

# Solutions for America *as an Intervention*

## **MAKING CONNECTIONS, CHANGING MINDS, THINKING SMALL, and DOING DEMOCRACY**

At the beginning, Solutions for America was about identifying, observing, recording, and reporting the problem-solving efforts of communities across the nation. But along the way something interesting happened: Solutions became something more, a program that not only observed, but provided expertise and built research capacity to help agencies and local governments study themselves, disseminate their findings, and ultimately improve their operations. And as it turns out, Solutions accomplished this precisely by *making connections, changing minds, thinking small, and doing democracy.*

### **Practitioner and Researcher Relationship**

First, Solutions embodied the principles of thinking small (but smart) and making connections by weaving together a network of small, community-sized solutions. The hub-and-spoke research model paired community-based organizations and local governments with local researchers to gather and analyze data on individual pieces of the solutions puzzle. These partnerships were an unqualified success. Assessments of Solutions by program participants were consistently positive. As early as the first survey of site staff, 91 percent of participants rated their overall experience with the program as “excellent” or “very good.” Sites were particularly enthusiastic about their local research partners, whom they saw as committed to their programs, able to work well with program staff, and instrumental for providing guidance and focus to the research effort. Among the local researchers, assessments were similarly positive. Two-thirds of those surveyed rated their experience with Solutions as “excellent” and all others considered it “very good.” Nine out of ten local researchers indicated that they would work with their Solutions site again, and 94 percent of site staffers said that they would participate in the program again. Indeed, three-quarters of the sites have continued the relationship with their local research partner since the conclusion of Solutions. These positive assessments came despite that fact that for most participants, particularly site staff, the research undertaken as part of Solutions was a new experience.

### **Motivation to Participate**

Sites and researchers had distinct but overlapping reasons for deciding to participate in Solutions; for both groups the idea of making new and productive connections was paramount. For researchers, the opportunity to evaluate a local organization in their backyard, to connect with and contribute to the local community in a new way, and to apply their research expertise to a real-world problem offered an opportunity to move beyond the usual confines of the university setting. “I was very interested in finding projects that formed a bridge between the university and the community,” explained one researcher, and Solutions “offered a great opportunity for this.” For sites, the opportunity to connect with and have their work evaluated and validated by an objective party, particularly with the prestige of an outside organization such as the Pew Partnership behind it, constituted the most important motivation for participation in Solutions. Site staff considered capacity to collect data and conduct program evaluation as activities essential to service delivery, but recognized their own limitations in these areas. Just as researchers sought to move beyond the university, site staff appeared eager to make connections beyond their own programs. These connections were forged through the hub-and-spoke structure, but also through the contacts made at a series of national meetings. Solutions brought participants together five times for meetings in cities across the country. These gatherings were an opportunity for site staff, local researchers, and local community partners to come together and exchange views, ideas, and information, while making connections that often lasted long after the meeting was adjourned.

### **Building Capacity at the Local Level**

Solutions for America also set out to change minds. As was the case at many of the nineteen sites, Solutions accomplished this both by providing new skills and information and also by shaping attitudes. By the end of the project we were surprised to discover just how important the latter turned out to be. Solutions for America helped to enhance the sites’ research capacity. In part, this capacity-building was brought about through the creation and fostering of a “culture of inquiry” among sites (see Hernández and Vishner 2001). Solutions required sites to engage in a sustained process of data-gathering and empirical analysis, through their work with the local researcher, through the demanding reporting requirements coordinated by the CUPR hub, and through the national meet-

ings organized by the Pew Partnership. These activities served to inculcate and enhance a mindset in which research and evaluation were seen as integral program functions. By the end of the project, 83 percent of site staff indicated that they themselves and their organizations had developed more positive attitudes toward evaluation research and had become convinced of its value.

Beyond such attitudinal changes, participation in the Solutions research yielded tangible informational gains as well. Nearly 85 percent of program staff agreed that the Solutions research revealed new information about their program, and more than three-quarters of staff members surveyed agreed that the Solutions research helped them implement new data collection methods and improved their organization's ability to conduct research. In addition, many staffers found the research to be helpful in validating their prior expectations about the effectiveness of their work. More than 80 percent of those surveyed agreed that the research process confirmed what staff suspected or assumed to be true. One interviewee indicated that his organization's participation in Solutions and the results that emerged from the research were "like getting a Good Housekeeping seal of approval that would allow us to go to funders, to go to our supporters...and say that we have been looked at and have been found worthy."

Other staff members reported that the Solutions research helped lead to improvements in existing data collection and analysis efforts, as well as to the introduction of new data-gathering systems. For some organizations, participation helped facilitate improvements in client survey or focus-group administration; others reported advances in tracking program and client information. Of the nineteen sites, thirteen conducted focus groups, fifteen administered surveys, and sixteen undertook a rigorous analysis of existing records. One program staffer explained that by the conclusion of Solutions the evaluation process had become more standardized, so that "we're much more proactive about building in documentation" to ongoing program operations.

### **Utilization of Research Findings**

More important, these new data are being put to good use. For many sites, Solutions demonstrated what was particularly effective about program operations, and in some cases this new information helped lead to internal changes in program practices, such as adding new components to service delivery operations or expanding services to a

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broader group of clients or wider geographical area. Sites have gone on to use the research findings and their participation in Solutions in a number of other concrete ways, including strategic planning sessions, fundraising activities, and sophisticated public relations efforts. Sites also made deliberate efforts to disseminate research findings externally. For example, over three-quarters of sites have met with their congressperson to discuss the research. Others presented findings at national conferences, included findings in organization newsletters and fundraising appeals, and so on.

For their part, the local researchers seemed to find their work with the Solutions sites to be challenging, but engaging and ultimately satisfying in precisely the ways they had anticipated. These researchers were eager to participate in real-world projects that got them out of the university setting and into the community. Participation in Solutions provided just such an experience. Beyond this, many of the researchers were able to use their Solutions funding to hire research assistants, and several researchers were able to incorporate their Solutions experience into their undergraduate or graduate-level teaching.

### **Challenges**

At times, Solutions was as demanding as it was innovative. Clear challenges emerged throughout the research process; staff members and local researchers alike identified a series of hurdles that needed to be overcome, the most pressing of which were the availability of sufficient funding and staff time to devote to data collection and working with the research partner. In one survey, more than half of site staff members agreed that “it was difficult to identify manageable methods of collecting data on program operations.” In part this was a question of expertise, and it was precisely this that the local researchers were able to provide. However, making data collection and analysis manageable also requires sufficient resources to conduct critical tasks such as client interviewing, data entry, and the preparation and dissemination of research reports. Here, the local researchers—particularly when aided by research assistants—were again able to subsidize some but certainly not all of the costs.

Staff time was clearly the most pressing challenge for many organizations. Several sites expressed a desire for additional funds to compensate existing (often overworked) staff for their work on the research or to hire a new staff person specifically for

the purposes of data collection and analysis. All told, more than a third of respondents *disagreed* with the statement, “there was sufficient staff and local researcher time available to implement the research process.”

### **Mitigating Factors**

These challenges, however, tended to be mitigated by the strength of the relationship between the sites and the local research partner. At least 80 percent of researchers agreed that site staff understood their role in the research effort; that they worked well together; and that staff members were intellectually committed to the research effort. Similar majorities of program personnel agreed that the researcher understood the organization’s work, worked well with staff, and provided direction and focus to the research. One of the reasons these partnerships appear to have worked so well is that each group brought a unique set of skills; there seems to have been an informal division of labor between researchers and staff. Researchers tended to be more involved in designing the research, analyzing and interpreting the data, and preparing reports for Solutions, while site staffers were more involved in data collection and staff training.

That researchers and staff members tended to agree on the nature of their relationship and that they tended overwhelmingly to work well together suggests that the parties experienced joint ownership of the research process and outcomes. However, in several cases such joint ownership was absent, communication between the researcher and program staff was poor, and in a small handful of cases sites and researchers got off to a rocky start and never fully recovered.

Despite the challenges the Solutions sites faced during the research process, in general most did not find the process to be overly burdensome. A number of factors helped mitigate challenges, including the involvement and enthusiasm of organizational staff and board members, a high level of preparation and organization in the early stages of the research, the availability of the research fund provided by Solutions and a hands-on, engaged local researcher all helped to ease the burden of conducting program evaluation research. As a result, in each of two surveys, at least two-thirds of program staff reported a relatively low burden associated with participating in Solutions.

When it comes to mainstreaming evaluation research—i.e., continuing what began under Solutions—the related concerns of funding and staff time are paramount,

and there are critical questions relating to the post-Solutions transition that remain to be addressed. Nevertheless, it is encouraging that, as noted earlier, nearly 94 percent of site staff members indicated that they would participate in Solutions again, and that three-quarters are continuing some form of collaboration with their Solutions research partner.

### **Doing Democracy**

Finally, it is important to recognize that part of the success of Solutions as an intervention rests on its embodiment of democratic values. Sites and local researchers were encouraged—indeed were required—to make their own decisions regarding research design, data gathering, the general organization of the research process, and of course the uses to which the research findings would be put. To be sure, Solutions provided information, guidance, and a certain number of required tasks. But the nineteen solutions and their local research partners ultimately had autonomy as to how the research process played out. Moreover, Solutions fostered an ongoing process of discussion and deliberation. Through national meetings, through a listserv e-mail forum, and through a series of newsletters and reports, the Pew Partnership sponsored opportunities for participants to come together, exchange information, and learn from one another about how best to pursue specific strategies and negotiate particular challenges. At the end of the day, this was not a top-down program of evaluation-from-afar. Rather, Solutions was shaped on an ongoing basis by the participants themselves. The project's success owes much to the democratic nature of this process.