



Collaboration at the U.S. Interagency Council on Homelessness: A Commitment to Dialogue, Planning and Accountability

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The United States Interagency Council on Homelessness (USICH) coordinates the federal response to homelessness through partnerships at every level of government and with the private sector. USICH is an independent agency within the federal executive branch. The agency consists of 19 federal Cabinet secretaries and agency heads. USICH partners with federal agencies, state and local governments, advocates, service providers, and people experiencing homelessness to carry out its mission of preventing and ending homelessness in America. Coordinating with leaders from these stakeholder groups is a unique and complex undertaking – one that requires a commitment to dialogue, communication, and responsiveness to local approaches and issues. USICH’s work is undergirded by innovation in practice and policy.

In June 2010, USICH and its member agencies launched *Opening Doors: Federal Strategic Plan to Prevent and End Homelessness*¹. *Opening Doors* is the first-ever comprehensive national strategic plan to prevent and end homelessness, and is the most far-reaching and ambitious plan to end homelessness in the Nation’s history. The Plan outlines an interagency collaboration that aligns mainstream housing, health, education and human services to prevent Americans from experiencing homelessness and to move those currently experiencing homelessness towards stability. Since launching the Plan, USICH has focused on working with its member agencies to align resources with best practices, improve data collection and management, and encourage collaboration to reach each of the four goals outlined in the Plan.

Collaboration is at the core of USICH’s work, both in the creation of *Opening Doors* and the day-to-day functioning of the agency. From the experiences of Executive Director Barbara Poppe and Deputy Directors Jennifer Ho and Anthony Love, USICH shares lessons learned and examples of key elements that can facilitate effective interagency collaboration on high-level strategic initiatives.

Collaborative Leadership

USICH, under the direction of Executive Director Poppe, began implementing a leadership style known as Collaborative Leadership. This style is grounded in the practice of “decision-making by consensus.” As noted by Executive Director Poppe, “collaborative leadership builds the capacity for all stakeholders to be a part of a decision” by soliciting their input and expertise in all phases of a project. Working with complex and cross-cutting issues like homelessness, this type of leadership focuses conversation on the ways participants can strategically use collective knowledge and resources to make a difference.

¹ U.S. Interagency Council on Homelessness. (June 2010). *Opening Doors: Federal Strategic Plan to Prevent and End Homelessness*.

http://www.usich.gov/resources/uploads/asset_library/Opening%20Doors%202010%20FINAL%20FSP%20Prevent%20End%20Homeless.pdf

Meaningful and Continual Conversation with Federal Partners

In the process of undertaking a large initiative like *Opening Doors*, it was extremely important to have meaningful involvement from federal partners in setting strategic direction. Ending homelessness necessitates the involvement of leaders from many different sectors that have varying priorities. On turning these disparate areas of expertise and knowledge into a set of shared goals, Executive Director Poppe notes:

If you are going to be able to work effectively with another agency, you have to have a spirit of appreciative inquiry and seek to understand the processes and organization of that agency. The question to be raised in some of your first meetings before a large project should be: 'How could we use each other's already existing systems of communication, funding mechanisms and program management tools to work together?' Once we can determine what each group's strengths are, we can have a better idea of where to begin our work. This involves creating a space where everyone feels like their voice is valued. It also must be understood that these conversations will result in a shared decision that brings to bear this knowledge.

Creating a space where decisions are made collectively among participants is a cornerstone of collaborative leadership. Deputy Director Love notes that:

[This type of leadership is] predicated on using the expertise of those in the room. The issue of homelessness has many layers and many times the expert in that topic will naturally arise as the leader. This role rotates often over the course of many sessions or may rotate even within the same conversation.

USICH continually seeks to break through the traditional silos that may hamper Federal government work on complex issues like homelessness with a commitment to continual conversation with its partners. As Deputy Director Jennifer Ho notes:

The first step is picking up the phone. In our [Federal government staff's] busy schedules, it may seem like a 'hassle' to invest the time in conversation to understand exactly how their program works and where your processes and goals fit in with theirs. However, partners, especially in the Federal government, should work through the complexity to see the possibility of what can be accomplished together.

Much of the work USICH has been able to accomplish with federal partners has transpired because of this type of open conversation and agreement on the shared goals of *Opening Doors*. In the coming years, USICH realizes that it needs to continue to improve communication with its partners. Deputy Director Ho:

In order for us to have a chance at collaboration, we need to establish ways to communicate with one another when things are at the idea stage – we are thinking about holding an expert panel, we want to figure out how to strengthen the strategies around youth, etc. Willingness to share early on will enable partners to have greater agreement on process and content, which

then will allow us to be more efficient. It also gives all of us involved time to really think through our shared goals.

Lessons Learned: Opening Doors and Strategic Planning

The creation of *Opening Doors* was the culmination of input from the Council's federal partners, notably those at the Departments of Housing and Urban Development, Health and Human Services, Education, Labor, Veterans Affairs, and from a variety of organizations and individuals invested in the issue. USICH's strategic planning process created high-level engagement and knowledge sharing from a wide variety of stakeholders. The strategic plan and its process were also designed with adaptability in mind, making it possible for states and localities to create their strategic plans aligned with *Opening Doors* after the federal plan's release. One of the first steps in USICH's strategic planning, notes Executive Director Poppe, was to agree on the planning process itself:

We had to essentially design the process from beginning to end and share it with all those involved – and while the process could be amended, it was important to stay true to it all the way to completion of the plan. This included obtaining agreement from Secretaries on how we would receive feedback from workgroups, stakeholder meetings, and when key decisions would be made. Because we had Secretary input both before and during the planning process, it was easier to get engagement from other groups along the way.

Facilitating this large strategic planning process, or any strategic planning process, requires both intense work from facilitators and constant communication with partner agency staffers before large meetings where key decisions are made. As Deputy Director Love mentions:

Facilitating clear decision-making when all the officials [Cabinet Secretaries] were in the room together involved intense work behind the scenes. That means compiling research and analysis on best practices, research on the practices we're proposing, and other documents to best tell the story of the field to Secretaries. [During *Opening Doors* planning], this information made it possible for Secretaries to make decisions on Plan goals, themes, and objectives efficiently.

Clarity on Best Practices and Thinking Big

Another important process in the creation of a strategic plan is coming to agreement on what strategies and practices will be put forth. Speaking on this process, Deputy Director Ho:

Everyone involved needs clarity on best practices as a foundation for Plan creation – how we'll reach the goals of *Opening Doors*. Because of the experience of those at USICH within the federal agencies and our process of listening to the field, we knew what the best practices were to get the job done. There was never a debate about what to do, only how to say it.

For other inter-agency initiatives in the Federal government, however, getting to agreement on how to proceed is difficult because of the siloed nature of knowledge within agencies. Executive Director Poppe:

One of the challenges of the Federal government is that there are many people who are experts in a very specific issue rather than having broad-based knowledge of all the facets of the problem or solution. In the strategic planning process, the real question becomes, 'How can we mine narrow and deep knowledge of the different partners and individuals around the table to be applied to the problem?' You have to get people to think perhaps more broadly than they are used to.

This broad approach was taken in both facilitating discussions and in the overarching content direction of *Opening Doors*: the problem is a big and complex one, so the solution must be at the same scale. From her experience creating *Opening Doors* and the resulting collaboration, Deputy Director Ho advises:

Think big and reach big – write things in the strategic plan that imply commitment, not just from [the lead agency], but from all agencies that touch the issue. Because of the scope of *Opening Doors*, it caused us to get commitment from every agency involved. Big ideas can do that.

From the Federal to the Local: Opening Doors across America

The work of ending homelessness is done by those on the ground in communities, implementing systems and programs that most effectively and efficiently meet the needs of individuals and families experiencing homelessness. The focus of all federal agencies and USICH must now include an increased presence in local communities. Deputy Director Love:

We need federal officials out in local communities seeing what best practices are being implemented successfully and what can be adopted broadly. Housing First, for example, is a best practice but it may look different in New York City than it does in Los Angeles. When we examine how different communities are working with the same practice, we can see how best to tweak these models to then share that resource with others. Putting the Federal government resources to the best use in communities involves seeing these innovations first hand.

The federal government viewpoint allows USICH to make connections between these innovations across the country, a unique perspective that enables more techniques and strategies to be brought to communities that may have seemingly little in common. On what USICH in particular can do from this viewpoint Executive Director Poppe notes:

As a federal government agency we have the ability to see across programs and then make connections for peer-to-peer resources to be used. Just the other day I was talking to a community that was having a problem and mentioned that Detroit is solving a similar problem, sharing with those leaders Detroit's tactics. What we can do, even though we [USICH] are small, is inspire communities to act and give concrete examples and resources (contacts, best practices, etc.) to help combat their problem.

Connecting with Local Solutions

Connecting with those implementing programs serving individuals experiencing homelessness not only informs the work of other communities, but it can also help inform policy at the federal level. Deputy Director Ho:

Strong federal collaboration begins with knowing what is happening in the field. For example, instead of having the federal government say ‘this works’ in using Medicaid for supportive housing, many agencies have the capability of getting an official out there to really see how things are getting done. We can use local programs that are working in order to drive federal policy.

Executive Director Poppe notes that federal partners outside of Washington are pivotal in making these connections and sharing best practices with the field:

We have to have inspired federal partners in our work on this issue across the country - not just with each other in Washington. Federal agencies in Washington can connect with field office staff and talk with them about how their resources and leadership can be creatively engaged with local leaders in the effort.”

From Planning to Implementation: Accountability

After submitting *Opening Doors* to Congress, the task transitioned from identifying goals and laying out strategies to implementing those strategies. This involves not only continued collaboration like that outlined above, but also a high level of accountability. To accomplish this, performance measures needed to be put in place to ensure that leaders and actors within USICH, among our federal government partners, and actors in local communities are following up on their commitments to others in achieve these goals. As noted by Deputy Director Ho:

The tougher part [apart from collaboration] is keeping people accountable to the goals we’ve put in place. We are able to keep our federal government partners accountable in part because of the structure of when we meet: we have four Council meetings a year as well as Council Policy Group meetings that require legwork from all the agencies in order to report out at these meetings. Barbara [Poppe] refers to these meetings as ‘action-forcing’ events, which they absolutely are. Putting five Cabinet Secretaries in a room together gives those working on programs and policies further urgency to show progress on these goals.

Keeping people accountable to our goals also requires a commitment to proper data collection and analysis. In the words of Executive Director Poppe, “nothing in a program can happen without it.” The goals of *Opening Doors* were created with data collection in mind – they are both real and achievable. These types of goals, then, create a sense of urgency among actors precisely because it can be shown whether progress is being made or not. Commitment to data-driven approaches and the accountability mechanisms built into the implementation plan of *Opening Doors* make it possible to tell a more accurate story.

While these goals are achievable, they are not achievable by one agency or policymaking arm alone. The issue of homelessness is cross cutting on the agency, organization, and personal level: not one agency has the resources to fully solve the problem and so collaboration is absolutely necessary. USICH and its federal partners have made tremendous progress in the last year increasing federal collaboration, and collaborative work is similarly critical at the state and local level. Deputy Director Ho:

Simply put, collaboration is the only way we'll achieve the goals in *Opening Doors*. We [USICH] would like this collaborative structure to be mirrored in cities across the country – with organizations that are data-focused, accountable, and implementing practices that work.”

Commitment to collaboration, setting achievable and measureable goals, and data analysis makes progress possible. The recently reported 12 percent decrease² in the number of Veterans experiencing homelessness is a testament to the power of communication, targeted investment, and program alignment in reaching the goals outlined in *Opening Doors*. Federal partners and many other stakeholders have been intimately involved in both the planning and implementation phases of *Opening Doors*, and USICH's ability to have successful relationships across agencies today is a result of that commitment to collaboration from the start. And while the work of ending homelessness is far from over, the collaborative tools USICH has put into place make progress possible and the goals achievable.

² U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development. (December 2011). *2011 Point-in-Time Estimates of Homelessness: Supplement to the Annual Homelessness Assessment Report (AHAR)*. <http://www.hudhre.info/index.cfm?do=viewResource&ResourceID=4568>