WHAT MAKES A SOLUTION?

Lessons and Findings from Solutions for America

Pew Partnership
FOR CIVIC CHANGE

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The Pew Partnership for Civic Change is a civic research organization. Our mission is to identify and disseminate promising solutions to tough community issues. Solutions for America is an action research initiative of the Partnership designed to pioneer a new model of documenting best practices and communicating results. The Pew Partnership is funded by The Pew Charitable Trusts and administered by the University of Richmond.

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Acknowledgments

This report provides a broad overview of the themes and lessons from the Pew Partnership for Civic Change's Solutions for America initiative. It draws on information from a variety of sources: reporting from local research teams, analysis from the Center for Urban Policy Research (CUPR) at Rutgers University, surveys of the site staff and local researchers, findings from site visits, and a series of national meetings of program and research staff. The present analysis builds on and is complemented by three additional reports. The first, *What's Already Out There: A Sourcebook of Ideas from Successful Community Programs,* is a compendium of findings from the nineteen Solutions for America sites. The second is the final internal report of CUPR to the Pew Partnership. The third, "Solutions for America: Preliminary Research Collaboration Findings," was presented by the author at the Building University-Community Research Partnerships Roundtable held in Charlottesville, Virginia, October 16-17, 2002. The present report would not have been possible without this earlier work, nor without the valuable contributions of Dr. Suzanne Morse, Jacqueline Dugery, James Knowles, and Sharon Siler of the Pew Partnership, and the diligent and meticulous assistance of Kathleen Grammatico Ferraiolo.

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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.

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

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

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-

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.

Themes and Findings

What Makes a Solution?

WHAT CAN WE LEARN FROM THESE NINETEEN PROGRAMS? The most important finding is that there are indeed solutions that work. In communities across the country people are working together and getting the job done. In each of the five policy areas we found creative, innovative, and effective efforts to solve problems. But what about failures? Did everything we looked at turn out to be a smashing success? Of course not, but the weaknesses we uncovered were usually narrow ones, involving particular indicators in the context of a generally successful solution. This should not be surprising, given that the deck was stacked: We set out looking for solutions, choosing to study fewer than one in five of the programs that applied. Our motivating questions were how to define and measure success and how to identify the common features of successful projects. We focus here on five themes, common attributes of success that provide lessons for future problem solvers. Successful solutions, we find, are characterized by one or more of the following features:

- MAKING CONNECTIONS. Solutions for America are, above all, about making connections: between different citizens, between individuals and groups, between public and private community stakeholders, between resources and needs. Understanding the ways in which the Solutions sites make connections is essential for understanding what makes a solution.

- CHANGING MINDS. Successful solutions involve changing the way people think. Sometimes this means reorienting how community stakeholders think about a problem. Other times this means changing the minds of clients by giving them new skills or new information. Often, successful programs change minds by transforming people's attitudes: toward themselves, toward their fellow citizens, and toward their communities.

- THINKING SMALL. These solutions think small. They're not out to change the world, just a small piece of it. Every once in a while, pressing national problems are ad-

dressed in broad strokes, with far-reaching and expensive national solutions. The programs we study here, however, solve problems one piece at a time: block by block, neighborhood by neighborhood, family by family. They also focus on an ounce of prevention, emphasizing efficiency and leverage, so that small solutions can help solve large problems.

- DOING DEMOCRACY. To a great extent, these solutions address problems democratically. There is an emphasis on inclusion, deliberation, and participatory decision-making by diverse groups of elites as well as by everyday citizens. These solutions work, in large part, because they're the products of a broad-based, deliberative, democratic process.

In what follows we take up each of these themes in turn, focusing on findings from the Solutions for America research. While the findings are specific, the broader lessons are portable: these are common features of successful solutions that can be applied broadly to problems faced by communities and citizens across the nation.

MAKING CONNECTIONS

At the heart of Solutions for America lies the simple notion of making connections. Whether connecting clients with services, employees with jobs, citizens and public officials with one another, these projects ultimately served to connect problems with solutions.

IN CEDAR RAPIDS, IOWA, NEIGHBORHOOD TRANSPORTATION SERVICE (NTS) has been literally connecting people and jobs since its founding in 1994. Despite high levels of economic growth in the Cedar Rapids-Iowa City corridor during the early 1990s, many new jobs were located in areas not served by public transportation, especially on nights and weekends when many entry-level shifts were available. This lack of transportation prevented inner-city residents who did not own automobiles from taking advantage of the higher paying jobs and educational opportunities available in the metro area. NTS solved this problem by providing transportation to work, education or job training, and work-relevant treatment programs for $3 a ride, primarily after 6:00 PM and on weekends when regular city buses are not running. NTS drivers are also trained in making outreach

and social service referrals, so that they not only help connect low-income Cedar Rapids residents with jobs, they can also connect them with needed community services. The Solutions research documented a striking increase in ridership, which grew from fewer than five thousand rides annually at the beginning of the program to more than 23,000 by 2001. The research also demonstrated a high level of satisfaction among riders. Rider surveys revealed that residents were able to hold onto jobs they would otherwise not be able to get to; 80 percent agreed that NTS helped them in "keeping a job or having a more regular work history," and majorities said that NTS helped them to increase the number of hours they work each week, to save money, and importantly, to "be more in control of my life" (55 percent). Sixty-three percent of riders cited reduced stress about getting where they need to be as a result of NTS, and 97 percent of riders surveyed said that NTS either always or usually got them to their destination on time. At least two-thirds of riders found NTS to be comfortable, clean, safe, and affordable. Interviews with NTS staff indicated that drivers experienced a high degree of job satisfaction, particularly in their roles as service providers. Many drivers also expressed a sense of connection to the community and to the NTS mission. NTS shows how a community solution can be deceptively simple. By merely providing transportation to and from work and other destinations, NTS has been able to forge crucial links: connecting employees with jobs, people in need with services, and staff members with their communities.

IF NTS MAKES CONNECTIONS AT THE MICRO-LEVEL—driver to passenger, one ride at a time—the city of Charlottesville, Virginia has been making *macro*-connections for the past thirty years. In 1971, Charlottesville found itself facing many of the same problems confronting cities throughout the country: rapid suburbanization and the accompanying erosion of the central commercial and residential urban core. Charlottesville embarked on a downtown revitalization program aimed at rethinking, reinvigorating, and rebuilding the city's downtown area. The city council brought together citizens, business owners, investors, and outside consultants as part of a comprehensive planning process, and facilitated a series of public and private partnerships to provide needed capital and creative energy. The results have been dramatic: Downtown Charlottesville now features an eight-block, tree-lined pedestrian mall lined with restaurants, cafes, and bookstores, populated by street musicians, vendors, and strolling families. The mall is

anchored by a hotel and indoor ice skating rink at one end, and an amphitheater (home to a weekly music series every summer) at the other. The Solutions research documented increases in gross receipts from downtown businesses, real property assessments, real estate sales prices, and new construction. Property values in downtown Charlottesville rose 10 percent in 1999 compared with 6 percent citywide, and commercial vacancy rates on the downtown mall were as low as 1 percent in July 2001. In addition to businesses, city residents enjoy the attractions the downtown mall has to offer. The average number of pedestrians on the downtown mall ranged from 1,100 at lunchtime on weekdays to 1,600 on Saturday evenings and a high of 3,500 for the weekly "Fridays after Five" summer concerts. In a 2000 survey, 96 percent of residents reported feeling safe on the mall during the day, and close to two-thirds felt safe on the mall at night. Put simply, the city's revitalization efforts have been a success. By connecting public and private players in the planning process, and by merging public and private investment, the city was able to connect businesses with new customers, the city with new tourism, and citizens with their community. In the process, Charlottesville made a connection of another sort: by renovating and refurbishing existing infrastructure and converting it to modern uses, the city was able to maintain links to its rich history, connecting the present with the past.

IN SHREVEPORT, LOUISIANA, SHREVEPORT-BOSSIER COMMUNITY RENEWAL (SBCR) fosters community organizing and community building by helping to forge neighbor-to-neighbor connections. In the early 1990s, Shreveport faced what seemed to be overwhelming problems as high crime, joblessness, welfare dependency, and homelessness plagued the city. Even residents of stable neighborhoods lacked a basic sense of security. Starting from the assumption that the social isolation of individuals is the root of community problems, SBCR takes a faith-based approach in encouraging poor and working-class families in the cities of Shreveport and Bossier to strengthen relationships with their neighbors. These new relationships—forged one block at a time—constitute the basis for stronger communities and improve citizens' daily lives. The Solutions research found successful dissemination of the SBCR program information: Residents in one of the neighborhoods targeted by the program increased their knowledge and un-

derstanding about the program by 23 percent. The research also showed that residents in a neighborhood where SBCR is active have increased the number and depth of their friendships on their block. Survey research found that 55 percent of residents reported having three or more friends in the neighborhood in the first year of the research; by year two, 90 percent reported having three or more friends in the neighborhood. In addition, when asked how many friends on the block were close friends, 18 percent of friends were reported as close in year one; by year two, 64 percent of friends were described as close. SBCR is in the beginning stages of a long-term approach to community building, but early results indicate that so far the process is working.

IN THE LATE 1980s, THE INFANT MORTALITY RATE IN AIKEN COUNTY, South Carolina was among the highest in the state, which in turn had one of the highest infant death rates in the country. Growing into Life (GIL) was formed in 1989 as a community-based collaborative organization to address the problem. GIL has reduced infant mortality in Aiken County by improving prenatal and early childhood care, and in so doing the program has been able to leverage existing resources to further the county's goal of becoming a healthier community. After a forty-member task force established several key programs to combat infant mortality and investigated each infant death that occurred in the county, GIL developed innovative educational programs and interventions for pregnant women and new mothers. The Solutions research found that GIL helped cut the infant mortality rate in Aiken County in half, from a high of 15.2 deaths per thousand (1985–87) to 7.6 per thousand in 1999. In 1999, the county's infant mortality rate was lower than the state average of 10.4 and only half a point higher than the national average. Key to the success of GIL was its ability to bring together community members including doctors, nurses, the health department, and local government representatives to address Aiken County's infant mortality problem as a community. GIL focused on collaborative partnerships, such as the "MOMS and COPS" program, which paired nurses and police officers to connect prenatal care with community policing. GIL also connected pregnant women with vital information through a toll-free hotline. GIL was governed in a collaborative management style by a "virtual board" that met on-line to help oversee program operations. While GIL is no longer in operation as an organization, its impact

on reducing infant mortality in Aiken County has resulted in statewide implementation of its most successful components.

IN MANKATO, MINNESOTA, THE REGION NINE Prevention and Healthy Communities Network (PHCN) works to discourage young people from using alcohol and other drugs. A 1989 survey, which showed that the region's young people were using alcohol, tobacco, and other drugs more frequently and at a younger age than Minnesota's youth as a whole, served as the catalyst for community action. The PHCN consists of thirteen community-based coalitions in southern Minnesota that strive to build healthy communities by reducing alcohol, tobacco, and drug abuse by young people. While Region Nine Development Commission, a local government entity, coordinates coalition efforts, the coalitions work individually on local prevention and youth promotion issues and band together to share lessons and strategies and pool their resources. Sample prevention strategies include informational brochures, booths at health fairs, peer leader programs, and youth drop-in centers. The Solutions research indicated that the incidence of alcohol, tobacco, and other drug use among young people living in communities served by PHCN decreased significantly between 1998 and 2001. In 2001, for example, 53 percent of ninth graders reported that they did not drink any alcohol, compared to only 49 percent three years earlier. The number of twelfth graders who reported drinking and driving decreased by 8 percentage points; the frequency of cigarette smoking also decreased by 40 percent among sixth graders and 17 percent among ninth graders. Moreover, fewer students reported using drugs: 81 percent of ninth graders and 68 percent of twelfth graders reported no use of marijuana during the prior year. As a collaborative body, PHCN works closely with all sectors of the community including youth, parents, law enforcement, schools, elected officials, health care providers, area businesses, and religious institutions. The Solutions research suggests that PHCN's work is sustainable: Ninety-five percent of partners said that they were hopeful about what their community coalition could accomplish, and attitudes about community partnerships and their effectiveness improved from 2000 to 2001. By making connections, the PHCN program has helped bring about an attitude shift among young people through community collaboration and prevention programming, leading to a decrease in the use of alcohol, tobacco, and other drugs.

CHANGING MINDS: SKILLS, INFORMATION, AND ATTITUDES

One of the primary ways in which problems are solved is by changing the way we think about them. Across the nineteen sites, solutions often began with a group of people realizing that a solution was within their reach, that obstacles were not insurmountable. An important next step is to change minds in other ways: by providing people with expertise, new information, and new skills that they can put to use on their own behalf. And new skills often lead to new attitudes, as citizens think about themselves and their communities in new ways.

IN RICHMOND, KENTUCKY, WOMEN IN CONSTRUCTION (WIC), an initiative of the Kentucky River Foothills Development Council, provides valuable expertise and job skills that enable its graduates to improve their quality of life. Despite the economic boom of the 1990s, finding a job that paid a living wage could be a daunting challenge, particularly for low-income women who lacked access to training programs that would prepare them for higher wage, long-term employment. WIC responded to these challenges. Since 1995, WIC has helped impoverished women in Kentucky obtain well-paying jobs by learning carpentry and highway construction skills. According to the Solutions research, the WIC program has provided women with the skills and experience to earn more money, live more independently, and provide a better life for their children and families. WIC graduates earn on average $10.28 per hour, about double the $5.15 minimum wage. Seventy-one percent of WIC alumnae were employed at the time the research was conducted, and two-thirds of those employed reported using the technical skills learned through their training. Eighty-six percent of women who completed the program reported high levels of satisfaction with the jobs they acquired as a result of participation. Employers and unions, too, were satisfied with the women's dependability and low turnover rates. Beyond these measures of workplace success, surveys with WIC participants reveal positive changes in self-perceptions and outlooks. Seventy-percent of WIC graduates, for example, said that WIC has helped them view the future more positively; 92 percent reported an increase in self-sufficiency and 63 percent reported that their family life had changed for the better since entering the program. These attitudinal changes constitute important spillover effects from a program ostensibly focused on providing job training. Moreover, they appear to have spilled over into the next genera-

tion: Children of WIC participants demonstrated higher levels of self-confidence, personal responsibility, and pride in the capabilities of their mothers. WIC recruits and trains low-income women to work in well-paying jobs that not only increase their standard of living, but also give them a sense of independence, reward, and satisfaction.

ACROSS RURAL AMERICA, EMPTY STOREFRONTS, deteriorating infrastructures, an exodus of talented youth, and a feeling of malaise haunt many once-vital communities. While some have turned to organizations like the National Trust for Historic Preservation's Main Street program for help, many small rural communities cannot meet the size and resource requirements to qualify for established revitalization programs. This was the case in rural western North Carolina when, in 1996, HandMade in America initiated the Small Towns Revitalization Project (STR). STR was designed to breathe new life into small towns by promoting and encouraging the rich crafts heritage of the region. STR works with twelve small towns, assisting them in civic and economic revitalization and helping them implement their plans with financial support and technical assistance. The Solutions research found that ten of the eleven small towns studied showed increased public, private, and volunteer investment as a direct result of the new skills and information gained through participation in STR. During the two-year research period, seventy-seven facade or building renovations occurred in the project's towns, which gained a net of 326 jobs. Volunteers logged an astonishing 31,000 hours of service over the two-year period. Many of the towns noted tangible, visible improvements in their community appearance as a result of participating in the project, as well as less tangible improvements such as increased community pride and a new "can-do" attitude among residents. By harnessing the power of citizen energy and expertise along with the region's crafts heritage, Handmade in America's Small Towns Revitalization project has enhanced the civic and economic development of rural western North Carolina.

STEP BY STEP, INC.'S WEST VIRGINIA DREAMERS PROJECT works to break the cycle of rural poverty and provide better futures for children and families in Big Ugly Creek, West Virginia. When the school board decided to close the local elementary school due to state pressures to consolidate, Big Ugly Creek parents feared that their families would become isolated and disconnected from the outside world. Children faced long bus

rides, a new and sometimes hostile school environment, and often unpleasant school experiences. In an effort to keep the local school open, parents formed the Big Ugly Dreamers committee and received permission to convert the local elementary school into a community center. Program sites now include two more elementary schools as well as the local high school. The Dreamers Project provides extensive community outreach and after-school activities, including music and arts programs, youth leadership training, and computer skills classes. Each child or youth enters into a "dream contract": an agreement with his or her family, a community representative, and a project staff person to pursue specific activities. Once completed, the child receives at least $50 that is deposited into a postsecondary school scholarship fund. Students' responses to the Dreamers program were overwhelmingly positive. According to the Solutions research, the Dreamers program had a positive impact on students' feelings about school and learning, academic performance, and self-concept. Parents of Dreamers children credited the program with helping their children succeed in school and in life, and parents felt more confident about their ability to support their children in school and life activities. Teachers viewed the program as positive in that it provided structure for children so they could finish their homework and polish basic skills, and most teachers noted positive effects on student attitudes and expectations. Through community outreach and effective programming that helps children develop their skills, interests, and imagination, the Dreamers Project raises families' aspirations for their children's lives and gives children the tools to begin to achieve those aspirations.

IN THE 1980s, NEARLY ONE-QUARTER OF CINCINNATI, Ohio's young people were dropping out of school. Because it was clear that the school system couldn't tackle the problem on its own, community members in Cincinnati decided to be proactive in reducing the dropout rate. Cincinnati Youth Collaborative (CYC) works with students in Cincinnati public schools to provide academic, emotional, and social support, increase students' work-related experiences and awareness of their postsecondary education options, and raise graduation rates. CYC offers a variety of programs and initiatives including tutoring, mentoring, internships, and college preparation assistance, and it provides a forum for public/private/nonprofit partnerships that support Cincinnati's youth. CYC's mentoring program, the focus of the Solutions research, recruits volunteer mentors from

the community who help students stay in school, guide them through the pressures of adolescence, and prepare them for promising careers. The research showed that mentoring reduced the dropout rate: Ninety percent of the participating teens stayed in school, compared to graduation rates of 40 to 75 percent throughout the school district. Students who participated in the mentoring program also improved their school attendance rates over time. In addition to these direct effects on academic performance, the mentoring program led to the same sort of spillover attitudinal effects described earlier. Participating students reported higher levels of self-esteem, and teachers reported that mentored students showed improved motivation and better attitudes toward school. Parents, too, were very satisfied with CYC's mentoring program. They believed the program helped increase their child's level of responsibility and focus and exposed them to new experiences, and valued in particular the attention and concern of mentors. Indeed, all constituents, including parents, students, mentors, and teachers, supported the use of the mentor program. With the help of a variety of public, private, governmental, civic, and religious organizations, CYC has helped young people to succeed in school and to graduate and has prepared them for the next phase of their lives.

BASED IN BURLINGTON, VERMONT, THE VERMONT DEVELOPMENT CREDIT UNION (VDCU) works to create wealth and promote grassroots community development by providing affordable capital and lending services to low-income Vermonters. Vermont has 64,000 residents living in poverty (11 percent of the population) and 90,000 low-income households. Many of these Vermonters have limited access to conventional financial institutions, are exploited by predatory lending institutions, and are vulnerable to a downward spiral of poverty and debt. VDCU provides this underserved population with a variety of lending and financial services such as check cashing and savings accounts, and development services such as home ownership counseling. Since its establishment in 1989, VDCU's financial counseling and services have helped more than 8,500 Vermonters in 205 of the state's 255 towns. In its first twelve years, VDCU made 6,700 direct loans, injecting $50 million into the lives of low-income Vermonters. Overall, through the $50 million in loans VDCU has made, its members have saved $8.2 million in interest payments compared with alternative forms of credit. VDCU reported a 99.5 percent loan repayment rate on all lending since the organization's founding. Through such opportunities, and

by providing low-income citizens with critical information and financial skills, VDCU provides concrete fiscal benefits; the research found that being a member of the credit union helps increase wealth as measured by savings over time and loan pay-down rates. But here, too, there are important attitudinal spillovers: By helping members take control of their financial futures, the credit union created a strong sense of empowerment. Survey respondents reported a higher degree of self-confidence, a better command of time management, a greater sense of hope, and a greater degree of involvement in their communities. Targeting a low-income and underserved population, VDCU gives its members the information and tools to gain control over their finances, and to become more empowered, involved members of their communities.

ECONOMIC CHANGES AFFECTING BROCKTON, MASSACHUSETTS over the past several decades have resulted in high unemployment, poverty, and a loss of hope, particularly among the city's young people. The Massachusetts Youth Teenage Unemployment Reduction Network (MY TURN) has developed a range of programs to help local high school students learn about and prepare for college and job opportunities after graduation. MY TURN targets students at risk of leaving school, foregoing postsecondary education, or entering low-paying "dead-end" jobs. The program offers those students services such as career and college counseling and information about postsecondary options, strives to build motivation and self-esteem, and teaches employability and career development through work-based learning opportunities. According to the Solutions research, the vast majority of MY TURN participants reported proficiency in specific skills needed to pursue job and educational opportunities, such as knowing how to interview for a job, how to manage time, and how to communicate effectively. Students also demonstrated significant gains in both self-esteem and self-mastery tests. Through counseling, information, and job-related experiences, MY TURN helps improve the lives of young people who need assistance in developing the skills and identifying the opportunities necessary for success.

IN THE EARLY 1990s, HIGH LEVELS OF IMMIGRATION, low expectations for education in many families, linguistic isolation, and gang activity combined to create high levels of unemployment and long-term underemployment among the young Latino population

of Santa Ana, California. With a small group of Sisters of St. Joseph taking the lead, Taller San Jose (TSJ) was created in 1995 to provide at-risk Latino youth in Santa Ana with the information and skills needed to thrive in mainstream American society. TSJ collaborates with Santa Ana's city government, its criminal justice system, a local college, local employers, and other community-based groups to provide services to mostly Latino immigrants and first-generation Americans. TSJ participants obtain the means (such as a GED, driver's license, or bank account) to get good jobs and broaden their future opportunities, all in the context of a culturally familiar environment where students can find a "circle of support" while they come to understand and feel comfortable within mainstream American society. Research findings suggest that TSJ is achieving its goal of preparing students to be successful in the American workforce. Graduates encounter fewer barriers to employment than they did before participating. TSJ graduates are more likely than they were before entering the program to have a résumé, to have attended a job interview, to acquire a job with benefits, and to hold a job for more than six months. The Solutions research found that 76 percent of program graduates had completed a computer class, and 69 percent had obtained a job that pays more than minimum wage. Through effective community collaboration and an approach that exposes students to education, training, and mainstream cultural expectations, TSJ nurtures the skills and attitudes that will enable students to succeed in a broad range of future activities.

POVERTY, DRUGS, AND CRIME HAD OVERTAKEN the Springfield area of Jacksonville, Florida in the early 1980s and the neighborhood was in a severe state of decline. When a 1982 community study showed that teen pregnancy was at a crisis level, community members formed The Bridge of Northeast Florida to reduce teen pregnancy and help young people grow into productive citizens. The Bridge has since evolved into a comprehensive youth development program, offering underprivileged Jacksonville youth a fun place to play and a wide range of positive activities, including medical, educational, social, recreational, and other programming. Sponsored activities include tutoring, college preparation courses, intramural sports teams, job shadowing, and vocational training. Students who attended the after-school program at The Bridge three or more times per week also attended school more often and tended to get in less trouble than those

who attended the program less often. In interviews, participants indicated that they believed The Bridge offered them support, cared about their well-being, and had high expectations for them. In the high-risk group studied by Solutions researchers, not a single participant became pregnant during the two-year study period. The research also found that the program is successful in improving the self-esteem of Bridge children: young people who attended The Bridge three or more times per week had higher self-esteem scores than those who attended less often. Since its founding in 1983, The Bridge has helped to develop high expectations among at-risk youth and served their educational and social needs in order to prepare them for a positive future.

THINKING SMALL (BUT SMART)

The programs we studied solve problems one piece at a time. They believe in an ounce of prevention—emphasizing efficiency and focusing on assets rather than deficiencies. The result is that small solutions can solve large problems.

WHAT COULD BE A SMALLER SOLUTION THAN A CHILD'S TOOTH? Based in Arlington, Texas, Dental Health for Arlington's SMILES (Sealing Molars Improves the Life of Every Student) program brings better dental health to the economically disadvantaged children of Tarrant County, Texas. Nationally, tooth decay is the most common chronic childhood disease, affecting 50 percent of first graders and resulting in almost 52 million missed school hours. In 1991, a community needs assessment revealed that poor dental health and the absence of affordable and accessible dental services were major problems among Arlington and Tarrant County residents. SMILES addresses this problem by providing free dental screenings, dental health education, and tooth sealants to grade-school children, reducing both tooth decay and student absenteeism due to dental health problems. In 1999 and 2000, twenty-one low-income public schools participated in the SMILES program. Through this outreach, more than 5,000 children were screened, 1,819 children received sealants, and 6,029 teeth were sealed. Annually, approximately 40 percent of the children screened receive sealants on one or more teeth. SMILES has expanded to meet community needs: between 1993 and 2000 the number of participating schools increased by 90 percent, the number of children screened increased by 93 percent, and the number of children receiving sealants grew by 99 percent. SMILES

has been successful in improving the general dental health of local children. Between 1994 and 2001, rates of severe decay in children were cut from 16 percent to 9 percent, and testing of students showed increased knowledge of dental health. One hundred percent of school employees surveyed found that bringing the SMILES program into their school was time well spent, and that their students enjoyed and profited from the preventive dental care program. Dental Health for Arlington has developed a school-based program that emphasizes education, treatment, and referrals. The SMILES program effectively addresses the problem of dental decay on a small scale that makes a world of difference to the children of Tarrant County.

IN THE EARLY 1990s, THE BLOCK OF WEST 118TH STREET between Fifth Avenue and Lenox in New York City was lined with condemned or abandoned buildings. Families were living in decrepit structures and safety was a major concern. Since 1992, the Children's Aid Society/Carmel Hill Project has given residents of 118th Street greater access to quality housing, a bustling community center, and improved public safety to transform a blight-ridden block to a thriving neighborhood. The Carmel Hill Project's comprehensive effort at block renewal aims to strengthen families, improve the lives of children, create a better physical and social environment on the block, and promote community organizing. Comparing descriptions of resident satisfaction on the block before and after the Carmel Hill Project, the Solutions research found vast improvements. More than half (55 percent) of block residents rated life on 118th Street as "great" or "very good." Only 3 percent of those surveyed said that they wanted to move away. More than 80 percent of residents who had lived on the block ten years or more felt that the block is better or much better than it used to be. Even among residents living on the block less than five years, over half said that the block is better or much better than when they arrived. Residents who felt that the block is better than when they arrived most often singled out improvements in housing and a decrease in crime as reasons for improvement. There is a new sense of security on the block: 62 percent of residents said that they felt safe on their block alone at night, and an additional 32 percent said that they felt safe at night if someone else was with them. Nine out of ten residents felt that people who live on the block know each other by face, get along with one another, and

can be counted on to take action, to maintain order, and to fix problems in the community. The Carmel Hill Project provides a model for how to improve the lives of residents and the well-being of a community one block at a time, through outreach efforts such as housing improvements, partnerships with local police, and community organizing.

IN THE MID-1980s, LOS ANGELES COUNTY EXPERIENCED A SURGE in homelessness among individuals and families. Despite the rise of family-oriented shelters and transitional housing facilities, it soon became apparent that the neediest of homeless families were being cycled through a variety of emergency and traditional housing programs for months and sometimes years on end. In 1988, Beyond Shelter created the Housing First program to help stabilize and improve the lives of homeless families in Los Angeles, California. Based on the premise that the traditional model of homeless relief—the provision of transitional housing—makes efforts to address other problems more difficult and prone to failure, Beyond Shelter provides homeless families with safe and decent *permanent* housing, one family at a time. Once families have made the transition into permanent housing, Beyond Shelter offers support services designed to help them move toward improved social and economic well-being, including family and individual counseling, child care, and job training and placement. The Solutions research demonstrated that the Housing First program successfully relocated and stabilized families into permanent housing. After six months in the program, 91 percent of families had paid their rent on time for three consecutive months. Of the families with a history of domestic violence, 97 percent reported living violence-free six months after their move, compared to 70 percent at enrollment. None of those who entered the program with substance abuse problems relapsed. Most parents obtained full-time employment, and parents were also more likely to have attended a child development class and participated in job training. Outcomes for children were also positive: during the evaluation period, 80 percent of school-age children were enrolled in school, and 77 percent attended regularly. Beyond Shelter has helped more than 85 percent of the 2,300 homeless families who have participated in the program stabilize in permanent housing within one year. The success of the Housing First program shows that focusing on particular pieces of the problem of homelessness—moving families into permanent

housing and providing them with support services—can reap tremendous rewards in the lives of homeless families.

OVER THE COURSE OF SEVERAL DECADES, a falling residential population has led to a decline in Boston, Massachusetts's neighborhood business districts. Suburban shopping malls, new kinds of retailers, and a shifting customer base have made it difficult for independent business owners to compete, and social problems such as real and perceived crime have tarnished the image of the city's neighborhood business districts. Modeled on the National Trust for Historic Preservation's Main Street program, the Boston Main Streets (BMS) program creates partnerships with local businesses and residents and provides the necessary public infrastructure to redevelop twenty-one neighborhood-based shopping districts in Boston. The program creates healthy and sustainable business districts and urban neighborhoods by focusing on design and physical improvements, marketing and promotion, economic restructuring, and organizational development. It succeeds by thinking small; finding solutions at the level of the neighborhood. Studying a subset of three program neighborhoods, the Solutions research found that all of the districts showed physical, financial, and civic improvements. Citywide, each Main Street district saw an average increase of 19 new or expanded businesses, 134 net new jobs, and 11 improved storefronts. More than 50 percent of merchants in each of the three districts studied reported increased sales over the past three to five years, and merchants reported that sales promotion efforts such as business guides, cooperative advertising, and special events were particularly valuable for business performance. In addition to these economic outcomes, the BMS program acts as a civic catalyst by creating a new organization to foster greater engagement by residents, merchants, property owners, and other stakeholders. For example, volunteers donated more than 8,100 hours to the Hyde Park Main Street initiative alone. Through its presence in each district, BMS provided a vehicle for direct resident involvement in shaping the district, led to greater local volunteer efforts, and brought new segments of the community into local planning and improvement work. The Boston Main Streets program successfully adapted the national Main Street model to the needs of a large, diverse city and proved effective in stimulating districtwide physical improvements, business activity and sales, and local capacity.

DOING DEMOCRACY: CIVIC PARTICIPATION AND DELIBERATION

At the heart of democratic citizenship lie the ideas of participation, deliberation, and equality. While some of the solutions we studied were top-down and hierarchical, others were organized more democratically, predicated upon the notions of citizen decision-making and collaboration.

IN THE EARLY 1970s, JACKSONVILLE, FLORIDA stood poised to enter a period of tremendous physical growth and development. Jacksonville Community Council, Inc. (JCCI) was established in 1975 as a nonprofit, nonpartisan, broad-based civic organization aimed at bringing residents of a fragmented community together to plan and implement civic change. Through JCCI's citizen-driven study process, Jacksonville area residents analyze critical community issues, make recommendations for solutions, and advocate for change to improve the region's quality of life. Each year, JCCI recruits diverse groups of citizens to engage in a sustained process of study and dialogue around two major community issues. Each issue group convenes for a series of meetings, develops a set of recommendations, and establishes an implementation committee to follow through on the recommendations. Past JCCI projects have included growth management, adult literacy, teen pregnancy, economic development, transportation for the disadvantaged, arts and culture, and race relations. Through the study process, JCCI increases public awareness of important community issues and realizes positive community change as a result of study recommendations developed through a decentralized, democratic process. The Solutions research found that once citizens begin the study process, they stay with it to the finish: overall, the retention rate of participants was between 59 percent and 83 percent during the evaluation period. Citizens were motivated to join a study process based primarily on their interest in the topic and desire to learn (58 percent ranked this as the most or second most important motivation) and the desire to make a difference in the community (42 percent ranked this first or second). Study participants were enthusiastic about the process, with 97 percent saying they would recommend it to someone else. Researchers found that the JCCI study process provides a critical structure for informed consideration of urgent community problems with a focus on solutions. Most of the study committee recommendations in the cases analyzed have been implemented, and implementation efforts were most likely to succeed when the re-

cipients of recommendations had participated in the study process and when trusting relationships were in place between JCCI and the recipient. Testament to the success of JCCI is the fact that another Solution for America, The Bridge of Northeast Florida, grew out of a JCCI study recommendation. JCCI's study process nurtures the development of good ideas through a deliberative, democratic process in which citizens join together to work to improve Jacksonville's quality of life.

ACCORDING TO THE 2000 CENSUS, OF THE FIFTY LARGEST METROPOLITAN AREAS in the United States, St. Louis, Missouri was the ninth most racially segregated. In a 1995 study, metropolitan area residents perceived the quality of race relations to be on the decline, and respondents reported limited interaction between races. While 80 percent of citizens said that good racial relations were very important to the quality of life in their community, the majority of respondents admitted that they did not know how individuals could begin working to improve those relationships. Bridges Across Racial Polarization® (Bridges) has helped to bridge the gap between aspirations and reality. Since 1993, Bridges has sought to improve race relations in the St. Louis area by promoting better communication and understanding across racial lines. The program is sponsored by FOCUS St. Louis, an independent, nonprofit organization whose mission is to engage citizens in active leadership roles to influence community change. Bridges brings together small groups of eight to twelve people from a mix of racial backgrounds. The groups meet regularly on an informal basis, so that participants have an opportunity to interact and build relationships with people whom they might otherwise never meet. The Solutions research found that Bridges is effective in improving individual relationships between people of different races and promoting racial understanding. Bridges produced more interracial contacts, cross-neighborhood visits, and interracial discussions among participants. Relationship building between participants of different races does in fact occur, particularly in the form of increased trust and reduced anxiety about interacting with individuals of other races. In addition, Bridges participants applied their new knowledge about racism and racial polarization in their personal lives and in their communities outside the group. By providing people of different racial backgrounds an opportunity to get to know each other better and have conversations about race

in a comfortable, informal setting, Bridges helps to reverse racial polarization and promote racial communication for the betterment of individuals and communities in the St. Louis area.

Solutions for America *as an Intervention*

MAKING CONNECTIONS, CHANGING MINDS, THINKING SMALL, and DOING DEMOCRACY

At the beginning, Solutions for America was about identifying, observing, recording, and reporting the problem-solving efforts of communities across the nation. But along the way something interesting happened: Solutions became something more, a program that not only observed, but provided expertise and built research capacity to help agencies and local governments study themselves, disseminate their findings, and ultimately improve their operations. And as it turns out, Solutions accomplished this precisely by *making connections, changing minds, thinking small,* and *doing democracy.*

Practitioner and Researcher Relationship

First, Solutions embodied the principles of thinking small (but smart) and making connections by weaving together a network of small, community-sized solutions. The hub-and-spoke research model paired community-based organizations and local governments with local researchers to gather and analyze data on individual pieces of the solutions puzzle. These partnerships were an unqualified success. Assessments of Solutions by program participants were consistently positive. As early as the first survey of site staff, 91 percent of participants rated their overall experience with the program as "excellent" or "very good." Sites were particularly enthusiastic about their local research partners, whom they saw as committed to their programs, able to work well with program staff, and instrumental for providing guidance and focus to the research effort. Among the local researchers, assessments were similarly positive. Two-thirds of those surveyed rated their experience with Solutions as "excellent" and all others considered it "very good." Nine out of ten local researchers indicated that they would work with their Solutions site again, and 94 percent of site staffers said that they would participate in the program again. Indeed, three-quarters of the sites have continued the relationship with their local research partner since the conclusion of Solutions. These positive assessments came despite that fact that for most participants, particularly site staff, the research undertaken as part of Solutions was a new experience.

Motivation to Participate

Sites and researchers had distinct but overlapping reasons for deciding to participate in Solutions; for both groups the idea of making new and productive connections was paramount. For researchers, the opportunity to evaluate a local organization in their backyard, to connect with and contribute to the local community in a new way, and to apply their research expertise to a real-world problem offered an opportunity to move beyond the usual confines of the university setting. "I was very interested in finding projects that formed a bridge between the university and the community," explained one researcher, and Solutions "offered a great opportunity for this." For sites, the opportunity to connect with and have their work evaluated and validated by an objective party, particularly with the prestige of an outside organization such as the Pew Partnership behind it, constituted the most important motivation for participation in Solutions. Site staff considered capacity to collect data and conduct program evaluation as activities essential to service delivery, but recognized their own limitations in these areas. Just as researchers sought to move beyond the university, site staff appeared eager to make connections beyond their own programs. These connections were forged through the hub-and-spoke structure, but also through the contacts made at a series of national meetings. Solutions brought participants together five times for meetings in cities across the country. These gatherings were an opportunity for site staff, local researchers, and local community partners to come together and exchange views, ideas, and information, while making connections that often lasted long after the meeting was adjourned.

Building Capacity at the Local Level

Solutions for America also set out to change minds. As was the case at many of the nineteen sites, Solutions accomplished this both by providing new skills and information and also by shaping attitudes. By the end of the project we were surprised to discover just how important the latter turned out to be. Solutions for America helped to enhance the sites' research capacity. In part, this capacity-building was brought about through the creation and fostering of a "culture of inquiry" among sites (see Hernández and Visher 2001). Solutions required sites to engage in a sustained process of data-gathering and empirical analysis, through their work with the local researcher, through the demanding reporting requirements coordinated by the CUPR hub, and through the national meet-

ings organized by the Pew Partnership. These activities served to inculcate and enhance a mindset in which research and evaluation were seen as integral program functions. By the end of the project, 83 percent of site staff indicated that they themselves and their organizations had developed more positive attitudes toward evaluation research and had become convinced of its value.

Beyond such attitudinal changes, participation in the Solutions research yielded tangible informational gains as well. Nearly 85 percent of program staff agreed that the Solutions research revealed new information about their program, and more than three-quarters of staff members surveyed agreed that the Solutions research helped them implement new data collection methods and improved their organization's ability to conduct research. In addition, many staffers found the research to be helpful in validating their prior expectations about the effectiveness of their work. More than 80 percent of those surveyed agreed that the research process confirmed what staff suspected or assumed to be true. One interviewee indicated that his organization's participation in Solutions and the results that emerged from the research were "like getting a Good Housekeeping seal of approval that would allow us to go to funders, to go to our supporters…and say that we have been looked at and have been found worthy."

Other staff members reported that the Solutions research helped lead to improvements in existing data collection and analysis efforts, as well as to the introduction of new data-gathering systems. For some organizations, participation helped facilitate improvements in client survey or focus-group administration; others reported advances in tracking program and client information. Of the nineteen sites, thirteen conducted focus groups, fifteen administered surveys, and sixteen undertook a rigorous analysis of existing records. One program staffer explained that by the conclusion of Solutions the evaluation process had become more standardized, so that "we're much more proactive about building in documentation" to ongoing program operations.

Utilization of Research Findings

More important, these new data are being put to good use. For many sites, Solutions demonstrated what was particularly effective about program operations, and in some cases this new information helped lead to internal changes in program practices, such as adding new components to service delivery operations or expanding services to a

broader group of clients or wider geographical area. Sites have gone on to use the research findings and their participation in Solutions in a number of other concrete ways, including strategic planning sessions, fundraising activities, and sophisticated public relations efforts. Sites also made deliberate efforts to disseminate research findings externally. For example, over three-quarters of sites have met with their congressperson to discuss the research. Others presented findings at national conferences, included findings in organization newsletters and fundraising appeals, and so on.

For their part, the local researchers seemed to find their work with the Solutions sites to be challenging, but engaging and ultimately satisfying in precisely the ways they had anticipated. These researchers were eager to participate in real-world projects that got them out of the university setting and into the community. Participation in Solutions provided just such an experience. Beyond this, many of the researchers were able to use their Solutions funding to hire research assistants, and several researchers were able to incorporate their Solutions experience into their undergraduate or graduate-level teaching.

Challenges

At times, Solutions was as demanding as it was innovative. Clear challenges emerged throughout the research process; staff members and local researchers alike identified a series of hurdles that needed to be overcome, the most pressing of which were the availability of sufficient funding and staff time to devote to data collection and working with the research partner. In one survey, more than half of site staff members agreed that "it was difficult to identify manageable methods of collecting data on program operations." In part this was a question of expertise, and it was precisely this that the local researchers were able to provide. However, making data collection and analysis manageable also requires sufficient resources to conduct critical tasks such as client interviewing, data entry, and the preparation and dissemination of research reports. Here, the local researchers—particularly when aided by research assistants—were again able to subsidize some but certainly not all of the costs.

Staff time was clearly the most pressing challenge for many organizations. Several sites expressed a desire for additional funds to compensate existing (often overworked) staff for their work on the research or to hire a new staff person specifically for

the purposes of data collection and analysis. All told, more than a third of respondents *disagreed* with the statement, "there was sufficient staff and local researcher time available to implement the research process."

Mitigating Factors

These challenges, however, tended to be mitigated by the strength of the relationship between the sites and the local research partner. At least 80 percent of researchers agreed that site staff understood their role in the research effort; that they worked well together; and that staff members were intellectually committed to the research effort. Similar majorities of program personnel agreed that the researcher understood the organization's work, worked well with staff, and provided direction and focus to the research. One of the reasons these partnerships appear to have worked so well is that each group brought a unique set of skills; there seems to have been an informal division of labor between researchers and staff. Researchers tended to be more involved in designing the research, analyzing and interpreting the data, and preparing reports for Solutions, while site staffers were more involved in data collection and staff training.

That researchers and staff members tended to agree on the nature of their relationship and that they tended overwhelmingly to work well together suggests that the parties experienced joint ownership of the research process and outcomes. However, in several cases such joint ownership was absent, communication between the researcher and program staff was poor, and in a small handful of cases sites and researchers got off to a rocky start and never fully recovered.

Despite the challenges the Solutions sites faced during the research process, in general most did not find the process to be overly burdensome. A number of factors helped mitigate challenges, including the involvement and enthusiasm of organizational staff and board members, a high level of preparation and organization in the early stages of the research, the availability of the research fund provided by Solutions and a hands-on, engaged local researcher all helped to ease the burden of conducting program evaluation research. As a result, in each of two surveys, at least two-thirds of program staff reported a relatively low burden associated with participating in Solutions.

When it comes to mainstreaming evaluation research—i.e., continuing what began under Solutions—the related concerns of funding and staff time are paramount,

and there are critical questions relating to the post-Solutions transition that remain to be addressed. Nevertheless, it is encouraging that, as noted earlier, nearly 94 percent of site staff members indicated that they would participate in Solutions again, and that three-quarters are continuing some form of collaboration with their Solutions research partner.

Doing Democracy

Finally, it is important to recognize that part of the success of Solutions as an intervention rests on its embodiment of democratic values. Sites and local researchers were encouraged—indeed were required—to make their own decisions regarding research design, data gathering, the general organization of the research process, and of course the uses to which the research findings would be put. To be sure, Solutions provided information, guidance, and a certain number of required tasks. But the nineteen solutions and their local research partners ultimately had autonomy as to how the research process played out. Moreover, Solutions fostered an ongoing process of discussion and deliberation. Through national meetings, through a listserv e-mail forum, and through a series of newsletters and reports, the Pew Partnership sponsored opportunities for participants to come together, exchange information, and learn from one another about how best to pursue specific strategies and negotiate particular challenges. At the end of the day, this was not a top-down program of evaluation-from-afar. Rather, Solutions was shaped on an ongoing basis by the participants themselves. The project's success owes much to the democratic nature of this process.

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.

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.

Conclusion

THIS IS A NATION OF PROBLEM SOLVERS. In communities across America, nonprofit organizations, local governments, and citizens' groups are working together to find solutions to our most pressing challenges. Whether the issue is health care, affordable housing, economic development, or civic engagement, solutions are springing up throughout the nation. Solutions for America was an effort to identify, document, analyze, and tell the story of these successes.

From the start, we knew what we didn't want: more of what had come before. We didn't want a top-down, university-based research design that would extract information from programs for a centralized process of data analysis. Such an approach would have provided uniformity and objective analysis, but at the cost of the kind of ground-level insight and collaborative relationships that could only be gained by working with the sites and communities themselves. At the same time, we wanted to avoid leaving the programs to fend for themselves, entirely responsible for conducting and reporting their own research. Such an approach would have undermined uniformity and objectivity, and would have placed a severe strain on the capacity of most of the programs, which, after all, are primarily in the business of service delivery.

The solution was the hub-and-spoke model. It resulted from a process of extensive deliberation, sporadic inspiration, and some old fashioned trial and error. The network of local research partners working closely with each of the nineteen sites, with coordination and guidance from a central hub, represented the best of both worlds: systematic, objective data gathering combined with in-depth, on-the-ground knowledge and perspective. The result was the insight, the lessons, and, we hope, the model for future research that characterized Solutions for America.

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