A Systems Approach to Ending Homelessness for Funders

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David Peter Stroh and John McGah
Learning Objectives

• Understand what systems thinking is and why it is important to ending homelessness

• Review examples from Funders Together and elsewhere about how a systems approach contributes to ending homelessness

• Learn basic systems thinking principles and tools

• Identify first steps for taking a systems approach “home”
WHAT IS SYSTEMS THINKING AND WHY IS IT IMPORTANT?
Context

- The role of interconnectedness
- Where a systems view is complementary
- Why this is an important lens
Traditional Approach

Housing
- Director
- Asst. Dir.
- Dep. Asst.
- Manager
- Asst. Mgr.

Employment
- Director
- Asst. Dir.
- Dep. Asst.
- Manager
- Asst. Mgr.

Veteran Affairs
- Director
- Asst. Dir.
- Dep. Asst.
- Manager
- Asst. Mgr.

Education
- Director
- Asst. Dir.
- Dep. Asst.
- Manager
- Asst. Mgr.

Health Care
- Director
- Asst. Dir.
- Dep. Asst.
- Manager
- Asst. Mgr.
Systemic Approach
Critical Success Factors in a Systems Approach: Experiences of Funders Together Members

1. Collaboration and continuous engagement
2. Coordinated and leveraged funding from public and private as well as nonprofit sectors
3. Shared goals, metrics, incentives, and written plans that motivate synergy
4. Demonstration projects
5. Rigorous data gathering and evaluation that updates plans
6. A long-time horizon
7. Continuous learning in light of evolving challenges
Getting Started: Definitions

**System**

an interconnected set of elements that is coherently organized in a way that achieves something  
(Donella Meadows)

**Systems Thinking**

the ability to understand these interconnections in such a way as to achieve a desired purpose
In the News

- Homeless shelters perpetuate homelessness
- Food aid leads to increased starvation
- Drug busts increase drug-related crime
- “Get tough” prison sentences fail to reduce fear of violent crime
- Job training programs increase unemployment

Job training programs increase unemployment.
What do these stories have in common?
Failed Solutions Have Common Characteristics

Address symptoms vs. underlying problems

Obvious and often succeed in the short run

Short-term gains undermined by long-term impacts

Negative consequences are unintentional

If the problem recurs, we do not see our responsibility
The Philanthropic Challenge: Fixing Now vs. Helping Over Time

When you are confronted by any complex social system … with things about it that you’re dissatisfied with and anxious to fix, you cannot just step in and set about fixing with much hope of helping. This is one of the sore discouragements of our time.

If you want to fix something you are first obliged to understand … the whole system.

Lewis Thomas
Two Types of Thinking

Conventional
appropriate for simple problems

Systems
appropriate for chronic, complex problems
Systems vs. Conventional Thinking

Conventional Thinking

• The connection between problems and their causes is obvious and easy to trace.

• Others, either within or outside our organization, are to blame for our problems and must be the ones to change.

• A policy designed to achieve short term success will also assure long term success.

• In order to optimize the whole, we must optimize the parts.

• Aggressively tackle many independent initiatives simultaneously.

Systems Thinking

• The relationship between problems and their causes is indirect and not obvious.

• We unwittingly create our own problems and have significant control or influence in solving them through changing our own behavior.

• Most quick fixes have unintended consequences: they make no difference or make matters worse in the long run.

• In order to optimize the whole, we must improve *relationships* among the parts.

• Only a few key coordinated changes sustained over time will produce large systems change.
Thinking AND Acting Systemically

*Thinking* systemically is an important complement to *acting* systemically
Examples of Acting Systemically

• Getting the system in the room
• The HEARTH Act
  -- Coordinated Assessments
  -- System wide measurements
• Communitywide HMIS implementation
• Communitywide prevention efforts
• Opening Doors
• Cross agency partnerships (HUD-VASH vouchers)
• Sharing data across service systems (VA, HMIS, PATH, FUSE)
## A Homeless Coalition Meeting

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Role</th>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>And …</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Elected Official</td>
<td>Permanent housing with support services and jobs are important</td>
<td>This takes a long time, is expensive – and the community has other more immediate issues</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Business Leader</td>
<td>It’s important for everyone to have shelter</td>
<td>Our primary concern is homeless people downtown who hurt business</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Homeless Shelter Director</td>
<td>Giving people shelter is humane</td>
<td>The more beds we fill, the more money we get</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health Care for Homeless Director</td>
<td>Homeless people need basic health services outside the ER</td>
<td>We have to compete with other providers for limited funding</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Affordable Housing Advocate</td>
<td>All people need permanent housing first</td>
<td>We need to attract people who can afford to pay for housing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Donor</td>
<td>We are committed to helping homeless people</td>
<td>Our board wants to help people now</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Concerned Citizen</td>
<td>No one should be homeless, and shelters provide a humanitarian solution</td>
<td>I don’t want homeless people living near me; taxes should go to more pressing problems</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Homeless Person</td>
<td>Permanent housing gives me ongoing security</td>
<td>My community is other homeless people; don’t know if I can make it in normal world</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
THE ICEBERG
The Iceberg
Deepening Our Understanding of Problems: The Iceberg

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>QUESTIONS</th>
<th>FOCUS</th>
<th>ACTION OR RESPONSE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>What happened?</td>
<td>EVENTS</td>
<td>React Firefight</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What’s been happening?</td>
<td>TRENDS &amp; PATTERNS</td>
<td>Anticipate Forecast</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Why?</td>
<td>STRUCTURE (Forces and Pressures)</td>
<td>Change Create</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

- Problems or Crises
- Actions or Interventions
- Unintended and Delayed Consequences
- Mental Models
- Purpose

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The Iceberg Simplified

EVENTS

TRENDS & PATTERNS

STRUCTURE (Forces and Pressures)
The Iceberg: Focus on Structure

EVENTS

TRENDS & PATTERNS

STRUCTURE
(Forces and Pressures)

Problems or Crises
Actions or Interventions

Unintended and Delayed Consequences

Mental Models
Purpose
EVENTS

TRENDS & PATTERNS

STRUCTURE
(Forces and Pressures)

Problems or Crises → Actions or Interventions → Unintended and Delayed Consequences → Mental Models → Purpose
Calhoun County, MI: estimated 250-500 people homelessness among population of 100,000

Homeless Coalition meetings again fail to deal with the problem: disagreements, competition, and lack of knowledge cited

Opportunity to receive funding to develop ten-year plan to end homelessness

Systems thinking integrated with community building process – involving political and business leaders, service providers, and homeless people – to produce the plan
Ending Homelessness: Trends

- Estimated # Homeless
- Efforts to Reduce Homelessness
- Visibility of the Problem

Time - Numbers
EVENTS

TRENDS & PATTERNS

STRUCTURE
(Forces and Pressures)

Problems or Crises
Actions or Interventions
Unintended and Delayed Consequences

Mental Models
Purpose
People are aware of a long-term, fundamental solution to a problem symptom. However, it is easier for them to implement a quick fix instead. Over time, their dependence on the quick fix makes it difficult to implement the long-term solution.

This is the core archetype of Addiction.
Ending Homelessness: The Irony of Temporary Shelters

Temporary Shelters and Supports

Homeless People

Problem Visibility

Pressure to Make Fundamental Shifts

Donor Pressure for Short-Term Results

Funding to Individual Organizations

Willingness, Time & Funding to Innovate and Collaborate

Fundamental Solution (1)

Quick Fix (2)

Vicious Cycle (3)

Vicious Cycle (4)

Permanent Housing

Critical Services

Employment
Ending Homelessness: Surfacing Mental Models (Perceptions)

Svc Providers: We have to help people now. It's the humane thing to do.

Public: What's the problem? We have more pressing needs.

Problem Visibility

Pressure to Make Fundamental Shifts

Svc Providers: We have to protect our own funding

Permanent Housing

Critical Services Employment

Public Officials: It might be best practice - but this is too hard, takes too long, and is too expensive

Willingness, Time & Funding to Innovate and Collaborate

Funding to Individual Organizations

Donor Pressure for Short-Term Results

Donors: Our board expects results
EVENTS

TRENDS & PATTERNS

STRUCTURE
(Forces and Pressures)

Problems or Crises

Actions or Interventions

Unintended and Delayed Consequences

Mental Models

Purpose

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Ending Homelessness: Choosing the Purpose

**Current Benefits**

- Feel good about helping people *cope* with homelessness
- Reduce *visibility* of problem
- Reduce *severity* of problem
- Receive *funding* for current work

**Espoused Purpose**

*End* homelessness
Ending Homelessness: Results

**Plan funded:** Leverage points identified by a shared understanding of why homelessness persisted became the basis for state approved plan.

**Collaborative breakthrough:** Homeless Coalition voted unanimously to reallocate HUD funding from one service provider’s transitional housing program to permanent supportive housing program run by another provider.

**Quantitative results:** In the plan’s first three years of operation (2007-2009), the county reported the following results:

- Homelessness decreased by 13% (from 1,658 to 1,437) and eviction rates declined by 3% ... **DESPITE** a 70% increase in unemployment and 15% increase in bankruptcy filings.
WHEN AND HOW TO USE SYSTEMS THINKING
When to Use a Systems Approach

- The problem is chronic and has defied people’s best intentions to solve it.
- Diverse stakeholders find it difficult to align their efforts despite shared intentions.
- They try to optimize their part of the system without understanding their impact on the whole.
- Stakeholders’ short-term efforts might actually undermine their intentions to solve the problem.
- People are working on a large number of disparate initiatives at the same time.
- Promoting particular solutions (e.g. best practices) comes at the expense of engaging in continuous learning.
How to Use Systems Thinking

Convening

Grant making

Advocacy

Asking powerful questions
Systems Thinking for Convening

- Invite diverse stakeholders to map the big picture
- Help them see how they unwittingly contribute to the problem
- Mobilize them to optimize the system instead of just their part
Systems Thinking for Grant-making

- Use systems thinking early to diagnose why a problem persists
- Look for unintended consequences, mental models, and current purpose
- Be patient and persistent in working towards the long-term
Systems Thinking for Education/Advocacy

• Help the public and policy-makers distinguish short vs. long-term consequences of existing and proposed policies

• Reduce people’s addiction to quick fixes

• Support small successes within a long-term context
Ask Systemic Questions in All Contexts

Why have we been unable to solve this problem despite our best efforts?

How might we be partly responsible, albeit unwittingly, for the problem?

What might be unintended consequences of our proposed solutions?

What might we have to give up for the whole to succeed?
Elements of a Community Approach

1. Begin with a community organizing initiative to engage all key stakeholders
   - Involve stakeholders: social/private/public sector leaders; homeless people; media and citizen opinion
   - Build readiness: create initial statements of shared vision/goals and current reality
   - Develop collaborative capacity: how to hold productive conversations around difficult issues and partner across sectors
Elements of a Community Approach (cont.)

2. Develop shared understanding of dynamics underlying local homelessness
   - Identify people to interview and questions to ask
   - Gather, assess, and improve data
   - Develop preliminary systems analysis of how different system elements interact to support or block achievement of vision
   - Introduce stakeholders to systems thinking and get their input on preliminary analysis
   - Refine analysis including mental models and current purpose (payoffs)
Elements of a Community Approach (cont.)

3. Test for commitment to change – then revisit shared vision

4. Bridge the gap between current reality and vision
   - Establish shared goals, synergistic metrics and incentives, and coordinated funding
   - Propose and refine high leverage interventions with community input
   - Develop an implementation plan that establishes a demonstration project and long-term roadmap
   - Refine data to be gathered based on new goals/metrics
   - Evaluate and update the plan regularly with input from all stakeholders
   - Expand stakeholder involvement to address external forces, e.g. poverty, jobs, foster care, and criminal justice
QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS
Resources

Articles, Papers, and Blogs

• Articles applying a systems approach to social issues, e.g. homelessness, criminal justice, economic crisis, identity-based conflicts: http://www.bridgewaypartners.com/OurPublications/Articles/SocialChange.aspx.
• Blogs on such topics as “Thinking AND Acting Systemically” and “The Ironic Addictions of Policy Makers”: http://www.bridgewaypartners.com/Blog.aspx.

Books

• The Fifth Discipline, Peter Senge
• The Fifth Discipline Fieldbook, Peter Senge et al
• Thinking in Systems, Donella Meadows

Websites

• Bridgeway Partners (www.bridgewaypartners.com)
• Give US Your Poor (www.giveusyourpoor.org)
• Applied Systems Thinking (www.appliedsystemsthinking.com)
• Leverage Networks (http://leveragenetworks.com)
Contact Information

David Peter Stroh, Principal
Bridgeway Partners
dstroh@bridgewaypartners.com
(617) 487-8766
www.bridgewaypartners.com

John McGah, Senior Associate
The National Center on Family Homelessness / AIR
john.mcgah@familyhomelessness.org
(781) 373-7069
www.familyhomelessness.org
www.air.org
www.giveusyourpoor.org
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