

A Review of Sonoma County's *Upstream Investments*: Addressing the Core Issue of Poverty Through Collective Impact

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

A primary function of governmental human services agencies is to manage the provision of public benefits that are designed to mitigate the negative impacts of poverty and inequality. Although public sector organizations typically dedicate the vast majority of available resources towards this end, it is not common for these agencies to attempt to address the root causes of poverty. In this context, it is extremely noteworthy that the Human Services Department in Sonoma County is using an innovative collective impact approach to achieve a vision where “Poverty is eliminated . . .” The Upstream Investments initiative represents a shift in the role of local government from poverty maintenance into the arena of prevention and promotion of social, health, economic,

and educational equality and well-being. But more importantly, the Human Services Department has taken the lead to create a collective impact project that has engaged a wide range of partners throughout Sonoma County. Upstream Investments is a model program that presents significant replication opportunities for local government. Recommendations for San Francisco County include the need to apply evidence-based research in the arena of contracts and increase outreach efforts to new networks, such as the private sector, for support, expertise, and resources. The use of a collective impact approach to social change has widespread potential for human services agencies throughout California.

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Introduction

The Human Services Department in Sonoma County serves as the backbone organization for a highly innovative collective impact project that aims to eliminate poverty and its ill effects. *Upstream Investments* is a county-wide initiative that has broad and powerful implications for improving the social, health, and economic security of typically underserved populations, as is suggested by the project's Downstream Vision: *In Sonoma County, poverty is eliminated and all people have an equal opportunity for quality education and good health in nurturing home and community environments.* Through efforts to promote the use of evidence-based practices by agencies serving Sonoma County's residents, *Upstream* is strengthening the capacity of local partners, and offers the possibility of long-lasting quality service provision. By expanding the scope of the initiative to include the business community, *Upstream* is moving beyond the traditional boundaries of local human services agencies to engage new partners in the fight against poverty and inequality. By aligning its vision with other community-wide initiatives and by promoting a shared outcomes system of measurement, *Upstream* is maximizing the collective impact approach to social change. Although *Upstream* is a long-range initiative, recent improvements on a range of "indicators of success" that describe and measure the four overarching goals of the project, suggest that the strategies of *Investing Early*, *Investing Wisely*, and *Investing Together* may be working effectively.

The Upstream Portfolio serves as the primary intervention of the initiative and functions as a core hub of the program. By utilizing the Portfolio to showcase model, evidence-based programs, and by motivating funders to recognize the value of such programs, Upstream has incentivized local service providers to invest in their own organizational capacity for the benefit of disenfranchised populations. Standards of excellence have been developed through the Portfolio Committee, and public sector programs in Sonoma, including those within the Human Services Department, are as motivated to improve upon their level of services as are community-based programs.

Origins

Upstream Investments was initially conceived in 2007, in response to concerns surrounding the level of funding that the county was dedicating to growing criminal justice costs. The fact that over half of the county's discretionary general fund was spent in this manner made it challenging to adequately support vital social services programs. One year later, the Board of Supervisors in Sonoma County chartered the Upstream project, and at that time they sought to understand the factors that contributed to an individual's entry into the criminal justice system, and also to identify those practices that had definitively been found to help reduce downstream criminal justice costs.¹

After completing an extensive data gathering process that included reviewing professional

literature, and carrying out a cost-benefit analysis on county criminal justice costs, the Upstream Investments Team made recommendations to the Board around next steps. These recommendations included a review of health and human services as well as criminal justice programs utilizing evidence-based practices; establishing indicators that reflect upstream principles; leveraging the work of other initiatives and programs; and convening the Ad Hoc Upstream Board Committee. In response to this initial report, funding was granted by the Board to support the activities of the committee.²

By the start of 2011, Sonoma County's Board of Supervisors had approved the Upstream Logic Model (see appendix), a framework that laid out the four overarching Upstream Goals that focus on supporting the healthy development of children, providing access to education and training for job readiness, ensuring that residents are housed and socially supported, and supporting a thriving and diverse economy.

The Foundation

Upstream Investments is based on a strong framework of foundational principles and strategies that were developed through the collective impact process. The Upstream Mission, "*To facilitate the implementation of prevention-focused policies and interventions that increase equality and reduce monetary and societal costs for all residents of Sonoma County*" provides an essential structure that guides both the Upstream Portfolio and Upstream Policy Committees. The initiative's key strategies of *Invest Early*, *Invest Wisely*, and *Invest Together* flow directly from this broader mission.

Invest Early refers to the implementation of prevention-focused policies and interventions throughout Sonoma County. Organizations that are aligned with Upstream principles are encouraged to focus on services that target individuals and families before they are overwhelmed by the social problems surrounding poverty.

The concept of *Invest Wisely* is at the core of Upstream's primary intervention tool, the Upstream

Portfolio. In order to ensure that upstream policies and interventions have the highest possible likelihood of success, it is necessary to select those that are backed by sound evidence and data.

The strategy of *Invest Together*, speaks to the collective impact approach that guides the Upstream Initiative. Organizations that are partners of the project, or that want to show their support of Upstream principles, can submit a *Resolution of Alignment*. Such alliances and affiliations not only encourage other groups to join in, but also help to fully engage a range of partners, even those that may not have the capacity to qualify to be part of the Portfolio.

Building capacity through the Upstream Portfolio

The Upstream Portfolio is divided into a three-tiered model and applicants to the Portfolio can apply as an Emerging Practice (Tier 3), Promising Practice (Tier 2), or an Evidence-based Practice (Tier 1). Those portfolio applications accepted onto Tier 1 are those that are already known to be evidence-based and that are part of an established national clearinghouse. Applicants must not only show that their services are evidence-based and but also that their organization has an adequate level of professional capacity to ensure that they will implement the program with fidelity. This is demonstrated through the submission of a *Logic Model* as well as an organizational manual that speaks to issues such as staff training.

Applications are reviewed by the Portfolio Review Committee for acceptance and placement among the three-tiered system.

The Sonoma County Human Services Department recently hired a full-time analyst with a strong research background to assist community-based organizations with the technical support that they need to apply to become part of the Upstream Portfolio. Through this process, local programs may achieve Portfolio acceptance, but they may also receive generalized consultation in the arena of data collection, use of research to improve upon direct practice, and strengthening the organizational

structure. The Portfolio review committee can make several concrete recommendations to the applicant including the need to improve their literature review and provide a more detailed organizational manual. Technical Assistance will be provided to the applicant with the goal of assisting them to gain Portfolio acceptance, and also to improve upon the overall capacity of the program or organization.

The Portfolio of Model Upstream Programs provides an opportunity for exemplary programs in the community to showcase the work that they are already carrying out, and it simultaneously serves as a motivator for emerging practices and programs to strive to meet the standards that are established by the Portfolio. In this way, the Portfolio serves as a hub for Upstream allowing community based programs, funders, Upstream partners, and Sonoma County to exchange information, ideas, and work to achieve collective goals.

A Shared Vision and Shared Outcome Measurement

In order to demonstrate the effectiveness of the project and the collaborative work that is being carried out with aligned initiatives, Upstream is promoting the collection of shared outcome measurement across health and human services sectors in Sonoma. Shared measurement is a key aspect of any collective impact project, and Upstream has taken a thoughtful and careful approach to this important task by developing a separate workgroup to review the need for a common measurement system that will facilitate cross-sector data tracking.³

Upstream has selected and is focusing on 26 key indicators that provide measurement around each of the four Upstream goals, and several of these indicators are shared and tracked by key aligned partners such as Health Action. The shared outcome measurement allows for quick snapshots of progress that is being made with an indicator, but as is true with collective impact projects, it is not possible to identify a clear cause-effect relationship. The inability to definitively determine whether Upstream is



responsible for creating positive social change could potentially hamper future support for the initiative.

However, Upstream has moved far beyond the realm of most human services agencies in California, in terms of the tracking that it is carrying out on key social indicators. Additionally, the ability to leverage resources and support from similarly aligned initiatives that is provided through the collective impact approach is certainly a strength of the project. Along with Health Action and HealthySonoma.org, Upstream has adopted the Healthy Communities Initiative registered trademark gauge that provides a quick status view of an indicator. For example, the indicators that support the first Upstream Goal (*"The whole community is engaged in supporting the healthy development of children"*) are intended to describe adverse childhood experiences that impact long-term outcomes.⁴ The 2012 report shows that even when Sonoma County is ranking among the top 50th percentile of comparable counties, there may be significant racial and ethnic disparities, such as is the case with the adolescent birth rate between females age 15-19. Per the green dial (left half of *Figure 1*) of the shared outcome measurement system that is noted above, Sonoma County is performing at or better than 50% of comparable counties in regards to this indicator. However, Upstream goes beyond this tracking system to look at the disparities between different racial and ethnic groups. There are seven evidence-based practices on the Upstream Portfolio that aim to improve this indicator. Having

a multi-layered view of this issue can help policy makers, funders, and Upstream committee members to more effectively direct future resources and efforts.

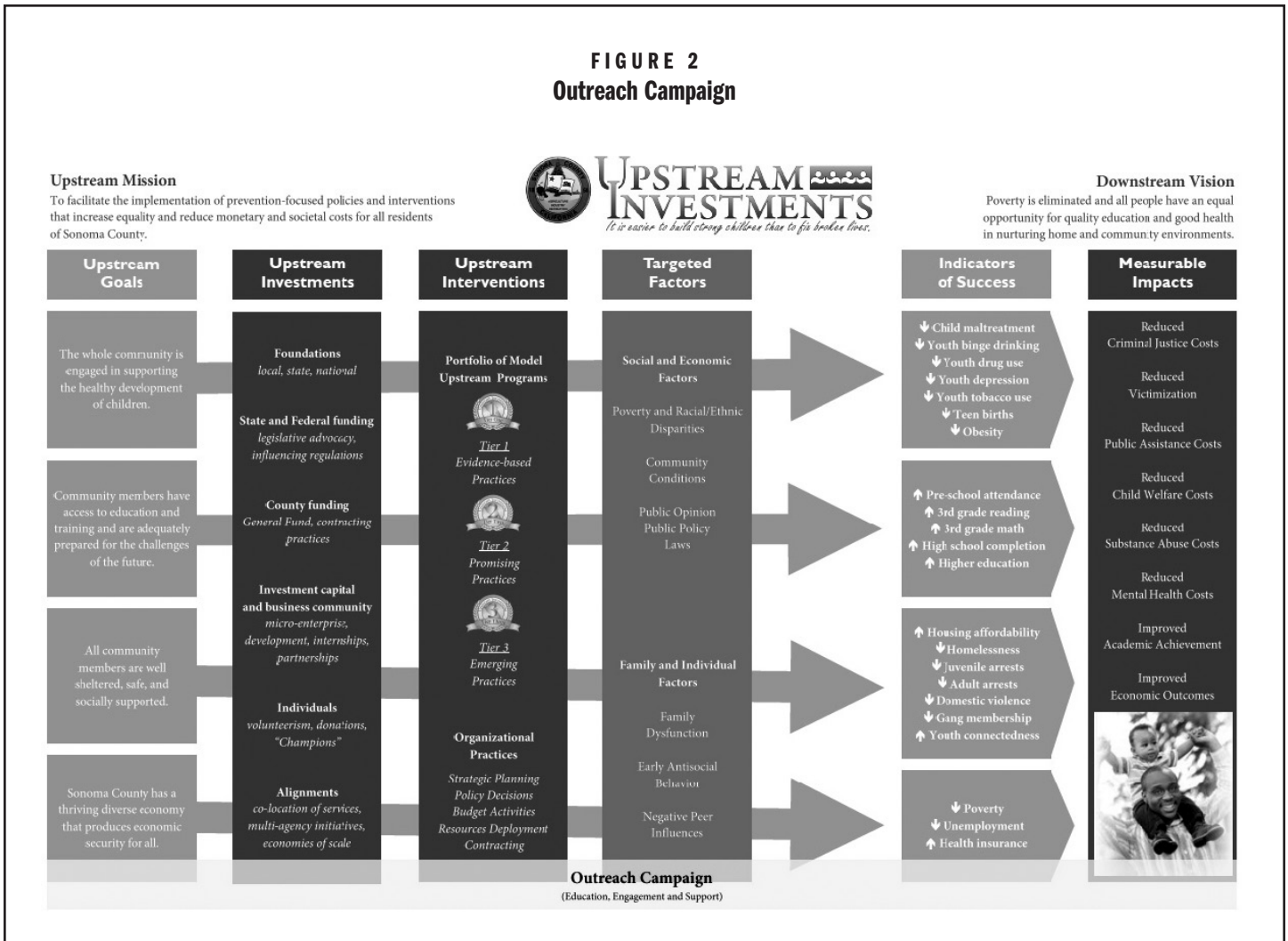
Funding Workgroup

The value of Upstream’s collective impact approach is exemplified through the partnerships that have been created with the Funder’s Committee, a group made up of foundations and businesses that want to use their funding capacity to invest in programs that effectively address the social problems created by poverty and inequality. By engaging these partners in Upstream’s shared vision, the initiative has succeeded in bringing non-traditional partners into the fight against a broad and deep social problem.

The Upstream Policy Committee is able to leverage the perspectives, expertise, and networks that members of the Funders Committee are able to provide, and this has strengthened the intervention approach of the initiative. Through the commitments that have been made by community partners (e.g., United Way, Sonoma Valley Vintners and Growers’ Alliance), members of the Funders Committee are using their grant dollars to encourage local organizations to complete a Portfolio application or seek out Technical Assistance to facilitate this process. Additionally, the Portfolio provides an avenue for local funders to seek out upstream programs and services that are considered model programs.

The Funders are not only engaged partners, but as a group they demonstrate ownership of the

FIGURE 2
Outreach Campaign



Upstream Mission and Vision. This is easily observed at a Funders Committee meeting, a gathering that was initiated by the members themselves. The purpose of coming together is to discuss ways of increasing their mutual collaboration, as well as to bring in additional partners that are aligned with the mission of funding upstream programs and practices

Recommendations

Specifically looking at the City and County of San Francisco, a meaningful recommendation in regards to the implementation and application of evidence-based research is in the arena of contracts. Secondly, the San Francisco Human Services Agency should consider adding a qualified technical assistant to support community-based agencies with contracting, seeking outside grants, or simply to provide training around effective management practices and organizational capacity. In addition, city government officials should reach out to new networks such as the private sector for support, expertise, and resources.

Perhaps the most compelling aspect of Upstream is its most fundamental component. Sonoma County reminds local governments that our primary responsibility is to eradicate social injustices, the vast majority of which are created by poverty. Local governments can learn from Upstream that tackling the issue of poverty is a powerful way to motivate both internal staff, as well as the community. Ultimately, this will improve the capacity of all partners to produce positive outcomes.

Acknowledgments

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