The Urban Health Initiative: Lessons for Philanthropy

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The Urban Health Initiative (UHI) is a ten-year $65 million initiative aimed at improving the health and safety of large numbers of young people by changing the way that systems function and allocate resources on behalf of children and youth. Funded by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation in five cities—Baltimore, Detroit, Oakland, Philadelphia, and Richmond—UHI is managed by a National Program Office (NPO) located at the University of Washington. This paper examines the “big ideas” and design choices that have shaped UHI’s experience to date, identifies some initial lessons for philanthropy, and poses questions designed to stimulate further consideration of these ideas and lessons.

Introduction

The Urban Health Initiative represents an ambitious attempt to make a measurable difference in the health and safety of young people in urban areas by changing the way that institutions and individuals think about and support services for children and youth. Approaching the end of its ten-year journey to realizing this ambition, UHI has accumulated a host of lessons from both its achievements and its struggles. Some of these lessons confirm the experience of other current or recent long-term, multi-site community change efforts supported by foundations around the country. Other lessons challenge existing practice. This paper aims to draw some initial lessons about the elements of UHI that distinguish it from the approaches taken by other initiatives. By focusing on UHI’s distinctive characteristics, we hope to stimulate new conversations and add to new knowledge about the role of philanthropy in promoting community change.

The paper is divided into two major parts. Part one of the paper is structured around the “big ideas” upon which UHI was founded, as well as the particular ways in which these ideas have been implemented. We begin by examining the driving goal of UHI and its most distinctive idea: “getting to scale” within a ten-year period. Getting to scale means improving the health and safety of enough children to make a measurable difference in the child health statistics for the city—or even region—as a whole. Subsequently, the paper discusses systems change as UHI’s
overarching strategy for achieving its getting-to-scale objectives. This distinguishing element of the UHI approach positions the five UHI sites as change agents that must focus on finding ways to improve policies, practices and funding for children and youth rather than as service providers, managers or even coordinators. Finally, part one ends with a discussion of two additional ideas that flow logically from UHI’s systems change approach: data-driven decision-making and a campaign model. These ideas—and the strategies they suggest—are not unique to UHI, but in combination, they define the specific approach that the UHI sites tried to use to achieve their desired outcomes.

For each of the “big ideas” in part one, we define the idea and the assumptions that underlie it; describe our understanding of what happened as the idea was implemented at the UHI sites; and present some of the critical lessons coming out of this implementation. Finally, we comment on the significance of the idea in the context of the broader community change field. We offer these comments based on our experience and observation of a number of other initiatives, but without making explicit one-to-one comparisons. Such comparisons might well be useful, but they would require a different paper and sources of information.

Part two of the paper focuses on the lessons that the NPO has drawn from several key aspects of UHI’s design and structure, including: use of an intermediary, site selection, site leadership, a non-prescriptive approach, evaluation, and a long-term funding horizon. We selected these from the many UHI design choices because although other community change initiatives have detailed their own lessons on some of these issues, we think UHI’s experiences can deepen this existing learning and offer some new insights for philanthropy. For each one, we describe the design
choice, summarize the NPO’s lessons about that design choice, and then draw some implications for the broader field.

Finally, the paper concludes with some questions that grow out of our analysis that we hope can be the initial focus for discussion at the upcoming Urban Seminar.

Our analysis relies almost exclusively on interviews with and written materials provided by the NPO. As such, it neither aims to define UHI’s successes and failures in specific terms nor represent the perspectives of all of the parties involved. UHI is still in progress and is being formally evaluated so this paper cannot comment on its final impact. Rather, our goal is to examine the ideas underlying UHI that appear distinctive and relevant for philanthropy and use the NPO’s description of UHI’s experience with these ideas as a jumping off point for broader discussion.

Part I: UHI’S “Big Ideas”

UHI’s Driving Ambition: Getting to Scale

UHI’s goals originated in the aftermath of the 1992 Los Angeles riots when RWJ, like many foundations, experienced a sense of urgency to address the pressing problems plaguing many

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1 Throughout the paper readers are referred to publications by the NPO that describe and draw lessons about various aspects of UHI’s experience. In order to give the flavor of UHI’s experience but keep this paper relatively short, we provide a few brief site examples but many more can be found in the NPO’s publications.
urban areas. The Foundation decided that incremental, fragmented solutions could not produce results at a scale and within a timeframe that was responsive to existing needs. Instead, a larger vision and more focused approach were required to make a difference in the lives of inner city residents. As a result, the driving ambition behind UHI is the idea of getting to scale, defined as making a measurable difference in children’s health and safety statistics for a city or even region. It is this notion of creating a measurable impact on a large-scale basis, and the rigorous way that UHI challenged its sites to think about and structure their work in relation to this idea, which is the most important distinguishing characteristic of the initiative.

Getting to scale, as UHI envisioned it, is anything but an abstract concept. Instead, this mandate requires the five UHI sites to identify the specific quantitative outcomes they need to achieve in order to reach scale, and to systematically analyze what it would take to bring about these outcomes within their communities. The Denominator Exercise provides a vehicle for helping sites to think in this manner, and offers the clearest window into what UHI means by getting to scale. The Exercise challenges each site to determine exactly how many children would have to be reached by a particular service strategy to bring about a measurable improvement in the relevant citywide child health statistics, and the amount of resources that must be mobilized to achieve this goal. For instance, getting to scale for Philadelphia’s after-school strategy means facilitating services for 96,000 children with a price tag of $150 million. Scale for Baltimore’s family support strategy is reaching 13,000 families at a total cost of $46 million.

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What Happened

Sites initially struggled to understand the magnitude of UHI’s getting to scale focus and how they needed to operate to take on this ambitious goal. It took almost two years into the implementation phase for most sites to identify their specific getting-to-scale targets, establish a realistic sense of the numbers, time, and resources that would be required to meet these targets, and to think strategically about what might be necessary to realize these objectives.

Once sites identified and understood their getting-to-scale objectives, however, their strategies and activities were framed by the knowledge that they had specific goals to meet and a limited time frame in which to accomplish them. As a result, sites experienced constant pressure to question whether the activities they were investing in would contribute to their getting-to-scale objectives and to be stringent about identifying the most effective and efficient means of achieving these objectives.

It is premature to assess the exact degree to which each site achieved each of its getting-to-scale goals. However, while variation exists across sites and across their multiple getting-to-scale targets, and while sites are still striving to meet most of these targets, it is clear that the UHI sites have together facilitated services for a large number of children and have raised and diverted significant resources to support the health and safety needs of disadvantaged youth.

Lessons Learned

Most importantly, UHI demonstrates that getting to scale is a feasible ambition. The UHI sites have facilitated services for a significant number of children and raised and diverted large pools
of funding to support these services. UHI also demonstrates that a focus on concrete, quantitative outcomes—in this case, numbers served and dollars diverted/raised—can help to motivate community initiatives to think about and organize their activities in a purposeful, rigorous fashion.

The largest challenge of getting to scale has proven to be the ambitious and uncommon nature of the idea itself. UHI site directors, as well as the NPO and RWJ representatives, struggled to grasp the magnitude and specificity of getting to scale and what was required of sites to accomplish it until well into the implementation phase of the initiative. Consequently, sites used their planning time less efficiently than the NPO might have liked, and initially invested in some strategies and activities that were not likely to result in large-scale systems changes.

In retrospect, the NPO believes that there are at least three strategies that might have helped to mitigate the challenges sites experienced in grasping and implementing the getting-to-scale mandate. First, it would have been useful for RWJ and NPO staff to develop at the outset some clear written materials about the concept of getting to scale so that all the parties involved in UHI could develop a shared understanding of this driving goal of the initiative. Second, the NPO believes that it should have more actively assisted sites to identify their getting-to-scale objectives and plan their strategies to achieve them. The concept of getting to scale was difficult enough and the work new enough to require a substantial investment in capacity building at the front end. Finally, an early assessment of the capacities of sites’ host cities would have been useful for sites’ planning purposes because the lack of infrastructure or organizational capacity to
deliver services at the desired level of scale needed to be factored into sites’ selection of their getting-to-scale goals and strategies.

*UHI in Perspective*

Although foundations often refer to the concept of getting to scale, it is a term that has remained remarkably undefined and poorly understood in practice. UHI’s important role here has been to take the concept out of the speculative realm and make it useable. All the parties involved in UHI—the sites, the NPO, and RWJ—have a shared, concrete definition of what scale means for each of the initiative’s goals, why it is defined as such, how it will be measured, and, as a result, what sort of planning and strategies are needed to achieve it.

Operationalizing the concept of scale and focusing relentlessly on achieving it is a huge contribution to the community change field. It helps long-term initiatives with “scale” ambitions to guard against mission drift. It allows initiatives to back up ambitious visions of transformation with measurable goals. It encourages foundation boards to develop realistic expectations about how the success of their investments will be defined. It demonstrates the substantial time and focus that is usually required for scale to be achieved. It provides some measure of public accountability, both for the sponsoring foundations and for the sites. And it leads to the notion of sustainability in that if scale—and the fundamental changes that are required to reach it—is achieved, sustainability is much more likely to follow. These are critical but often missing elements in foundation-sponsored community change initiatives.
Focusing the work around a set of getting-to-scale goals also provokes additional questions or concerns. Does the intense attention to getting-to-scale crowd out other activities or lines of work that, if unaddressed, compromise the potential of the getting-to-scale effort? What strategies are required to avoid staff burnout in the face of such daunting, publicly proclaimed goals? Is there a way to calibrate progress along the way to avoid early discouragement? And is our knowledge of service effectiveness sufficient to reliably assume that if a certain volume of service is provided at a certain cost, it will produce a certain level of outcome?

**UHI’s Overarching Approach: Systems Change**

UHI was founded on the belief that a systems change approach was necessary for sites to get to scale. As the NPO describes it, “systems change is getting best practices or innovative ideas accepted, generating or redirecting the resources needed to support them for the long term, and then embedding these new methods in the regular ‘business as usual’ practices of governments and service delivery systems.” The NPO does not conceive of the UHI sites as service providers, managers, or even coordinators, but as change agents who are supposed to catalyze an array of institutions, individual leaders, and even the public at large to increase and improve policies, programs and funding for children’s services. In sum, systems change requires changing the way people do their work and the way that funds are used.

UHI’s systems change strategy entails two key elements. First, according to the NPO, systems change requires a collaborative effort among “a broad cross-section of those most directly affected by the problems (including youth) as well as those in a position to address them.” Thus, UHI challenges its sites to partner—through both the composition of their board of directors and
in their daily activities—with government, private, and non-profit institutions as well as with individual power brokers who can provide them with the access, authority, and expertise needed to stimulate change. Second, systems change calls for a multi-faceted approach for which sites need capacities to move comfortably and exert influence in multiple arenas, from politics to communications, and to work at multiple levels, from facilitating the provision of services to diverting and even managing large funding streams.

What Happened

As with the idea of getting to scale, the UHI sites struggled initially to understand how a change agent role was different from their traditional way of thinking about the provision of children’s services. Many found it difficult to shed their service provider mentality even once they understood that systems change was required to get to scale. In addition, this new role required staff and board capacities that could not be created overnight. As a result, sites took longer than expected to develop and execute effective systems change strategies, and the NPO found it necessary to provide more technical assistance and hands-on guidance than it had originally anticipated.

Over time, all of the sites have established robust multi-sector collaborations that have proven instrumental in facilitating systems reforms. Since grasping the demands of the systems change approach, most sites have overhauled their boards to include individuals with the political muscle and institutional savvy needed to help sites to serve as effective agents of change. And all have worked—sometimes through new staff, sometimes through technical assistance—to become more adept at operating in a variety of political, social, and economic arenas, and employing an
array of mechanisms—including data, best practice research, advocacy, and media campaigns—to the tasks of reforming systems and getting to scale. (Some of these new capacities are discussed in detail later in the paper).

Although, once again, we cannot comment on the extent to which the UHI sites achieved all their ambitious system change goals, it is clear that they have stimulated concrete improvements in each city’s capacity to promote the health and safety needs of children and helped to foster a political and social environment conducive to enacting these as well as future changes. A sampling of the sites’ systems change accomplishments include the fact that Baltimore has helped establish the Maryland After-School Opportunity Fund, which is the first state-mandated fund dedicated to supporting after-school/youth development activities. Richmond has strengthened early childhood care in its three county area by building the capacity of all of the home visitation programs to, for the first time, include family literacy and early learning as a major focus of their work. Philadelphia has facilitated a partnership between the police department, probation department and a local nonprofit, which has resulted in the reallocation of over twenty million dollars of these agencies’ manpower and services to provide intensive, community- and home-based services for those youth most likely to kill or be killed. Oakland has worked with the principals of the most troubled middle schools in the city to permanently add to their staffs a "coordinator" to oversee the installation and continuous application of Oakland’s anti-violence, family outreach and youth development programming as well as to provide mental health services to children within school buildings. And, Detroit worked with the Mayor to secure the earmarking of $400 million dollars in casino revenue (over twenty years) to rehabilitate city recreation centers and support after-school programming, and helped to establish the Michigan After-School Partnership—which is now an
agency of state government within the Department of Education—to guide this rehabilitation and other after-school improvement efforts.

Lessons Learned

UHI’s experience suggests that broad-based community-change efforts can develop the strategic capacity to play an important role in shaping and improving upon the way in which children’s services in urban areas are provided and funded. UHI sites have worked with local agencies and service providers to facilitate improved health and safety outcomes for children while striving to promote the funding and policy changes needed to create an environment conducive to sustaining these improvements and promoting additional reforms that may be needed in the future.

While such a system change approach shows much promise, UHI also demonstrates the significant organizational capacity challenges associated with this strategy. In retrospect, the NPO underscores the importance of helping sites internalize early on the critical elements of a systems change strategy and how these elements differ from other community change approaches.

UHI in Perspective

UHI’s system change approach is an important complement to the neighborhood development focus of most community change efforts. Although foundations have increasingly recognized the need to link work at the neighborhood level with promoting changes in the service systems at the city or regional level, UHI’s system change work signals a push to an even more complex
appreciation of the elements that are needed to constitute a serious and credible community change effort.

At the same time, UHI’s experience leaves only partially answered the question of how to actually transform the practice and organizational culture of the big systems it targeted—changes that are notoriously difficult to create and sustain over time. In fact, it was the difficulty and limited or narrow impact of systems change strategies that led some foundations to turn to the neighborhood as the primary vehicle through which to improve the lives of the urban disadvantaged. The field now appears to be at a point that acknowledges the critical role of change at both the systems and neighborhood levels but is challenged to develop strategic and operational links between the two.

To further complicate this challenge, the policy, funding and practice changes necessary for systems change are at least partially controlled by decision makers and conditions outside the boundaries of UHI’s target communities. The NPO tried to integrate a regional perspective into its systems change approach by pressing sites to consider how they could engage regional actors in their work and draw upon and redirect the energy and resources of neighboring, and perhaps more affluent, areas to address the problems plaguing inner-city youth. However, given the enormous challenge of getting to scale, most of the sites considered a regional approach to be tangential to their core efforts rather than, possibly, an additional strategy for achieving systems change more efficiently. A key barrier was that if they broadened their geographic area of focus, they also by extension increased the number of children they needed to reach and dollars raised/diverted to make a measurable difference in children’s health and safety statistics. Even
without this disincentive, however, sites faced both strategic and operational questions about where and how to expand their activities to maximize the potential benefits of a regional approach. We expect that a key priority for future work in the community change field will be articulating and testing out the links between neighborhood and systems change strategies within a regional framework.

**Strategies for Changing Systems to Get to Scale: Data-Driven Decision Making**

Since getting to scale in this initiative is fundamentally about impacting the health and safety statistics of a city or region, UHI challenges sites to determine how to find, collect, aggregate, and analyze data on children’s outcomes and then use this information to guide their goals and strategies. UHI’s dependence on data-driven decision making can be seen at three different stages of sites’ efforts. First, sites could not identify realistic getting-to-scale objectives without using data to establish a baseline measure of children’s well-being in their city and to understand how many children are already being served through community activities. Second, in order to achieve scale in an efficient manner, sites need to focus on those activities that have proven most likely to actually have an impact on children’s lives. As a result, sites use “best practice” research to identify the number of children they can realistically reach with a given practice; the likelihood that this practice will produce the desired change in children’s outcomes; and the cost required to ramp up this practice to the necessary scale. Third, sites need to be able to rely on a constant influx of data throughout the life of UHI to track and assess their progress on a series of process and outcome measures leading to the goal of getting to scale.
What Happened

Few of the UHI cities had a comprehensive or coordinated data infrastructure regarding children’s services; similarly, few site leaders and staff members initially possessed the expertise to use research and data to drive their decision making. As the NPO describes, “…in some cases the numbers don’t exist, or they’re not in a usable form, or they’re hidden under layers of bureaucracy, or people won’t share them due to turf or other issues. In every case, UHI sites didn’t have the expertise early on to gather and analyze data, and the NPO didn’t provide the right kind of help and training.” Instead, then, the UHI sites had to devote a large amount of time and energy to aggregating and synthesizing isolated data streams and developing their own capacity to analyze this data.

However, as a result of this investment, UHI sites developed the capacity to track and prepare periodic reports on their progress towards achieving concrete goals. These reports also provide descriptions of the legal and policy changes still needed to bring program strategies to scale. The reports help sites as well as the NPO assess the strengths and weaknesses of their activities and ensure that sites are staying focused on those activities most likely to help them to achieve scale.

UHI sites have provided themselves (as well as their host cities) with data tools and products that help them to focus their efforts more tightly on addressing the largest services needs through the most efficient, proven strategies. For example, Philadelphia’s Safe and Sound campaign created a number of data products that have proven valuable for both its work and the city at large,

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including: an annual Children’s Report Card, which is the most comprehensive and exhaustive study of children's health and safety indicators ever undertaken in the city of Philadelphia; and the Children’s Budget, which measures and analyzes all government spending for children and youth in Philadelphia.

Lessons Learned

UHI illustrates that a strong emphasis on data can provide community initiatives with an objective way to establish their priorities, focus their activities, and measure the effectiveness and efficiency of their efforts. Given often difficult and sometimes heated debates about what ultimately qualifies as success for community initiatives, this data-driven decision making offered UHI a way to measure sites’ achievements compared to the concrete getting-to-scale goals that they originally established.

UHI also demonstrates that encouraging sites to use data to guide their decision making can result in a number of benefits for their cities and for their ability to garner the support of city institutions. In creating new data intermediaries and providers, the UHI sites have helped to permanently improve the capacity of their host cities and local government agencies to collect data on children’s health and safety outcomes and to use this data to guide their decision making. This improved data capacity should also benefit future community initiatives in the UHI cities, as these initiatives will be able to save valuable time and money by drawing upon the existing data infrastructure that the UHI sites have helped to create.
Finally, the UHI sites discovered that data serves as a useful tool for their political and communications strategies. Sites have found it much easier to argue for proposed changes to children’s services funding streams or to work with city agencies to institutionalize a particular service strategy when they are armed with quantitative data and best practice research that supports their causes.

*UHI in Perspective*

UHI’s contribution here is to demonstrate very clearly the critical role that data can play as a means to assess an initiative’s progress and as an important component of broader community capacity. The ability to collect and analyze data about the characteristics of its residents and the neighborhoods in which they live positions a community to speak with its own voice, identify problems, track changes over time, and make informed decisions about the allocation of resources. Over the last two decades, foundations have increasingly invested in the development of this capacity. One question they confront is where to locate it in order to ensure its maximum utility over the long term. One option is to build this capacity into the organization leading the community change effort; another choice is to help government agencies to see the advantage of data sharing and to develop strategies for preparing and sharing the data they collect with a range of community organizations; and a third option is to invest in the development of data intermediaries that sit in a neutral place between government and community organizations and have the explicit charge to compile data from different sources and make it accessible to a broad audience. Whatever the approach, this philanthropic investment can become a central element of a community change effort’s effectiveness. More often than not, this requires the foundation to take the initiative, help frame the activity and negotiate the agreements among those involved,
and monitor the results in the early years. This can present a considerable challenge to the capacities of both the foundation and the community.

**Strategies for Changing Systems to Get to Scale: Campaign Model**

UHI assumed that neither systems change nor, therefore, getting to scale would be possible unless sites were able to wield influence with key political actors and institutions and, ultimately, influence the “hearts and minds” of the city bureaucracy and public in terms of the provision and funding of children’s services. UHI was designed with the idea that sites would develop and implement a campaign to alter the status quo through two primary approaches—political strategizing and a communications campaign.⁵

Initiative designers believed that sites needed a sophisticated political strategy to influence city and even regional policy and funding decisions and to institutionalize policy changes within political bureaucracies that would support and sustain improved outcomes for children. In addition, given UHI’s ten-year horizon, political, economic and social change within each city would be inevitable. Sites needed to be adept at anticipating political change, educating and motivating new power brokers, and reframing their activities in light of changing conditions.

While a political strategy could help provide access to and influence with city actors and agencies, UHI believed that a communications campaign, directed primarily at the general public, was needed to foster both the political and public will to push through and sustain children’s service policy and funding changes. Sites were challenged to find creative ways to

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⁵ For more in-depth information on the lessons learned in these areas, see: Vanderwood, Jerry. 2003. *Aggregate Lessons Learned on the Use of Data, Communications, and Political Strategizing by Local Urban Health Initiative Campaigns*. Prepared for the Urban Seminar Series on Children’s Health and Safety.
increase the prominence of children’s health and safety issues and to help grow an active and involved constituency that would provide the impetus for change.

What Happened

Each UHI city experienced a great deal of turnover of political officials, especially school superintendents, as well as an economic recession and the tightening of social service budgets. Yet, all of the sites managed to weather these changes, develop important relationships with political actors and institutions, and move beyond an “us vs. them” mentality that often pits community change advocates against the political establishment. Sites facilitated these connections by adding value to politicians work through research on best practices and the creation of useful data tools. For example, during the Mayoral race, the Detroit UHI site worked with each of the candidates to make after-school an important agenda item, provided data to the candidates on the challenges and opportunities involved with after-school programming in the city, and marketed this information to the general public to raise the profile of after-school issues. These activities culminated during the Mayoral campaign in the facilitation of the Youth Forum—an informal debate in which young people asked the candidates questions about issues that affect children and youth. The new Mayor then formally partnered with the Detroit site to make after-school programs and UHI a central part of his term. Detroit’s effort reflects the success of many of the sites in not only helping get services for children onto the political agenda, but in partnering with government agencies to institutionalize needed policy shifts within city bureaucracies.
Sites were also able to craft political strategies as part of their larger “campaigns” to bring about system change. The experience of Richmond’s Youth Matters offers a noteworthy example. In order to promote additional funding for children’s services, Youth Matters took a multi-pronged approach. First, Youth Matters used television, video, and print promotions as well as a direct response web site to raise awareness of Youth Matters’ commitment to, and role in, promoting children's literacy, as well as the extent of the literacy challenges for children in Richmond. Second, Youth Matters advocated amongst and partnered with the local business community to garner their support in working with the Virginia Assembly for the needed funding changes. Third, Richmond employed professional lobbyists, through the Richmond Chamber of Commerce, to advocate directly with legislators to support funding for children and families. As a result of this reinforcing set of community and policy level strategies, Youth Matters played an instrumental role in restoring funding for healthy families and children during a tough budget climate and laying the groundwork for the expansion of funding in the future.

Sites had less success developing and implementing a communications campaign. Some sites did organize communications efforts designed to create awareness of and support for proven strategies to improve children’s lives. However, these campaigns were less successful than imagined, largely because neither sites nor the NPO realized at the outset of UHI how difficult it would be to design and implement a communications campaign meant to have community-wide impact. Some of the challenges that sites encountered in this regard include: difficulty linking either the idea of a campaign model or communications activities directly to their systems change strategies; lack of specialized communications skills and experience; competition within
the marketplace of ideas; insufficient resources; and competing communication needs, such as organizational fundraising.

*Lessons Learned*

UHI demonstrates the viability of a political campaign model: community initiatives can be political without being partisan, and they can develop the political expertise and strategic capacity needed to remain relevant and useful to changing political administrations.

At the same time, none of the UHI sites conducted a thorough enough communications campaign to rigorously test the efficacy of a campaign model for changing community perceptions and priorities. However, based on those campaigns that were enacted, the NPO questioned the logic model behind its communication strategy—at least as it relates to marketing ideas about services for children directly to the public. UHI assumed that if city residents could understand children’s services issues better and have more sympathy for programs to address them, then the necessary resources would flow. But the experience of UHI suggests that public will may not matter much around the technicalities of the policies and funding streams that affect children’s services, and that “children’s health and safety” may not be a sufficiently galvanizing moral or civil rights issue which the public is passionate enough to champion.

*UHI in Perspective*

Like the concept of going to scale, the idea of thinking and acting politically in order to promote community change has been a part of foundation discourse about community change that is not often translated into concrete goals and strategies. UHI has made a significant contribution
through its work to operationalize this idea, which has frequently eluded and sometimes frightened other philanthropic efforts. When foundations have addressed the political arena in prior initiatives, it was often through grants to advocacy groups to make the case for change on behalf of the target community. UHI takes an approach—a political campaign—that is both more self-conscious and more ambitious. It conceptualizes UHI’s system change goals as explicitly political and therefore gives sites permission, or rather requires sites, to develop political strategies as an important component of their systems change work. Given the many dangers of getting too close to any one political leader or becoming embroiled in partisan politics, this approach calls for a sophisticated capacity to navigate complex political waters. Although UHI established the logic of an accompanying communications campaign, it was not as successful in operationalizing one. Thus, more work needs to be done to identify how people working on future community change efforts should design, stage, operate and evaluate an approach to communications.

UHI’s experience suggests that foundation-supported community change efforts should at least consider their potential to operate in this fashion, as well as what it would take to build their capacity to do so. Going down such a path would require foundation staff and boards to review their tolerance for risk institutionally and define the ways in which they can and cannot be effectively engaged as partners in the political process. While explicitly political strategies are clearly challenging, ignoring the political arena, as have some community change initiatives in the past, no longer seems like a viable alternative for a serious community change effort.
Part II: Design Issues

Foundations that develop long-term, multi-site community change initiatives face a plethora of design choices ranging from how to select grantees to how to provide assistance to these grantees and evaluate the impact of their work. This section of the paper identifies a limited number of design and structural issues around which UHI offers particularly important lessons.⁶

Using an Intermediary

Design Choice

As is its standard practice for national, multi-site initiatives, RWJ established the NPO to manage UHI and carry out a range of intermediary functions including: program monitoring and fiscal management, technical assistance, cross-site meetings and learning, and program development.⁷ RWJ selected NPO leadership with a significant track record in local and state government, and provided the NPO with sufficient resources to support the intermediary’s relatively intensive role. Looking for much more than a manager, it gave the NPO a good deal of discretionary authority and input into the major decisions governing UHI’s design and implementation.

Lessons Learned

The NPO attributes the success of its working relationship with RWJ to a clear understanding from the beginning about the division of authority and responsibility between them, good communication and trust, and the Foundation’s flexibility regarding the scale and deployment of

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⁶ For further reflection on UHI’s design and implementation lessons learned, see: Jellinek, Paul. September 2004. Reflections on the Start-Up of the Urban Health Initiative. The National Program Office of the Urban Health Initiative: UHI Lessons Learned Project.

⁷ For more in-depth information of UHI’s use of an intermediary, see: Brown, Prudence. April 2005. The Urban Health Initiative’s National Program Office: The Experience of an Intermediary in a Complex Systems-Change Initiative. The National Program Office of the Urban Health Initiative: UHI Lessons Learned Project.
resources. The choice to use an intermediary in UHI was clearly consistent with both the ambitious nature of the initiative’s goals and the Foundation’s operating principles, capacities and culture. Further, the Foundation did not make the NPO pay a price for candor; indeed, Foundation staff for the most part saw themselves as genuine partners when problems arose in the initiative and did not try to micromanage the consequences.

_UHI in Perspective_

Foundations cite a number of advantages of working with an intermediary to implement a community change initiative. An intermediary allows the foundation to engage individuals with specialized expertise and credibility without having to build its own staff internally; it reduces overhead costs; and it tends to mute the often-difficult power dynamics between foundation staff and grantees. We have seen foundations that have been successful in using intermediaries and others that have been equally successful managing the initiatives themselves. We have also seen less successful examples of both design choices. What appears key in the first case is absolute clarity between the foundation and the intermediary regarding expectations and rules of engagement, effective communication, flexibility and trust. The foundation must establish its comfort level with an independent voice that can hold up the initiative’s vision and speak candidly to both the sites and the foundation despite pressures to drift, accommodate or relay only good news. If the foundation decides to manage the initiative itself, it needs to be sure that it has the staff capacity to do the job well and finds ways to hold itself accountable to the initiative’s original vision, goals and shared understanding about how the parties will operate together over the long haul.
In both cases, the investment of sufficient resources—money, oversight, trust, time—is critical. We have seen many potentially promising ideas go essentially untested because they were implemented with inadequate resources. Foundation underspending either for its own staff or for an intermediary can invite initiative failure as well as undermine the learning that would be generated by a robust enough test of the ideas behind the initiative.

**Site Selection**

*Design Choice*

One of the key aspects of UHI’s site selection was the establishment of a competitive process in which eight sites selected from a larger group for funding for the two-year planning period competed for five final funding slots. The NPO and RWJ believed this competition would spur the sites to work harder to produce good plans and help them to develop a strong sense of investment in UHI before implementation even formally began.

*Lessons Learned*

While a competitive site selection process may have resulted in some of the expected benefits, the experience of UHI illustrates that competition can actually hamper the goals of a community initiative. One unintended consequence was that sites were hesitant about sharing ideas and asking each other for advice during the initiative’s planning phase. As a result, sites failed to develop a culture of mutual exchange, leaving them largely without their peers’ insights into promising practices and approaches as well as a collective voice with which to inform the NPO that they lacked clarity on UHI’s core components. A second consequence was that sites were reluctant to not only ask for advice from their peers, but to solicit TA from the NPO because they
did not want to be viewed as weaker than their colleagues. At the same time, the NPO was overly cautious about providing TA to sites because it did not want to give the impression that it was privileging some sites over others. Instead, sites were left on their own to navigate the complexities of UHI, often with less than optimal results.

UHI in Perspective

All foundations supporting multi-site community-change initiatives are faced with devising a way to make a final selection from a larger pool of prospective sites. Given the long-term nature of these initiatives, and the need to learn more about how a site operates in practice (rather than as conveyed through a proposal and site visit), many foundations design a two-stage process like the one that UHI employed. But the competitive process that is usually built into such an approach can have the kind of negative consequences that are described above. We are particularly intrigued with a suggestion that the NPO made in retrospect about an alternative selection process: the foundation would not decide a priori how many sites would ultimately be selected but would instead fund all sites in the initial pool that meet a given threshold of quality by the end of the planning phase. This “quality threshold” approach to site selection is harder to manage because it requires foundations to clearly define such a threshold (which is a daunting task) and to display a considerable amount of flexibility in their funding plans. It also goes hand in hand with the approach, similarly more labor intensive from a management perspective, of tailoring the funding amounts, and even their timing, to the performance and opportunities at each site as they develop over time. But the negative consequences of a public competition and of producing “winners and losers” as a result of the planning period, as well as of treating all
sites, once selected, as if they had the same needs at the same time explains why some foundations are beginning to experiment with alternative site selection and funding processes.

**Site Leadership**

*Design Choice*

The NPO invested heavily in sites’ leadership capacity by providing technical assistance, convening sites for peer learning, exposing them to experts and system change models elsewhere, and creating the UHI Fellows Program, which was designed to recruit key change agents within the UHI cities to help sites gain access to city power brokers that they could not reach on their own and to provide assistance on the development and implementation of their systems change strategies.

*Lessons Learned*

UHI’s experience illustrates the critical role of leadership in determining the success of systems change initiatives. The fact that most sites still did not have the proper leadership in place until well into the implementation phase of the initiative was one of the major reasons why sites had such difficulty grasping what getting to scale and systems change actually meant and investing in activities appropriate to these tasks. Many sites initially hired leaders with primarily direct service or community organizing backgrounds who were unprepared to spearhead a large-scale systems change effort. As the initiative progressed, the NPO learned that the sites most needed leaders who possessed the visioning skills required to see how to get to scale, the ability to think strategically about what it takes to get there, and the political and social skills needed to effectively partner with community stakeholders.
In retrospect, the NPO concludes that it should have taken a more hands-on, active role with sites concerning their staffing decisions in order to guard against these leadership mismatches. It would have been useful to have provided sites with clear job descriptions that spelled out the experiences and political and strategic thinking skills that site leaders would need to in order to be successful; made the demonstration of this leadership part of the initial UHI site selection and funding criteria; and provided guidance to the sites in crafting job descriptions, conducting interviews, and developing a system for assessing job candidates. Additionally, the NPO concluded that it could have weighed in more heavily on the compensation offered to site directors. Initially, most of the UHI sites did not offer a salary high enough to attract experienced individuals who could manage such an ambitious, multifaceted community initiative and who felt comfortable sitting at the table with and expecting to be taken seriously by the top decision makers in city agencies and institutions. Finally, the NPO suggests that sites may need a different set of leadership skills, expertise, and relationships at different stages in a community initiative, and thus may benefit from building in ways to adjust their leadership and staffing as well as the composition of their boards in accordance with these needs.

*UHI in Perspective*

All community change efforts point to the importance of finding and developing leadership. UHI’s experience confirms the need to devote attention to both staff and board leadership throughout the initiative. Identifying initial community leadership is particularly challenging for foundations that do not have deep roots in the community. Some do not take the time to undertake a careful and sensitive reconnaissance of the community ecology and dynamics of
leadership and, therefore, end up making decisions that reduce the initiative’s overall effectiveness. A related issue involves taking the time to identify community initiatives and collaborations—and their leadership—that already operate in the sites’ host cities. New community change efforts spend a great deal of time upfront recruiting, hiring and training staff; composing their boards and creating other collaborative structures; locating and equipping offices; building and sustaining relationships with key constituencies and city power brokers; and collecting and analyzing data. Yet, opportunities to build on or establish some sort of formal or informal collaborative venture with existing foundation-funded initiatives, organizations, and consortia working on related issues are often overlooked. Foundations may benefit in the future from a more intentional effort to understand the existing community initiative leadership and “traffic” within their cities and to tailor their approaches to take as much advantage as possible of these “platforms” for change.

This kind of reconnaissance for effective indigenous leadership and for identification of existing community platforms to build from is only possible in initiatives that have secure enough long-term funding to warrant such a time investment upfront, underscoring once again the critical role of such funding for an initiative that is serious about significant and sustainable change.

Non-Prescriptive Approach

Design Choice

The NPO and RWJ established UHI’s getting-to-scale mandate and systems change approach, and called for sites to use data, best practice research, political strategizing, a media campaign, and even a regional focus in service of these aims. Yet, other than the establishment of this
general operating framework, UHI’s design reflected the belief that those closest to the community have the most thorough understanding of local resources, politics, and the service provider infrastructure, and are more likely to exert ownership over the initiative and achieve better results if they can select their goals and find their own path to achieving them. Thus, UHI encouraged sites to identify their own getting-to-scale target areas (after-school, violence reduction, etc.) and strategies. During the planning phase, the NPO also took a non-prescriptive approach—partly as a function of not wanting to appear as if it was trying to dictate sites’ goals and strategies—to technical assistance, preferring to offer it only when asked and to provide sites with only the most basic written descriptions of the initiative.

Lessons Learned

UHI suggests that allowing sites to take control over their specific goals and strategies is an effective way to help local initiatives take ownership over their work. The success of this approach—credited with facilitating the UHI grantees to invest more time, resources, and personal energy into the initiative than RWJ has seen with many other funding efforts—squares with findings from other community change initiatives that suggest that being non-prescriptive with communities about goals and strategies can empower local actors.

In contrast, the NPO learned that a non-prescriptive approach to TA can have a detrimental impact on sites’ work. All of the UHI sites struggled early in the life of the initiative to understand their getting-to-scale mandate and the systems changes needed to achieve it. As the NPO asserts, sites’ planning “…could have been significantly improved if the process, products and timetable had been set and monitored by the NPO, while the local entity retained the
flexibility to identify and select their own goals and strategies.” In retrospect, even seemingly small changes in the NPO’s early approach to TA, such as providing sites with more formal, detailed written descriptions of the initiative and its requisite components as well as examples of a systems change plan, could have made a large difference in helping sites to understand the purpose and design of the initiative. As implementation proceeded, the NPO took a more active approach to helping the sites focus and carry out their strategies.

**UHI in Perspective**

Foundation funded community change initiatives have run the gamut from prescriptive to permissive, both in terms of goals to be achieved and strategies to be employed. Every foundation has an objective in mind when it undertakes an initiative, and regardless of its stance on the prescriptive-permissive continuum, it is crucial that the foundation be clear to itself and its community partners (and intermediary if it uses one) about its objectives. This clarity then sets the boundaries for local independence and creativity within the initiative. In particular, foundations may purposefully choose ambiguity at the inception of an initiative as a way of pushing local change agents to take ownership over the community work and decide for themselves what the initiative’s goals and strategies should entail. However, when employing this approach, it is important for foundations to be cognizant of the lack of direction that they are providing and to, before too much time and resources have been invested, convene all of the initiative stakeholders to make sure everyone is on the same page and buys-in to the way the initiative is taking shape. In initiatives where there has been continued ambiguity about foundation objectives, or where these objectives were changed well into the life of the community work, or where a shared vision for the initiative was lacking, momentum was
seriously impeded and strains developed in foundation-community relationships that proved difficult to overcome.

Here again, long-term funding is critical. The more non-prescriptive the foundation is, the more time it needs to allow for the community processes to work in framing objectives, choosing strategies and using technical assistance.

**Evaluation**

*Design Choice*

As is its standard practice for long-term, multi-site initiatives, RWJ selected an independent contractor to conduct an evaluation of UHI. Part of the thinking is that the intermediary, particularly one managing a long-term initiative, is vulnerable to “going native,” or in other words, becoming so invested in the initiative’s success that it can lose its ability to objectively evaluate grantees’ efforts. By creating a firewall between the evaluators and the NPO, RWJ aimed to protect the independence of the evaluation. At the same time, the NPO’s role included assessing sites’ ongoing progress and promoting cross-site learning.

*Lessons Learned*

Although UHI’s designers, implementers, and evaluators met periodically over the life of the initiative, the NPO concludes that it would have been beneficial to have more frequent, formal points over the ten years when the different parties could come together to reassess and update the initiative’s goals, strategies and logic model to reflect the changing nature of the work on the ground.
UHI in Perspective

It is not unusual for evaluators, foundation representatives, intermediaries and community initiative implementers to value different kinds and sources of data differently, to prioritize different research questions, or to have different perspectives on the lessons from a complex initiative that unfolds over a long period of time. The exchange of ideas based in these different perspectives can be a powerful and useful learning exercise for the initiative and for the field. However, this kind of exchange has been the exception in community initiatives to date, which has reduced the collective learning that such initiatives should be generating.

Two strategies might help to address the lack of progress in this area. First, it is always useful to be clear about the purpose of the evaluation: is it primarily an accountability device, a mechanism for feedback so that implementers can adjust their approach, a knowledge development strategy, a way to test out new methodologies or some combination of these or other functions? These purposes are not mutually exclusive, but each has different requirements and sets up different expectations, all of which should be very clear to all parties at the beginning of an initiative and reviewed regularly during implementation. Second, there is an increasing momentum within the Aspen Roundtable on Community Change and other philanthropic venues to develop a common learning agenda for the community change field that would go beyond what can be learned in single initiative evaluations as important as these are. Such an approach would require foundations to work in greater concert with each other and with researchers and practitioners to prioritize some common questions and attempt to address these questions across
multiple initiatives. Such an approach could also legitimize different ways of learning, each of which could add value to a larger knowledge development enterprise.

**Long-Term Funding Horizon**

*Design Choice*

UHI was designed from its inception as a ten-year community change initiative. This long-term funding horizon provided for an extensive planning and implementation phase; offered sites the opportunity to focus on getting to scale rather than on securing funding from one year to the next; and allowed sites time to make mistakes, learn from their efforts, and eventually develop the capacities and knowledge needed to accomplish their goals. At the same time, changes are inevitable over a decade, and the UHI sites, the NPO, and RWJF all needed to find creative ways throughout UHI to adjust to shifts within their own and each other’s organizations as well as changing external conditions in sites’ local communities.

*Lesson Learned*

UHI suggests that making a long-term funding commitment at the outset of a community initiative is a necessary step for providing sites with the time they require to grapple with complex community problems and to incur the buy-in of community stakeholders needed to facilitate systems changes. Given the continuous political, economic, and organizational shifts that will occur over a long-term funding horizon, it is tempting for foundations to hedge on a full ten year commitment by doing three or five year renewable grants rather than making a ten year commitment up front. The experience of UHI, however, suggests that the most effective way to cope with changing conditions is to coordinate the continued provision of funding over the ten
year term with milestones that should be accomplished along the way. This coordination allows for constructive and disciplined interplay between the foundation and the community, but within a context of security that provides communities with the opportunity to make the necessary investments and take the necessary risks to accomplish change over the long haul.

**UHI in Perspective**

Change is a constant presence during a long-term community initiative. For example, in the ten years since UHI’s inception, all of the RWJ staff who founded, shaped and initially championed the initiative left the Foundation, and the Foundation hired a new president and experienced substantial turnover of board members. These kinds of shifts are not uncommon in foundations conducting long term initiatives, and they challenge foundations to consider ways to ensure continuity, develop safeguards against capricious deviations from an initiative’s initial formulation, build ownership among new staff, and sustain the investment of trustees. We see a range of strategies emerging to address these challenges such as: keeping more extensive records on the history and evolution of an initiative and its logic model; tracking the strategic decisions that were made and why; documenting the lessons learned among foundation staff; devoting the necessary time and resources to ensure that departing staff educate and update new hires as thoroughly as possible; and linking board members to individual sites so that they become familiar with their accomplishments and challenges, and invested in their success and in the full initiative over time.
Conclusion

The major significance of UHI for philanthropy is in its big ideas of scale and systems change, and its operationalization of these ideas. Further, UHI’s adoption of the “campaign” approach, and its strong reliance on data-based decision making, represent significant enrichments to implementation strategies currently employed by community change initiatives. Finally, the design choices that UHI made in attempting to actualize these ideas also offer important lessons for all foundations interested in conceiving, planning, and carrying out multi-site, long-term initiatives. Although implementing these ideas and producing the intended results was often challenging for UHI, we hope that these ideas and design choices—as framed through the context of other community change initiatives—can stimulate discussion within philanthropy that will result in new possibilities for foundations and new learning for the field.
Appendix: UHI Site Descriptions

Baltimore’s Safe and Sound Campaign

Baltimore’s Safe and Sound Campaign is a citywide effort to significantly improve the well-being of Baltimore's children, youth, and their families by mobilizing the entire community, using data to drive decision-making, instituting best practice approaches and identifying sufficient and sustainable resources.

Baltimore’s strategic blueprints to improve conditions for kids include: the Success By 6—Family Support strategy, which is designed to ensure that babies are born healthy, children live in safe and nurturing homes, and children enter school ready to learn; the Reading By 9 strategy, which is targeted at helping children to be successful in school; the After School strategy, designed to help young people make healthy choices; the Safe Neighborhoods Strategy, which works to ensure that children and youth live in safe neighborhoods; and finally, the Community Engagement Strategy, which is focused on working with young people to know that adults value and appreciate them.

Detroit’s Mayor’s Time

Mayor's Time is an initiative dedicated to improving the well being of metropolitan Detroit youth through advocacy for increased investment and participation in quality after-school programs. By providing resources that parents and children need to connect them with programs in their neighborhoods, and by eliminating or reducing barriers that often impede a child's participation in after-school programs, Mayor's Time is aiming to inform and educate the
community about the importance of after-school programs; build and maintain partnerships with after-school program providers and organizations; and help expand existing after-school programs and create new opportunities for programming where needed.

The ultimate goal of Mayor's Time is to increase the participation rates in after-school programs to 50 percent of all school-age youth. Mayor’s Time is working to accomplish this task by leveraging resources and creating partnerships that will serve to enhance the quantity and quality of accessible after-school programs, and as a result, decrease youth violence, substance abuse and early sexual activity, which some research has shown to predominantly take place between the unstructured, after-school hours of 3 - 8 p.m.

**Oakland’s Safe Passages**

Safe Passages is a partnership of community leaders who have joined together to share resources, coordinate services and promote proven strategies to reduce youth violence.

Safe Passages strives towards this goal through three primary strategies. First, Safe Passages’ Early Childhood strategy works to ensure that young children exposed to violence in Oakland are provided with the services they need. Through this effort, family advocates respond with police officers to domestic violence incidents and help link the family to community supports. In addition, Safe Passages works to incorporate violence prevention curricula into early childhood learning centers and Head Start Programs. Second, through its Middle School strategy, Safe Passages strives to reduce suspensions through a network of school-based services, which include developing alternatives to suspension such as in-school suspension; teaching a nationally
recognized violence prevention curriculum; and providing academic assistance as well as mental health, after-school and other support services to youth and their families. Finally, Safe Passages’ Youth Offender strategy entails the provision of intensive case management and wraparound services for young offenders with the goal of helping youth offenders to become healthy, productive, law-abiding citizens.

**Philadelphia Safe and Sound**

Philadelphia Safe and Sound collaborates with government, foundations, corporations and nonprofits to foster reform within major public systems that deliver services to youth. It strives to improve the well being of children through initiatives designed to increase youth development opportunities and reduce youth violence and substance abuse.

Philadelphia Safe and Sound's strategies aim to produce measurable improvements in targeted outcomes for children and youth in two ways. First, Safe and Sound works to reform government systems so that decision-making is driven by research, results and accountability. Second, Safe and Sound develops and promotes innovative and successful prevention and youth development initiatives, such as the annual publication of the Report Card and Children's Budget, implementing the Children's Investment Strategy, and working with the city to facilitate an integrated data system for social service providers and a system of performance-based contracting. These various initiatives help the City of Philadelphia to evaluate conditions for children, focus resources, and ensure the greatest chance of achieving measurable positive outcomes for children. Ultimately, Safe and Sound is striving to reach 100,000 children through
its strategic initiatives with the goal of encouraging improved academic performance and reduced involvement in substance abuse, violence, and other delinquent behaviors.

**Richmond’s Youth Matters**

Youth Matters mobilizes community resources on behalf of Richmond region children, and partners with a variety of community institutions, governments, and business leaders to improve children’s health and safety outcomes.

Youth Matters’ primary initiative to improve outcomes for children is Richmond Region Reads, known as 3R, which is Youth Matters’ ambitious, region-wide endeavor to ensure that all third graders are reading at grade level by 2010. The 3R campaign incorporates a number of strategic initiatives including, the Our Home Advantage initiative, which coordinates donations of books, baby supplies and money to help parents be their child's first teachers, and trains staff to conduct home-visits to teach parents and caregivers how to support their children’s literacy development; the 3R Preschool Prep initiative, which is designed to help childcare providers make reading a priority; the 3R Tutor in Time, an aggressive effort to train and places tutors in schools to work one-on-one with struggling readers; the Recreational Readers initiative, designed to encourage organizers of extra-curricular activities to make reading a regular element of their practice; and, finally, a series of other promotional and resource collection efforts targeted at increasing children’s and parents’ access to reading materials.