women

Girls Leading Girls is entirely women-led. The organization believes that women coaches can more effectively deliver a girl-centric curriculum while also serving as role models for future women leaders. Women coaches can also create a safe space to discuss difficult topics that come up for adolescent girls. Girls Leading Girls leadership notes that it is difficult to hire women soccer coaches, an anecdote that serves as further motivation for their mission to teach young women the game of soccer.

Intentional, girl-centered curriculum

Girls Leading Girls curriculum was designed specifically with the needs of girls in mind. Leadership, character, teamwork, and community service are all key components of the curriculum. Leadership activities are incorporated into soccer practices on and off the field. An example of one of these activities is a partner communication activity in which players get into pairs with one player blindfolded. The player without the blindfold guides her partner with her words. The guiding teammate is practicing effective communication and leadership while the blindfolded teammate is practicing trust, listening, and ball sense.

Mentorship ladder

Girls Leading Girls employs a female mentoring ladder of role models by pairing junior coaches (volunteer high school students) with a head coach (young professional) who also works with collegiate athletes. This exposure helps the younger girls witness real-life examples of female leaders and athletes at every stage of coaching and play, while setting up the organization for sustainable growth with a pipeline of future coaches.

Leadership skills

Do you feel able to lead your friends / family/ community, either now or in the future?



% of participants that responded "yes"

Self-confidence

Do you feel more confident about yourself as a person/soccer player?



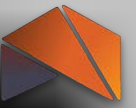
% of participants that responded "yes"

Physical fitness

PACER Test Improvement



% of participants that improved from pre to post program

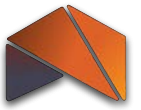


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Most coaches say it's not all about winning and that skill development is their motto. We agree with this, and our goals also include to teach life skills, keep girls in the game, and build up their confidence – on and off the field – to become leaders in their communities.



*-Brianna Russell,
Executive Director,
Girls Leading Girls*



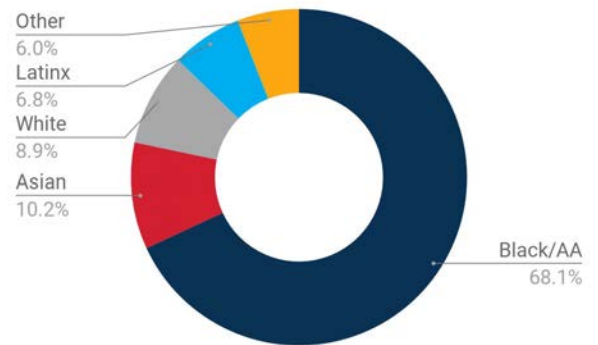
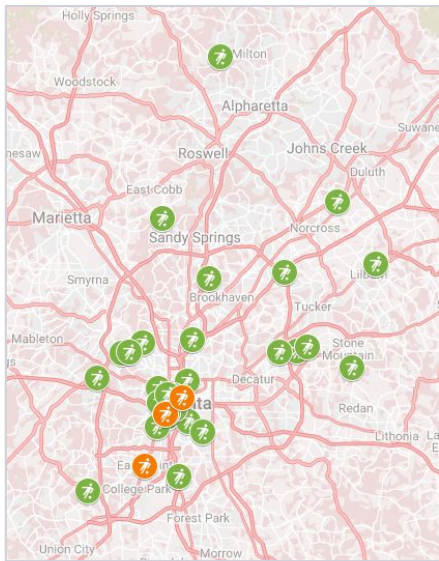
Soccer in the Streets

ATLANTA, GA

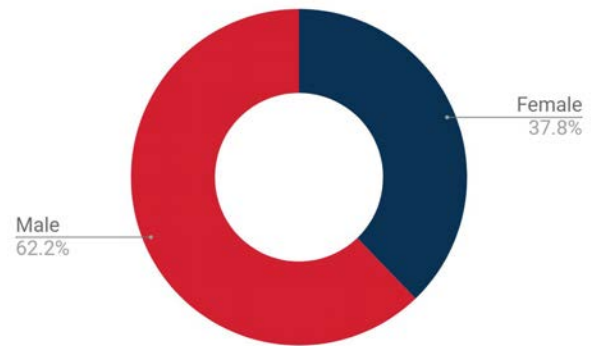
Founded in 1989 in Atlanta, Soccer in the Streets (SITS) works to develop young leaders so they can lead rich lives and cultivate healthy communities through sports-based youth development. Core to its mission is providing better access to quality soccer programs and making youth ready for employment. SITS reaches kids at schools and community-based sites through soccer play and coaching development, work-readiness training, youth events, and participation in youth leadership councils. The organization is gaining worldwide recognition for its 'Station Soccer' initiative – launching the first soccer field at a train station in the world in 2016, they've continued to build accessible soccer fields and community classrooms in and around metro transit hubs.

SITS program sites

StationSoccer locations are in orange.



Student demographic breakdown
AA= African American



Student gender breakdown





Soccer in the Streets

ATLANTA, GA

INNOVATIVE PRACTICES

Designing for accessibility & community

The 'Station Soccer' initiative is a new urban soccer model that builds soccer fields and community classrooms in and around metro transit hubs. In building fields, the organization is allowing young people to access the game of soccer while also creating neighborhood centers where participants can receive other services. Additionally, the location of the fields break down invisible barriers across the city, connecting participants from different neighborhoods and backgrounds.

Developing young leaders

While teaching soccer skills and promoting health is integral to the program, for SITS, soccer serves as the "hook" to teach important life skills to help develop young leaders. The program intentionally develops leadership skills by addressing character development, social and emotional learning, and career readiness. For example, SITS' tournaments and clinics emphasize the development of conflict resolution skills, and their referee program teaches skills to lead a game successfully. Participants learn that skills such as making respectful choices, understanding the consequences of our actions, and prioritizing the well-being of selves and others are essential leadership skills across all arenas of life.

Partnerships are key

SITS' success in their programming, participation, and pitch-building efforts has been significantly impacted by support from key stakeholders. Some of their most prominent partners have included The City of Atlanta, Atlanta Public Schools, the MARTA transit authority, Atlanta United Foundation, the YMCA, The Coca-Cola Foundation, and FIFA Football for Hope, just to name a few.

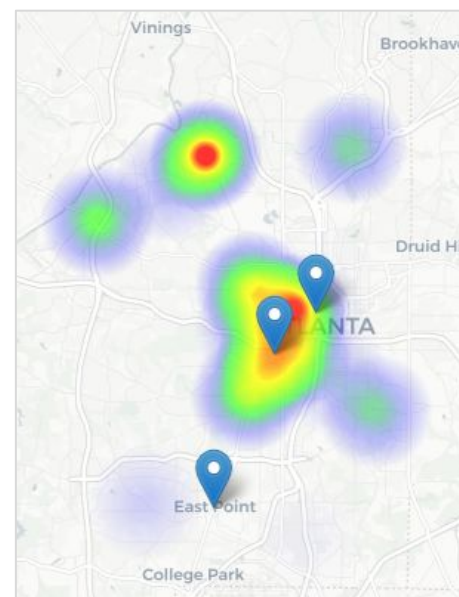
19,197 participants

attended SITS events from Fall 2018 to Winter 2020.

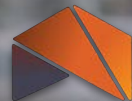
28,373 hours

engaged with SITS participants from Fall 2018 to Winter 2020.

Heat map of SITS participation hours



Orange/yellow shows areas with higher engagement.
Blue pins show Station Soccer locations



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At Soccer in the Streets, we are providing something that is fun, physical, and healthy for kids. But this program is about more than just soccer. Everything else that we are throwing at them - financial literacy, social and emotional learning - it's through these parts of the program where we are looking to do more than build great athletes. We are trying to make great human beings. Soccer is the foot in the door to do this. It is our leverage.



*-Tony Carter,
Director of Programs,
Soccer in the Streets*



COVID-19 Response

In light of COVID-19, innovation was required for these organizations to continue to serve their communities. Below, we highlight some of the ways this cohort of grantees was able to innovate during this challenging time.

Transitioning to virtual programs

Following the announcement of shelter in place, the grantees transitioned their programs to be delivered virtually. The grantees share that feedback has been critical, learning that virtual sessions should be modified to keep players engaged and, in some cases, scaled back in response to screen time burnout and the overwhelming nature of virtual learning.

Many of the grantees speak to the possibility to incorporate virtual programs as a supplement to their normal offerings in the future. Girls Leading Girls sees the value in virtual offerings to provide additional programs for students who are interested in diving deeper into particular topics, and as a means to build relationships with participants' families. Similarly, Doc Wayne leveraged virtual programs to share their approach with the greater SBYD community through a series of webinars and group chat series.

Expanding services to meet community needs

In light of the many challenges that our communities face as a result of COVID-19, these organizations expanded their services to meet the most pressing needs of their participants and their families during this difficult time.

Collaborative Solutions for Communities and Soccer in the Streets leveraged their partnerships to deliver food to the youth and families that they serve, and in some cases, soccer balls to complement virtual programming. Recognizing the overwhelming need for mental health services, Doc Wayne expanded their offerings to support all ages and are accepting new clients regardless of affiliation with partner schools. In addition, they are offering mental health services to parents, guardians, teachers, coaches, nonprofit professionals, and other helpers.

The U.S. Soccer Foundation commends the grantees for continuing to innovate to support their participants, their families, and the greater community during this challenging time.





Innovating the Future of Youth Soccer

BEST PRACTICES

The UpMetrics team has compiled a list of best practices to support innovation to share with the greater SBYD community.

Leverage sports as a hook to drive impact

Soccer is a means to build trust and relationships to impart life lessons or necessary services. Whether providing legal support, leadership and life skills, confidence training, mental health services, relationship and community building, or access to programming, soccer is a tool to engage, inspire, and empower.

Cultivate intentional programming

Purposeful and evidence-based methods and tools help ensure a quality experience for all participants. SBYD programs should access, or if necessary, develop, curriculum tools to support the goals of their program and address the unique needs of their community.

Integrate meaningful data processes

Acknowledge various approaches for using data to support programming and measure progress. SBYD programs should gather information to monitor their impact relative to program outputs and outcomes. Types of information can include qualitative surveys, publicly available neighborhood data, real-time community alerts, referral or case management documentation, and individual or small-group check-ins. SBYD programs should also encourage participants' to track progress towards their own development as soccer players and leaders.

Partner with established local stakeholders

Building relationships with the appropriate local stakeholders is critical to ensure you are accessing the targeted participant demographic, increasing overall organizational capacity, and building trust amongst those you serve and support. A robust network of local stakeholders can increase collaborative efforts to aid with the more comprehensive needs of a community, while supporting quality control, simplifying operations, and building long-term sustainability for programs, initiatives, and stakeholders alike.





Conclusion

The U.S. Soccer Foundation is proud to partner with the Innovative Soccer Program Grantees.

These five organizations are providing quality, innovative soccer programs, while also supporting the development of the world's future leaders. Their varying best practices are a response to the considerable challenges and barriers communities face, and unique supports required to support equitable programming and services via sports-based youth development. This cohort's commitment to serving youth from underserved communities and their demonstrated impact and innovation can be used as an example for other SBYD organizations to cultivate innovative practices and cultures within their own programs.