

Social Service Delivery Through Public-Private Partnerships: Implications for Faith-Based Organizations

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Introduction

Homelessness remains one of the most pressing social problems of the 21st century, with nearly 100 million people without homes worldwide (UNDP 1997). Throughout the late 20th century, estimates of the number of men, women, and children who were homeless on any given night within the United States range from six hundred-thousand to three million (Hill 1994). Possible reasons include unemployment among the poor, deinstitutionalization of former mental patients, scarcity of low cost housing, drug addiction and alcohol abuse, and domestic violence (Hill 1991; Hill and Stamey 1990).

Over time, the character and makeup of this subpopulation within the U.S. transformed from stereotypes of Bowery bums and bag ladies to families and children (Wasson and Hill 1998). Young women head the vast majority of homeless families, and their children often are less than five years old. Additionally, throwaway and runaway youths have become a significant homeless subgroup. Oftentimes these children leave home as young teens because of eviction by a parent or the creation of intolerable and abusive conditions. As a result, they often end up sleeping outside.

The situation in Portland, Oregon reflects these national trends (Noell 1998). While the general homeless population has increased as a result of the region's overall growth pattern, the problems encountered by youths living on the streets is particularly dire. For instance, many of the services for the homeless already in existence were

developed for adults and, therefore, are inappropriate for younger men and women. Additionally, services for families that include children are focused on the very young rather than teenagers. With no place left to go, these youths selected to congregate and sleep outside in a small number of downtown locations. As this population grew and their presence became increasingly visible, members of faith-based organizations, government officials, nonprofit service providers, and representatives of the business community believed the problem had reached crisis proportions.

This paper provides a description of how service delivery to these homeless teens was advanced through a public-private partnership that included faith-based organizations in a leadership role. A brief discussion of the creation, implementation, and system-wide review of this public-private collaboration is presented next. The final section describes lessons learned from this partnering that have implications for faith-based organizations seeking to develop strategies for relationship building with government agencies, nonprofit firms, funders, and other entities.

Service Delivery and Public-Private Collaboration

The principle investigator in this research played several key roles in the development, implementation, and assessment of the public-private partnership formed to serve the needs of homeless youths in Portland, OR. First, he was selected for the committee that developed the original model for service delivery as a result of his research on poverty. Second, he was a board member of New Avenues for Youth—one of the four service providers chosen to implement the resulting model. Third, he served on the committee that evaluated the operationalization of the service delivery system after

eighteen months of functioning. These appointments allowed for the observation of the complete process.

There are several interesting findings that emerge from this investigation (see Hill 2002 for more details on themes and lessons). These discoveries are embedded within themes involving *community uprising*, *negotiated peace*, *a service-delivery system emerges*, *dissension in the ranks*, and *coming together*. The nuances of each are presented below in the same order.

Community uprising reveals that this public-private partnership was spawned by widespread dissatisfaction with the provision of services to homeless youths. Well-regarded and politically connected citizens led this revolt, even though their personal and professional lives only were impacted tangentially by this problem. They were classic outsiders who did not have faith in the philosophical approaches or operational tactics employed by the current service providers and the government agencies with supervisory responsibilities over the system. As a result, they sought to bring a private business ethic to solving this public problem that was based on deliverable outcomes instead of social service ideals. The leaders among them demanded unified governmental management of service delivery and a programmatic plan of action.

These concerned citizens proactively dealt with this difficult problem by taking charge of the reform process and seeking critical transformation of the prevailing service delivery system. However, in order for a negotiated peace to occur, local government officials needed to exert leadership to ensure that the diversity of interests surrounding this issue was adequately represented during reformation. To meet this goal, all relevant constituencies were empowered jointly to effect change, and they were allowed to

maintain continuous contact with the developing model from creation to implementation to evaluation. Local government's decision to improve funding for the final product created an additional incentive for action.

Given the dissimilar orientations of group members, responsive and coordinated management of the change process from local government officials was required for a new service delivery system to emerge. Representatives from the appointed supervisory agency opened the deliberations of the Ad Hoc Committee with a series of informational meetings designed to establish a common grounding in the data necessary to make appropriate decisions. Outside experts, current providers, and homeless youths participated in these discussions, eliciting considerable empathy from the membership. As a result, rigid initial positions gave way to a consensus mentality focused on establishing a shared overarching goal.

Unfortunately, initial enthusiasm for the resulting system lapsed into dissention among the committee members and the providers during the implementation phase. In particular, a lack of adequate local-government financing for the proposed service delivery system forced the Ad Hoc Committee to cannibalize the ideal system and recommend a lower-quality substitute. The providers were left to make up the revenue shortfall on their own if they wished to be truly successful, leading them to approach a diverse set of public and private sources for funding. These sources often placed considerable demands for accountability on the providers that hindered cooperation within the system, and further exacerbated the philosophical differences among them.

Nonetheless, the need to come together to ensure continued local funding required that the providers and the Oversight Committee members put aside their differences.

When this tacit agreement was struck, they were able to focus attention on the positive changes that had materialized as a result of the reform process and address troublesome issues as a concerned community. Survival of the system took precedence over individual differences, resulting in a public acknowledgment of accomplishments and a proactive stance towards problems that occurred during this early period of the new system's existence.

Lessons Learned

Lesson 1: Impetus for the establishment of or radical changes to a public-private initiative may come from outside the government-provider-recipient network.

Most organizations, regardless of their orientation, concentrate their attention on a limited number of constituencies. In the case of profit-making enterprises, their focus may be on particular groups of consumers, a select number of key competitors and suppliers, and environmental elements that play a role in their long-term success.

Nonprofit firms often must satisfy the diverse needs of two primary constituencies—funding organizations and service recipients. While this close attention is both appropriate and essential, this investigation demonstrates the necessity for members of public-private initiatives to monitor politically influential groups within their community that may have an indirect interest in service delivery.

Lesson 2: Leadership of the development, implementation, and evaluation of a public-private alliance may be optimally located in a single entity that has the authority to mandate change.

The issue of leadership is fundamental to interorganizational relationships. Within business alliances, a variety of arrangements exist from channel captaincy to legal

contracts to system ownership in order to ensure cooperation among the relevant players. In the delivery of social services, hybrids of these interorganizational forms exist that range from privatization to public-private partnerships to provision entirely by governmental entities. The goal of these combinations should be to serve important constituencies in the most effective and efficient manner possible. Thus, consistent with the findings in this study, members of public-private alliances may wish to locate leadership in governmental partners that have the capacity to attain the required resources through political mandate and a broader vision of service provision.

Lesson 3: Decision-making concerning the service delivery system may be most effective if it includes the various parties with a direct or indirect interest in the outcomes of the deliberation process.

Management theorists have long suggested that decision-making among individuals with diverse backgrounds and beliefs can be enhanced when relevant parties have an opportunity to influence the process. Optimally, involvement occurs early on and includes all aspects of these deliberations that ultimately may impact them or the constituencies they represent. From problem definition to implementation to evaluation, participation must be significant enough to guarantee ownership of the final product, ensuring cooperation across intra- as well as interorganizational boundaries. It is the responsibility of entities playing a leadership role in public-private partnerships to facilitate, monitor, and maintain such open participation.

Lesson 4: Establishment of common ground among decision-makers may lead to greater consensus and the development of superordinate goals.

While the open and participatory approach advocated in lesson three recognizes and embraces diversity of perspective, little progress can occur unless decision-makers ultimately come together and function as a cohesive body. To create a greater sense of togetherness, leaders often seek common ground amidst differences in order to define problems and seek solutions that all or most can support. As chronicled in this investigation, the establishment of consensual superordinate goals may be an effective mechanism for building a unified front.

Lesson 5: Lack of adequate financing or the use of multiple public and private sources of revenue may disrupt the system and lead to conflicts among service providers.

Managers often allocate fewer resources to solving problems than their organizational members believe necessary, yet somehow they expect their goals and objectives to be accomplished. While a significant portion of this shortfall is due to economic limitations, another important factor is the level of priority of a particular issue. For example, social services are typically a low priority among taxpayers, except in a few cases involving vulnerable populations such as the elderly or children. As a result, public and private social service initiatives take a backseat to other concerns, and providers are asked to accomplish their missions without adequate resources or to search widely for alternative sources of funding. As this investigation reveals, both options may be losing propositions.

Lesson 6: Survival of the system, once it is established, may become an important rallying point during times of stress.

Within every organization or system of organizations are the seeds of its own destruction or continued success. A chronic lack of adequate resources, stagnation or

calcification of thinking or practice, and failure to meet the needs of internal and external constituencies may result in extinction or dissolution of interorganizational relationships. On the other hand, the continuous infusion of new resources, innovative thinking and open participation among relevant parties, and an orientation to high-quality service provision may lead to long-term success. While this investigation suggests that system survival may become a higher-order goal, it does so only as long as public-private partners believe that working together is in their mutual best interest.

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