



# **Working Together Across Sectors: Creating a Fair and Equal City**

**New York, NY  
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*Reinventing the Partnerships Among  
City Government, Nonprofit Human Services Providers,  
and Communities*



*I owe [these] feelings of hope to all of you, and your selflessness, compassion, and dedication. Because I know from personal experience, that when government and non-profits work together, there is nothing, and I mean nothing, that you can't achieve.*

*—New York City First Lady Chirlane McCray  
March 2, 2015*



## Overview

New York City has a comprehensive network of social services and invests billions of dollars each year in critical programs to strengthen communities and better the lives of New Yorkers. Human services providers are integral to the fabric of our neighborhoods. The network includes citywide nonprofit service providers, community-based organizations, government agencies, and philanthropies.



Since the recession, the need for services has increased as people struggled. At the same time, nonprofits themselves faced funding challenges. Wealth and opportunities for positive human growth and development are abundant in some communities but are distributed unequally, leaving many of our neighborhoods severely under-resourced. Many of our residents are without sufficient access to the opportunities and resources they need to survive and thrive. While government, nonprofits, philanthropy, and other stakeholders are working to improve the lives of the people they serve, silos, redundancies, and bureaucracy can hinder the delivery of services, create information gaps, and stifle innovation. In order to deliver high quality services—and the right services—it is imperative that all the stakeholders work together to improve collaboration, break down silos, and foster new approaches to improve outcomes.

Leaders of nonprofit organizations, City agencies, academia, and philanthropy have been working together toward this end through a process called ‘Strengthening Communities.’ Our common goal is to improve the ways in which City agencies, nonprofit service providers, and community organizations collaborate to provide access to opportunity across

the City, for all New Yorkers, in all neighborhoods. The work is largely focused on ensuring that residents of underserved neighborhoods can find support to improve their health, education, employment, housing, food access, and well-being. The Strengthening Communities work has been inspired by the active conversations that the de Blasio administration is having with its partners, making this an exciting and critical moment to formulate concrete steps on new ways to cooperate and collaborate.

*We all know that administrations come and go, but if you look around this room, you see organizations that have been the bedrocks of their communities for generations. So clearly you are at the center of our work.*

*—Deputy Mayor Richard Buery*

The Strengthening Communities Steering Committee, made up of representatives of human services agencies, City government, academia, and philanthropy, believes that the human services sector and the City can work together differently to better reach into under-resourced communities and to find ways that the overall impact of these individual interventions can be more than the sum of their individual parts. To get there, we wish to reconsider the relationship between the City and the providers, which in the past has been transactional and sometimes adversarial. At the heart of this work is a joint commitment to working together as partners, rather than only as contractors and vendors. Allies from philanthropy and academia can provide critical support for this process by helping to identify ongoing challenges and develop potential solutions. The Strengthening Communities effort builds upon several parallel work streams among human services providers, NYC philanthropic leaders, and their colleagues at the City University of New York (Appendix A describes these efforts).

The Steering Committee organized a Summit on March 2, 2015, which brought together 140 senior City officials, CEOs of nonprofit human services organizations, community representatives, and thought leaders from academia and philanthropy (Appendix B – Strengthening Communities Summit Participant List). Together, they set out to generate insights, possibilities, and pathways for re-inventing

the working partnerships among City agencies, nonprofit social service providers, and the communities in which they work, in order to provide comprehensive, coordinated services in a manner that promotes equity in opportunity to residents across the city.

### **Summit Methodology**

The March Summit brought together a cross-sector group of about 140 people. The conference organizers, a cross-sector group themselves with representatives from City government, philanthropy, human services organizations, and academia, are mindful that the work needs to build on the learning from past initiatives and efforts in New York City and nationally. They are committed to building cross-sector participation, communication, and cooperation in a deliberate and realistic manner. The Summit was designed to be an interactive and generative conversation that would lead to action, rather than a more traditional series of presentations.

During the Summit, participants worked in changing small groups, sometimes sorted by sector, and sometimes in mixed groups, to take on a series of questions, consider an in-depth case study of a New York City low-income family, and hear from colleagues deeply immersed in the work (Appendix C - Summit Agenda and Case Study). The conference organizers set the stage for collaboration by creating a mixed sector working experience in the room.



In small group conversations, participants considered the following questions:

- What will be different in the communities we serve if we are successful?

- How will the system look different if we are successful?
- What barriers and constraints prevent us from addressing the community's actual needs and issues, advancing our vision of equity, and achieving community-level outcomes?
- What works that we can build on or do more of? What do we need to change?
- What concrete, actionable steps can we take to build a better partnership among City government, non-profit human services providers, and the communities they serve for promoting equity and opportunity in under-resourced, high-need communities?
- How do we ensure that limited resources are allocated to where they are most needed and used effectively?

In the afternoon, participants selected the most compelling ideas to come out of the day, and Steering Committee members then synthesized four collective goals to guide the next phase of work (see p. 7 for goals).

*There will be disagreement, and that's important and necessary. We need to wrestle through things in order to get the best results.*  
—Sheena Wright, President and CEO, United Way of New York City

Cross-sector collaboration was critical to conference planning and remains at the center for all the follow-up work that has come out of the conference.

### **Working Together**

To best support the formation of new working relationships and development of new structures, the Strengthening Communities group is guided by several 'working agreements' through which participants: 1) commit to focusing on possibilities and the future, working to create a shared vision, and on identifying priorities for what they can accomplish together; 2) set aside personal and organizational interests and agendas to focus on the system as a whole; 3) commit to discuss the "undiscussables" in order to get the difficult issues on the table; and 4) recognize and be honest about the tension between the City and

nonprofits, among the community, City, and nonprofits, and to openly discuss the political realities that get in the way of certain changes.

Dr. John Mollenkopf, the Director of the Center for Urban Research at the CUNY Graduate Center, articulated the importance of these agreements as he opened the Summit:

*.... While a few speakers will inspire us and provoke us to think differently, today is about bringing the incredible talent that is in this room together to discuss what we really want to achieve together, what gets in the way of doing that, and how we can overcome those obstacles to deliver on our shared priorities.*

*Today's summit is something new. It brings together leaders from City agencies, non-profit human service providers, academia, and philanthropy. All of us, in our own way, are crucial to making the system of human and social service delivery the best it can be. We are here in the spirit of coming together around what each of us can do to improve the system. [We ask you to] step outside your normal roles and routines to think about what we can do together to reshape the system as a whole.*

Chirlane McCray, New York City First Lady and Chair of the Mayor's Fund to Advance New York City, addressed Summit participants and set the stage for collaboration:

*I am deeply grateful for all that you have done and will do to create a more fair and equal city. And I say that as someone whose life has been profoundly shaped by the work of non-profits since childhood. I am the granddaughter of immigrants from Barbados and [migrants] from the South. Neither one of my parents had a college degree, but they understood how important it was for their children to get the best education possible. They moved our family to a good school district, they set high expectations, and they made sure that the arts and physical exercise were part of our everyday life. They were smart. They knew they couldn't give us all the skills we would need to thrive as adults. Even the most dedicated parents need others to raise a well-rounded child, and they knew this. So after school I took piano lessons. I went to the Dunbar community center or the library. On weekends I went to the girls club and then later to the YMCA where later I was a member of the swim team and*

*Leadership Corps. I spent so much time at the Y I thought of it as my second home. It's where I first volunteered.... These programs were supported by a mix of public and private funds, and they helped make me who I am today. I am reminded of those programs, and the people who helped me, each and every day.*



*The needs of the citizens of NYC are so great. And I know the power that you have. Over the past year I have had the chance to visit many different kinds of non-profits.... Tomorrow I will be visiting [three more organizations that working on mental health issues in New York City]. I'm sure I will encounter some serious, sobering challenges that we must address. But I am also sure that I will walk away with some hope. And I owe those feelings of hope to all of you, and your selflessness, compassion, and dedication. Because I know from personal experience, that when government and non-profits work together, there is nothing, and I mean nothing, that you can't achieve.*

*There's no change that can be made without first talking about it.*

*—New York City First Lady Chirlane McCray*

### **Opportunities and Challenges**

The many conversations at the Summit were wide-ranging and expansive. While there were divergent opinions among participants, there was also significant overlap and agreement. The opportunities and challenges outlined below do not, of course, reflect full consensus or every point made, but they did emerge over and over:

- a. Participants identified the **siload nature of services** as a significant impediment. We have many organizations working towards narrow goals, but not working together to provide comprehensive services. At the same time, there is a real need for New Yorkers to be able to gain easier access to a range of services – with various “doors” to come through. There was a lot of conversation about the roles that a “navigator” could play within community institutions in helping families find and access the services available in the neighborhoods.

*Community leaders, City agencies, nonprofit service providers all want to help the people they serve to reach their potential and avoid negative outcomes. They also hope that their services to individuals and families will translate into uplifting communities. So why is it so hard to work together to achieve these goals?*

*–Tim Ross, Managing Partner, Action Research Partners*



- b. Given the universal commitment to equity across basic needs, the group was conscious that there exists a **lack of specificity and articulated agreement about common values, vision, and goals** across organizations or sectors.

- c. One of the most popular refrains was the need for **strong and stable community institutions**. ‘Strong and stable’ generally referred to well-staffed, efficient, and fully funded organizations, and cross-organizational collaborations. These would feature family-centered services that comprehensively address the whole family, rather than having different organizations and programs to serve each individual member or need.

If partners across the sectors are able to identify common goals, then they can develop strategies to measure those goals and identify the results that matter most. These common goals and measures would improve and streamline services across the sector.

Participants identified the need for a strong network of organizations in each neighborhood, and the importance of the work of smaller and specialized CBOs (*e.g.*, those that work with immigrant groups, or use community organizing strategies) in addition to larger, multi-service organizations. There should be supports for organizations to work together to provide integrated services that respond to local needs.

Implicit in the discussion was the need for better collaboration and easier contracting and reporting systems.

Conference participants believed that **neighborhood residents should be a part of designing goals, demands, approaches, and measures for programs and initiatives that serve them**. Community engagement is critical to making sure that programs and agencies are giving people what they actually require, not just “what we have.” There were several suggestions that the City integrate community organizing approaches and expertise into defining needed services, as well as into program design.

*From a client’s perspective, it’s an alphabet soup of services, and it’s an alphabet soup of City agencies, and it’s an alphabet soup of not-for-profit agencies.*

*–Steven Banks, Commissioner, New York City Human Resources Administration/ Department of Social Services*

- d. There was general agreement that the current system diverts time, energy and resources away from meeting real needs. Most of the conversations lead to the need for **new and improved structures for partnership** between City and human services, a deliberate way to change the relationship from that of non-profits and the City as “vendors” and “purchasers,” instead positioning them as partners in imagining, designing, implementing, and supporting services that benefit all New Yorkers.

*We end up basically giving people what we have, not what they need.*

*—Jeremy Kohomban, President and CEO, The Children’s Village*

There were many more important ideas that came out of the days’ energetic and deep conversations, and notes can be found at <http://www.humanservicescouncil.org/scsummit.php>.

Perhaps most importantly, the principles of collaboration were referred to and refined over the course of the day. Organizers were struck by the clear consensus that emerged to create four goals to guide on-going Strengthening Communities work, and the strong commitment to exploring how to make the goals operational and concrete.

### **Strengthening Communities Goals**

At the end of the conference, the Steering Committee reviewed the themes and priorities that emerged among participants, and synthesized them into four overarching goals:

- a. *Develop community-level outcome goals to complement the individual-level measures used by various programs. These should be consistent with the Mayor’s vision and agenda and the work already under way within the Administration. They should be developed through an inclusive dialogue with neighborhood residents, community leaders, and non-profit human services providers. These goals will anchor the partnerships among City agencies, non-profit providers, and communities and enable us to hold ourselves accountable for*

*outcomes, guide meaningful action by all partners, and assess progress.*

- b. *Develop community-based initiatives that aim to advance the developed goals via pilots (including regulatory waivers) that demonstrate a new partnership marked by a focus on outcomes, pro-active/data-driven interventions, flexibility, access, coordination, innovation, willingness from providers to partner on service delivery, and more effective regulation that ensures accountability for productive action without creating stifling compliance standards.*
- c. *Develop policies, procedures, and regulations, especially as they relate to procurement, that allow for greater flexibility, including across contracts (i.e. master contract), to meet need that emerges and provide (not just what we have to offer) but the help and opportunity that youth, families, and communities actually find helpful to pursue stable, successful lives.*
- d. *Stabilize human services providers within communities by ensuring adequate funding with the right incentives that covers the full cost of services, including adequate/fair and living wages, opportunities for training and development for direct practice professionals delivering services in communities, and rising costs of doing business.*

*It is incredibly hard work to be poor in New York City. It’s incredibly hard work to be poor anywhere, but it’s really, really hard—it’s a job—to be poor in New York City.*

*—Rev. Dr. Emma Jordan Simpson, Executive Pastor, Concord Baptist Church of Christ*

### **Next Steps**

Leaders from across the City came to the Strengthening Communities Summit in order to generate new thinking that would result in action and change. The Steering Committee has taken that charge seriously, and is working to create an action plan to move forward on the four goals.

In the weeks after the convening, the Steering Committee met with Deputy Mayor of Health and

Human Services Barrios-Paoli and many of her agency heads to discuss how to use one of the Administration's new initiatives as a platform for the kind of collaboration sought through the Strengthening Communities Summit process.

As a first step, the members of the Steering Committee and City representatives (the "working group") have agreed to work together over the summer of 2015 to focus an agency initiative in an under-resourced neighborhood to develop a process that will apply the conference goals in real time, and allow cross-sector partners to work together in new ways. As part of this collaboration, the working group will have the opportunity to work together to actualize the conference goals and achieve better outcomes for the initiative.

*Because they are embedded in communities, it makes sense for nonprofits to drive conversations about what approaches we should be investing in as a city, but that will require us to flip the current approach to procurement.*

*—Allison Sesso, Executive Director, Human Services Council of New York*

The working group will have the opportunity to identify common goals, both for the summer project and on the City-wide level (Goal 1), and integrate the program qualities prioritized by the Strengthening Communities group (such as focus on outcomes, data-driven interventions, flexibility, coordinated service delivery, and developing more effective regulation Goal 2).

Further, in participating in the development of the program architecture, the working group will be able to incorporate the kinds of policies, procedures, and regulations that allow for greater flexibility (Goal 3), and to examine City contracts and other funding to ensure the full funding needed for the project (Goal 4).

By working out these questions in real time, around a shared priority initiative, the City and human services providers have an unprecedented opportunity to work through questions, opportunities, and obstacles together, in partnership. Lessons learned and

methodologies and contracting structures that are developed during this process can then be integrated into other places where the City and human services providers work together, creating real change and better partnerships to serve our communities.

We still have far to go, but the energy coming out of the Summit, and the concrete steps and pledges of future action are hopeful. The work will be complicated and difficult, but holds promise in this moment of shared commitment between the City and the providers.

*Some of the greatest change happened because almost everybody changed three things. They changed their perspective on the problem, they changed their definition of the boundaries of where their work stops or starts, and they changed their relationships.*  
*—Ben Hecht, President and CEO, Living Cities*

### **Appendices**

A – A Covenant for Success: Working in Partnership to Strengthen New York City's Neighborhoods:

<http://bit.ly/1hxKlFd>

B – Strengthening Communities Summit Participant List: <http://bit.ly/1TtvQhz>

C – Summit Agenda and Case Study:

<http://bit.ly/1IGoV1s>