

# Lessons and Recommendations

## ***For Policymakers, Program Personnel, Funders, and Researchers***

THE MOST IMPORTANT FINDING FROM SOLUTIONS FOR AMERICA, the most important lesson to take away, is that there are working solutions out there, waiting to be discovered. Across the nation a thousand flowers are blooming in the form of communities taking problems into their own hands and finding solutions. And these solutions involve making connections, changing minds, thinking small, and doing democracy.

But there are additional lessons to take away from Solutions for America, lessons that speak to a number of different audiences, including policymakers, program personnel, funders, and researchers.

### ■ **Long-term Commitments Are Essential**

Many of the most pressing problems communities face took years, even decades, to develop. Not surprisingly, solving them can often take just as long. The most successful solutions we encountered featured players who were in it for the long haul. In Charlottesville, for example, downtown revitalization is now well into its third decade; in Los Angeles, Beyond Shelter has been aiding homeless families for fifteen years; and in Brockton, MY TURN has been training young people for almost twenty. Such staying power requires patience, commitment, community support, and the ability to document results.

### ■ **Collaboration Is Key**

None of the solutions we studied entail individuals or even groups acting alone. As we have discussed, “making connections” is a central component of successful solutions. Across the board, we found instances of collaboration within and across the public, private, and nonprofit sectors. And in general, greater collaboration translates into a broader base of support and greater success, as more resources, expertise, and manpower can be brought to bear on community problems when more—and more diverse—groups of citizens are involved.

### ■ **An Ounce of Prevention: A Little Goes a Long Way**

Whether screening teeth in Arlington, Texas, providing safe havens for young people in Jacksonville, or helping students stay in school in Cincinnati, the solutions we uncovered recognize the value of small investments that have big payoffs. Sometimes these payoffs are evident right away; sometimes they emerge further down the road; but whatever the time horizon the lesson is as clear as it is familiar: treating problems early—or preventing them altogether—makes more sense and costs less money than waiting until they're big enough to make headlines as crises.

### ■ **Research Counts**

How best to demonstrate the effectiveness of a solution? This can be a challenge, especially when programs seek to prevent problems at early stages when they can seem less pressing. But funders, local governments, and other stakeholders appropriately expect to see evidence that programs do what they claim, that accomplishments are empirically demonstrable. In addition, knowing what works and what doesn't is critical at the level of the program as well, where staff members seek to improve services. Incorporating research into program operations is therefore critical when it comes to evaluating and demonstrating success. And carefully conducted research can also raise public awareness about community problems, building support and expanding coalitions.

### ■ **Focus on Families, Neighborhoods, and Communities**

Few of the solutions we encountered deal with individuals. Rather, they address the problems of families, neighborhoods, and communities. New York's Carmel Hill Project, Charlottesville's downtown revitalization, Boston's Main Streets all represent neighborhood-level solutions, and Beyond Shelter takes the family as the "unit of solution." Almost all of the other sites also recognize that solving problems requires addressing them in some larger context. When problems exist at the level of families, neighborhoods, and communities, then that is precisely where solutions should be addressed.

### ■ **Beware of Success**

Surprisingly, we found that success can often pose as many problems as failure. What happens when a program succeeds? Does it expand its existing operations? Branch out into new directions? Define problems more broadly? Close up shop? The Solutions sites responded to success in different ways, and there is no one-size-fits-all approach to dealing with success. Clearly, biting off too much can be risky; expanding into new areas can tax resources, strain relationships, and lead to a loss of focus. However, many of the Solutions sites were able to navigate these challenges successfully, providing more services to more clients while still seeing clear results. Dealing with success, though, remains an important challenge that is often overlooked.

### ■ **Measure Success in Terms of Outcomes, Not Just Inputs**

When asked to evaluate their results, most program personnel are quick to describe the extent of their efforts: the number of volunteers or person-hours worked, the number of clients served, meetings held, dollars invested, time expended. But these are all *inputs*, that is, they are the ingredients of the solution, not the measures of success. When it comes to assessing solutions, what is also needed are indicators of *outcomes*, which in turn require that measures of success be carefully defined in advance. A rise in employment or income, improvements in health, increases in graduation rates, and decreases in infant mortality or teen pregnancy or homelessness all represent demonstrable measures of individual or community well-being. Counting clients means little if the treatment is ineffectual. Public officials, funding agencies, and citizens demand and deserve real measures of success.

### ■ **Measure Success Broadly: Primary vs. “Spillover” Effects**

It is important to note that success comes in many varieties, and can even be easy to miss. Sometimes programs succeed at solving problems they never set out to address. In Richmond Kentucky, for example, Women in Construction found real gains in self-esteem and life outlook in addition to the valuable job skills that clients obtained. Similarly, Vermont Development Credit Union noted important secondary attitudinal effects including greater self-confidence among credit union members.

## 50 • *What Makes a Solution?*

It is important to differentiate, therefore, between primary measures of success and “spillover” effects, and be sure to look for both.

### ■ **The Hub-and-Spoke Model**

This research model has real potential to bring together researchers and service providers from a single community. Together, these teams can foster a culture of inquiry, develop new and improved mechanisms for data gathering and analysis, and generate new information that serves to stimulate dialogue within organizations, improve program operations, and provide critical feedback to funders and other community stakeholders.

### ■ **Make Use of Local Knowledge**

Local researchers are the key to the hub-and-spoke model, but it is important to recognize the collaborative nature of the enterprise: the local researchers were not airdropped into the sites in order to gather data and report back to the hub. Rather, they worked hand-in-hand with program staff to integrate evaluation research into the regular operations of the agency. In most cases this process is ongoing, as witnessed by the three-quarters of sites that are continuing to work with their local researcher in some capacity.

### ■ **Funding Agencies**

Funding agencies should recognize the potential for the local research partnership to provide valuable insight into program operations. Whether or not such partnerships are embedded in a full-blown hub-and-spoke model, funders can realize significant “bang for the buck” by building evaluation research dollars into program operations with the help of a local, university-based researcher. The clear need in this regard is not only to support the efforts of the researcher, but to provide ample staff support, time, and resources to conduct the data-gathering and analysis.

### ■ **Colleges and Universities**

Colleges and universities stand to gain by fostering collaboration between faculty members and community organizations. Certainly academic institutions can fa-

cilitate such research through salary support, but there are other steps that may be equally critical. Course-load reduction is one important step that universities can take, as is the opportunity for faculty to combine this kind of research into pedagogical activities, such as graduate research seminars. Universities can also foster less tangible but no less important incentives, such as counting this kind of community-based research as service when it comes to tenure and promotion, and promoting such work within the institution. Just as many sites need to develop a culture of inquiry that values empirical research, so universities may need to adopt and communicate to faculty the position that this kind of research is valued within the institution.