

Upstream Investments

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Administering social services has become increasingly complex in contemporary society. Counties are often asked to do a lot more for their constituents even with flat or diminishing budgets. As a way to increase the impact of the scarce resources, Sonoma County has instituted the Upstream Investments office.

The Upstream Investments office is responsible for helping the county and governmental partners invest wisely in programs and aiding collaborating programs to perform more evidence-based research. This aligns with the Upstream Investment's core values surrounding not only investing early but also investing wisely.

Investing in issues early is a way to control costs for a county via prevention. Each dollar that a county invests early on with specified populations has the potential to save multiple dollars within other county programs that have a higher cost to administer, such as correctional institutions.

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When counties and other government agencies implement and maintain programs, they often consider questions surrounding program performance. Counties often analyze programs to see if they are efficient or impactful. Are these programs doing enough of what they are designed to do and if they are really making a difference? A significant topic that most always arises is surrounding the cost of the program and if the program is truly making a difference. Edward Suchman described program evaluation as a “growing body of administrative and research people confronted by the increasing necessity for reliable assessment of the impact of programs” (Suchman, 1967, p. 67). In other words, county social service programs have the need to evaluate how much impact programs are having while budgets are being reduced. As a way to contend with more constrained and limited budgets that are paired with increasing public need, Sonoma County has implemented the Upstream Investments program. The Upstream Investments program is a progressive approach to investing dollars both early and in a purposeful way that is supported by research and data. This paper will define Upstream Investments, describe the purpose and benefits of the portfolio, and close by offering the differences between program tiers and some conclusions about the benefits of the program.

The Upstream Investments program is a public-private partnership between Sonoma County and local community partners. Sonoma County has created an upstream office that is imbedded within the Human Services Department (HSD). Although the upstream office is contained within HSD, the office collaborates internally with probation, behavioral health and health care services. The Mayor’s Gang Prevention Task Forces, continuum of care, health action and

Partnership for Children are a few of the examples of some of the external partners for the upstream office. A core tenet of the upstream program includes: “an emphasis on prevention-focused intervention and policies for children, families, individuals, and the community to increase equality and promote opportunities that reduce future monetary and societal costs” (Sonoma County, 2015, p. 2). Upstream programs are intervening early and in a purposeful way to hopefully address societal issues to control costs of future programs. An example of this could be an investment in a community gang program that provides tutoring and after school programs which “can be an upstream investment because of the future positive societal and financial costs. Investing in a program now, would potentially positively impact our probation department in the future, basically saving hire cost of incarceration” (personal communication, Oscar Chavez, 2017). A mainstream example is contained within the value set of the First 5 Program which funds early intervention preschool and education readiness and success. Students are more successful and use less school services by investing in preschool education. “Research shows that kids who attend quality preschool have higher math and reading skills, are better prepared for kindergarten, behave better in class, and are more likely to graduate from high school and go to college” (First 5, 2017). A last major component of upstream investments focuses on portfolio management and technical support. Upstream investments support community partners and program applicants by offering technical assistance surrounding research and program evaluation.

The Upstream Investments program offers many benefits, both current and future. The Upstream Investments portfolio is the only comprehensive management system within Sonoma County. A key future benefit of the Upstream Investments program is that it will save partner county departments future dollars by offering cheaper interventions now. Other future benefits

include improving societal and social outcomes through investments and stabilizing communities with health services, childcare and therapeutic interventions. Some of the current benefits of the upstream program are through technical assistance, program enhancement through research and data analysis, and community program development. Some applicants do not have the finances or expertise to perform research or set of measures to capture data. The Upstream Investments program offers clients and applicants with assistance surrounding research. The degree of assistance is dependent on the sophistication of the program, the organization administering the program, and the research operating budget of the organizations. The point of the Upstream Investments team and the portfolio is to get more programs in the portfolio and show more evidence-based outcomes for these programs. The outlook is always to improve the portfolio and ultimately the status of the communities. The Upstream team closely holds these values when providing services to clients and/or applicants to the portfolio. The Upstream Investments program also assists in meeting mandates established through the Mayor's Office and local county departments. "Having such a portfolio helps the county and community partners to individually and collaboratively do the following" (Sonoma County, 2015, p. 2):

1. Increase capacity to apply for and receive funding for upstream programs.
2. Identify existing effective and cost beneficial upstream programs and target funding and resources to these programs.
3. Validate and acknowledge the effective work currently being done throughout the county.
4. Promote replication of successful and cost beneficial upstream programs.
5. Identify and understand the gaps in upstream investments throughout the community (including geographic gaps).
6. Identify duplicate programs (if any) and make adjustments (if necessary).

7. Plan to expand funding for and referrals to effective and cost beneficial upstream programs.
8. Understand what upstream programs work best for which clients (one size does not fit all).
9. Strengthen county/community partner collaborations and partnership related to upstream programs.
10. Explain to the community, to funders, and to clients why some upstream programs are selected over others.
11. Demonstrate to taxpayers that the county makes wise, responsible and forward-thinking fiscal decisions.
12. Expand county and public recognition of the value of investing in upstream programs and the value of children.
13. Increase community commitment to upstream programs through volunteerism
14. Help to populate the 211-referral list. (Portfolio of Upstream Programs: Instructions (revise 7.24.15)).

As stated above, a key component of the Upstream Investments program involves program evaluation and research. As a way to streamline applications to the portfolio, recertifying the portfolio and strengthening research, the portfolio is divided into a three-tiered system.

Depending on the tier that a program applies to, determines the program requirements and access to the upstream clearinghouse. Tier 1 programs are evidence-based programs “that have been empirically proven to produce positive outcomes and that are implemented in Sonoma County with fidelity to the model program” (Sonoma County, 2015, p. 7). Tier 1 programs are included in the Evidence-based Clearinghouse. Programs that are entered into

the Evidence-based Clearinghouse are certified, indicating they meet the standards of empirically based programs with fidelity. These programs can apply to other organizations for funding and grants and can have their application process streamlined, as they will not have to prove their evaluation process. Tier 2 programs are classified as promising practices. Promising practices do not meet “the rigorous Tier 1 criteria for evidence-based practice but they are designed based on sound theory and with clear expected outcome” (Sonoma County, 2015, p. 9). The point of promising practices is that there is an expectation of creating a logic model once data have been collected. To qualify for Tier 2 programs, agencies must provide a substantial contemporary literature review with which the prospective logic model should be aligned. Tier 3 programs involve innovative practices and “have the intent of being outcomes-based and meet the prerequisites of evidence-based practice. However, these programs have not yet conducted or completed an evaluation” (Sonoma County, 2015, p. 12). A core criterion is that the logic model, policy and procedures and evaluation plan are all aligned and reflect the evidence cited in the literature review.

Having a flexible approach to program validity allows for inclusion of programs that have not been evaluated, or do not have the capacity to be evaluated due to the population or subject matter of the services being delivered. An example of this is PUNCHES Boxing Gym that is established through the Santa Rosa Mayor’s Office. This program is set up to offer after school extra-curricular activities for at-risk youth. Some of the program goals are to improve grades and school outcomes through increased self-esteem of youth. The program goals are difficult to account for due to many validity issues; however, anecdotally speaking, providing activities to underprivileged and underserved youth is a positive investment. The

upstream tier system provides the opportunities to maintain these programs that appear to be doing well serving the community.

In conclusion, it is important to summarize the tremendous benefits of the Upstream Investments program. The Upstream Investments program is an innovative and dynamic process of supporting and creating community programs through partnerships and collaboration. Morgan, Green and Shin (2015) state that, “the ability of public administrators to be successful in their work depends to a large extent on the social capital, civic competency, and civic enterprise in the communities they service” (D. Morgan, R. Green & C. Shim, 2015, p. 49). Public agencies cannot support the community alone. They need the help of community partners and have a duty to help partners help themselves through research. Providing technical research assistance is paramount to helping community programs to be successful. Sonoma County should be commended for incorporating the future funding aspect of the upstream programs. By taking a dynamic view of programs today, and their potential to control the costs of other programs in the future, the county has implemented a brilliant use of public funds. This praxis is fiscally sound and builds communities from a grass roots perspective.

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