

Introduction

Solutions for America

IN THE FALL OF 1998, A SMALL GROUP CONVENED by the Pew Partnership for Civic Change gathered in a hotel meeting room to ponder a simple challenge. Hometown answers to America's most pressing problems were cropping up in communities across the nation. In small towns and in big urban centers, nonprofit organizations, local governments, and citizens' groups were working together to find solutions. How best to uncover these solutions and discover what made them work? What was the most effective way to identify, study, and tell the world about these efforts?

Just telling the stories of these communities, it was decided, would not be enough. There needed to be some process of analysis, of validation, in order to demonstrate that these programs were *effective*, and not merely well-known or well-intentioned. At the same time, the research process needed to go beyond a sterile collecting and crunching of quantitative data. What was needed was a middle ground between a comprehensive but dry impact evaluation on the one hand, and purely anecdotal description on the other.

Solutions for America was the answer. Launched by the Pew Partnership in 1999, Solutions was a two-year national research initiative designed to identify, document, and disseminate information about successful efforts to address tough challenges in communities across the country. The project was initially launched as *Wanted: Solutions for America*, but the search is now over: we have uncovered solutions that work. This report documents our findings.

SOLUTIONS FOR AMERICA WAS DESIGNED TO ACCOMPLISH FOUR PRIMARY OBJECTIVES:

- to document successful solutions to critical community problems;
- to showcase the best of research and practice for national audiences;
- to increase access by policymakers, practitioners, and citizens to practical knowledge about what works; and
- to increase the capacity of community-based nonprofit organizations and local governments to conduct their own research and program evaluation.

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In 1999, the Pew Partnership's Solutions for America advisory board chose a diverse group of initiatives from around the country to see whether they were indeed solutions to some of the nation's most pressing problems. In all, nineteen of the most promising projects were selected from a pool of more than a hundred applications. The projects represented a broad range of communities. Some were based in major cities (Boston, New York, Los Angeles); others were located in smaller urban centers (Burlington, Vermont; Cedar Rapids, Iowa; Charlottesville, Virginia); and some served rural communities (Big Ugly Creek, West Virginia; Aiken County, South Carolina). In addition to this geographic diversity, the projects represented significant issue diversity as well, as they addressed problems in five policy areas: community economic development; community health; workforce development; civic engagement; and children, youth, and families. Solutions for America was a comprehensive effort to gather systematic data on each of these projects; to learn precisely what works—and what doesn't—when it comes to solving problems in these areas.

The chart on the following pages lists the location, name, and issue focus for each of the nineteen Solutions sites.

The Nineteen

Solutions Sites

Aiken, SC	Growing into Life <i>(infant mortality)</i>
Arlington, TX	Dental Health for Arlington <i>(access to dental services)</i>
Big Ugly Creek, WV	Step by Step, Inc. /West Virginia Dreamers Project <i>(rural youth empowerment)</i>
Boston, MA	Boston Main Streets <i>(commercial revitalization)</i>
Brockton, MA	MY TURN, Inc. <i>(job training)</i>
Burlington, VT	Burlington Ecumenical Action Ministry/ Vermont Development Credit Union <i>(access to capital and credit)</i>
Cedar Rapids, IA	Neighborhood Transportation Service <i>(job transportation)</i>
Charlottesville, VA	City of Charlottesville <i>(downtown revitalization)</i>
Cincinnati, OH	Cincinnati Youth Collaborative <i>(youth mentoring)</i>
Jacksonville, FL	The Bridge of Northeast Florida <i>(youth development)</i>
Jacksonville, FL	Jacksonville Community Council, Inc. <i>(community issue analysis)</i>

Los Angeles, CA	Beyond Shelter/Housing First for Homeless Families <i>(homelessness)</i>
Mankato, MN	Region Nine Prevention and Healthy Communities Network <i>(teen drug and alcohol use)</i>
New York, NY	Children’s Aid Society/Carmel Hill Project <i>(comprehensive neighborhood revitalization)</i>
Richmond, KY	Kentucky River Foothills Development Council/ Women in Construction <i>(job training for women)</i>
St. Louis, MO	FOCUS St. Louis/Bridges Across Racial Polarization® <i>(race relations)</i>
Santa Ana, CA	Taller San Jose <i>(job preparation for Latino youth)</i>
Shreveport, LA	Shreveport-Bossier Community Renewal <i>(neighborhood revitalization)</i>
Western North Carolina	HandMade in America/Small Towns Revitalization Project <i>(rural revitalization)</i>

The Hub-and-Spoke **Research Design**

AT THE HEART OF SOLUTIONS FOR AMERICA was an innovative research design, a two-part “hub-and-spoke” model. At the center—the “hub”—was the Pew Partnership, working in conjunction with the Center for Urban Policy Research (CUPR) at Rutgers University. Together, the Partnership and CUPR worked to coordinate the research effort, provide technical assistance, and oversee centralized data-gathering tasks. Each of the nineteen sites—the “spokes”—identified a local research partner with whom they worked over the two-year period of the project. Eighteen of the nineteen research teams included researchers from a local college or university. These local researchers, drawn from schools of social work, architecture, nursing, and education along with various social science departments, worked in concert with organization staff to design and implement a research strategy. Other local research team members were drawn from nonacademic research firms.

The Pew Partnership and CUPR worked directly with each of the research teams, providing support for the local researchers, convening national meetings of researchers and program staff over the course of the project, and providing each site with an additional research fund to defray related expenses. In addition, CUPR provided the evaluators with a common research plan to ensure consistent work and make possible comparable analyses. A research handbook was distributed to every research team, outlining the resources available to team members (a website, newsletter, and e-mail listserv), and describing the reports that each team would be asked to prepare.

This process was motivated by four central questions that each research team was asked to address throughout the project: First, *what are the results of the program?* Second, *how does the program work?* Third, *what role do partnership and collaboration play in the selected programs?* And finally, *what lessons can be extracted for audiences both within and across issue areas?* By addressing these questions at the local level—and by analyzing the responses across the nineteen sites—Solutions was able to get the maximum leverage from the hub-and-spoke model.

As a final component of the research design, researchers at the University of Vir-

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ginia undertook a longitudinal evaluation of the Solutions for America research process. Key program staff members from each site, along with their associated local research partners, were surveyed—by mail, phone, and over the Internet—in the fall of 2000, in the fall of 2001, and in the spring and summer of 2002.