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Institutionalizing Systems Change: Lessons from the Field

In the wake of the urban unrest in Los Angeles in 1992, the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation realized that the well-being of urban children needed greater attention. Recognizing that "a community that cannot assure the basic health and safety of its children is hardly a community at all," in the words of Paul Jellenik, former RWJF vice president, the foundation launched the Urban Health Initiative (UHI). This ambitious 10-year enterprise aimed to "engage entire cities in a concerted, collaborative effort to bring regionwide improvements in multiple measures of youth health and safety," according to Charles Royer, former Seattle mayor and director of the UHI national program office.

UHI organizers resolved participating cities would choose their own priorities and develop their own strategies to bring about an improvement in the lives of the youth. To gain legitimacy and leverage prodigious public and private resources for their efforts, leaders in the five cities selected by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation-Baltimore, Detroit, Oakland, Philadelphia, and Richmond-would also need sophisticated political and communication campaigns. The initiative would also be data-driven: it would rest on proven approaches and measured results and would rigorously evaluate the validity of its assumptions and analyze progress as it unfolded to provide mid-course corrections. In short, the UHI aimed to provide a new model for securing systems change: institutionalizing best practices and dedicating funds to reach a scale whereby a marked improvement is seen in citywide youth health and safety statistics.

UHI leaders in each city created new organizations to collaborate with public and private agencies and forge regional coalitions across racial and economic lines. While the organizations had a common underlying philosophy in aiming for systems change, and shared many of the same approaches to building consensus and obtaining support from local decision leaders, each site also employed methods specific to its city and the problems it faced in improving the well-being of children. In Richmond, site leaders formed Youth Matters, in partnership with the Chamber of Commerce, as the agency best situated to overcome tensions between the city and surrounding suburbs. Oakland's UHI leaders created Safe Passages, composed of representatives of numerous jurisdictions serving area youth. In Detroit, child advocates established the Youth Connection (now known as Mayor's Time), which also targeted Pontiac and Mt. Clemens as part of a regional focus. Baltimore Safe and Sound, the UHI affiliate in that city, relied on grassroots organizing to boost the area's belief that the city could be a positive place for children. Philadelphia Safe and Sound, for its part, formed a joint effort with local officials to expand funding for kids. To learn as much as possible from this broad, multi-year effort, the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation funded an extensive mixed-method evaluation design, headed by Beth Weitzman at New York University.

To complement the UHI, the Urban Seminar Series on Children's Health and Safety-convened twice yearly and directed by William Julius Wilson at Harvard University's Kennedy School of Government-has invited practitioners, policymakers, foundation directors, and researchers to share expertise and experiences as the UHI has progressed. The most recent seminar, held in December 2003 at Harvard University, focused on lessons from the initiative, now in its final phase. In papers, presentations, and discussion, participants analyzed what they have learned about harnessing high-quality data and launching communication and political campaigns to create systemic social change.

Using Data in a Decision-Making Process

Change agents harness data throughout the planning process to clarify their mission and their objectives. To help the sites focus on systemic problems in the provision of services to families and children in their locale, the national program office of the UHI instituted the "denominator exercise." This approach enabled sites to determine the number of children and families they needed to reach and which strategies they had to adopt to "get to scale"-that is, exert a significant and measurable effect on regional health and safety. For example, Philadelphia Safe and Sound set the goal of reducing youth homicides by 50 percent by, among other approaches, increasing the number of kids in after-school activities by 96,000-at a cost of $150 million. Meanwhile, Baltimore Safe and Sound decided it needed to reach 13,000 families with support programs at a cost of $46 million.

"The denominator exercise gave numerical precision to what would otherwise have been ambitious but vague statements of goals and strategies," says Jerry VanderWood, UHI communication director and a seminar presenter (1). The denominator exercise also revealed that sites couldn't provide the needed level of services directly or rely on grants-even major ones-to reach their goals. Instead, local UHI leaders "realized they had to be change agents, and therefore the roles of data, communications, and political strategizing became clearer," says VanderWood.

"Data shock" can grab public attention and exert political pressure. High-quality information plays a critical role in spurring large-scale change, according to VanderWood. For example, research by associates of Richmond's Youth Matters revealed that "adjacent suburban counties had significant literacy problems," enabling the group to suggest regional solutions. "Change agents can provide the data tools that improve a government's decision-making process" by "illuminating gaps between what the needs are and where the resources are spent," VanderWood points out. And "early wins in the form of positive data from small-scale efforts" can give "policymakers confidence that a strategy can make a difference" and prevent a new administration from reversing course. Overall, change agents provide "a great service to their cities by collecting, analyzing, and mining data" (1).

Agents of social change should avoid creating new burdens for policymakers. In gathering and analyzing data and pursuing other initiatives, change agents need to simplify the jobs of busy people rather than adding another layer of responsibility, cautions Charles Euchner, executive director of Harvard's Rappaport Institute for Greater Boston and a seminar discussant. Projects that work "become embedded in everyday working reality. Projects that don't work create a whole different set of missions and activities."

Integrated, real-time data tools can enable dedicated, hardworking people in government agencies and nonprofit organizations to focus more clearly on their goals, and help people "escape bad systems and create better ones," he maintains. Effective change agents use these and other tools to foster collaboration, transparency, and accountability. Effective change agents also create "the conditions for new networks" among government agencies, churches, schools, and universities to enable activists to merge "the insider and outsider game." He counsels agents of systems change to aim for the "tipping point" in which small, incremental improvements build to "an intermediate goal that makes the bigger goal possible."

Data alone do not lead to systems change. Two assumptions underlie expanded efforts to gather data now underway in numerous cities nationwide, says Beth Weitzman, professor of health and public policy at New York University, leader of the UHI evaluation team, and a seminar presenter. Proponents of "rational choice" assume that policymakers with better data will make better decisions, while adherents of "deliberative democracy" hold that communities with good information will mobilize and "engage in the political process differently, and better decisions will result." Yet a 15-city evaluation designed to compare UHI cities and their counterparts across the country shows that "efforts to transform data practice have not yet resulted in a dramatic shift from politics as usual" (2).

Although good information is critical to effective policymaking, Weitzman found that shaping "the political process through building relationships and cultivating partners and champions" is even more important than "getting the data. What's more, she uncovered "no evidence that [communities] rise up if they have access to more information. . . No one looks at indicators and says, 'I'm not going to take it anymore.'"

The exploding capacity of computers has not spurred a commensurate surge in the ability to gather and use information. Weitzman also found that "most cities gather data informally, having failed to establish an institutional mechanism for sharing information." Part of the problem, she says, is the "tremendous dismantling in the capacity of city agencies to use, analyze, and process data" that occurred during the eighties-"at the very moment that the technology started to grow." Thus decision makers often lack the funds to maintain an effective information infrastructure, while most service providers are not set up to provide data in useful form. Public employees also often fear that if they share information policymakers will penalize them based on perceived poor performance. Thus cities need an outside push from foundations and federal agencies as well as technical assistance in gathering and analyzing information-especially because data are better at "revealing problems than suggesting solutions."

City agencies "hemmed in by staggering operational responsibilities" may not have the staff to develop the policy, planning, and analytical capacity to use this new generation of tools, agrees Jo Ann Lawer, executive director of Philadelphia Safe and Sound and a seminar presenter. "People need to know what the data will do for them" before they commit the needed resources. Because "most human service agencies still rely on incomplete, disparate, and fragmented data," PSS became the intermediary linking city government and the private sector by developing an interrelated set of data tools that provides a comprehensive assessment of how residents are faring. She says corporations are sometimes willing to help fund such tools if they promise greater public acccountability" (3).

One such tool, the Children's Report Card-a "roadmap demonstrating the status of conditions for children and suggesting targeted outcomes that need improvement"-revealed that Philadelphia devoted only $8 million of $2 billion for children's services to prevention in 1999; the city applied the rest to "fixing problems." The Report Card helped convince the Philadelphia Department of Human Services to boost funding for up-front activities eightfold from 1999 to 2003.

Creators of data tools need to understand their audience-who will be using the information and how? Elected and appointed officials have "reasonable cause to be concerned about misinterpretation and misuse of data," and "face formidable odds in trying to show immediate and positive change," Lawer acknowledges. She says intermediaries such as Philadelphia Safe and Sound need to "continually repackage and portray data more effectively," and to hone a data-marketing plan. For example, the Children's Report Card revealed an epidemic of sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) among teenagers. Informed by these data, Philadelphia's health commissioner "took great political risk" in seeking to establish screening programs in schools-at which point the number of detected cases of STDs rose. However, Safe and Sound was instrumental in helping communicate the message that the rise was an artifact of the improved methods of detection and not an increase in unprotected sex among youth.

J. Lawrence Aber, a senior fellow at Columbia University's National Center for Children and a seminar discussant, contends that data purveyors need to better understand the link between knowledge and action. Too often, he says, advocates act as though they are "shooting arrows into a crowd," failing to consider who exactly they are trying to reach and "what they want people to do." And "data are competing with preexisting beliefs," he points out, "and when the two conflict, the latter win."

Messages promoted by mainstream media strongly determine those beliefs. For example, episodic information-such as that conveyed by TV crime reports-encourages people to believe that individuals cause social problems, whereas "thematic" information focuses public attention on structural causes and solutions. "This has profound implications for how we think about communicating data to audiences," maintains Aber. "The communications industry has said to us, 'Put a human face on it, hook us with a story.' . . . But framing to get people to attend to your story is not the same as framing for change." Advocates of social change, he says, "need to do both."

Developing and Implementing a Communications Strategy to Optimize Success

Identify the goals, audience, and message before launching a communication campaign. In considering how to create an effective campaign that combined compelling storytelling and a call to action, Richmond's Youth Matters sought to "reframe how people think about kids," according to Lisa Spector, former associate director. Despite some initial setbacks, Youth Matters settled on a strategy that linked youth literacy with the region's economic future-with the specific goal of ensuring that all children read on grade level by third grade. A four-pronged approach entailed encouraging parents to read to their children, enhancing the quality of preschools and childcare, providing intensive tutoring in low-achieving schools, and infusing after-school programs with reading.

Aided by a local public relations firm that was savvy about regional issues, Youth Matters sought to further fine-tune its focus to promote the "three Rs": Richmond Region Reads, by encouraging the public to "get involved for selfish reasons" and "read to a child." Ultimately the "changing message was driven by the changing focus of the initiative itself," says Veronica Templeton, former director of Youth Matters (4).

An effective communication campaign convinces individuals and communities to act. Baltimore Safe and Sound aims to achieve dramatic improvements in infant mortality, child abuse, school readiness, reading scores, high-school graduation, adolescent child bearing, and juvenile arrests, among other goals. This ambitious agenda requires changing people's "basic belief systems," says Hathaway Ferebee, Safe and Sound director and seminar presenter. "Any new awareness must be accompanied by a conviction that . . .an individual or a community has the capacity to effect change. . . which in turn will dramatically influence . . .the policymakers who determine how to invest funds" (5).

To explode stereotypes that the city's kids are beyond hope, Safe and Sound organized a team of 300 youth ambassadors, who in turn "recruited, inspired, and mobilized over 7,000 citizens to attend Baltimore's Promise Summit and to elect Baltimore's

agenda for children and youth" (5). Then, in early 2000, Safe and Sound released a family-support strategy, an after-school strategy, and Operation Safe Neighborhoods, developed by service providers, researchers, city leaders, and neighborhood leaders. This early work to put the well-being of children on the map has leveraged over $90 million in public and private funds. Meanwhile the mayor and the city council have adopted the blueprints, and citywide measures have begun to improve.

Safe and Sound aims "to create the right balance between the street-level work required to get everyday citizens acting in support of this kind of civic agenda and the sophisticated polling and media work necessary to convince elected officials to do the people's will." Yet "over the last seven years we have contracted with seven different [media] agencies to help propel this campaign," says Ferebee. "Only one delivered us a plan that communicated a movement." What's more, the Promise Summit "netted the campaign more positive behaviors than our media buys, as the grassroots effort inspired initial philanthropic investments." Change agents need to enlist a firm that "understands the keys to marketing social movements-it's not enough [to have] an appreciation of the work or an earnest desire to help."

The strategies and resources of a communication campaign must be commensurate with the task. To ensure that a communication campaign is effective, advocates need to determine the behavior they want to change and make sure their strategy can address it, says Robert Hornik, professor of communication at the University of Pennsylvania and a seminar discussant. For example, he asks, "are politicians reluctant to fund children's programs because their constituents rarely voice support for such programs, or because the leaders lack good evidence on what is going to work?" The answer will determine the shape of the resulting campaign. Leaders of Richmond's Youth Matters literacy campaign, for example, need to "understand why parents don't read to their kids now": explanations could include lack of confidence, ability, time, social expectations, and beliefs. "Some of those [barriers suggest] communication as an intervention and lots of them don't."

And just as social programs need a certain level of resources to be effective, if "you can't get the resources" to mount a serious communication campaign, "you probably can't do it successfully, and you have to choose a much smaller objective, one [that's] more to scale," he says. Communication "isn't a single fixed intervention. . . It's a set of tools in the hands of professionals trying to respond to an ever-changing context." What's more, advocates of systems change "are dealing with a radically different" agenda, and firms that "know how to work on social change programs" are rare.

Political Strategizing in a Constantly Changing Environment

Local government in Oakland is "a many-headed hydra," says Laura Hewitt, former executive director of Safe Passages, the local UHI entity. Thus the organization decided to create a "forum for the leaders of the multiple agencies serving Oakland's children to jointly establish and implement a systems change agenda" (6). Toward that end, Safe Passages convened a board composed of these leaders, who collectively agreed to invest "their expertise in reviewing and designing strategies to address youth violence. They also reached into their own budgets . . .to find the resources necessary to launch the strategies." However, Safe Passages "was deliberately created to be apolitical"- a commendable but possibly misguided approach since politics pervades so many of the issues that change agents seek to address.

Achieving systems change requires active participation in politics. Both appointed and elected leaders "agreed to participate in Oakland's Safe Passages only if politics were left at the door," believing that a focus on "good data and best practices would keep the initiative out of the political fray," says Hewitt. However, the group quickly found that it needed to take a public stand on "decidedly political issues, such as a ballot measure that married more police officers with more funding for youth violence prevention."

Safe Passages also underestimated the "mutual distrust many partners brought to the table," and overlooked their lack of understanding of the challenges their counterparts faced, says Hewitt. The message for change agents is to be cognizant of the delicate balance between politics with a large and small "P"- involvement in both the larger political process and person-to-person persuasion.

Systems change requires a shared political agenda and broad public support. Early planning emphasized that Safe Passages would include community leaders in the policymaking process. However, because they did not help set its agenda, most such leaders viewed Safe Passages as more "business as usual conducted behind closed doors by 'the suits.'" Now that tight fiscal times mean that resources amassed by board members have dried up, Safe Passages has to "demonstrate the value of its agenda to the larger world, and mechanisms for mobilizing constituents to support and even help define Safe Passages' agenda are critical" (6). The effort to sustain large-scale change "is a political campaign-and 15 people can't accomplish it," Hewitt contends. "Although leaders need a safe space outside the public spotlight in which to confer on contentious issues, a change agent needs more people to push for its agenda."

Relationships with elected leaders are essential to systems change. To promote its goal of significantly expanding the number of kids in after-school, Youth Connection, Detroit's UHI affiliate, hosted forums for mayoral and gubernatorial candidates and established contacts with key leaders statewide. Meanwhile a city councilwoman who was also a Youth Connection fellow launched an after-school task force and connected the UHI group with after-school proponents in neighborhoods around the city. Besides fostering relationships with powerful people, the Youth Connection also established itself as "vocal, visible experts," seeing the lack of centralized data on after-school programs as an opportunity," says executive director Grenae Dudley. "Over time the Youth Connection became the go-to agency in Detroit for data and information" (7).

Elected officials need to see votes to support a systems change agenda. Wading into the political fray is essential for advocates of greater social investment, says Michael Petit-president of Every Child Matters, an advocacy group for children and families and a seminar respondent-because foundations and other nonprofit and private funders can never fill the prodigious need. As proof, this former head of Maine's Department of Social Services cites the fact that Maine United Way's entire statewide outlay equaled only 1 percent of his department's budget.

Some "5 million single parents and half of 2 million childcare workers nationwide are not even registered to vote," Petit points out, and "young parents are not voting because politicians are not addressing their needs." Thus Every Child Matters is registering voters in battleground states and building a database of 1 million people who both vote and support its causes. Petit will provide those names to politicians in those states, whose inevitable response is "show me your list" when asked to support a children's agenda.

"We are not making progress-despite everybody's natural sympathy toward children-because there are no consequences, positive or negative, for politicians no matter what their stand," he maintains. "We have to show that children's issues have political traction," he maintains.

Overall Lessons

In concluding remarks, several national UHI advisors focused on overall lessons from the initiative.

Concerted action can spur systems change. Cities have seen a renaissance that belies the conventional wisdom that urban problems were "not only intractable but unsolvable," according to Paul Grogan, president of the Boston Foundation. "New ideas in motion" over the past 30 years have enabled U.S. cities to combat crime and remake gigantic systems such as public housing, resulting in a "staggering amount of neighborhood revitalization." This fragile rebirth of the "idea of urbanity-that cities are special and distinct places in civilization that need to be prized"-occurred despite the "robbing of urban resources" initiated during the Reagan years, Grogan points out. One important factor has been the optimism conveyed by advocates for social change-a "force multiplier that resonates in the American soul."

A "hunger for knowledge"-especially for high-quality data-drives social change. Credible data and analysis can "connect the dots" and suggest leverage points for change, he says. For example, a series of reports pinpointing a shortage of affordable housing in the Boston area as a crucial economic liability attracted new constituencies and spurred far-reaching legislation. The participation of the business community in such efforts is important, but the "dramatic decline" in local business leadership means that change agents must also enlist the active support of civic institutions-and economic engines-such as universities, hospitals, community foundations, and cultural groups.

Creating systemic change requires nurturing "boundary-crossing" leaders. Cities need to become a "breeding ground for social entrepreneurs," says Grogan-"pragmatic zealots" eager to "make change and make a difference," who are equally credible in city hall, community meetings, corporate boardrooms, and the media. Fortunately, he observes, young people today are "incredibly idealistic . . . they're very eager to make change and they want to make a difference."

Politics are a positive arena for advancing systemic change. The "risk of engaging with political leaders is well understood and well known," but the "risk of irrelevancy if [change agents] do not engage political leaders is far greater," maintains George Latimer, former long-time mayor of St. Paul. He urges change agents to align their self-interests with those of political leaders while fighting for broad-based programs to sustain public support. Showing the cost-effectiveness of programs such as early childhood education is essential to winning the support of politicians, business leaders, and the public across the political spectrum.

High-quality research provides an essential scaffolding for systems change. While the UHI illustrated the importance of data and research, it also revealed a "startling" gap between academic social science research and the concrete needs of practitioners, maintains Manuel Pastor, chair of Latin American and Latino Studies at the University of California at Santa Cruz. To build new partnerships, universities need to move toward a "model of research that would feed into and articulate what fieldworkers need to know," and researchers should recognize

that "the big prize is political change" and a "vision . . . that rings true" around which people will organize.

Race and ethnicity are critical aspects of social change. Although the UHI took shape in response to urban unrest, such initiatives risk "playing to the lowest common denominator" if they fail to confront issues of race and ethnicity head on, says Pastor. He urges change agents to work with the country's burgeoning immigrant population, especially to address the country's enormous rates of incarceration.

Change agents need to embrace the "morality of limited gains." Grogan cautions that change agents "cannot expect big wins every time." However, the recent record in U.S. cities attests to the wisdom of "the patient assembly of local victories: that's how America changes." Advocates need to act as-and enlist the support of -intermediaries such as the Local Initiative Support Corporation (LISC), which provides technology transfer, standards, and conduits to capital to local movements. LISC also helped win significant national legislation such as the low-income housing tax credit and a revitalized Community Reinvestment Act. Such organizations, he says, add "reach, power and depth to a scattered series of local efforts."

References

Papers commissioned for this seminar and cited in this policy brief are available online at www.ksg.harvard.edu/urbanpoverty:

1. Jerry VanderWood. "Aggregate Lessons Learned on the Use of Data, Communications, and Political Strategizing by Local Urban Health Initiative Campaigns."

2. Beth C. Weitzman, Diana Silver, and Caitlyn Brazill. "Efforts to Improve Public Policy and Programs through Improved Data Practices: Experiences in 15 Distressed American Cities."

3. Jo Ann R. Lawer, Charles R. Lyons, and Marsha Zibalese-Crawford. "Using Data Tools in the Decision-Making Process.

4. Veronica Templeton. "The Power of Persuasion to Perfect a Movement: The Role of Communications in a System Reform Effort."

5. Hathaway Ferebee. "Communication Lessons Learned: The Safe and Sound Campaign, Baltimore."

6. Laura Hewitt. "Political Strategizing to Maintain Local Partnerships for Systems Change."

7. Grenae D. Dudley. "There Are Children Here! The Importance of Credibility, Relationships, Opportunities, Communication, Leadership, and Politics as Strategies to Improve the Health and Safety of Children in Metropolitan Detroit."

*The mission of the **Urban Health Initiative (UHI)** is to improve the health and safety of children and youth. Local campaigns in Baltimore, Detroit, Oakland, Philadelphia and Richmond participating in the UHI seek to change the major systems that serve children in order to improve youth and safety statistics throughout the entire city or metropolitan area. The UHI National Program Office is located at the University of Washington and is headed by former Seattle Mayor Charles Royer.*

The Urban Seminar Series on Children's Health and Safety *brings together researchers, practitioners, and policy makers who have a common interest in improving the health and well being of urban children. The series is sponsored by The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (RWJF) and directed by William Julius Wilson at Harvard University's John F. Kennedy School of Government. The seminars are designed to complement RWJF's Urban Health Initiative.*

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