

When Our Networks Need Networks: Designing A New Infrastructure for Collaboration and Collective Impact in Montgomery County, Pennsylvania

Jason D. Alexander 23 January 2013

Our networks need networks. Strategic partnerships for social good demand a new kind of infrastructure to maximize and sustain their collective impact on systems, communities and people. Too often, nonprofits and their philanthropic, government and community partners expend too much time and energy organizing themselves and too little time translating shared purpose into meaningful action.

Take a moment to list all of the strategic alliances that your organization participates in as a member, funder or ally. Are they really making a difference? Do they engage policymakers and the public? Do they effectively use social media for advocacy and networking? Are they financially viable in the long run? Do they rely too heavily on the leadership of one or two visionary and tireless volunteers or staff members? Do they have their finger on

the pulse of changing community needs and promising practices in the field? Do you find yourself slowly succumbing to “death by meeting” in order to stay involved with all of them?

Now imagine that the myriad nonprofit collaboratives, coalitions, alliances and membership organizations in your region were coordinated and managed by one professional, highly visible, trustworthy and robust entity. Visualize an entity with the strength of leadership, brand, expertise and technology to help partnerships effectively and efficiently recruit and mobilize members, organize meetings, establish an online presence, engage civic officials, business leaders and community members, administer public-private investments with transparency and accountability and harness their combined talents, numbers and assets to create positive change. If such an entity existed, beholden to no one funder, member or cause, these partnerships could throw the vast majority of their efforts into fostering collaboration (through networking, training and information sharing) and achieving collective impact (through advocacy, research, programming, service coordination, quality improvement and community engagement).

This vision is becoming a reality just northwest of Philadelphia. An impressive constellation of nonprofit health, housing and human service collaboratives and their funding partners in Montgomery County have designed and are implementing an innovative concept to

foster collaboration and achieve collective impact. The Montgomery County Collaborative, comprising the Eastern Region Collaborative, the Greater North Penn Collaborative for Health and Human Services, the ICN Central Advisory Board, the Southeastern Regional Services Network, the TriCounty Community Network and the Upper Perkiomen Valley Community Services Coalition, has joined forces with the Montgomery County Health Alliance and the Montgomery County Housing Coalition to develop a new entity tentatively called the Montgomery County Nonprofit Council. Its purpose will be to champion and nurture nonprofit collaboratives and emerging strategic partnerships, such as Your Way Home Montgomery County, a new cross-sector initiative to improve housing stability and to end homelessness through systems change.

The Montgomery County Nonprofit Council will create a stronger, more unified voice for the nonprofit sector in Montgomery County. The Council is conceived as the administrative home of any nonprofit collaborative, coalition, or alliance whose members are primarily based in or providing service in Montgomery County. The Council will provide its members with the following services and benefits:

- Management (including fiscal sponsorship and grantwriting)
- Meeting facilitation and networking
- Information technology (including a website and social

media tools)

- Cooperative purchasing of goods, services and employee benefits
- Learning and professional development
- Communication and support
- Research and data warehousing
- Planning for collective impact and systems change
- Direct access to public, philanthropic and community leaders
- Meaningful interaction with other collaboratives
- An idea lab for creative problem solving and social innovation
- A governance role as a voting member of the Council's board of directors

The primary advantage of joining the Council is that a nonprofit collaborative can focus on mission and core activities rather than management, administration and resource development. The Council will help members pursue opportunities for visibility, fundraising, advocacy, member recruitment, event marketing, collaboration and learning. These collaboratives do not have to invest in establishing 501c3 status or creating their own infrastructure for operations and management. Established collaboratives that already have 501c3 status and dedicated staffing or infrastructure can purchase tiers of service as desired.

The entire community will benefit from the Council's growth and success. Funders, providers and the

community will benefit from:

- Greater return on public and private investments in nonprofit collaborative infrastructure and administration
- Access to more comprehensive data and intelligence on countywide health, housing and human needs, provider services and systems capacity
- An organization capable of pursuing federal grants and contracts and managing both public and private investments in strategic initiatives and systems change
- A platform for planning and implementing countywide strategic initiatives, especially those that require community engagement
- A mechanism for establishing new nonprofit collaboratives in response to changing funder, provider and community priorities
- Better access to nonprofit and community leaders
- Greater accountability and transparency in the service provider community

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As membership grows, the Council will be able to increase the scope and value of these services and benefits to members. Initial funding for Council operations will require significant public and private investments, as well as reasonable financial and in-kind contributions from members. Gradually, the Council will decrease its reliance on private funding as it develops revenue from grants, corporate sponsorships, contracts, fee-based services

and economies of scale.

The time for social innovation in human service delivery in Montgomery County is now. The Council will be a critical success factor in a large-scale evolution of the County's housing and human service delivery systems and safety net for vulnerable families and individuals. The following prospects are making this cutting-edge approach possible in Montgomery County:

- The County's new vision for a more person-centered, community-based and effective human service delivery system as codified in the new Your Way Home Montgomery County Roadmap for Housing Stability and forthcoming Human Services Blueprint;
- A desire on the part of Montgomery County grantmakers to invest in systems change, regional infrastructure and collaborative solutions that enhance the positive social impact of nonprofit service providers on the quality of life for individuals, families and communities;
- A recognition on the part of nonprofit collaboratives that a more formal relationship between service providers in different regions of the county and special interest collaboratives focused on housing, health, immigrant populations, etc. would be mutually beneficial;
- The emergence of promising practices, innovative organizational models and new information technology solutions to enhance nonprofit collaboration and better engage citizens, businesses, faith communities and foundations; and

- The willingness of Montgomery County leaders and funders to work together across sectors with an eye on maximizing impact rather than limiting themselves to minimizing risk.

The seeds for the Montgomery County Nonprofit Council were planted in the winter of 2010 when Montgomery County officials and staff from the United Way of Greater Philadelphia and Southern New Jersey (then the United Way of Southeastern Pennsylvania) invited a group of nonprofit leaders from the Montgomery County Collaborative and its six regional collaboratives to a meeting to discuss their collective and individual futures given current and anticipated cuts in public and private funding. Following this initial meeting and subsequent conversations with county officials and collaborative leaders, United Way sponsored a sustainability-planning project led by a task force of these volunteer Montgomery County Collaborative leaders that began in early 2011 for the purpose of assessing and enhancing the impact and long-term financial and organizational sustainability of the Collaborative and its regional members. The task force selected, and United Way retained, Capacity For Change, LLC to facilitate the project's planning and design.

The year of research and planning that followed yielded a design for the future that requires a very different kind of Montgomery County collaborative—one focused on innovation, economic value, technology and the power of social networks to inspire better community and provider

solutions and stability.

With the Montgomery County Nonprofit Council's conceptual model in place, the leaders of the Montgomery County Collaborative and representatives from the funder community, including the Montgomery County Human Services Cabinet, the Montgomery County Department of Housing & Community Development, the Montgomery County Foundation, Inc., the North Penn Community Health Foundation and the United Way of Greater Philadelphia and Southern New Jersey, will spend the first few months of 2013 charting a roadmap for implementation. This cross-sector task force will address detailed questions related to the Council's governance, operations, leadership, membership and business model. What emerges from their work will be a unique, innovative and exciting infrastructure for strategic partnerships in Montgomery County and beyond—a groundbreaking network for networks that may be the first of its kind in the nation.

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