Service Provision Through Public-Private Partnerships

An Ethnography of Service Delivery to Homeless Teenagers

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This research examines a service delivery system for homeless youths that was created by a public-private partnership between the business community, nonprofit service providers, and governmental entities. The article opens with a brief introduction to homelessness, a review of the literature on the material lives of the poor, and a discussion of public-private alliances. A description of the ethnographic method employed in this study follows, with a concentration on the locally appropriate roles assumed by the researcher. The results examine the genesis of this public-private initiative and the development of the service delivery model, its implementation, and its first system-wide review. The final section closes with lessons learned from this particular alliance that may have implications for the development of other public-private partnerships.

The public policy issue of homelessness was one of the most vexing social problems of the late 20th century, with nearly 100 million people without homes worldwide (United Nations Development Programme 1997). Estimates of the number of men, women, and children who were homeless on any given night within the United States during the 1980s and into the 1990s range from 600,000 to 3 million (Hill 1991). The seriousness of this dilemma caused a wide variety of social scientists to explore possible reasons, resulting in an expanding list that includes unemployment among the poor, deinstitutionalization of former mental patients, scarcity of low-cost housing, drug addiction and alcohol abuse, and domestic violence (Hill and Stamey 1990).

As the century came to a close, the character and makeup of this subpopulation within the United States had transformed (Wasson and Hill 1998). Although old stereotypes of Bowery bums and bag ladies remain within popular culture, the fastest growing segments are families and children. Young women head the vast majority of homeless families, and their children often are less than 5 years old. These youths spend their critical physical and psychological development years without the security of a permanent home, increasing the likelihood that they will remain on the streets (Hill 2001b). In addition, throwaway and runaway youths have become a significant homeless subgroup. Oftentimes these children leave home as young teens because of eviction by a parent or the creation of intolerable and abusive conditions. As a result, they often end up sleeping outside.

The situation in Portland, Oregon, reflects these national trends. The general homeless population has increased as a result of the region's overall growth pattern, and the problems encountered by youths living on the streets are particularly dire (Noell 1998). For instance, many of the services for the homeless already in existence were developed for adults and, therefore, are inappropriate for younger men and women. Also, services for families that include children are focused on the very young rather than teenagers. With no place left to go, these youths se-

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lected to congregate and sleep outside in a small number of downtown locations. As this population grew and their presence became increasingly visible, city and county government officials, members of local churches, nonprofit service providers, and representatives of the business community believed the problem had reached crisis proportions (Ad Hoc Committee 1998).

In the fall of 1997, the Citizen's Crime Commission and the Association for Portland Progress, two organizations from the area composed primarily of local business leaders, issued a report on the state of services to homeless youths (Joint Homeless Youth Assessment Committee 1998). This document was critical of current providers and the local government, and it closed with a challenge to public officials to take a leadership role in the planning and implementation of a new service delivery system for homeless youths in the downtown area. The Board of County Commissioners accepted this challenge, and they agreed to take the lead in the coordination of the service delivery system. Through the work of an ad hoc committee, a model of service delivery was developed, and an oversight committee was established to monitor its success.

The purpose of this research is to examine the service delivery system created by this public-private partnership. The next section presents a review of the literature on service delivery to the poor and on public-private alliances. A discussion of the ethnographic method employed in this study follows, with a focus on the locally appropriate roles played by the researcher. The results come next, and they explore the creation of this public-private initiative, its implementation, and the system-wide review following 18 months of operation. The final section provides lessons learned from this partnering that may have implications for the development of other public-private alliances.

SERVICE DELIVERY TO THE POOR AND PUBLIC-PRIVATE INITIATIVES

The consumer lives of the impoverished surfaced as an important topic for scholars following the publication of *The Poor Pay More* by David Caplovitz (1963). Preferences among the poor for more expensive versus more economical products led him to conclude that impoverished consumers practice "compensatory consumption." However, Irelan and Besner (1966) found that the poor value the same material possessions and share the same goals for material accumulation as the remainder of society. Thus, the primary distinction between poor and nonpoor consumers is not their needs and desires but their inability to actualize them as a result of their relative poverty.

Most early investigations of the marketing system within impoverished communities concentrated attention on marketers' inability to serve adequately the needs of the poor. Some of these accounts suggest that marketplace deficiencies were the result of chronic cash shortages among the impoverished that made them questionable economic risks (Holloway and Cardozo 1969). Their impecuniousness resulted in fewer competitors, higher prices, lower quality, and a smaller assortment of goods and services within their neighborhoods (Andreasen 1975). As James Baldwin aptly noted, "Anyone who has ever struggled with poverty knows how extremely expensive it is to be poor" (Sturdivant 1969, p. 1).

At approximately the same time and as a result of these marketplace ills, President Johnson declared his "war on poverty" and greatly expanded the government services for the poor enacted during the Great Depression (Hill, Hirschman, and Bauman 1996). Programs that were enlarged or created during this period include revenue sources such as Aid to Families With Dependent Children (AFDC), food and nutritional programs including food stamps, and health insurance from Medicaid. Unfortunately, these services were eroded or discontinued during the ensuing decades due to a variety of agendas from both political parties, resulting in less coverage, lower benefit levels, and greater and more diverse societal poverty (Hill and Macan 1996).

The 1990s led to renewed interest in poverty by consumer researchers,[1] revealing that the imbalance in exchange relationships favoring businesses over poor consumers in the United States continues to plague impoverished communities (Alwitt and Donley 1996). However, even with the erosion of the welfare safety net, the poor exhibit a surprising resiliency and actively exert some control within their consumer world. For example, Lee, Ozanne, and Hill (1999) found that the impoverished occasionally call upon limited yet critical resources to meet unfulfilled consumer needs. Hill (2001a), using a decade of ethnographic research on the material lives of the poor, reveals that this resource typically is community support or social capital, which supplements the government system of service delivery within poverty neighborhoods (see Putnam 2000 for more on social capital).

The matching of community or private support with public agendas is consistent with former president Bush's "thousand points of light" and current president Bush's "compassionate conservatism" (see "New Directions" 2001 for a look at emerging opportunities). For example, during the 1980s, public-private partnerships became a popular collaborative approach to achieving collective

1. Hill and Adrangi (1999) reported the extent of poverty on a global scale. According to the United Nations, 1.3 billion people live on less than $1 a day, more than 1 billion people do not have access to safe drinking water, about 840 million people lack food security, and approximately 800 million people are unable to receive health services.

ends. Combining government revenue sources with private investment funds created an additional incentive and spawned a variety of hybrid alliances between government, businesses, and nonprofit organizations (Sternberg 1993).

By the 1990s, this trend became a worldwide movement, resulting in a complex set of overlapping interorganizational relationships that deliver essential services such as health care, education, and social services (Larason-Schneider 1999). This increased visibility led to greater scrutiny, causing some to cast suspicion on the effectiveness of public-private partnerships ("Limited Partners" 1994). Nonetheless, the spread of these alliances and anecdotal evidence of their success led others to assert that important social problems cannot be resolved effectively by government acting alone (Huxham and Vangen 2000).

Such partnerships are seen as an alternative to the complete privatization of government service delivery systems. Alliances among government and business organizations arouse images of Western civilization during gentler times, when local resources were shared more widely among the citizenry and community responsibility was an important social value (Linder 1999). Proponents of this service delivery hybrid believe that it combines the best characteristics of each partner. Government is required to be more responsive to its constituencies' needs and goals, whereas businesses must embrace public service agendas and endure greater external evaluation and accountability.

The organizational form that best epitomizes such a public persona combined with an entrepreneurial outlook is the nonprofit firm (for more on the entrepreneurial spirit, see Osborne and Gaebler 1992). As Larason-Schneider (1999) has suggested, nonprofits often are adept at finding and using social capital within their communities to advance the quality of life of vulnerable citizens. Such firms appeal to individuals of both political persuasions because they are rooted in concern for others within a context of civic engagement that fosters community-based responsibility. They are more likely to establish successful public-private partnerships in neighborhoods with high levels of social capital, well-developed relationships between diverse constituencies, and a strong sense of community spirit (Backman and Smith 2000).

For example, many local governments providing welfare services are working to develop public-private partnerships that include relationships with community-based nonprofit organizations (Bailey and Koney 1996; Larason-Schneider 1999). The articulated rationale of such alliances has changed over time from protection against market vagaries that make consumers vulnerable to requiring the poor to become increasingly independent of social support and responsible for their own relationships with the marketplace (Rom 1999). The underlying theme is reduced dependency in favor of increased empowerment, even if this empowerment is forced on vulnerable citizens. It is within this set of circumstances that this research project is embedded.

ETHNOGRAPHIC METHOD AND LOCALLY APPROPRIATE ROLES

The use of ethnography to examine service delivery has increased significantly throughout the previous two decades. For example, Arnould and Price (1993) used this method to explore the complex relationship between white-water rafting experiences and consumer levels of satisfaction (also see Price, Arnould, and Tierney 1995). Celsi, Rose, and Leigh (1993) conducted an ethnography of the skydiving subculture and its impact on the voluntary consumption of high-risk services. Finally, Hirschman (1992) investigated the use of 12-step program services (e.g., Narcotics Anonymous) by addicts through her weekly attendance at two different chapters.

A primary method for collecting ethnographic data involves participant observation by one or more members of the research team (Atkinson and Hammersley 1994). Although this tactic can be operationalized through a number of forms, the use of locally appropriate roles that help the researcher blend into the existing cultural background may cause less disruption and elicit greater cooperation from informants. In his extensive ethnography of the delivery of police services, Van Mannen (1988) attended training at the police academy so that his presence in squad cars would arouse little suspicion from the officers that he accompanied on the job. Hill (1991) became a volunteer at a shelter for homeless women and their children to gain their trust so that they would reveal their experiences of homelessness. In addition, one of the researchers in Ozanne, Hill, and Wright (1998) acted as a life-skills consultant to the juvenile delinquents who were incarcerated at a religious-affiliated rehabilitation facility to have a legitimate reason for interviewing inmates.

Consistent with these approaches, the principle investigator in this research has played several key roles in the development, implementation, and assessment of the public-private partnership formed to serve the needs of homeless youths in Portland, Oregon. First, he was selected for the committee that developed the original model for service delivery as a result of his research on poverty. Second, he was a board member of New Avenues for Youth—one of the four service providers chosen to implement the resulting model. Third, he served on the committee that evaluated the operationalization of the service delivery system after 18 months of functioning.

These appointments allowed for the collection of a vast amount of data from a wide variety of sources. For example, formal meetings associated with these assignments occurred approximately three times per month in a 3-year period. The minutes from these meeting, handwritten notes by the researcher, and handouts from various speakers comprise the bulk of information for this study. Final reports issued by the Crime Commission on the state of service delivery, the Ad Hoc Committee on the new service delivery model. and the Oversight Committee on implementation of the model also served as information sources. In addition, audio and video recordings of public meetings; personal interviews with government officials, nonprofit providers, and private donors; and discussions with homeless youths complete the data set.

These data were treated as text and subjected to evaluation that is typical of qualitative data (see Arnould and Wallendorf 1994). The first step of the analysis involved creating an understanding of the different perspectives of the public and private constituencies interested in fostering this partnership. The second step required summarizing these divergent perspectives across the various stages of model development from creation of the system to implementation to evaluation. The third step involved developing thematic categories that best capture the interpersonal and/or interorganizational dynamics that drove each phase of this negotiated process. The fourth step required that relationships among the themes be explored to develop a comprehensive understanding of this public-private partnership. The results presented in the next section are organized within and across themes to give the reader a gestalt of this service delivery system.

THE SERVICE DELIVERY SYSTEM

The foundation, creation, utilization, and evaluation of this public-private partnership are best described through five interrelated thematic categories that move from one to the next consistent with the chronology of the developing system. The first category involves *community uprising* by business and civic leaders of the downtown area, as the presence of homeless youths became increasingly obvious. The next category reveals a *negotiated peace* that occurred as a result of action by local government officials to moderate the increasing animosity between the downtown business community, nonprofit service providers, and themselves. From this settlement, *a service-delivery system emerges* that meets the tacit approval of all three parties to this newly formed alliance. Nonetheless, *dissension in the ranks* occurs in the implementation of the resulting service-delivery model, and nonprofit providers in the system experience grave concerns about their working relationships with each other. The final category, *coming together*, demonstrates the ultimate cohesiveness of the system when it meets with public scrutiny after 18 months of operation.

Community Uprising

By the summer of 1997, the situation of homeless youths living in the downtown Portland area had become untenable. The number of young people younger than 18 years living outside within this community had tripled during the previous decade to approximately 1,500, overwhelming local social services. Although only limited data existed at the time, it was believed that this population was composed of members of homeless families, runaway adolescents escaping physical and sexual abuse, throwaways discarded by their parents or guardians, youths abandoning foster care, and children who grew up on the streets.

With their rise in numbers came their increased visibility among the citizenry of the downtown community. Media reports of expanding drug use, property crimes, and citizen intimidation by homeless youths caused businesspersons to fear the demise of downtown shopping and dining, similar to some large eastern U.S. cities. The negative experiences of several civic leaders on the boards of the nonprofits serving this population provided additional impetus to action. As a result, the two organizations noted earlier (Citizens Crime Commission and Association for Portland Progress) formed a joint committee headed by two well-known corporate executives to examine the situation. Their final report was blunt in its assessment:

> We have found the existing system of services for homeless/displaced youths in downtown Portland to be inadequate in scope and quantity, plagued by competing philosophical approaches, woefully underfunded, poorly coordinated, and undermined by a lack of government leadership. In short, the current delivery system lacks the attributes we believe are necessary for an effective, meaningful homeless youth system. (Joint Homeless Youth Assessment Committee 1998, p. 4)

An important concern centered on the two primary philosophical approaches of the service providers. One of the agencies followed a social welfare model that was grounded in the provision of relief-based services, without regard to the deportment of the recipients. Another of the providers employed an outcome-based model with the expressed goal of moving youths from the streets to independent living through family reunification or transitional housing and education. The others used some combination of the two philosophies, holding youths to a greater or lesser degree of accountability for their intentions or actions. As a result, members of the Joint Homeless Youth Assessment Committee believed that many youths, especially the more hard core among this population, were able to access services when needed, live on the streets when desired, and avoid moving closer to a permanent housed state.

Another concern involved the lack of public resources dedicated to serving the needs of this population. As the Joint Homeless Youth Assessment Committee noted, "In recent years, neither the city of Portland nor Multnomah County has placed a high priority on funding programs that serve homeless youths" (p. 11). This neglect included a general paucity of local governmental funding and a shortage of national dollars from federal legislative programs spawned by the McKinney Act. As a result, a relatively small percentage of all public support available to serve the needs of the homeless in general or displaced youths in particular was spent on services accessible to homeless teens.

Nonetheless, even if resource levels were adequate, members of the Joint Homeless Youth Assessment Committee believed that the delivery "system lacks an effective process for assuring that publicly funded services are meeting measurable standards" (p. 11). According to committee members, this problem was due, in part, to the dearth of clear systemic goals and objectives for service delivery by the nonprofit providers. Consistent with earlier discussion, there was little agreement by providers on what constituted successful service provision to homeless youths. Some agencies were satisfied with getting them off the streets, even if this situation was temporary. Others believed that success occurred only after youths moved to permanent housing. This difference of opinion led to a focus by some providers on anecdotal evidence of effectiveness in lieu of more rigorous evaluation when reporting to funders.

It was the opinion of Joint Committee members that much of this problem was attributable to a lack of clear leadership from local government. For instance, there was no single governmental agency managing the provision of services by nonprofit providers using public funds. "Both Multnomah County and the City of Portland provide funding, yet they do not have a coordinated, consistent philosophy or plan for addressing homeless youth issues" (Joint Homeless Youth Assessment Committee 1998, p. 8). Furthermore, neither entity was involved in the development of assessment criteria or the collection of outcome data. As the Joint Committee members revealed, "There is no evidence that trained City or County social workers are involved with oversight, policy setting, program audits, outcome monitoring or reporting" (p. 11).

Negotiated Peace

To solve the problems identified and improve the service delivery system to homeless youths, the Joint Homeless Youth Assessment Committee advanced several recommendations:

- The responsibility for oversight of the homeless youth provider network should be vested in one governmental entity.
- A systemic plan of action should be developed that represents a partnership between the relevant public, private, and nonprofit agencies and organizations.
- This partnership and the resulting plan should be grounded in one clear philosophical approach that supports movement of homeless youths from the streets to safe and secure housing.
- A set of clear and measurable objectives should be based on this overarching goal, and data on the resulting outcome-based parameters should be collected and widely disseminated.

The Board of County Commissioners reviewed these recommendations following the issuance of the report, and they subsequently approved a resolution in support of many of its guiding principles and suggestions. For example, this resolution recognized the growing number of homeless youths in the downtown area and the responsibility of Multnomah County to help them exit street life. To this end, the county's Department of Community and Family Services was asked to take the lead in the coordination of the service delivery system. In support of their efforts and to engage the diverse groups involved, the county chair empowered an ad hoc committee composed of nonprofit, business, and government leaders to

- Evaluate the current service delivery system
- Outline components of an ideal system
- Develop outcomes for that system
- Make recommendations for the use of available funding for services
- Identify additional policy issues to be addressed

The resulting committee report emphasized the need for a responsive market-driven approach to serving these youths (Ad Hoc Committee 1998). The guiding principle declared that it is unacceptable for any young person to live on the streets, and it is the community's responsibility, through a public-private partnership, to ensure that their basic shelter, health care, and nutritional needs are met on a daily basis. Nonetheless, there must be a balance between short-term relief and long-term programs that help youths move to permanent accommodations. Consistent with the report by the Joint Homeless Youth Assessment

Committee and the charge of the county, their proposed model had the following attributes:

- Clear measurable objectives and outcomes for service programs as well as the overall system
- Recognized that a variety of programs and approaches are needed to address the needs of homeless youths
- Allowed for a continuum of services that maximizes the use of available resources
- Required that service providers be accountable to public and private funding sources as well as the community at large

To ensure that the model was implemented properly, an oversight committee was established that contained members from the major public and private constituencies represented on the Ad Hoc Committee as well as the executive directors of the four agencies that provided services to homeless youths. This group was to meet monthly to discuss operational activities of the primary providers, new opportunities for and threats to service provision, and public and private funding sources. The goal was to establish a collegial and collaborative environment that was focused on effective and efficient use of resources.

A Service Delivery System Emerges

With their charge in hand, representatives from the Department of Community and Family Services went about the task of assembling the diverse membership of the Ad Hoc Committee. To ensure that all interested parties were represented, individuals from the mayor's staff, the county commissioners' offices, the Joint Homeless Youth Assessment Committee who issued the original report, the juvenile justice system, the police department, the public school district, the academic community, and the youth provider network were asked to serve. However, to prevent actual or perceived conflicts of interest, no persons from the current provider system or those interested in furnishing services to homeless youths in the future were selected for membership.

The multidisciplinary nature of this committee and the disparate perspectives among the membership led the researcher to question their ability to come to an agreement on the state of the current service delivery system or the makeup of an ideal system. His field notes from their first gathering reveal his concerns:

> As they arrive, I am struck by the difference in dress among the various committee members. Representatives from the business community are in suits, white shirts and ties, while the individuals from the social service community are dressed in casual slacks or jeans and collar-less shirts. They mingle together in four or five small cliques, engaged in friendly banter. It will be interesting to see how they align themselves around the table and respond to each other in the larger group. (April 1998)

The first few meetings were designed to ensure that the entire committee shared the same baseline information about the youths themselves, the current provider network, and regional and national best practices for service delivery. For instance, a noted researcher from the state-affiliated university was invited to present his findings from a 3-year study of 600 homeless youths in the downtown Portland area. His presentation challenged the thinking of those members with little firsthand knowledge of this population, painting a portrait of children suffering from abuse, neglect, poverty, mental illness, and addiction.

The committee also was given access to perspectives of the current service delivery system from the points of view of these youths as well as the providers. Approximately 60 young men and women offered written suggestions for changes to the present system that they believed would assist their movement from the streets to secure housing. Their recommendations concentrated on improving the availability of basic services, increasing the flow of information about services within the homeless population, and enhancing their ability to make informed choices. In addition, the current providers were given an opportunity to discuss and present information about their service delivery philosophies along with operational details. Two subsequent field trips by committee members helped make these approaches and their resulting challenges more tangible.

With this information as background, national, regional, and local experts exposed the committee to best practices for serving homeless youths. They described the discontinuity, disruption, and trauma of the early lives of these young people and the need to establish a youth development model that was appropriate to the level of maturity and receptivity of the population served. From their experience, such a model "offers youths an array of services and opportunities, provides chances for youths to become involved in their community, and focuses on young people's strengths rather than their failings" (Ad Hoc Committee 1998, p. 5).

One outcome from these discussions and deliberations was a gradual softening by members of the committee and movement away from adversarial and rigid positions toward a consensus mentality. As the researcher noted after a late-May meeting during 1998:

> The committee is slowly looking like one body rather than a group of entrenched and separate inter-

> ests. People still sit in their "usual" seats around the table, but cordial conversations often break out across ideological lines. Public statements have shifted from a focus on position to a focus on solving a complex problem with a human face. The prospect of doing something to help these youths now dominates our approach.

A result of this movement was a merging of the primary interests of various constituencies into one unified approach. The ideal service delivery system advanced by the committee contained a single overarching goal that "homeless youths are able to leave street life to become productive members of the community" (Ad Hoc Committee 1998, p. 8). This system was anchored by "two bottom lines: 1) homeless youths will have access to basic resources, and 2) community laws and regulations will be enforced for homeless youths" (Ad Hoc Committee 1998, p. 6). Thus, these young men and women were to be given unconditional access to food, companionship, clothing, health care, shelter, and transportation as a demonstration of the community's compassion. However, enforcement of standards of acceptable behavior showed that the community was willing to set boundaries to convey appropriate adult deportment. These positions were codified in a set of basic, youth, community, and system outcomes designed to lead to the achievement of the superordinate objective.

Dissension in the Ranks

The service delivery system that emerged from these deliberations was met with high praise. For example, the youths responded positively to the ideal of a continuum of services designed to meet their basic needs and to support their movement toward permanent housing. Also, the researcher's field notes following a presentation of the proposed system at a county board meeting suggest widespread support from the broader community:

> The large turnout for this presentation demonstrates the level of concern/interest in this issue among the downtown community. Once we completed our talk, representatives from the business district and the provider network, as well as other concerned citizens, approached the microphone to give publicly their support for this new service delivery model. The commissioners also gave their support and pledged to seek the necessary financial resources for its implementation. (July 1998)

The Ad Hoc Committee (1998) likewise praised the resulting model in the Analysis section of its final report:

> The new system will be fully integrated and coordinated so that there is a continual flow of information between the variety of service providers. Service Coordinators/Case Managers will be responsible for monitoring youths' progress through the system and ensuring that they are progressing through the system. Programs will have clearly identifiable and measurable objectives and outcomes. Funding for staff positions will be at a level to allow salaries that attract and retain highly trained and professional staff.
>
> The new system will encourage a connection between the larger downtown community and homeless youths, and will help youths build and develop their skills and strengths. Multnomah County will be responsible for coordinating the overall system and making sure the model is fully implemented. (p. 22)

Unfortunately, some of the euphoria that resulted from these positive perspectives and encouraging remarks quickly evaporated. Representatives from the county believed that although funding was expected to increase significantly, it was unlikely to rise to the level necessary to finance the complete system. Therefore, they asked Ad Hoc Committee members to prioritize the services contained within the model. A vocal contingent felt that this request was incompatible with a systems approach to service delivery because it failed to take into account the connections between the various components of the model that were essential for successful exit from the streets.

After considerable debate, the committee agreed to establish a "minimum package" of services from those recommended that they felt was critical to the safety of homeless youths. However, they issued the following warning that anything less was insufficient: "The Committee strongly recommends that a minimum package of services must be funded, even if it exceeds currently available funding, in order for the system to function and the outcomes [to be] achieved" (Ad Hoc Committee 1998, p. 21).

The decision to fund only essential portions of the ideal system had longer term negative consequences for its implementation. For instance, the minimum package only provided for basic services, needs assessment, and service coordination of homeless young people, without many of the transitional services necessary to move youths from crisis to permanent accommodations. Furthermore, funding for alcohol and drug treatment and mental illness services was cut in the hope that other public sources might materialize, ensuring that the most difficult cases would not be adequately cared for within the system. The young people privy to the model believed that substance abuse was a key problem that needed immediate attention within their homeless community. As a result of these deficits, some members of the Ad Hoc Committee questioned the ability of the delivery system to meet the overarching goal of helping homeless youths successfully exit street life.

After this agreement was concluded, the county released a request for proposals to the current set of four providers, asking them to create a continuum of services based on each agency's experience and expertise. Together, they divided up the pieces of the service delivery system, assigned responsibilities to each according to its abilities, and developed a plan for implementation. However, early on it became clear that no provider would be able to accomplish its goals without additional revenue. As a result of this deficit, each agency sought private and/or other public funding to supplement the county's allocation.

This search also had unanticipated negative outcomes. Although the four providers were expected to cooperate for overall service delivery, they found themselves in competition for the money necessary to meet their individual obligations. The Oversight Committee charged with supervising the provider network never addressed the balance between cooperation and competition, and the manager selected by the county to play a leadership role struggled with this issue during her entire tenure. Also, when they were successful at fund-raising, the organizations or persons providing financial support often had agendas associated with their philanthropy that conflicted with the goals of the service delivery system. This situation led to philosophical conflict reminiscent of earlier days, causing a serious strain on the relationships between the providers.

Coming Together

Approximately 18 months after implementation of the new service delivery system, the Oversight Committee was asked to evaluate its effectiveness and present their findings at a public meeting of the county commissioners. In preparation for this meeting, a private consultant who had been an ex officio member of the committee was asked to provide a preliminary evaluation of the system based on data gathered during the first 12 months of operation (Pacific Research and Evaluation 2001). His findings revealed a mostly positive but mixed assessment of the success of the current provider network.

On the positive side, a large majority of the homeless youths living in the downtown area entered the system at the designated point of entry, and most youths were screened to determine their immediate need for services. Of the youths entering the system, almost half met the criteria for hard core homeless, a population of particular interest to county officials and the business community. Finally, most homeless youths who moved from screening to assessment to service coordination to exit from the system successfully obtained safe and secure housing.

On the other hand, several troublesome issues were revealed by this initial evaluation. Most important, a bottleneck was uncovered at the point of entry to the system. Of the homeless youths screened at intake, only about one third received a formal assessment of long-term needs, limiting the likelihood of an appropriate referral to other providers within the network. Further discussions with selected youths showed that many were unaware of, or confused about, how to secure follow-up services.

News of this finding spread rapidly among the committee membership, resulting in defensive remarks from managers of the organization that operated as gatekeeper and angry reactions by the other providers. The following field notes by the researcher from a meeting he attended with the four executive directors and their county supervisor indicate the nature of this conflict:

> The underlying tension at this meeting is quite severe. The source of the bottleneck is addressing this revelation with defensive language, suggesting that the screening to assessment percentage is appropriate for the population served. However, one of the other providers believes that the problem is a philosophical one. According to this executive director, the point of entry organization is more interested in providing youths with access to basic services rather than helping them permanently exit street life, a position this antagonist does not share! (March 2001)

Another troublesome issue involved the number of homeless youths accessing the service delivery system who had criminal backgrounds. Data showed that almost half of these youths had some level of involvement with the justice system during the previous 12 months, and about one third had active criminal warrants. Concern developed among representatives from the business community and police force that one or more of the providers were purposefully harboring fugitives. Reports from the youths confirmed their use of the shelter system to avoid arraignment or detention on such charges.

In addition, media reports on networks such as MSNBC suggested that serious drug use, including a heroin product known as "black-tar," increased rather than declined after the introduction of this new system. Even though funding for drug treatment never materialized, some providers believed that the county commissioners would hold them accountable for the heightened visibility of such drug abuse. These two problems further exacerbated the conflict surrounding perceived philosophical differences among the providers.

Given the initial negative reaction to these data by the providers as well as several committee members, the presentation to the county commissioners was postponed. Instead, several meetings were held by the Oversight

Committee membership in an attempt to resolve these obstacles. The committee eventually arrived at consensus on the following points as a result of these deliberations:

- The new service delivery system was a significant improvement over the old system despite its current shortcomings.
- The point of entry bottleneck was resolvable without significant change to the organizational philosophies of the providers.
- The manner in which the providers dealt with criminal warrants among youths required a unified policy.
- The resources necessary to cope with the drug problem among homeless youths must come from private or noncounty sources of public funding acquired through a joint effort by the providers.

With this settlement in place, the committee membership developed a presentation that would highlight the positive outcomes of the new system yet demonstrate that the providers were proactively resolving the trouble spots. To showcase the diverse membership of the committee and the widespread support for solving this problem, several individuals from different backgrounds and orientations took part in the actual presentation before the county commissioners. In the end, agreement on *why* and *how* to serve homeless youths took a backseat to ensuring the survival of the service delivery system through continuity of public support and funding.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Summary of Findings

There are several interesting findings that emerge from this investigation. These discoveries are embedded within the themes described previously involving community uprising, negotiated peace, a service-delivery system emerges, dissension in the ranks, and coming together. The nuances of each are presented below in the same order.

Community uprising reveals that this public-private partnership was spawned by widespread dissatisfaction with the provision of services to homeless youths. Well-regarded and politically connected citizens led this revolt, even though their personal and professional lives were affected only tangentially by this problem. They were classic outsiders who did not have faith in the philosophical approaches or operational tactics employed by the current service providers and the government agencies with supervisory responsibilities over the system. As a result, they sought to bring a private business ethic to solving this public problem that was based on deliverable outcomes instead of social service ideals. The leaders among them demanded unified governmental management of service delivery and a programmatic plan of action.

These concerned citizens proactively dealt with this difficult problem by taking charge of the reform process and seeking critical transformation of the prevailing service delivery system. However, in order for a negotiated peace to occur, local government officials needed to exert leadership to ensure that the diversity of interests surrounding this issue was adequately represented during reformation. To meet this goal, all relevant constituencies were empowered jointly to effect change, and they were allowed to maintain continuous contact with the developing model from creation to implementation to evaluation. Local government's decision to improve funding for the final product created an additional incentive for action.

Given the dissimilar orientations of group members, responsive and coordinated management of the change process from local government officials was required for a new service delivery system to emerge. Representatives from the appointed supervisory agency opened the deliberations of the Ad Hoc Committee with a series of informational meetings designed to establish a common grounding in the data necessary to make appropriate decisions. Outside experts, current providers, and homeless youths participated in these discussions, eliciting considerable empathy from the membership. As a result, rigid initial positions gave way to a consensus mentality focused on establishing a shared overarching goal.

Unfortunately, initial enthusiasm for the resulting system lapsed into dissension among the committee members and the providers during the implementation phase. In particular, a lack of adequate local-government financing for the proposed service delivery system forced the Ad Hoc Committee to cannibalize the ideal system and recommend a lower quality substitute. The providers were left to make up the revenue shortfall on their own if they wished to be truly successful, leading them to approach a diverse set of public and private sources for funding. These sources often placed considerable demands for accountability on the providers that hindered cooperation within the system and further exacerbated the philosophical differences between them.

Nonetheless, the need to come together to ensure continued local funding required that the providers and the Oversight Committee members put aside their differences. When this tacit agreement was struck, they were able to focus attention on the positive changes that had materialized as a result of the reform process and address troublesome issues as a concerned community. Survival of the system took precedence over individual differences, resulting in a public acknowledgment of accomplishments and a proactive stance toward problems that occurred during this early period of the new system's existence.

Lessons Learned

Although ethnographic methods do not permit specific generalizations to particular situations, the findings do suggest some interesting implications for government officials, nonprofit providers, and concerned citizens who develop service delivery models through public-private partnerships. These inferences are broad enough to encompass local, regional, national, and global alliances, and they are designed to be applicable regardless of the larger context in which the organizations are embedded. As with all lessons, however, they may be more or less appropriate depending on a variety of idiosyncratic factors. These conclusions parallel the recommendations of Osborne and Gaebler (1992) on reinventing government.

Lesson 1: Impetus for the establishment of, or radical changes to, a public-private initiative may come from outside the government-provider-recipient network.

Most organizations, regardless of their orientation, concentrate their attention on a limited number of constituencies. In the case of profit-making enterprises, their focus may be on particular groups of consumers, a select number of key competitors and suppliers, and environmental elements that play a role in their long-term success. Nonprofit firms often must satisfy the diverse needs of two primary constituencies—funding organizations and service recipients. Although this close attention is both appropriate and essential, this investigation demonstrates the necessity for members of public-private initiatives to monitor politically influential groups within their community that may have an indirect interest in service delivery.

Osborne and Gaebler (1992) have supported this conclusion in their discussion of community-owned government. Through a variety of examples that include public, nonprofit, and business providers, they demonstrate the high level of concern about the delivery of essential services from diverse constituencies within communities. Such groups concentrate their attention on solving problems rather than maintaining the status quo, with a grassroots understanding of the relevant issues. They also tend to be more flexible and creative in their approaches to difficult social problems and are willing to set and enforce high standards. This combination of interest, commitment, and problem-solving style makes them a formidable influence that must be integrated into the strategic thinking of public-private partners for service delivery.

Lesson 2: Leadership of the development, implementation, and evaluation of a public-private alliance may be optimally located in a single entity that has the authority to mandate change.

The issue of leadership is fundamental to interorganizational relationships. Within business alliances, a variety of arrangements exist from channel captaincy to legal contracts to system ownership to ensure cooperation between the relevant players. In the delivery of social services, hybrids of these interorganizational forms exist that range from privatization to public-private partnerships to provision entirely by governmental entities. The goal of these combinations should be to serve important constituencies in the most effective and efficient manner possible.

As Osborne and Gaebler (1992) have noted, many conservative critics have called for governments to transfer responsibility for service delivery, whenever possible, to the private sector. However, these authors present several examples of government in a leadership role among organizations, acting as a catalyst and facilitator to solve problems and pursue solutions outside the typical public domain. These governmental entities leverage public assets to maximize private contributions, bringing the resources necessary to achieve service delivery goals. Thus, consistent with the findings in this study, members of public-private alliances may wish to locate leadership in governmental partners that have the capacity to attain the required resources through political mandate and a broader vision of service provision.

Lesson 3: Decision making concerning the service delivery system may be most effective if it includes the various parties with a direct or indirect interest in the outcomes of the deliberation process.

Management theorists have long suggested that decision making among individuals with diverse backgrounds and beliefs can be enhanced when relevant parties have an opportunity to influence the process. Optimally, involvement occurs early on and includes all aspects of these deliberations that ultimately may affect them or the constituencies they represent. From problem definition to implementation to evaluation, participation must be significant enough to guarantee ownership of the final product, ensuring cooperation across intra- and interorganizational boundaries. It is the responsibility of entities playing a leadership role in public-private partnerships to facilitate, monitor, and maintain such open participation.

This decision-making approach is consistent with the decentralized government advocated by Osborne and Gaebler (1992). The use of decentralization suggests the limited viability of hierarchical and bureaucratic organizational structures in today's complex world and the need to allow decision making to occur "*down below* or at the *periphery* instead of concentrating them at the already stressed and malfunctioning center" (p. 251). Under these conditions, the focus of the decision-making process is on participation through teamwork among individuals who are closest to the problem and have a frontline sense of how to solve it. The lessons from the study take this approach one step further and recognize the need for public-private partners to engage interested parties who have relevant influence, expertise, or resources to contribute.

Lesson 4: Establishment of common ground among decision makers may lead to greater consensus and the development of superordinate goals.

Although the open and participatory approach advocated in Lesson 3 recognizes and embraces diversity of perspective, little progress can occur unless decision makers ultimately come together and function as a cohesive body. To create a greater sense of togetherness, leaders often seek common ground amid differences to define problems and seek solutions that all or most can support. As chronicled in this investigation, the establishment of consensual superordinate goals may be an effective mechanism for building a unified front.

One outcome of this tactic may be a focus on a single overarching theme instead of several often conflicting and personal agendas. Osborne and Gaebler (1992) referred to this outcome as "organizing by mission rather than turf" (p. 132). Using this tactic, public-private partners concentrate less on partisanship and more on innovative solutions to persistent and vexing social problems. Implicit in this decision-making approach is the need for accountability and the development of performance measures that gauge successful service delivery.

Lesson 5: Lack of adequate financing or the use of multiple public and private sources of revenue may disrupt the system and lead to conflicts among service providers.

Managers often allocate fewer resources to solving problems than their organizational members believe necessary, yet somehow they expect their goals and objectives to be accomplished. Although a significant portion of this shortfall is due to economic limitations, another important factor is the level of priority of a particular issue. For example, social services are typically a low priority among taxpayers, except in a few cases involving vulnerable populations such as the elders or children. As a result, public and private social service initiatives take a backseat to other concerns, and providers are asked to accomplish their missions without adequate resources or to search widely for alternative sources of funding. As this investigation reveals, both options may be losing propositions.

One way of resolving this dilemma is to place the service recipient front and center rather than political obstacles or limitations (Osborne and Gaebler 1992). When this occurs, public-private partners no longer have the luxury of doing a partial job of meeting service delivery requirements and become accountable to their consumers for need satisfaction. Doing what they can with what they have is insufficient—using creative problem solving and seeking innovative solutions are essential. Such a focus eliminates the viability of budgeting with available dollars in favor of budgeting for task, even if this means coordinating resources and efforts across organizations.

Lesson 6: Survival of the system, once it is established, may become an important rallying point during times of stress.

Within every organization or system of organizations are the seeds of its own destruction or continued success. A chronic lack of adequate resources, stagnation or calcification of thinking or practice, and failure to meet the needs of internal and external constituencies may result in extinction or dissolution of interorganizational relationships. On the other hand, the continuous infusion of new resources, innovative thinking and open participation among relevant parties, and an orientation to high-quality service provision may lead to long-term success. Although this investigation suggests that system survival may become a higher order goal, it does so only as long as public-private partners believe that working together is in their mutual best interest.

According to Osborne and Gaebler (1992), the best way to ensure continuous renewal, innovation, and a focus on high-quality service delivery is to infuse competition into the larger environment. From their perspective, competition among service delivery systems often results in more efficient use of scarce resources and a concentration on solving the underlying problems associated with supplying social services. Public-private partners learn to anticipate future political roadblocks and service-delivery opportunities and to respond proactively, rather than reactively, to these situations. Strategic thinking supersedes day-to-day survival tactics, and the system starts to reward lasting success rather than stopgap measures.

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