

# **Upstream Investments: Sonoma County's Collective Impact Initiative**

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## **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

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Sonoma County's Upstream Investments (UI) initiative is an approach to improving social services and community outcomes. UI sets out to break through structural barriers in service delivery with methods fundamentally based in the collective impact principles of equity and data-driven decision-making. UI was developed through the Sonoma County Board of Supervisors' exploration into reducing long-term criminal justice involvement by shifting funding to programming that addresses root-cause issues. Key components of the UI initiative focus on investing wisely and collaboratively, a 10-year commitment to investing in early prevention efforts,

investing in evidence-based programs, and investing through a collective impact structure. UI developed a Portfolio that set guidelines and formed an incentive structure for funding community service programs. UI's Technical Assistance (TA) provides free support and training for community service providers related to qualifying for the Portfolio, data collection and analysis, and integrating UI principles. Equity is at the forefront of UI principles, specifically focusing on Anti-Racist Results Based Accountability (AR RBA). Sonoma County's UI initiative creates a change in mentality, approach, and systems on an organizational and community level.

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## Introduction

Inspirational writer and speaker, Ifeanyi Enoch Onuoha (2011), stated, “Teamwork is the secret that makes common people achieve uncommon results.” In the world of social and health services, we are results-driven, whether it be keeping a child out of the system, providing a family with the necessary resources for health and wellness, or protecting a vulnerable adult from financial scams. We are common people hoping to achieve uncommon results despite obstacles impeding our success. One of our biggest obstacles is the fundamental structure of local, state, and federal organizations. Organizations across the spectrum offer services through siloed structures. These organizational silos directly hinder communication and collaboration, ultimately limiting the beneficial outcomes for the communities we serve.

Sonoma County’s Upstream Investments (UI) initiative provides the tools to break through the antiquated structural barriers associated with a county’s ability to deliver services. Led by the principle core values of collective impact (Kania & Kramer, 2011), UI establishes a common agenda for the community to invest early in prevention efforts, invest wisely in interventions proven to work, and invest together by aligning investments for maximum impact. UI’s agenda is set to improve social services and community outcomes through the lens of equity and justice, data-driven decision-making, and collaborative partnerships.

## Background

In 2007, the Sonoma County Board of Supervisors (BOS) was faced with the decision to approve construction of a new county jail. Instead of accepting the proposal

to build another jail, the BOS decided to explore and question the reason why another jail was needed. What comes from continued funding into the criminal justice system? What are the antecedents to involvement within the criminal justice system, and what can be done to prevent them? At this moment, Sonoma County BOS set the tone and mindset for what eventually would become the UI initiative.

The first county strategic plan developed by the BOS included language aimed at reducing long-term criminal justice involvement by shifting the funding upstream. Sonoma Department of Human Services (DHS) was selected to conceptualize what upstream investments could be and how it could be implemented in the county. A policy committee was formed composed of county department heads, local nonprofit CEOs, a school superintendent, and other community leaders. Within the policy committee, sub-committees were formed to focus on key areas as necessary, including branding/communications, indicators, private sector engagement, and evidence-based practices. The committees met for 12 months and submitted their recommendations to the BOS.

Key components of their recommendations:

- A 10-year commitment to fund and support the UI initiative
- **Invest Early** by funding prevention
- **Invest Wisely** by funding evidence-based and evidence-informed programs
- **Invest Together** by following a collective impact model

The BOS endorsed the recommendation, and in 2010, an Upstream Investments Initiative Policy Committee was established as a permanent fixture with the inclusion of two roles for BOS members.

## Strategy

### *Invest Early*

UI utilizes strategies that help address social issues before they develop into larger societal issues or to prevent them from occurring in the first place. UI is different from traditional approaches that focus on treating the symptoms of social problems rather than on addressing their root cause. Investing in upstream strategies aims to promote sustainable, long-term solutions.

Examples of upstream investments include:

- Early childhood education programs that aim to promote school readiness and reduce the achievement gap among low-income children
- Affordable housing initiatives that aim to address the root causes of homelessness
- Healthcare programs that aim to promote healthy behaviors and prevent chronic diseases
- Financial literacy programs that aim to promote financial stability and prevent poverty
- Workforce development programs that aim to provide training and job opportunities for low-income individuals

### *Invest Wisely*

Upstream Investments uses a wide range of data sources to inform its work. The organization uses data to drive decision-making, identify areas where social services can be improved, and to develop strategies for addressing those needs. One such instance involves a collaboration with the FIRST 5 Sonoma County to improve outcomes for local children through the age of five. Through data analysis and strategic planning, the organization has helped identify areas where additional resources and support are needed and has worked with

community partners to develop programs and services to address those needs.

#### Population-Level Indicators

The Human Development Index (HDI) is a statistical tool used to assess and compare the level of human development in targeted areas. It factors in life expectancy at birth, education, and standard of living. UI utilizes HDI to track three key areas where UI can impact change in Sonoma County: health, income, and education. Tracking the key areas also allows UI to pinpoint the coordination of services and collaborative efforts based on geographical location, ethnicity, and race.

#### Portfolio

A key component of the UI structure is setting the standard for service providers to implement and/or develop evidence-based and evidence-informed programming. The standard is set through UI's Portfolio containing vetted programs. Vetted programs have two paths to be added to the Portfolio.

Evidence-Based Practices	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Rigorously evaluated</li><li>• Listed on a clearinghouse</li><li>• Demonstrate fidelity to the model</li><li>• Clearly describe adaptations</li><li>• Evaluation plan</li></ul>
Evidence-Informed (Promising) Practices	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Literature review</li><li>• Logic model</li><li>• Program manual</li><li>• Evaluation plan</li></ul>

### *Technical Assistance (TA)*

Technical Assistance (TA) is another component that provides vital support to community organizations in meeting criteria to add programs to the UI Portfolio and guidance on UI principles. TA is offered to providers at no cost and encourages an environment of learning and mutual support. UI's organizational structure is designed to be flexible, and TA is the guiding arm that allows UI to be responsive to the needs of the community it serves while facilitating systems change within County government. The primary objective of UI's foundational structure was to develop a portfolio of community programs. It then focused on establishing evaluative techniques and procedures and, currently, integrating Anti-Racist Results Based Accountability (AR RBA) (County of Sonoma Office of Equity & Upstream Investments; Friedman, 2015).

### *Invest Together*

Upstream Investments works with a variety of community partners (local government agencies, non-profit organizations, and private sector stakeholders) to identify areas where social services can be improved and to develop strategies for addressing those needs. UI provides a space for service providers to explore what resources and programs are with a collaborative mindset. UI has effectively established a universal framework that promotes a collective, equitable culture and terminology, facilitating providers to have consistent evaluation methods and data tracking.

### *Anti-Racist RBA*

One of the most beneficial collaborations under the UI umbrella is found within Sonoma County's Office of Equity. The failure to center on equity is the primary reason why community change efforts are less impactful, if impactful at all (Williams, 2023). UI and the Office of Equity received

feedback through a community engagement process and adopted AR RBA to bring equity to the forefront of UI principles.

*"If you want to actually create anti-racist change, you need to have a deep understanding of the problems so that your solutions can actually fix what's broken. In order to understand the problem and all of its nuances, the best experts are the people who live that life every day."*

- Zea Malawa (2021)

UI's AR RBA approach focuses on the understanding of the context of inequalities in three ways:

- Distinguishing between structural and interpersonal racism
- Emphasizing the importance of gaining a deeper understanding of history and the origins of disparities
- Highlighting the need for empathy beyond feelings of guilt among privileged individuals and shame among marginalized groups.

AR RBA also allows for the creation of space for difficult conversations, analysis, and action through Turn the Curve Thinking (TTC) Concepts. TTC focuses on addressing the contributing factors to inequalities. Ideas are then discussed to prioritize ideas for action. UI's approach specifically asks five questions:

1. How are we doing?
2. What is the story behind the curve?
3. Who are the partners that have a role to play in turning the curve?
4. What works to turn the curve?
5. What is our action plan to turn the curve?

### *Data and Performance Measures*

Currently, eight sites in Sonoma County input data from across the community into

Apricot, a shared measurement tool. Apricot combines case management features with advanced data and analytics. The tool supports organizations in making data-driven decisions. Data from Apricot will soon be able to be transferred into a public-facing dashboard that will provide reports focused on three core areas of analysis:

1. How many people in the community were engaged?
2. How well was the engagement?
3. Was the engagement beneficial?

Data collection involves both quantitative and qualitative forms. Data is disaggregated by population characteristics, especially race/ethnicity, gender, etc., to align with AR RBA. Once collected, data can be analyzed for patterns of disparities. Sharing the intentions of data collection and outcomes allows UI to build trust and be accountable to the community it serves.

## **Recommendations**

### **Board of Supervisors Sponsored Initiative**

The most efficient methods for change occur when the mechanisms for such are supported from the top down. The County Board of Supervisors are not only responsible for providing support with a majority buy-in, but also for their participation in the development of a county structure and guidance based on UI principles. Board of Supervisor participation will allow for faster decision-making and easier strategy alignment for the county. The commitment will need to be long-term (at least ten years) and include fiscal support and a dedication to promoting equity, learning, and flexibility.

### **Designation of Lead County Department**

Selecting the County department to lead the initiative is the next important step. In Contra Costa County, the Employment and Human Services Department (EHSD), Policy and Planning Division has the established structure to lead the initiative. Policy and Planning would be tasked with establishing a guiding policy committee that would adapt UI principles, accounting for characteristics that may be unique to the specific county. The committee will include members from the Board of Supervisors or similar positions. Much like Sonoma County, housing the initiative's core with the human services department would allow for the utilization and leveraging of established structures and collaborative efforts. Policy and Planning department staff can contribute to the formation of the initiative backbone team; however, at least four additional 1.0 FTE positions are essential for the overall operation, including:

- Administrative Services Assistant III
- Research and Evaluation Manager
- Planner and Evaluation, Level B (2)

Committee members would include representatives from all Bureaus and Programs from EHSD, Health Services and Veteran Services. The committee would also include members from the Board of Supervisors. Contra Costa County Board of Supervisors has an established Internal Operations Committee to examine and make recommendations on a variety of issues relating to the effectiveness and efficiency of County services. Two County Supervisors hold Chair and Vice Chair positions. Other committee members would include county non-profit/community business organizations (CBO) and law enforcement agencies.

Committee priorities would focus on assessing county needs utilizing recent Needs Assessments from Contra Costa



Health Plan (2022) and other published community assessments. A strategic plan would be created to enhance collaboration and service delivery between county agencies, health services, CBOs and law enforcement. The plan would focus on elements of capacity building and community engagement through a diversity, equity, inclusion, justice, belonging (DEIJB), data-driven framework. A data platform, like Apricot which is also being used by some CBOs in Contra Costa, would need to be researched and adopted for data collection analysis. Ultimately, the committee should have a common goal to effectively integrate UI principles, align resources, and create a well-rounded, preventive approach to address county social issues.

## **Conclusion**

The ultimate goal for community service providers is to enhance the well-being and quality of life for individuals in the community across the lifespan. Providers set goals that address various social issues and promote positive change. Strategy is built around supporting vulnerable populations, empowering others, promoting inclusive environments, and creating opportunities for growth and development. Upstream Investments and all the individuals and organizations involved are creating a path guided by the goal of community service. UI provides a lean approach to solutions to address complex societal issues by focusing on prevention-based programs, data collection, and analysis. The approach is led by a mindset based in equity and influenced by community engagement and an anti-racist framework. A primary characteristic for the success of this initiative, and others alike, is the ability and freedom to be flexible, develop and promote a learning environment, and top-down support. Commitment to UI principles can

lead to generational systems change, changing how organizations interact and support communities and ultimately elevating the community in all the dimensions of human development.

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