

Building Policy Leadership for Systems Change: A Regional Model for Health, Human Services, and Education

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Abstract

Building Policy Leadership for Systems Change argues that durable reform in health, human services, and education requires intentional investment in policy leadership capacity at the regional level. As communities confront escalating complexity—from workforce shortages and housing instability to fragmented funding and eroding public trust—the article contends that effective systems change depends on leaders who can bridge service delivery, policy formulation, and cross-sector collaboration. Drawing on national research and practice, the authors emphasize that experiential, practice-based learning is essential to preparing leaders for real-world policy challenges.

Using the **Greater Delaware Valley Policy Fellowship in Health, Human Services, and Education** as a case study, the article presents a regional model for building a pipeline of policy-informed leaders across government and nonprofit sectors. The Fellowship integrates applied policy analysis, ethical governance, advocacy skills, and regional collaboration to strengthen nonprofits and local governments as active policy actors. Positioned within broader national movements toward civic infrastructure and evidence-based policymaking, the Fellowship demonstrates how regions can cultivate leadership capacity as a lever for systems change—advancing more resilient, equitable, and accountable public systems.

Introduction

Across the United States, communities are grappling with increasingly complex challenges at the intersection of health, human services, and education. Rising healthcare costs, workforce shortages, housing instability, and widening inequities have placed enormous strain on local governments and nonprofit institutions alike. At the same time, public trust in government remains fragile, and policy solutions often struggle to keep pace with lived realities. In this context, there is a growing national recognition that durable systems change requires leaders who are fluent not only in service delivery but also in policy formulation, advocacy, and cross-sector collaboration.¹

The Greater Delaware Valley Policy Fellowship in Health, Human Services, and Education, sponsored by the Tabor Services Foundation, represents a forward-looking response to this challenge. Designed as a practice-based learning experience for senior leaders, the Fellowship

builds the competencies required to shape public policy grounded in community experience, rigorous analysis, and ethical governance.ⁱⁱ At its core, the Fellowship recognizes that effective policy is not created in isolation, but emerges from sustained engagement among government, nonprofit, private-sector, and community actors.

A Practice-Based Approach to Policy Leadership

National research consistently underscores the importance and value of experiential learning in public-sector leadership development. Studies from the Harvard Kennedy School and the National Academy of Public Administration emphasize that leaders who combine theoretical knowledge with applied policy practice are better equipped to navigate political complexity, manage risk, and implement reform.ⁱⁱⁱ The Greater Delaware Valley Policy Fellowship puts these findings into practice by immersing fellows in real-world policy challenges rather than abstract simulations.

As outlined in the Fellowship overview, participants examine the social, economic, legal, ethical, and political forces that shape policy outcomes.ⁱⁱ This interdisciplinary framing aligns with national best practices in policy education, which increasingly emphasize systems thinking and the analysis of potential consequences, including unintended consequences. In fields such as healthcare and human services, where fragmented funding streams and regulatory silos are common, such skills are essential.

The Fellowship’s structure—spanning multiple modules over several months—allows leaders to deepen their understanding incrementally while applying lessons directly to their organizations and communities. This mirrors national executive fellowship models that prioritize sustained engagement over short-term workshops, recognizing that policy fluency develops over time.^{iv}

Strengthening the Role of Nonprofits as Policy Actors

Historically, many nonprofit organizations have viewed policy engagement as peripheral to their core mission. Yet national trends suggest this paradigm is shifting. Research from Independent Sector and the Urban Institute shows that nonprofits are increasingly recognized as critical policy actors, particularly in areas where government capacity is limited or community trust is low.^v

The Greater Delaware Valley Policy Fellowship explicitly positions governments and nonprofits as social capital assets in enacting systems change.ⁱⁱ By equipping local government and nonprofit executives with tools to research policy, write briefs, map power dynamics, and provide testimony, the Fellowship challenges the notion that advocacy is reserved for professional lobbyists or elected officials. Instead, it elevates practitioner expertise as a vital input into policy design.

This approach reflects a broader national movement toward “civic infrastructure”—the idea that healthy democracies require strong intermediary institutions capable of translating community needs into policy action.^{vi} In regions like the Delaware Valley, where governmental agencies and

nonprofit organizations often serve as first responders to social crises, strengthening this policy capacity is both pragmatic and democratic.

Cross-Sector Collaboration and Regional Governance

Another distinguishing feature of the Fellowship is its emphasis on cross-sector collaboration and regional policy alignment. Fellows engage with county leaders, academic institutions, advocacy organizations, and private-sector partners across the Greater Delaware Valley.ⁱⁱ This regional lens is becoming increasingly important, as many policy challenges—such as workforce development, housing affordability, and public health—transcend municipal boundaries.

National governance research highlights that regional collaboration can reduce duplication, improve resource allocation, and enhance policy coherence.^{vii} However, such collaboration requires leaders who understand both formal governmental processes and informal networks of influence. By incorporating power mapping and coalition-building into its curriculum, the Fellowship provides participants with practical tools to navigate these dynamics.

Both authors—former classmates and graduates of the Fels Institute of Government at the University of Pennsylvania—established and now lead the Policy Fellowship. They bring deep experience in policy and advocacy at the regional, state, and national levels, with David Byerman also offering extensive experience in county and state governance and civic education programs. Their collective background underscores the importance of the diverse skill set the Policy Fellowship seeks to develop. Effective regional policymaking depends on leaders who can align diverse stakeholders around shared goals while respecting local autonomy. The Fellowship's emphasis on testimony, negotiation, and ethical advocacy reflects this balance between collaboration and accountability.

Policy Skills for an Era of Complexity

The policy environment confronting leaders today is marked by volatility and constraint. Federal and state funding streams are uncertain, regulatory frameworks are evolving, and public expectations for transparency and equity are rising. National surveys of public administrators indicate that leaders increasingly cite policy complexity and stakeholder conflict as major barriers to effective governance.^{viii}

Against this backdrop, the Fellowship's emphasis on concrete policy skills, such as writing policy briefs, analyzing economic and social impact, and understanding legislative processes, is particularly timely.ⁱⁱ These competencies align with national calls for evidence-based policymaking, which emphasize the use of data and research to inform decisions.^{ix}

Importantly, the Fellowship also addresses the ethical dimensions of policy leadership. By examining social change movements and the historical context of policy decisions, participants are encouraged to consider not only what is effective, but what is just. This ethical grounding is critical in sectors where policy choices can have life-altering consequences for vulnerable populations.

Building a Pipeline of Policy-Informed Leaders

Leadership succession and workforce development are pressing concerns across the public and nonprofit sectors. National studies warn of a “leadership gap” as experienced executives retire and fewer mid-career professionals are prepared to assume complex leadership roles.^x The Greater Delaware Valley Policy Fellowship contributes to closing this gap by intentionally developing a pipeline of policy-informed leaders rooted in the region.

By requiring fellows to produce actionable policy briefs and present testimony, the Fellowship ensures that learning translates into tangible outcomes.ⁱⁱ This applied focus reflects national best practices in leadership development, which stress accountability and real-world impact over credentialing alone.

Conclusion: A Model for Regional Systems Change

The Greater Delaware Valley Policy Fellowship offers a compelling model for how regions can invest in policy leadership as a lever for systems change. By integrating experiential learning, cross-sector collaboration, and ethical analysis, the Fellowship prepares leaders to navigate complexity and drive meaningful reform in health, human services, and education.

As national challenges continue to strain public institutions, initiatives like this Fellowship demonstrate that policy capacity is not an abstract ideal, but a practical necessity. Building leaders who can bridge sectors, translate community experience into policy action, and sustain democratic engagement is essential to creating resilient and equitable systems. In this sense, the Fellowship is not only an educational program, but an investment in the region’s long-term civic and social health.^{xi}

Endnotes

ⁱ National Academy of Public Administration, **Leadership for a Changing Public Sector**, 2023.

ⁱⁱ Tabor Services Foundation, **Greater Delaware Valley Policy Fellowship in Health, Human Services, and Education: Overview and Program Description**, 2025.

ⁱⁱⁱ Harvard Kennedy School, **Executive Education and Public Leadership**, accessed 2025.

^{iv} Brookings Institution, **Developing Public Leaders for Complex Governance**, 2022.

^v Independent Sector, **Nonprofits and Public Policy Engagement**, 2023.

^{vi} Putnam, Robert D., **Our Kids: The American Dream in Crisis** (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2015).

^{vii} OECD, **Regional Governance and Multi-Level Policy Coordination**, 2022.

^{viii} IBM Center for The Business of Government, **The Future of Public Leadership**, 2024.

^{ix} U.S. Office of Management and Budget, **Evidence-Based Policymaking Act Implementation**, 2023.

^x Bridgespan Group, **The Nonprofit Leadership Deficit**, updated 2024.

^{xi} Tabor Services Foundation, **Policy Fellowship Program Materials**, 2025.