

Developing Local Infrastructure: The Salience of Muddling Through

Lessons from the Urban Health Initiative

One challenge to expanding services to a dramatically larger scale involves the state of the local infrastructure. Some intermediary may have to be created or restructured to allocate the infusion of service-delivery dollars, determine the basis for that allocation, provide training and quality control, and more. Each UHI site took a different approach to developing the intermediaries to provide this infrastructure. What were the benefits and trade-offs of these different approaches?

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About the Urban Health Initiative

The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (RWJF) established the Urban Health Initiative (UHI) in 1995 to determine whether a concerted, collaborative effort can bring about region-wide improvements in multiple measures of child health and safety. Five cities were chosen to implement UHI. These cities and their respective UHI campaigns are:

- Baltimore's Safe and Sound Campaign
- Mayor's Time (Detroit)
- Safe Passages (Oakland)
- Philadelphia Safe and Sound
- Youth Matters (Richmond)

UHI campaigns work to implement proven programmatic strategies at such a large scale that citywide statistics will improve significantly. To do that, UHI campaigns must be change agents to secure systemic policy and fiscal changes necessary to get strategies to that scale.

The UHI was designed to be non-prescriptive, allowing communities to craft implementation plans based on local conditions without assumptions, mandates or imperatives set forward by RWJF, which made a ten-year funding commitment.

The National Program Office (NPO) based in Seattle provides guidance, technical assistance and oversight to the local UHI campaigns in a number of areas including research, management, systems change and communications. The NPO also helps campaigns attract and develop the local leaders essential to bring about and sustain change in their cities. Former Seattle Mayor Charles Royer is national program director.

About the UHI's Lessons Learned Project

The UHI has learned a great deal with regard to developing change agent organizations and securing change in large cities. The NPO is working to catalogue these lessons so they can benefit future change agent organizations and their funders. As of July 2005, these papers had been written (and more are in the works):

- Political Strategizing in a Constantly Changing Environment
- Sustainable Funding for Program Strategies
- Using Data in the Decision-Making Process
- The Experience of an Intermediary in a Complex Systems-Change Initiative: The Urban Health Initiative's National Program Office
- Reflections on the Start-Up of the Urban Health Initiative
- The Origins of the Urban Health Initiative
- Communications Planning by Change Agents

All papers can be found on the UHI's website, www.urbanhealth.org. Comments, suggestions and questions about the UHI Lessons Learned Project are welcome. Contact Jerry VanderWood, UHI Director of Communications, at 206-616-3692 or jerryvw@u.washington.edu.

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By Lawrence D. Brown, Ph.D.¹

Introduction

In the traditional imagery of public administration, political leaders (executives, legislatures) make policy and then hand it over to administrators for implementation. In time an important complication got added to this pristine picture: the practical meaning of the policies handed over is often unclear, so administrators must per force exercise considerable discretion to improvise at the “street level.” Then, as policies evidently bogged down in the standard operating procedures of administrative agencies, anxiety arose about “system change,” that is, how to get local implementers to consider evidence indicating how “best practices” could secure value for money higher than that achieved by the inertial continuities said to pervade bureaucratic cultures. A third set of players was thus occasionally introduced into the policy mix, namely, entities designed to delineate and steer toward system change. The five organizations created by the Urban Health Initiative (UHI) are examples of these entities.

These organizations’ goal is to implement best-practice strategies at the scale necessary to improve outcome statistics, and their objective is to secure the systemic changes necessary to get to scale. As they pursued their systems change objectives, these organizations made an unsettling discovery: Even when they identified better ways of doing business and spending money the service-delivering entities that might be willing to entertain the better behavior that is requisite to “real” system change often lacked adequate local infrastructure to do so. As UHI National Program Director Charles Royer put it: “If our wildest dreams had come true in the early days of the initiative, and one of our cities got \$100 million for, say, enhanced after school programs, there would have been no agency to take control and run it. The cities faced an organizational vacuum in delivering services and in managing money for services. If you’re going to go to scale, there has to be leadership, some institution that gets the big picture and gives out money according to the big picture.”

And so a fourth actor joined the policy chain, to wit, “intermediary”² organizations, the distinctive role of which is to provide that infrastructure, to get and to give money in light of criteria that build organizational capacity to adopt desirable changes in the provision of services.

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² Editor’s note: The word “intermediary” is used to describe different sorts of entities. In this paper, intermediary refers to an organization within a city that “gets/gives/manages money”, as elaborated upon by Dr. Brown. Within the context of the UHI, intermediary also has a different meaning – a management entity that is situated between a foundation and its grantees. See UHI’s lesson learned paper, *The Experience of an Intermediary in a Complex Initiative: The Urban Health Initiative’s National Program Office*, for a discussion of this type of intermediary. Those involved in community change efforts sometimes apply the term intermediary to entities such as the local UHI sites, which are not service providers but seek to expand service delivery systems through policy and fiscal changes. The UHI refers to its local sites and similar organizations as “change agents”.

Defining “intermediary”

Definitions of the intermediary organization and its roles are by no means clear-cut. An executive at Baltimore’s Family League offered a pure and simple formation: intermediary organizations take money in and give it out in a process that features Requests for Proposals, reviews, awards, contracts, and monitoring.

The McKnight Foundation suggests a more capacious conception: intermediaries are “organizations that support and guide many other organizations.” Supporting and guiding may entail funding and advising on a wide range of topics (for instance, technology, financial management, strategic planning, communications, advocacy, and governance), compiling and distributing (data), developing and marketing (innovative strategies), partnering (with community agencies and financial institutions), bridging (grantees, practitioners, and policymakers), building (community capacity), providing (technical assistance, training, and resources), forming (learning communities), translating (research and theory into practical tools), creating (research based frameworks), mobilizing (local funders), managing (public support campaigns for worthy causes), designing (evaluations), developing (tools and processes), and doubtless many other activities.³

Intermediary organizations are more prominent in principal than in practice. The potential value of their many contributions is widely recognized, but creating a stable niche for durable intermediaries is difficult. The after school field is an instructive case in point. Done right, after school programs can improve the health and safety of children (and perhaps also their personal and intellectual development) by offering them enjoyable and productive activities in the hours between the end of the school day and dinnertime. But after school agencies need to know what programs work best for what types of children, and how to reach and retain children, mount high quality programs, raise money, keep good records, and recruit able staff. Likewise, youth service centers can be a valuable alternative to the incarceration of youth in legal trouble, but only if comparable criteria are met.

Policymakers “on high” cannot grapple effectively with such organizational details and nuances. The agencies themselves often lack the resources (and perhaps the will) to put their houses in order. Change agents that enmesh themselves in capacity building risk diversion from their big picture missions. A well-functioning intermediary, therefore, can fill voids that, left unaddressed, may stymie best-laid plans as they filter down the layers of program “command.”

Such organizations are hard to launch and sustain, however. For one thing they must be adequately funded and staffed. Alas, policymakers are more inclined to support the tangible delivery of services than organizations whose role is to help others to develop capacities these others are assumed already to have as a matter of course. Supporting capacity might seem to be a rational investment, notes Jonathan Peizer, but “it’s not sexy, doesn’t read very well in the annual report of accomplishments, and doesn’t provide that ‘feel good’ effect to

³ These renderings of the intermediary role come from: The McKnight Foundation, MCF News Archives, “McKnight Emphasizes Importance of Intermediary Organizations,” March 26, 2002, pp. 1-2; Community Network for Youth Development, “About CNYD: CNYD Story,” n.d.; Jonathan Peizer, “The Quiet Revolution in Non-Profit Capacity Support,” Open Society Institute, October 21, 2003; and an undated report by the Vice President, Strategic Communications of the William T. Grant Foundation, pp. 17-18.

either the institutional donor or granny who is just trying to help those poor starving kids.” Knowing this, grantees tend to join donors in “danc[ing] around the issue of capacity rather than addressing it realistically.”⁴

Moreover, the capacity an effective intermediary needs depends critically on the character of the entities whose capacities intermediaries are expected to help build. In after school agencies, for example, funds tend to be tight and precarious; staff positions tend to be temporary jobs, not careers; staff turnover tends to be high; and programs of a given type and size do not fit all youth, who differ by age, sex, personality, and proclivities. Intermediaries themselves often need considerable support (training, technical assistance, and more) before they can upgrade service delivery agencies—a strategic regress that may become infinitely frustrating unless policymakers recognize the value of intermediary organizations and fund them accordingly—a condition seldom met in the best of times and more seldom still in tight fiscal eras.

Intermediaries in the UHI cities

The five UHI sites differed markedly about the roles intermediaries might usefully play in their communities and about what they intended to do to institutionalize those roles.

Philadelphia: Intermediary by Default. The UHI’s Philadelphia Safe and Sound program assumed intermediary roles because, as a staffer explained, no other entities were at hand to do so. City government balked at disbursing sizable sums to local service agencies of suspect capacity, so Safe and Sound was obliged to mediate the distribution of funds while offering training and technical assistance to the organizations that received them. Such mediation, staff acknowledged, was time-consuming, energy intensive, and (as the UHI’s National Program Office repeatedly warned) in tension with its big picture, system changing mission.

As the UHI began winding down there was little prospect that new intermediaries would emerge, and Safe and Sound seemed to be redefining the intermediary role in ways consistent with its own strengths and aspirations. A former Safe and Sound staffer cited the Pennsylvania Economic League as an example of a potent intermediary: “They’re a force within the state, the go-to organization for understanding taxes and their impact on economic development. They’re politically visible and credible on major policy issues, which is key.” Intermediaries, this source continued, need to be “well-honed, credible centers of evidence and intellectual capital.” Forging its niche around these contributions, the entity in question “wouldn’t manage money but would do sophisticated fiscal strategy work—helping municipalities to think about revenue maximization, getting waivers, and so on.” This brain-trust image dovetails well with Safe and Sound’s self-conception but, for better or worse, departs sharply from the “getting/giving/managing money” job description commonly assigned to intermediaries.

Detroit: Anointing Intermediaries. Detroit’s Mayor’s Time program faced an institutional vacuum similar to Philadelphia’s: the city is well endowed with after school agencies but an inordinate number are politically connected, poorly run, unaccountable, inclined toward cream skimming, suspect in the eyes of the schools, the juvenile justice system, and the state, and unable to meet the needs of their clients. Recognizing the need for an institutional

⁴ Peizer, “Quiet Revolution.”

presence that could set standards, offer training and advice, and push for continuous improvement in the quality of services, Mayor's Time proposed to choose a handful (three to five) service agencies that stood out from the crowd, give them training and assistance, designate them as After School Management Organizations and rely on them to train and assist their organizational peers. Like The After School Institute in Baltimore, Detroit's ASMOs might be called quasi-intermediaries: they do not allocate money and mainly supply training and assistance.

Oakland: Intermediary on the Drawing Board. Oakland's Safe Passages, like Philadelphia Safe and Sound, adopted elements of the intermediary role that, an official remarked, can be "very valuable." On the other hand, noted this source, that role is fraught with peril, especially for an agency devoted to system change: "Intermediaries get drawn into dictating the agenda. You have ideas, get invested in them, want to make them happen, and then you're caught up in power struggles." Designing a workable intermediary in Oakland's complex institutional milieu is no easy matter, however: "It's gotta be city AND county, some kind of joint power authority among the major players. It should be quasi-governmental: not part of government, but a 501c3 is too far from government."

Alameda County's Interagency Children's Policy Council was envisioned as an intermediary but the county showed more enthusiasm for it than did the city, said to be more comfortable with such arenas as police, parks, and economic development than with human and social services. An enterprising assistant city manager helped bring the city along—an intermediary to the intermediary as it were—but the institutional challenge remains. In Oakland that challenge also remains defined largely in negative terms, that is, discerning and avoiding what an intermediary should not do. For example, a participant observed (in terms at variance with Philadelphia's vision) that intermediaries must "add real tangible value to the work—real results, not just research." Whether the site's determination to eliminate the negatives will evolve into an affirmation of some particular positive model remains to be seen.

Richmond: Intermediary Coalition. For intermediary functions in the childhood development field, Richmond mainly looks to the Early Child Development Coalition, a 150-member entity launched by the United Way, Voices for Virginia's Children, and the UHI's Youth Matters (YM). To reconcile efficiency with so large a membership, the group does much of its business in executive and steering committees. The Coalition, a member explained, acts as a planning council, administers training grants, and supports the accreditation process of child care centers, thus filling a gap left by the absence of state standards.

As evidence of its effectiveness, a YM staffer noted that although child care centers find the national standards and accreditation process a challenge, there is a waiting list for accreditation. The Coalition, which draws on grants from local foundations and federal funds, was described as "balanced, broad based, very collaborative, and able to draw on the organizational resources of its members." The key contribution, a participant contended, is "the ability to talk across systems, to look at a range of services." In this site the distinctive expertise of the intermediary has less to do with data, evidence, or bridging agencies and levels of government than with interorganizational savoir-faire.

Baltimore: The Real McCoy? Although its scope is not limited to either after school programs or intermediary functions, the Family League of Baltimore City is the only case of a “classic” intermediary to be found in the UHI quintet of sites. The organization, an interviewee explained, serves as “the main fiscal agent for the after school strategy, manages the disbursement of money, monitors the use of funds, assures compliance with standards, collects and analyzes data, and seeks public funds.” Lobbying and advocacy lie outside its mission, as do training and technical assistance, for which it largely relies on (and funds) The After School Institute (TASI).

The League began life as the Family Preservation Institute in 1991, one of 24 “local management boards” created by the state of Maryland in hopes of giving community groups more voice in decisions about state programs aimed at families and youth. The Family League of Baltimore City, like most of its 23 counterparts, quickly got entangled in political thickets. An observer recalled that the new funding channels “pissed off the state agencies by taking their money and putting it into new pools while keeping the mandates on them. So the local boards had lots of people with dumb ideas fighting over how to use ‘their’ money.” As the organizations bogged down in turf battles and operational frictions their reputations as planners and strategists plummeted.

By 1996, the director of the Family League, having concluded that (as she put it in an interview) one could not simultaneously “steer and row,” decided to cease providing services and focus on steering the flow of dollars toward better outcomes. About the same time UHI’s Safe and Sound Campaign came to town. Overcoming initial jitters about duplicative missions, the directors of the two agencies evolved a division of labor based on their respective and complementary strengths. In essence, Safe and Sound’s director played “Ms. Outside” to the Family League director’s “Ms. Inside.” “What Safe and Sound does best is the public campaign, strategizing, motivating, exciting people,” a source observed, “while the Family League is best at the nuts and bolts, nitty gritty stuff and in the ‘neutral convener’ role.” (This latter role was said to entail “bringing the parties together, giving them some food –and maybe some data—and letting ‘em go at it. That’s all there is to it, but it works”!)

Safe and Sound focuses more on raising private than public funds, the Family League vice versa. Safe and Sound lobbies and advocates for its mission, the Family League took over a data collaborative Safe and Sound had incubated at Johns Hopkins University. Safe and Sound’s strategic vision, a participant argued, gave “unity” to Family League decisions that thus could transcend turf conflicts; the Family League’s managerial acumen gave Safe and Sound reason to hope the system changes at which it aimed might survive the pitfalls of implementation.

The Family League is a valuable resource for Safe and Sound but even an intermediary so savvy and seasoned is no panacea. The after school strategy remains controversial because its proper goals lie in the eyes of multiple beholders—the schools want it to produce better achieving students, the juvenile justice system expects it to keep kids out of legal trouble, the pregnancy-prevention crowd hopes that after school programs will advance its agenda, and so on. The needs and wants of children differ widely; older children are particularly hard to enlist and retain in after school projects. The evidence that after school programs “work” is beset by ambiguities that can equally fortify arguments for funding them better or for giving them less. Funding in this field is precarious and said to be declining of late. After school providers differ greatly in capacity and in their will to upgrade it. They also

enjoy political connections that can complicate the enforcement of standards and other vehicles of quality improvement. Remarking on the difficulties of staying apolitical, a respondent recalled how “the Family League and Safe and Sound teamed up and defended our programs against some political folks. We prevailed because we had a rigorous strategy and good data, but it wasn’t easy.”

Moreover, intermediaries face the incessant challenges of small “p” politics, the building and refurbishing of legitimacy and support among the constituencies whence money comes and to which it goes. “Trust is the key,” said a veteran Family League official. “How it works is function of who is in charge and the relationships you build with them. You can invest many hours and then those folks are gone. It’s all about open communications, nurturing relations, finding win/win scenarios—it’s old social work stuff, but that’s what’s crucial.”

Conclusions

The absence of “classic” intermediary organizations in four or the five UHI sites and their struggles (Richmond excepted) to create some reasonable facsimile thereof indicate how hard it is to get intermediaries going, let alone get them “right.” On the other hand, continuing discussion of the issue and repeated attempts to address it testify to the salience of the organizational gap intermediaries might fill. So too presumably do the 1.3 million items a Google search for “intermediary organizations” yields. (Space limits regrettably preclude a full discussion of this literature here.)

The review offered here suggests that communities differ widely in how they perceive their “intermediary” needs and in the types of organizations with which they feel comfortable. Successful innovation in this sphere defies formulas and recipes. Baltimore’s Family League worked in good measure because it had a secure foundation in state law; had the organizational “slack” to evolve through trials and errors and mid-course corrections in role if not mission; was prepared to negotiate a division of labor with Safe and Sound, which might otherwise have been a rival; and, not least important, had strong, steady leadership since its inception in 1991. Such variables, heavily contingent on luck and serendipity, cannot be routinized.

Absent clear recognition by their sponsors and supporters of the importance of management functions “per se,” intermediary organizations will face tough sledding. Keeping their eyes on the ball—get/give/manage money—is difficult, as the diversity of forms and functions across the five sites shows. As the laundry list of verbalized functions –bridging, forming, supporting, advising, assisting, compiling, developing, marketing, building, providing, translating, training, creating, mobilizing, managing, designing, developing, and more—makes plain, the intermediary role means many things to many people, which invites diffusion and blurring of organizational focus as funders and constituents marshal their power to press their priorities. Designing a “distinctive competence” (in Philip Selznick’s term) for intermediary organizations is no small challenge.

The challenge of organizational design is compounded by (as Peizer noted) widespread failure among sponsors and funders to “get” what the intermediary role entails and why it deserves support. Intermediaries sit along a continuum of five policy “points,” namely, policymaking, administration, intermediation, training and technical assistance, and implementation. (If system change agents are inserted between administrators and intermediaries, as in the UHI sites, the points increase to six.) Intermediation may seem

· easily assimilable to administration (for what conceivable purpose do funding agencies
· exist if not to get, give, and manage money?) or to training and technical assistance (those
· interviewed for this paper differed about whether such functions were part of, indeed central
· to, the intermediary role or not).

· Moreover, intermediary organizations are the only point of the five or six the role of which is
· “pure”—aka “mere”—management. If they stay within their classic definition, intermediaries
· do not proclaim goals and priorities, run programs, unearth and promote best practices,
· impart new skills to service providers, or deliver services. Policymakers and foundation
· leaders may assume that “the system” does or should handle management challenges within
· its several internal parts and may therefore decline to invest in “managing” entities per se.

· Crediting the role with its true salience requires immersion in nitty-gritty details of intra-
· organizational capacity and inter-organizational exchange that those making policy and
· loosing purse strings from 30,000 feet up seldom attain. It does not help that organizational
· analysis—the notion that complex formal organizations have dynamics of their own that
· matter greatly to the success of policies—is rarely on the minds of policymakers, foundations,
· or—alas—academicians as they ponder the paths to system change. Nor does it help that
· the literature on intermediaries tends to put the cart before the horse: advocacy on behalf of
· such organizations and celebration of their achievements and potential are more prominent
· than carefully crafted case studies that explain why the usual suspect players cannot
· adequately shoulder the management tasks in question. Such practical knowledge, however,
· demands close familiarity with the realities of local public and nonprofit administration,
· before which bright minds boggle and sharp eyes close.



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