Partners In Progress Case Study: Community Solutions

I n November, 2013, Community Solutions was awarded a grant from the Partners in Progress (PIP) Initiative, a national program funded by the Citi Foundation and managed by the Low Income Investment Fund. This grant funded Community Solution's work in Brownsville, a deeply distressed neighborhood located almost seven miles Southeast of the Brooklyn Bridge; far enough from Manhattan to be untouched by the tidal wave of gentrification that has swept across the East River driving up rents and displacing low-income residents in neighborhoods closer to Manhattan.

An article in the *New York Times Magazine* described Brownsville as "one of New York's poorest neighborhoods, with nearly 40 percent of people living below the poverty line. It has been that way for decades, even as lawmakers tried one anti-poverty program after another." The article continues:

> *Nearly half of those 16 and older are not in the labor force; thousands more are looking for work and unable to find it. A steady barrage of violence punctuates their idle hours. There were 72 shootings last year and 15 murders — in an area spanning about two square miles that many people never leave.*

The neighborhood's most distinctive physical feature is the number of public housing projects. There are eighteen, the highest concentration in the nation according to a 2012 article and photo essay on *Time* magazine's website. In other respects, it looks and feels characteristically like other un-gentrified New York neighborhoods with ground floor commercial activity along the busier thoroughfares but without the pricey boutiques and high-end retail chains found in more prosperous Brooklyn enclaves.

Creative Problem-Solving: The Road to Brownsville

Indeed, Community Solutions selected Brownsville as the site of its first neighborhood initiative – the Brownsville Partnership – because of these extraordinary challenges. To understand the most novel and intriguing aspects of the Brownsville Partnership, the story needs to start twenty years ago as the growing problem of homelessness became evident on the streets of many cities. Just a few years earlier the growing urgency prompted Congress to enact the McKinney Homeless Assistance Act. Community Solutions' roots are in the movement to end chronic street homelessness, and the McKinney Act provided new support and impetus for action. The organization grew out of Common Ground, a pioneering nonprofit founded by Roseanne Haggerty. In 1993 that organization gained prominence when it acquired the Times Square Hotel, a dangerous and financially troubled property in a notoriously seedy section of Midtown, and converted it into 652 apartments, including many supported housing units for the homeless.

The goal was to get people off the streets, out of the shelters and into permanent afford-able housing. The expectation was that a project of this scale would have a visible impact on the homelessness problem in the twenty blocks around Times Square. Haggerty and her staff were surprised that the homeless population in the Times Square area remained persistently high. This started the organization on a journey into the phenomenon of homelessness and ultimately into what arguably became Community Solution's core competency: its distinc-tive approach to solving complex social challenges.

To figure out why their efforts were not having greater impact Common Ground created its Street-to-Home team to reach out to and get to know people living on the street. According to one of its publications:

> We learned quickly in our conversations…with homeless individuals that the greatest stumbling block to individuals ending their homelessness was the dizzying complexity of the programs existing to assist them. The rules, requirements, and separate operating spheres of public and not-for-profit programs highlighted a reality that was seldom acknowledged: no coherent process existed to assist vulnerable people in resolving multi-dimensional problems.

Community Solutions also encountered this pattern of systemic dysfunction in subsequent projects, including Brownsville. Understanding this pattern helped explain the frustratingly intractable character of other intractable social problems: They are caused by bewilderingly complex circumstances to begin with and do not yield to disjointed responses from a labyrinth of organizations and agencies operating in their insular orbits. In other words, the only way to untie the Gordian knot of failed interventions was to elicit from the people affected by the problem insight into the challenges they face – what Community Solutions calls their "user driven design process" – and to use that knowledge to craft highly targeted and integrated strategies. This approach to problem solving became one of Common Ground's legacy contributions to Community Solutions.

Community Solutions tests the ideas it derives from this user-driven design process by launching small scale pilot efforts. It subjects these prototypes to frequent, on-going and rigorous evaluation to figure out what works. To continue to evolve its approach to problem-solving, Common Ground formed an innovations team headed-up by the Streets-to-Home director; a step that foreshadowed a strategic fork in the organization's path. By this time Common Ground had become an efficient developer and manager of supportive housing in and around Manhattan. The decision was made to separate these business lines. It spun-off the innovations team's portfolio into a new organization – Community Solutions – with Haggerty as its president. It would apply and scale the problem-solving techniques Common Ground had used so successfully. As a separate organization the innovations team would be freer to expand its geographic scope and explore initiatives to prevent homelessness and persistent poverty. The reorganization allowed Common Ground to concentrate on devel-oping and managing supported housing.

The recently completed 100,000 Homes Campaign was Community Solutions' tour de force demonstration of its methodology. A team of Community Solutions' employees coordinated public-private partnerships in hundreds of communities across the country to find permanent housing for the most vulnerable homeless individuals. It not only declared its startlingly ambitious numerical goal, it was time-bound: Four years. *New York Times* OpEd writer David Bornstein described the campaign as "the human welfare equivalent of the race to put a man on the moon," and asked, "Was it achievable?" Ultimately it was. But it did not look that way for a while.

"When you looked at the data," Andrew Haupt, Community Solutions' senior director for operations, admitted, "it was only going to be a 30,000 homes campaign unless something was different." The 100,000 Homes Campaign staff members had read about the Rapid Results Institute, a nonprofit that works in developing countries on intractable problems, and, as its name suggests, achieves results in short periods of time. Working as partners, the two organizations together built a hybrid methodology that combined the best insights of each organization into a strategy that would move the needle on homelessness. This hybrid methodology enabled the campaign to achieve its goal and would become pivotal to the Brownsville Partnership's approach to the neighborhood's persistent poverty.

The Institute's approach to large-scale change begins with an unreasonable goal, a small and tightly focused cross-sector team and an unrealistic 100-day completion date. Community Solutions has repeatedly demonstrated that when the goal is important, the participants are able to track it in real time, and the teams are motivated and properly coached, they are able to gain a comprehensive understanding of all the factors that create obstacles. That enables them to rapidly develop and test ways to overcome obstacles and achieve the goal. In the process, the participants develop the know-how and confidence to do the same at a far larger scale.

Putting Down Stakes in Brownsville

Although building robust cross-sector partnerships may require extra time and commitment, they are crucial to fulfilling the community quarterback role and dramatically improved community development outcomes. So Citi Foundation selected grantees like Community Solutions that embody characteristics of a community quarterback. The PIP grant and peer learning community enabled Community Solutions and the other PIP grantees to accelerate the partnership development process and test the assumption that community quarterbacks could overcome the limitations of traditional community development practices. In Community Solutions' case, it is possible to track that trajectory back to Common Ground's effort to house homeless individuals in Times Square. Each twist and turn in its evolution built organizational capabilities to serve as an effective community quarterback.

Even before its metamorphosis into Community Solutions the innovation team began to see its work with the Times Square homelessness population as part of a process of neighborhood transformation. This inspired the team to explore opportunities to re-imagine its

future course. A funder concerned with the growing problem of family homelessness created an opening to attack this crisis in a neighborhood context. Sifting through data on families entering the homeless system in New York City, "one place glowed bright red," Haupt explained: "The two Brownsville zip codes." That placed the Brownsville in Community Solution's sweet spot. "We begin with the places and people in the most extreme distress," one of its publications explains. Getting to know people and their circumstances exposes the systemic failures that thwart well-intentioned efforts to ameliorate social problems. . The extreme outliers "reveal most clearly the failures of existing systems," the Community Solutions document concludes.

Thus the first step in Brownsville involved outreach to neighborhood residents to better understand the community and the challenges that contribute to family homelessness. This was not easy. There is a great deal of distrust of organizations promising change. "It is a community cast aside so many times," Rasmia "Ras" Kirmani-Frye, Director of the Brownsville Partnership at the time, observes. "No one believes anything can change and that organizations promising to do so are there to take advantage of them."

The organization launched HomeLink, an intervention program to prevent evictions. As it built its relationship with families struggling to stay housed in Brownsville, Community Solutions discovered a complicated confluence of circumstances drive a family's downward spiral toward homelessness. A scarcity of resources and nonprofit human services organizations in the neighborhood compounded the challenge of preserving tenancies. To address this, as early as 2009, Community Solutions started to approach high performing organizations in New York with an offer that must have seemed easy to refuse: Create a presence in Brownsville; raise whatever funding you need to service neighborhood residents, and commit to work collaboratively. On the other hand, to these organizational recruits, the need was manifest, as was Community Solution's commitment to drive change. The resulting alliances matured and became the Brownsville Partnership.

The Brownsville Partnership developed over multiple years. SCO Family of Services joined the partnership and over five years launched eight early childhood and family programs in Brownsville. The Center for Court Innovation, an organization sponsoring alternatives to incarceration, joined. So did a leadership training program: East Brooklyn Congregations. Over time, many more joined. Describing this relationship-building process Kirmani-Frye resorts to a dating metaphor. With some prospective collaborators, it was a long slow courtship, gradually getting to know and feel comfortable with each other. In other cases, the chemistry was immediate.

5,000 Jobs Campaign

The Partnership's mission to make Brownsville a safer, healthier, more prosperous neighborhood advanced on many fronts over the past five years. During this period, a consensus viewpoint among residents and partners began to crystallize: If Brownsville could overcome its residents' pervasive disengagement from the workforce, it would have a positive spillover

effect and drive a lot of other positive change in the neighborhood.

Low labor force participation rate is a complicated problem. "The concentration of generational poverty impedes creating inroads into a workforce development system," Kirmani-Frye observed. "For most of us, we find jobs through our networks. That kind of networking doesn't exist in Brownsville. We need to build a network to the outside. There are not a lot of jobs in Brownsville. That is a barrier. What the New York City economy needs is not always the same as what Brownsville residents have to offer. That is a skills barrier."

She cited two additional and more elusive barriers: First, "What is missing in the workforce is a culture of work. Most people don't see their neighbors getting up and going to work." Second, Kirmani-Frye asks, "Why is it that in so many…people have a hard time leaving the community for training or to work? What would crack that open?" By way of explanation, Kirmani-Frye describes Brownsville as "urban in its density and rural in its disconnectedness. We need to connect Brownsville to the mainstream networks."

This understanding framed the PIP grant proposal from Community Solutions. Community Solutions had many partners at the table who had committed in-kind resources. The partners had already agreed on a bold outcome – 5,000 jobs for community residents in four years. But what was missing was the funding required for the Community Solutions staff person who would coordinate, motivate, advise and celebrate the teams as they worked on piloting, prototyping, and scaling the innovative solutions that would enable them to reach the goal of 5,000 jobs.

With the PIP grant in hand, the partners turned to focus on the details of the workforce development system, which was not working for Brownsville. In New York City workforce development is a function of the Department of Small Business Services. It has established Workforce1 Career Centers throughout the city. "We learned that Brownsville is the second highest user of workforce services in the city," Kirmani-Frye explained. "This indicates that people are very motivated to work." On the other hand, citywide one in four Workforce1 users land a job whereas only one in six Brownsville users do so. The Partnership plans to track that statistic to see if the campaign shrinks that disparity.

As the campaign planning proceeded, the Partnership continued to recruit new partners and solicit commitments of time and talent. The City's Department of Small Business Services was among the new partners signing-on to work on the 5,000 Jobs Campaign. "Huge" is the way Kirmani-Frye described that agency's decision to join the effort. Moreover, the department's deputy commissioner for workforce development, Jacqueline Mallon, volunteered to personally participate. This ensured the campaign's ability to tap the department's expertise; gain access to its data, and learn about training and employment opportunities.

Community Solutions agile problem-solving approach involves careful, but not prolonged, planning. Most of the planning went into designing and launching the first phase of the campaign: a 100-day prototyping process. The benefits of the "just do it" approach are three fold. First, using resources that exist within the partnership, it is possible to generate outcomes quickly, thus building the confidence in the partnership's capacity to achieve its long term

goal. Second, urgency to achieve 100-day goals, forces the team to innovate. When the implementation teams encounter barriers, there is too little time to work through a bureaucratic chain of command; they need to rely on their own wits to invent a better solution. Finally, members of the partnership learn how to work together to achieve results. This is what the Rapid Results Institute calls "implementation capacity – the ability to make the hundreds or thousands of changes at the grassroots level that must occur for large-scale change to succeed."[1]

Community Solutions formed a design team to plan the 100-day prototyping phase culminating in a two-day "boot camp." The boot camp introduced the Brownsville partners to the 100-day exercise. Participants were divided into three teams of 8 to 9 people culled from partner organizations and neighborhood residents. Each team had responsibility for one of the 16-story buildings at Tilden Houses – a 998-unit public housing development. The teams chose one member to serve as its leader, a day for their weekly meetings, a name – Job Mob, Success Express and DO-Mont (named after Tilden Houses Dumont Avenue address) – and set its own 100-day goal for job placements and number of residents providing employment-related information for the campaign's jobs database. Together they committed to 175 jobs and 400 database entries.

In addition to weekly reports of progress, they scheduled a full-day review with the members of all three teams after 30, 60 and 100 days. With the 100-day review fast approaching, it is clear the three teams will fall short of their numeric goals. Yet the three teams do not seem to be deflated by that. "We have created a culture where people do not perceive failure as failure but an opportunity to learn," Kirmani-Frye reports. "Our focus is on learning. Maybe we picked the wrong number. Maybe if we had done x instead of y. Without the emphasis on learning, we would feel defeated but the point is to figure out how to be successful." She then gave some examples of how the process has worked.

"When we started we were all about outreach," trying to bring residents and employers together. "We did not know what we could provide to these people or employers beyond bringing them together." However, without a resume in hand and without interview preparation, residents were not being offered jobs. That led to another innovation. The Center for Court Innovation, one of the partners, has a computer lab. "We got Workforce1" to staff the computer center twice a week with people who are able to coach candidates and prepare them to meet with employers. The next time the teams hosted a recruitment event in the neighborhood for Dollar Tree, a retailer, "thirty residents showed up and nineteen had jobs within 24 hours." This is precisely the point of prototyping according to Kirmani-Frye: "We don't have to wait until we have the perfect model."

The iterative problem-solving that characterizes the prototyping process enables the partners to figure out what they need to do to achieve their goal and how to get better at it. The 100-day exercise generates an urgency and visibility. In such a high stakes environment

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1   Schaffer, R.H. & Ashkenas, R.N. (2005). *Rapid Results!: How 100-Day Projects Build the Capacity for Large-Scale Change.* Jossey-Bass: San Francisco, CA. p. 1.

with clearly defined success or failure, the teams become intensely engaged. This produces a collaborative working relationship that encourages creativity. And in fact one of the striking developments Kirmani-Frye points to is the evolution between the 30- and 60-day reviews. At the first review, people were still a bit tentative. Thirty days later, the team participants were highly engaged, solutions were being developed and tested, and "everyone was swimming in the same direction." This bodes well for the partnership's success.

Community Solution's experience highlights a number of potential insights about the role of a community QB and building a cross-sector, cross-silo collaborative:

Bold, time-limited goals

Community Solutions' experience in the 100,000 Homes Campaign, followed by the 5,000 Jobs Campaign, shows the galvanizing effect that a bold goal with a clear timeframe and easily understood metrics can have. This bold goal has helped to attract attention, energy and resources at the scale that a more modest approach would have had a hard time achieving.

Achieving the intense focus on a single outcome takes time

While the numeric goal was the product of Rapid Results' specific methodology, the focus on employment is the product of time and shared effort. For Community Solutions, and many other PIP grantees, the PIP collaborative relationships and shared focus grew out of a history of work in the community. The Brownsville Partnership's work over five years provided the time for trust to develop and a consensus viewpoint on jobs to emerge. If the Brownsville Partnership hadn't had the time to engage the residents and stakeholders deeply, and hadn't been able to establish itself as a trustworthy partner, coming to such a sharply defined goal would have been much more difficult.

The power of concentrated energy

Like a hurricane passing over warm water, the Brownsville Partnership, and especially the 5,000 jobs campaign, attracted energy and resources. The Jobs Campaign intensified the collaborative relationships previously formed and, attracting new partners, most notably the city's Department of Small Business Services. In short, concentrated effort generates its own momentum.

Focus on results

Organizations working within the constraints of their own silos often overlook the many ways in which their mission intersects with other organizations operating in other spheres. However, as the 5,000 Jobs Campaign demonstrates, when they come together without those restrictions, success becomes more likely. Indeed, when the problem is a dysfunctional system, like the employment system, the only way to have impact is to see and address the totality of the system. That's what this partnership is doing.

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