Two years ago we began designing the Living Cities Integration Initiative with the belief that the problems faced by low income people today are simply too large and too complex for one sector to solve alone. We understood that collaboration was a much needed tool for achieving collective impact and that only by aligning the efforts of many actors working on pieces of the problem would we be able to create meaningful and enduring change in America’s cities. While the need for collaboration is clear, many cities and organizations struggle to build the kind of resilient, cross-sector partnerships that can fix broken public systems and not just create small scale “workarounds.” One year into the implementation of the Integration Initiative we’ve learned these four important lessons that can serve as guiding principles for those wanting to collaborate for innovation and impact.

1. **We can’t “non-profit” our way out of these problems.** We need a real, cross-sector civic infrastructure that includes leaders from the public, private, philanthropic and non-profit sectors. For collaboration to be successful participants must represent decision-makers and doers from all sectors, fields and jurisdictions. The public sector can no longer be viewed as an obstacle or external object for lobbying and advocacy efforts. Successful partnerships must bring the government in as a full participant in this new ‘civic infrastructure’ and make it possible—with philanthropic support if necessary—for government officials to play their role effectively.

2. **Focus on changing systems, not piloting new programs.** From education to workforce and health, many of our public systems are broken and no longer meet the needs of residents. Rather than lifting up and focusing on that one program or initiative that is defying the odds, cross-sector partnerships should use their collective power and expertise to move beyond work-arounds to design solutions that fundamentally transform and modernize systems for the 21st century.

3. **Use a data-driven approach and focus on results.** In order to ensure that collaboration produces meaningful results, partnerships should focus on defining shared goals – what Nancy Zimpher, Chancellor of the State University of New York has called “big, hairy audacious goals” -- and metrics for tracking progress. The Strive Partnership in Cincinnati has been highly effective because local leaders have been able to define mutually agreed-upon data to measure effectiveness and drive performance accountability. This transparency about what works and doesn’t can also provide the evidence to redirect public funds away from obsolete approaches.
4. Cross-sector collaborations need cross-sector funding streams. Grants alone cannot deliver the scale of change that makes collaboration so enticing. Instead we need to think about how we can combine grants and loans to begin creating a space for greater private sector involvement in communities that have traditionally been under-invested.

Last week I provided the keynote at the Federal Reserve Healthy Communities Conference and had the opportunity to share some of these same insights and ideas about collaboration. For more information, make sure to check out the conference website once videos are available or follow @TII_LC on Twitter for the latest news and updates.

Related Articles:

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