

# The Public/Philanthropic Partnership: The Your Way Home Montgomery County Story

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A quick review of the literature suggests that many communities around the world have embraced the concept of government and private-sector partnerships and collaborations. The reasons for each partnership differ, but there are numerous common elements that drive the parties to work together. Among these is the desire to:

- Right-size the infrastructure
- Enhance accountability, especially to taxpayers and beneficiaries
- Improve efficiency
- Secure cost savings and/or improve outcomes with existing resources
- Establish new sources of financing
- Enhance impact

As the worldwide financial recession took hold in 2007 and 2008, the executive director of a Montgomery County housing provider was pondering observations published in a 2006 community needs assessment. She was

concerned about the finding that people and providers engaged in the county's housing and homeless services system experienced difficulty accessing and navigating services. This was a very curious finding to other service providers and to county officials, too. Together they were proud that Montgomery County had developed a robust continuum of care for individuals and families experiencing homelessness. Although sufficient resources were not always available to address everyone's immediate needs, the continuum of care offered emergency, temporary, transitional and supportive or subsidized housing services, as well as an array of preventive and wraparound services. With the onset of the recession, the provider knew that even fewer resources would be available to assist a growing homeless population.

The North Penn Community Health Foundation convened a work group of health, housing and human service funders and providers. They were invited to identify and explore possible strategies to improve consumer access and outcomes. Over the next few months, the work group identified several access barriers and developed a pilot project to explore whether a centralized intake and referral structure might improve the system. Until this point, this is a fairly typical story of how foundations support innovation. Yet a remarkable set of circumstances presented themselves just as this small pilot project was about to start.

First, the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009 (ARRA) presented an opportunity to secure new funding through an initiative managed by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development. ARRA included new funds for the Homelessness Prevention and Rapid Re-Housing Program (HPRP) a set of services and short-term financial supports provided to stabilize existing housing or rapidly re-house individuals and families. The funds were available to counties that operated a county-wide, centralized intake program. The foundation's pilot program, envisioned for only a portion of Montgomery County, was quickly expanded to include the entire county, in full partnership with county officials. This was the true start of the public-private partnership.

As individuals and families were served through the local HPRP, data began to inform the partners about consumers' needs and the true amount the system was spending to meet those needs. The pilot program also brought to light promising opportunities to meet consumers' needs with few or no charitable dollars used.

With private funding, the partners engaged Capacity for Change, a public interest consulting firm, which conducted an initial "situational analysis" of the provider network and services offered through the county's continuum of care. The consultant also prepared a comprehensive literature review of best and evidenced-based practices that prevented homelessness and/or

rapidly re-housed displaced individuals and families. Several communities in other states were identified where promising work was underway. This information led to a deeper assessment of the potential value of these models to Montgomery County's providers and consumers, both of which groups were eager to identify more efficient, cost-effective and higher-quality approaches to ending homelessness. The consultant observed that six county departments received funds earmarked for various housing-related activities. While many providers and housing developers were aware of which agency had these funds and of funding opportunities, the county had no means of prioritizing the use of these funds or of making coordinated decisions across departments to leverage and direct the use of these funds for greater impact. The foundation suggested that a blueprint or strategic plan might be a useful tool to enhance opportunities to achieve better outcomes. This suggestion led to the formation of the county's human services council, which developed a housing blueprint document that identified the county's priorities for the use of its funds and coordinated the application and review processes to ensure that funds awarded would achieve the shared goals of all departments and their constituent communities. Later, this blueprint evolved into the Your Way Home (YWH) Montgomery County strategic plan, a much more robust approach that formally linked the public resources with those of the private sector.

As discussions ensued to further refine the strategic plan, four representatives of the emerging partnership traveled to Alameda County, California to explore a promising, nationally recognized practice model called EveryOne Home Alameda County. The site visit team visited with representatives of the philanthropic community, county leaders, provider groups and consumer representatives. These conversations and observations led to the affirmation that a strong partnership between government and the private sector was essential to ending homelessness.

So what were the elements that contributed to the creation of the public/private partnership? First, there was a deep level of trust between the local public officials and the core funding partners, including the North Penn Community Health Foundation and the Montgomery County Foundation. Second, a shared vision emerged from key stakeholders that people experiencing homelessness need a permanent home and that services should be redirected and refocused to swiftly assist homeless people in securing and maintaining a permanent home. Third, an election of county commissioners took place that resulted in a change of leadership. The new commissioners, faced with a daunting set of priorities and financial challenges, nurtured opportunities for "open government" and partnering. The commissioners were particularly impressed with the Your Way Home public/private partnership because it sought to make

government more efficient while also improving services to residents. Fourth, the partners made a serious commitment to using data to inform their decisions. Short-term, goal-focused action teams were created to solicit input and ideas to solve pressing problems and to identify opportunities for lasting improvements. Fifth, Capacity for Change was formally engaged and tasked with the role of providing backbone support guiding vision and strategy; coordinating and aligning activities; developing and managing shared data gathering and analyses; building public will; advocating for policy and practice changes; and mobilizing funds. While the private sector provided initial funding to engage Capacity for Change, the county later provided the majority of financial support to sustain these essential backbone support functions.

Your Way Home Montgomery County now has a formal structure that includes a three-year strategic plan with a set of defined and mutually shared goals and desired outcomes, a leadership team, a community advisory committee, a strong and connected provider network that will shortly begin to participate in a learning collaborative and a fundraising structure. With private sector support, an evaluation will commence with annual reports to the community and stakeholders on the outcomes achieved, the barriers encountered and the attempts and strategies employed to overcome challenges.

The YWH leadership team has attracted the attention of other government and private sector leaders in the region. There is now a nascent plan to convene quarterly and share stories about the transformative work underway and to coordinate efforts and share policies and practices that enhance the investment of public and private resources to end homelessness.

Our story has no ending. But there are already several lessons to share for those interested in developing a public/private partnership:

- Agreement that the collective resources of all the participants will never be sufficient to end homelessness without nurturing meaningful relationships with the people who are served. They have their own resources and often with a bit of focus and discipline can succeed in overcoming barriers that once seemed insurmountable.
- Find solutions that create social value and make good financial sense.
- Put modesty aside. Someone has to lead yet remain respectful of the contributions and possible solutions others bring.
- Keep an open mind but question naysayers. Press for the basic truth and underlying barriers that hinder individual and organizational participation and achievement of goals.
- Remain vigilant about federal, state and local policies that may advance or inhibit progress.

- Listen to all stakeholders and solicit their input on a regular basis.
- Seek common ground. Be open to compromises that incrementally advance the vision.

Through the collective efforts of the partners, YWH continues to evolve. The private sector has wrapped its resources around the public's strong commitment to employing evidence-based and/or promising practices. Where taxpayer resources are unavailable, the private sector is stepping up to supplement. Beyond this, the YWH partnership demonstrates that fiscal responsibility and discipline, when coupled with a shared vision and commitment to specific outcomes, can make a meaningful difference in the lives of homeless people and enhance the satisfaction of providers who are devoted to improving government programs and services.