Built for Zero: Backbone Partnerships

Supporting Place-Based Backbone Partnerships to End Homelessness

Ending homelessness in local communities and metropolitan regions helps transform lives and serves as a powerful proof point for the rest of the country that solving homelessness is possible. Success will require place-based backbone organizations that are organized nimbly, equipped with quality data and trained in the skills and mindsets needed to credibly convene stakeholders to improve local systems and positioning them as the go-to entity for homeless leadership. It will also require that regional and local system-level leaders are mobilized to provide responsive, coordinated support in service of population-level aims.

The Problem. Fragmentation dominates homelessness response efforts:

- Continuum of Care geographies are non-uniform and often cut across other funding, programmatic, or administrative boundaries (counties, VA catchment areas, etc.)
- Data management is not interoperable across systems, geographies or programs, nor is the data itself of equal comprehensiveness, quality or reliability
- Stakeholders have different definitions of success and ways of measuring progress giving way to competing narratives on how to tackle the issue
- Elected Officials and community leaders are under increasing pressure to deliver results but uncoordinated or duplicative efforts slow progress
- Coordination requires capacity but funding streams have been historically focused at the programmatic level

As a result, regional and state actors suffer from:
- Poor line of sight into homelessness
- Competing incentives across a siloed array of actors
- Constrained ability to respond to evolving conditions
- Inadequate tools for determining whether various efforts, resources and policy decisions are adding up to population-level results
- Lack of system-level capacity and capability to support alignment and problem solving
- Potential for quick wins that can't be sustained in the long-term

The Solution. Backbone organizations play a critical goal in driving racially equitable outcomes by helping maintain overall strategic coherence and coordinating the day to day operations and implementation of work. More specifically, backbone organizations support seven key functions:

- Community Engagement and Network Building
- Visioning and Goal Setting
- Partnership Coordinations and Communications
- Fund Development and Resource Alignment
- Measuring Community-Level Impact
- Building Partner Capacity
- Organizing and Advocacy for Systems Change

*In the best of circumstances, these **backbone organizations** embody the principles of adaptive leadership: the ability to focus people's attention and create a sense of urgency, the skill to apply pressure to stakeholders without overwhelming them, the competence to frame issues in a way that presents opportunities as well as difficulties, and the strength to mediate conflict among stakeholders.[1]*

Regional Models & Place-Based Coaching: Some participating communities are also focusing on a regional approach, built on archetypes that allow for large-to-small or small-to-large coordination across geographies where a regional approach may assist in accelerating success. In this setting, there is often the need for a Place-Based Coach to lead coordination and provide improvement advising to local system leaders across multiple geographies.

Outcomes. Based on the success of our ongoing backbone-level work, our cohort of state and regional partners has expanded to include five states (Colorado, Maine, Illinois, Kansas, Maryland) and four regions (Metro Denver, Metro DMV (Washington DC, Maryland and Virginia). Honolulu Continuum of Care, and Colorado Balance of State CoC - Southwest Region.

Metro Denver (as of September 2024)
➔ Nine local sub-regions engaged, covering 100% of the CoC's geography. Six of nine operating local case conferencing for Veterans and making reductions
➔ Local Continuum of Care Lead Agency serving in backbone capacity with place-based coaches (PBCs) leading improvement work with sub-regional teams
➔ 30% reduction in Veteran homelessness across the region (from 2020 baseline to 2024)
➔ Five sub-regions at quality, real-time data for Veterans with four at >75%
➔ Douglas County is the first sub-region to achieve Functional Zero for Veterans
➔ The first sub-regional level performance dashboard to show both aggregate and disaggregated Veteran data and by name list demographics; building out infrastructure for All Singles populations
➔ Increased alignment leading to additional local, state and philanthropic funding, including funding to focus on racial equity and elevating the voices of lived experience

Metro DC, Maryland and Virginia (as of September 2024)
➔ Council of Governments serving in backbone capacity with staffing structure connecting core CoG infrastructure with Backbone Functions
➔ Engagement strategy for 9 CoCs within the region towards a regional strategy and local aims, with Veterans as a shared population group but other populations locally included

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[1] https://ssir.org/articles/entry/collective_impact

> ➔ Leveraging existing workgroups and convened bodies to execute on enhancing coordination between jurisdictions
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> ➔ Data infrastructure being tested for both CoC-level and region-level dashboards and data sharing

How We Work. We support backbone partners through a simple, hybrid support model, operating jointly at the backbone and community improvement team levels.

Backbone Team Support. Our backbone partner coaching includes multiple levels of strategic and direct support, including but not limited to:
- A **shared framework** and theory of change for partners to apply in their context (regional or state)
- Facilitating the development of shared, measurable aims, measurement strategy and quality data collection framework
- Bi-weekly **strategic coaching** for backbone team
- Facilitation of backbone partner **strategy sessions** every six months (after each Action Cycle)
- **Skills transfer and training** in Improvement Science and other problem solving skills for backbone team staff and partners
- Opportunities to **connect with peer backbone organizations** and leaders for collective learning and problem solving
- **National partner trainings** to deepen understanding with backbone and collective impact subject matter experts, often from the broader economic mobility field
- A bi-annual **replicable model assessment** to establish a baseline and measure progress over time towards fulfilling the functions of a backbone organization
- Access to **specialized advising** and other resources across CS

Leveraging Built for Zero Community-Level Support. Local community improvement teams focused on sub-regions or sub-populations can access specialized advising and peer networking opportunities through the national Built for Zero network.
- Assembling + skilling up a local improvement team
- Achieving quality, real-time data on homelessness (at local or regional level)
- Deploying rapid cycle testing methodologies to drive monthly reductions

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