

2. Rethink Your Community's Current Approach

Although countless individuals now labor tirelessly on meaningful efforts in education, health care, child welfare, youth development, housing, economic insecurity and poverty, public safety, and more, few communities have enough to show for their collective efforts.

Real progress on the issue you are passionate about is invariably blocked by the current problem-solving environment that stifles innovation and improvement. As a result communities are stuck attacking ever-changing problems with stagnant solutions that are decades old.

There is a government program for every imaginable problem, including your issue of choice. Yet as you well know, too often they fail to meet the needs of the people they seek to serve. Ask yourself:

- Does the social system in which you work allow too little space for improvement?
- Does it suffer from a lack of meaningful focus on measurable results, rule-bound funding and a deep-seeded aversion to risk?
- Has your local system been infected with a “curse of professionalism” which causes providers (despite the best of intentions) to assume they know what is best for citizens who receive services without asking what works for them?

You are not alone. In many of today's bureaucracies, technically proficient professionals design solutions for other people. We have shut communities out of determining much of their own progress while simultaneously lowered expectations for individual potential and responsibility. We have encouraged and increased a dependence on government that stifles upward mobility.

The problem you are addressing likely has a long legacy of good intentions dating at least as far back as the early 20th century. At that time, the Progressive era brought promises of efficiency and effectiveness—and got its start by transforming local governments to end the culture of patronage, nepotism and corruption that preceded it. In fact, the Progressives' move to formalize procedures and professionalize government through rule-based bureaucracy was seen as a critical innovation in its time.

Many of the rules you bump up against today were valuable 100 years ago in protecting citizens and taxpayers. Whether you work inside government or out, there is no denying that this legacy has steered government to a place that is unpopular and unsustainable. We have inherited a system that gets the balance

wrong between what government must do to guarantee health, safety, and performance and what government too often does—over-prescribing activities and limiting individual initiative.

It is no easy task, but to see results on social issues like the one you are working on will require social systems that are wired differently. Adding additional urgency is the fact that today we need social delivery systems that meet the needs of two 21st century realities: dramatically rising demand and rapidly diminishing resources.