



Set Collective Goals

A clear and unified set of goals is necessary for effective mutually reinforcing activities. If partners are not in agreement about the goals, priorities, and the overall mission of an initiative, the work of individual partners will be uncoordinated and unaligned instead of reinforcing and complementary. A shared understanding of goals and priorities is not easy to achieve—it requires ongoing, consistent meetings with representatives from all partner organizations present. Building a stable bridge to the policy community involves fostering trust, transparency, and open communication with the policy arm of Home for Good’s collective impact network.

Establish Working Groups

Breaking down collaborative tasks and responsibilities into working groups and committees helps to design specialized processes and allows partners to take ownership of specific issues. This practice embodies the mutually reinforcing activities component of the collective impact framework and also allows for improved coordination. In its first year, HPRI established a steering committee that included six members of the research committee and a Home For Good staff member to guide the overall direction of the Institute. Several other working groups were also established to create a research agenda and protocols around the Institute’s activities. These working groups included: an RFP working group, a research accelerator working group, and a research agenda working group, all of which honed in on particular aspects of HPRI’s overall mission.

Listen and Adapt

The ability to be adaptive and amenable to course corrections is a critical quality for creating the foundations of any organization, but it is particularly important in the development of a collective impact model. Listening to and acting on feedback from policymakers, funders, and research committee members ensures long term sustainability of relationships vital to success. HPRI adapted its structure based on partner feedback in the creation of the race equity working group.

During HPRI’s first year, the disproportionate prevalence of homelessness within communities of color was elevated by researchers, policymakers, and through the work of LAHSA’s Ad Hoc Committee on Black People Experiencing Homelessness. Simultaneously, stakeholders pointed to the historic lack of diversity in the research community as a contributing factor to continued racial inequities in the population experiencing homelessness. In response, HPRI established a race equity working group to promote a race equity lens in homelessness research and to elevate the voices of researchers of color, service providers and people with lived experience as critical leaders in ending racial inequities in homelessness.

Pursue Collaborative Funding Opportunities

Following the lead of Home For Good’s Funders Collaborative, which between 2012 and 2016 aligned over \$1 billion in public and private philanthropic resources toward permanent solutions to homelessness (Home For Good, 2017), HPRI has been exploring collaborative funding opportunities for research. For example, HPRI researchers recently submitted two different collaborative proposals to evaluate LAHSA’s new transitional housing program for transition aged youth. Importantly, LAHSA awarded the two HPRI teams the highest scores of all of the proposals submitted, demonstrating the policy community’s appetite for collaborative research.

CONCLUSION

During its first year, HPRI has worked with policymakers and funders to establish a shared agenda, set up a research accelerator to serve as a shared measurement system, conducted policy-relevant data analysis and research translation to reinforce the work of policymaker partners, and engaged in continuous and transparent communication through monthly meetings and quarterly symposia. HPRI also learned a number of important lessons around collaboration, listening and adapting, and establishing working groups. Over the next two years, HPRI will work to expand its membership and the pool of funding available for homelessness research in Los Angeles County. HPRI is exploring new partnerships with funders that will allow for research partners to directly apply to RFPs through HPRI, reducing administrative burden on funders and promoting collaboration amongst researchers. HPRI’s commitment to fostering a collaborative spirit in every aspect of its work and organizational structure aligns closely with the components of Kania & Kramer’s (2011) collective impact framework.

ABOUT THE HOMELESSNESS POLICY RESEARCH INSTITUTE

The Homelessness Policy Research Institute (HPRI) convenes researchers and policymakers to help design and coordinate timely, relevant, and actionable research to end homelessness in Los Angeles County. HPRI is a partnership between the USC Price Center for Social Innovation and the United Way of Greater Los Angeles’ Home for Good Initiative.

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Catalyzing Collaborative Research to End Homelessness Through a Collective Impact Framework

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Homelessness Policy Research Institute (HPRI) is a partnership between the USC Price Center for Social Innovation and the United Way of Greater Los Angeles’ Home For Good initiative, whose purpose is to convene researchers and policymakers to help design and coordinate timely, relevant, and actionable research to end homelessness in Los Angeles County. The Price Center led the development of HPRI to create a place for researchers within the Home For Good Initiative’s broader collective impact model, which also includes funders, policymakers and service providers. This brief will describe how HPRI’s goals, work, and organizational structure align closely with the key components of the collective impact framework, as outlined by Kania & Kramer (2011). It will also highlight several lessons learned from the successes and challenges that HPRI has experienced while working within this framework.

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

Established in 2017 with a leadership gift from the Conrad N. Hilton Foundation and support from the United Way of Greater Los Angeles’ Home For Good Funders Collaborative, HPRI is a county-wide effort that comprises over 30 scholars and policymakers convening and collaborating on research to end homelessness in Los Angeles County. HPRI’s four primary activities are:

- 1) fostering collaboration and coordination among researchers focused on homelessness in Los Angeles County
- 2) sharing current and upcoming research with policymakers and community partners
- 3) conducting rapid-response policy research requested by local partners
- 4) providing research consultation and technical assistance

The wide range of partners that make up HPRI’s research committee are indicative of the collaborative approach that guides the Institute’s work. The research committee includes highly regarded researchers and policymakers from public and private institutions such as USC, UCLA, Corporation for Supportive Housing, RAND Corporation, the Los Angeles Homeless Services Authority (LAHSA), Abt Associates, Economic Roundtable, and others. While the collaborative has an explicit focus on Los Angeles, it also draws in expertise from national partners whose work has relevance to the Los Angeles area.

HPRI is situated within Home For Good’s collective impact framework and acts as the research partner of the initiative. As defined by Kania & Kramer (2011) in the Stanford Social Innovation Review, collective impact refers to “the commitment of a group of important actors from different sectors to a common agenda for solving a specific social problem” (p. 2).



Collective impact models are used to address complex social problems like homelessness, where a single organization or sector cannot create any meaningful change on its own. The collective, cross-sector commitment is distinct from simple collaboration or partnerships and involves five key components:

- 1) a common agenda or shared vision
- 2) a shared measurement system
- 3) mutually reinforcing activities
- 4) continuous communication
- 5) a backbone support organization

HOME FOR GOOD: COLLECTIVE IMPACT TO END HOMELESSNESS IN LOS ANGELES

Launched in 2010 by the United Way of Greater Los Angeles and the Los Angeles Area Chamber of Commerce, Home For Good is a collective impact initiative comprising over 200 partners across sectors who have the common agenda of ending homelessness in Los Angeles County. In 2011, the initiative piloted a shared, centralized system called the Coordinated Entry System (CES), which matches people experiencing homelessness with appropriate housing based on their unique needs and circumstances and has since been adopted countywide. Home For Good’s mutually reinforcing activities include the formation of the Home For Good Funder’s Collaborative, which aligns and coordinates over 70 funding sources from public and private partners across the county (Home For Good, 2017). Additionally, Home For Good convenes public and private policymakers at the Policy Table to facilitate communication and information sharing in the creation of policies around homelessness. The partner organizations within the initiative have different yet complementary roles, which they coordinate through working groups like the Funders Collaborative and the Policy Table, regular meetings, and continuous and consistent communication. Additionally, Home For Good has a dedicated staff separate from its partners that constitutes the initiative’s backbone organization (Lynn et al., 2018).

Since its inception, Home For Good’s organizational structure and activities have met the criteria for a collective impact initiative. However, even though its numerous partner organizations span the private and public sectors, the initiative initially lacked a sustained, collective research voice, which prevented it from maximizing its impact. In 2017, Home For Good helped launch HPRI as the much needed research voice for its work to end homelessness in Los Angeles County. Shortly after HPRI’s inception, the need for a collective research voice to end homelessness was highlighted nationally through a National Academies of Sciences (2018) report on the health impacts of permanent housing interventions for people experiencing chronic homelessness. The report recommended that federal health and housing agencies “support the convening of subject-matter experts to assess how research and policy could be used to facilitate access to permanent supportive housing and ensure the availability of needed support services” (p. 6).

HPRI AND THE COLLECTIVE IMPACT FRAMEWORK

While HPRI is part of Home For Good’s collective impact model, the Institute is also guided by the collective impact framework itself. The following section details the ways in which HPRI’s work, activities, and organizational structure align with the collective impact framework.

Common Agenda

Participants in a collective impact initiative must have a common vision for change, a mutual understanding of the problem at hand, and an agreed upon set of actions that they will take to jointly solve the problem (Kania & Kramer, 2011).

HPRI’s research committee spent the first several months of its existence developing a common agenda through a shared vision, values, and goals document. This document defined the committee’s agenda and established agreed upon activities, namely producing timely, actionable research for the homelessness policy community.



While the development of a common agenda created a unified set of research priorities for the committee, challenges arose when the research committee’s plan did not fully align with the research priorities previously developed by the Home For Good Policy Table. To address this challenge, HPRI formed a working group that collectively reframed the research agenda to meet the needs of both policymakers and the research community. In this way, HPRI worked to develop a common agenda both within its own collective of researchers and within the larger Home For Good collective impact model.

Shared Measurement System

Uniform access to data and consistent measurement strategies across participants in a collective impact initiative ensures the alignment of efforts and allows participants to hold each other accountable and learn from each other’s successes and failures (Kania & Kramer, 2011).

The Homelessness Management Information System (HMIS) is an administrative dataset that documents the use of various homeless service programs and is a key data source for research on ending homelessness. However, members of the research community face several important challenges with accessing and using HMIS data for research purposes. First, each research organization must individually contract with the local homeless service authority to obtain and use HMIS data for research, a process that can often take a number of months to complete. Additionally, HMIS data is an administrative dataset whose primary purpose is for public administration rather than research. As a result, once each researcher obtains HMIS data, he or she must individually clean and restructure the complex administrative dataset for research use, which adds additional time to a research project and can easily lead to error if done incorrectly.

To address these data use issues and solidify itself as a sustainable long-term resource for the policy community, HPRI is creating a “research accelerator” that will house a secure, pre-cleaned, regularly-updated copy of HMIS data

for researcher use on approved projects, along with a full-time staff to answer questions and reduce error in complex data analyses. The accelerator will give researchers a common starting point across projects and will promote knowledge sharing on the use of HMIS data in a secure environment. HPRI will pilot the accelerator with HMIS data for one year with the prospect of linking additional administrative datasets (such as the Enterprise Linkages Project) in the future.

Mutually Reinforcing Activities

Collective impact initiatives entail collaboration between diverse groups of partners and encourage each participant to engage in the activities that it does best in a manner that supports and complements the efforts of the other participants (Kania & Kramer, 2011).

By design, HPRI excels at producing, translating, and sharing research in the form of policy briefs, literature reviews, and symposia. These activities produce products that are actionable and policy-relevant, which reinforces the work of the Home For Good collective impact network. Additionally, HPRI responds to specific requests from funders, service providers, and policymakers, and bases its activities in part on the priorities of the Home for Good Policy Table. Further, HPRI hosts an extensive research catalog on its website that includes the latest research products from HPRI partners and other researchers around the country, in addition to HPRI policy briefs and literature reviews. This catalog serves as a centralized resource for stakeholders to access relevant research and information related to homelessness in Los Angeles County.

The early stages of HPRI’s communication challenges around policy goals and the research agenda led to activities that were not necessarily mutually reinforcing. Home For Good and HPRI addressed this challenge by ensuring that at least one representative from HPRI attends all Policy Table meetings, reducing communication barriers and allowing HPRI to better support Home For Good’s priorities with its research activities.



Continuous Communication

In order to develop trust, effective coordination, and a sense of common motivation among participating organizations, agencies, and corporations, collective impact initiatives must hold consistent, structured, in-person meetings over a protracted period (Kania & Kramer, 2011).

In line with this component of the collective impact framework, HPRI holds monthly research committee meetings where committee members become familiar with each other’s work and learn about new opportunities for collaborative research. Additionally, HPRI sends a representative to monthly Home for Good Policy Table meetings, sometimes presenting substantive content and other times simply listening to identify high priority policy issues. HPRI also hosts quarterly research symposia attended by key policymakers and practitioners, offering a forum for a more extensive discussion on active research projects and/or timely policy topics. The quarterly symposia provide the research and policy communities with a comprehensive understanding of the current landscape regarding homelessness research in the greater Los Angeles region.

Continuous communication does not come without its challenges however; in some cases, urgent matters or projects need to be discussed between monthly meetings, and because membership is voluntary and unpaid, it is often difficult to connect with people who are occupied with other work. Digital interactions between leadership and committee members are crucial to help bridge the gap in communication between monthly meetings. Further, in a traditional academic setting, researchers often have to compete for resources to support their individual work and institutions. This sometimes creates tension among HPRI members who must balance their commitment to collective impact while also satisfying the needs of their own work. While HPRI has increased the level of funding available for homelessness research in Los Angeles County, it will require more time and collaboration building for some members to find this balance.

Backbone Support Organization

Effective collective impact initiatives must establish a backbone support organization made up of dedicated administrative staff who can provide technical and logistical support and manage the efforts of the collaborating partners (Kania & Kramer, 2011).

The USC Price Center for Social Innovation has several staff members who are funded to coordinate HPRI research and activities, including the Director of External Relations who manages research translation, communication, and resource allocation, and a project manager who oversees monthly meetings, rapid response research and collaborative research. Further, HPRI’s Director and Associate Director act as liaisons between the research community and policymakers and funders on a regular basis. HPRI staff also frequently interact with the backbone support staff of the larger Home For Good collective impact initiative through monthly meetings to discuss fundraising and high-level research and strategy items.

LESSONS LEARNED

Prioritize Authentic Collaboration

Every part of HPRI consciously works toward fostering collaboration, which is also a key component of the collective impact framework. A collaborative relationship between researchers, practitioners, policymakers, and funders generates new ideas informed by a variety of perspectives and allows for collective action that would have been previously impossible without sustained cross-sector coordination. Authentic collaboration is the result of transparency, good communication, and lasting intentional relationships, not of a one-time upfront investment in an initiative.

Although HPRI is committed to fostering authentic collaboration, challenges have arisen around competition for research projects and funding. HPRI has worked to address these challenges by giving researchers the opportunity to openly discuss their concerns and recognizes that trust in its staff, members and the collaborative process will continue to build over time.