

# PolicyMap: An Innovative Data Collection and Analysis Tool for all Sectors

Linshuang Lu, Christina Miller and Sarah Singer Quast  
21 February 2012

## Summary

“PolicyMap. Good Data. Good Decisions.” That tagline captures both the purpose of PolicyMap and what drives the team behind this innovative new tool. Everyone—from funders to the general public—is placing increasing pressure on public and nonprofit sector programs to make “data-driven” decisions. Good data, however, can be costly and time-consuming to gather, not to mention difficult to analyze and interpret.

Data-mapping software has emerged as a critical tool for helping everyone from large government agencies to small nonprofits analyze and present place-based data more effectively. Until recently, however, mapping data required significant expertise and software investment.

Enter PolicyMap. Launched in 2007 with seed funding from The Reinvestment Fund (TRF), a Philadelphia-based organization committed to community investment, PolicyMap offers datasets combined with powerful mapping technology, without expensive software or

training. Through PolicyMap, users have access to customizable data and tools that can help them map their own data. PolicyMap aims to provide and present information in ways that help users make better and timelier decisions.

## **The Problem: Cumbersome Data Analysis and Dissemination**

## **The Problem: Cumbersome Data Analysis and Dissemination**

The policy world is flooded with information from a seemingly endless array of sources, including the U.S. Census Bureau, the Home Mortgage Disclosure Act (HMDA), and the Internal Revenue Service. In the past, answering questions like, "Where should I invest next?", "What programs and services already exist in this community?" and "Who are the people in this neighborhood?" meant embarking on the time-consuming task of compiling information from such sources, using specialized software to map data, and then sharing results with others either in printed copy or via a computer disk.

In TRF's experience, this process too often resulted in data that had taken immeasurable hours to compile sitting untouched on a client's desk or, worse, becoming outdated before someone got around to using them. It was this issue that prompted TRF to wonder how the power of the Internet could be harnessed to make the

collection and analysis of data both easier and more accessible.

## **The Solution: Create a Dynamic Web-Based Data Platform**

## **The Solution: Create a Dynamic Web-Based Data Platform**

TRF's expertise in working with place-based data combined with its core business of investing in community development positioned the organization well for developing a new online mapping tool targeting public policy and program stakeholders. However, TRF leadership recognized early on that they would need to bring on additional technical expertise. TRF chose to partner with Placebase, a West Coast company that offers mapping services to both nonprofit and corporate clients, to launch PolicyMap.

Initially, TRF believed that Placebase would help PolicyMap build the service, and then the PolicyMap team would turn their attention to marketing—in other words, that tool development and marketing would happen in sequential phases. However, PolicyMap and Placebase quickly realized that a static online mapping application would not last long, particularly in light of rapidly-changing technology and possible competition from giants like Google. Just as they saw static maps on a CD become obsolete, a web-based tool that did not continue

to evolve would also become obsolete. As such, tool development and marketing are ongoing processes, rather than one-time events, working in tandem with one another. PolicyMap constantly adds new datasets and new capabilities to its application. Recently, PolicyMap added a data loader that allows subscribers to map their own datasets, overlay those with pre-populated data, and produce custom maps to share with others.

## **How PolicyMap is Innovative**

## **How PolicyMap is Innovative**

PolicyMap is a revolutionary tool, making mapped data and mapping functions available via the web to a variety of public policy and program stakeholders, from large government agencies to small grassroots organizations that would not otherwise have access to such usable data. PolicyMap makes information accessible and easy to understand, offers a one-stop shop for multiple sources of data, and allows users to generate and customize data maps.

As a result, people and organizations are equipped to make better-informed decisions about investments and programming, and improve tracking and communication about impact. Examples include:

- Wachovia Regional Foundation used PolicyMap to coordinate with other public, private and nonprofit

investors by identifying underinvested areas.

- Neighborworks has combined its own neighborhood, block-by-block survey results with PolicyMap's market data in order to examine patterns and identify particularly successful or blighted blocks.
- The Brookings Institution has used PolicyMap to develop a widget that allows users to view the locations of, and generate reports about, communities in 10 different metropolitan areas with limited access to supermarkets.

In addition to the innovative nature of PolicyMap from a product perspective, PolicyMap also serves as an example of innovation at the organizational level through its internal culture. The team makes the exploration of new applications, features, data sources and partners a priority. The team is lean, and, as a result, agile. Every staff member is critical to the organization and empowered to take ownership for the areas for which s/he is responsible.

## **Mission-Driven Business**

## **Mission-Driven Business**

From the beginning, PolicyMap faced the challenge of generating revenue for its services in a world where many believe that information should be available at no cost. PolicyMap has worked through this tension by gaining significant traction with institutional users and developing

a mix of free and paid subscription services. Publicly available information, such as Census data, is accessible through PolicyMap at no cost, reflecting PolicyMap's commitment to making data widely accessible. However, a paid subscription model for some features and information—mostly data that PolicyMap has paid to obtain—generates revenue for the organization and will ultimately secure its sustainability.

PolicyMap's successful launch and subsequent registration of over 17,000 users is not the result of technology alone. The organization's daily engagement with those who have on-the-ground experience working with the datasets that are part of the PolicyMap tool has been instrumental in ensuring that the online application truly works with the vast array of available data, rather than the design of the tool limiting data capabilities.

TRF invested in PolicyMap with funds that could have been directed to any number of other projects. Why? In addition to the social mission of the project, PolicyMap is a sustainable investment that directly supports TRF's institutional mission. By linking multiple sources of data and allowing users to create customizable maps that provide information essential to decision-making about investments in community development, PolicyMap offers the opportunity to increase and improve community investments over the long term. Investing in good data to make good decisions is a powerful example of balancing mission with business savvy.

# Advice to Social Innovators

## Advice to Social Innovators

*Innovation does not happen without willingness to take risk.* PolicyMap emerged as the result of TRF's willingness to take a risk and make an initial investment. The PolicyMap team points to a culture of healthy risk-taking as a key factor in their success. Developing new solutions, and knowing there is no guarantee of success, means taking risks and trying things that have not been done before.

*Careful business planning is critical for social innovation.* While the success of any new innovation cannot be guaranteed, careful planning through the development of a solid business plan is critical. This includes conducting an investigation of the market, researching available services, outlining an initial plan of action, and identifying potential revenue sources.

*A good idea is just an idea without the right team to implement it.* Recruiting and keeping a talented and committed staff has been a key factor in PolicyMap's success. Any socially innovative service, approach, tool or product cannot exist without people to create and implement it.

*Passion and partnership go a long way.* Placebase was purchased by Apple in 2009; however, the development

team that worked with PolicyMap chose to stay in Los Angeles, forming a new company called 3D-L. That company continues to work with PolicyMap today. The passion and shared belief in the PolicyMap tool contributed to a successful bi-coastal partnership that continues to successfully innovate.

*To learn more about PolicyMap, including information about free and paid subscription services, please visit <http://www.policymap.com/>.*

## **About the Innovators**

**Jeremy Nowak is currently the President of the William Penn Foundation and was formerly the President of The Reinvestment Fund (TRF). Mr. Nowak is the Vice Chair of the board of the Federal Reserve Bank of Philadelphia. He is the Chair of the Board of Mastery Charter Schools Foundation, a network of inner city schools in Philadelphia successfully closing the achievement gap for low income students. He is the Board Chair for Alex's Lemonade Stand, a charity that supports pediatric cancer research. He is a board member of the Pennsylvania Housing Finance Agency. The author of numerous reports and articles Mr. Nowak holds an undergraduate degree in philosophy (Pennsylvania State University, Phi Beta Kappa, 1973) and a Ph.D. in cultural anthropology (New School for Social Research, 1986). He was a Fellow at the Aspen Institute in their program for entrepreneurial**

**education leaders. He is a member of Harvard University's roundtable on social enterprise and urban reform. Mr. Nowak has received numerous awards including the Philadelphia Award (1995), the city's highest civic honor; as well as honorary doctorates from Villanova University (2000) and La Salle University (2008).**

**Maggie McCullough is Director of PolicyMap. She has been recognized throughout her career for her ability to present a wide array of data to policy makers in an easy-to-understand and actionable format. She has had an extensive career in local, state and federal government, having worked for the City of Philadelphia's Office of Housing, for then-Governor Casey of Pennsylvania, for the Office of Management and Budget within the Clinton Administration, and within the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development. Ms. McCullough joined TRF in 2004, conducting much of TRF's housing-related research and analysis for several of its public sector and foundation clients. Ms. McCullough has a B.A. in Economics and Political Science from St. Joseph's University and a Masters in Governmental Administration from the University of Pennsylvania.**