

MONTGOMERY COUNTY

A COLLABORATIVE MODEL FOR MEETING CHANGING NEEDS

BACKGROUND

Montgomery County, Maryland—a suburban county adjacent to the nation’s capital—is often showcased as one of the country’s wealthiest counties. In recent years, however, this million-person jurisdiction has also set itself apart for its increasing economic and demographic diversity. Between 1990 and 2010, non-Hispanic whites dropped from 72 percent to 49 percent of the county’s population. By 2010, immigrants made up nearly one-third of Montgomery County’s residents. The county has become a significant portal for new Americans, drawn to its large number of jobs, diverse housing stock, and well-regarded school system.

Montgomery County, like suburban counties across the country, was also hit hard by the Great Recession. In the three years between 2007 and 2010, Montgomery County lost more than 37,000 jobs, and the number of residents living below the federal poverty line grew by two-thirds. Additionally, Montgomery County saw a rapid increase in the working poor—people who are employed but still living near or below the federal poverty line.

The economic downturn, alongside the county’s changing demographics, presented Montgomery County with the tough challenge of meeting the scope and scale of need among the county’s increasingly diverse residents. It quickly became apparent that no one sector—public, private, or nonprofit—could meet the challenge alone.

THE INNOVATION

In 2009, during the deepest part of the recession, officials from Montgomery County government, led by the Department of Health and Human Services and the Office of Community Partnerships, partnered with leaders from the faith-based community, social service nonprofits, and grassroots organizations to develop strategies aimed at delivering critical emergency and safety net services to struggling communities and families in the area. This partnership launched the Neighborhood Opportunity Network, a cross-sector collaboration that seeks to ensure that critical services (county or nonprofit) reach residents in need, and to create community networks in suburbs where such resources may be lacking.

The initiative uses door-knocking campaigns to identify needs and alert residents to services available at newly created Neighborhood Service Centers. These centers are staffed by “Community Connectors” who guide residents through various application processes. The network also promotes participatory community sessions and small meetings of neighbors to build relationships, identify issues and needs, and share resources. As Montgomery County’s Office of Community Partnerships (OCP) director Bruce Adams writes, the Neighborhood Opportunity Network model “has replaced the traditional charity/social services approach to emergency service delivery with a culturally competent capacity building model.”

ACCOMPLISHMENTS

The Neighborhood Opportunity Network partners each drew on their respective strengths to move the initiative forward. The County Department of Health and Human Services secured the commitment of three large established nonprofits (Family Services, Inc., Mary’s Center, and Catholic Charities) to serve as the anchor sites for the new Neighborhood Service Centers, providing physical space as well as staff support in setting up and running the centers. The OCP served as a relationship broker for internal and external stakeholders. The Montgomery County Community Foundation (MCCF) raised over \$300,000 in private funds to increase the amount of emergency assistance dollars available and to support the capacity of key nonprofit partners.

Following a four-month pilot in the spring of 2009, the Neighborhood Opportunity Network launched a full-fledged campaign in the summer of 2009. Over the course of its first year, the Network knocked on 5,106 doors and initiated 1,341 one-on-one conversations with county residents from over 63 different countries.

CONFRONTING SUBURBAN POVERTY IN AMERICA

The initial pilot program revealed a larger degree of fear, misinformation, pride, and lack of information about government resources among low-income county residents than initially anticipated. As a result, the Neighborhood Opportunity Network has since developed a three-month neighborhood-based leadership training program, “Neighbor Corps,” which aims to develop a core team of diverse individuals who can use their new network to better connect low-income residents to available services and develop relationships of trust.

CHALLENGES

Montgomery County’s innovative approach has not been without its challenges.

- Bringing new and emerging populations in need to the Centers requires ongoing and intensive outreach, which takes a significant investment of resources and capacity. In the early years of the program, the traffic to the Centers was mostly from clients who knew the Department of Health and Human Services and had accessed resources from the department before. It took four years for the ratio of residents served to shift to a majority of new and first time clients.
- Even as the demand for services has continued to grow in the past three years, the funding levels have remained flat. Funding shortfalls continuously constrain the efforts of the Neighborhood Opportunity Network.
- Forging an effective cross-sector partnership like the Neighborhood Opportunity Network requires a long-term commitment to investing the time and effort necessary to build and strengthen connections among partners, which can be difficult in a resource-strained environment.

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY

Few suburban communities have the available public, private, or nonprofit resources necessary for the delivery of services across the full range of issues that their populations and communities face. Montgomery County’s proactive and collaborative approach to meeting the needs of its increasingly diverse population provides an important model of the type of effort that policy should support going forward.

Policymakers, practitioners, and funders should spur similar types of action and encourage existing actors to work better together, across sectoral and program lines by:

- Reducing barriers to cross-cutting and collaborative approaches like the Neighborhood Opportunity Network, by improving administrative systems to streamline service delivery in ways that help to speed eligibility determination, cut workloads, and make limited resources stretch further;
- Creating incentives and aligning funding to explicitly encourage and reward cross-sector collaborations working across policy silos to provide a continuum of services that meet the diverse needs of low-income families and residents; and
- Building regional capacity, by investing in the seeding and scaling up of collaborative entities working in underserved and high-need areas, and by dedicating resources to their continued maintenance and development.