

GOOD PRACTICES

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If You Build It, They Will Come

PATH: PEOPLE ASSISTING THE HOMELESS

The PATH case illustrates some of the characteristics of innovation and innovative organizations. Innovation is the generation, acceptance, and implementation of new ideas, procedures, products and services. It is more than the creation of an initial idea but involves a whole process of change: finding acceptance for the idea among stakeholders (the Board, clients, donors), being able to implement necessary changes and encourage new practices, and, finally, the diffusion of the idea and implied changes across the system.





ORGANIZATION PROFILE

Founded in 1984 in the basement of the Westwood United Methodist Church with a philosophy of offering a “hand-up not a hand-out,” PATH had humble beginnings. As the number of homeless began to soar, PATH grew to meet the growing demand, and by the end of the decade, PATH had become a full-service homeless agency offering emergency and transitional housing, an employment program, and a drop-in center. In the 1990s, PATH continued to grow, and purchased its first permanent home in West Los Angeles in 1992. During this period, the agency also developed a successful job assistance program called the PATHfinders Job Center, which was replicated in several sites throughout Los Angeles County. In 1995, Joel John Roberts came on board as the CEO and Executive Director of PATH and within four years, in 1999, he oversaw the merger of PATH with the Foundation House Transition Group, which had recently purchased a 40,000 square foot building. That building became the PATHMall, the case reported here. Today PATH operates on 4 sites in Los Angeles, has 90 employees, 200 volunteers, and services 4,500 homeless individuals and their families annually, with an operating budget of \$4 million in 2005.



THE CHALLENGE

When Joel John Roberts, CEO and Executive Director of People Assisting the Homeless (PATH), found himself with a 40,000 square foot building after a merger with another nonprofit agency five years ago, he also faced a host of daunting challenges. He had just two years to design and build a state-of-the-art transitional facility for the homeless, to gain the support of his board of directors and his staff, to identify and cultivate collaborators—both nonprofit partners and local government agencies—and to raise \$7 million. What is more, he would be doing all of this in Los Angeles, with a sprawling geography, a housing shortage, and where an estimated 80,000 people are homeless each night. While some thought Robert was taking on the impossible, he let his vision guide him: “It was probably naively idealistic, but I kept telling myself that the City, the County and the community wouldn’t let us fail.”

Even given his tremendous time constraint, Roberts didn’t rush the process. He took the time to build consensus among his staff, to create buy-in among a majority of his board members, to meet with would-be champions from the County and City, and to hold focus groups with various stakeholders, including his homeless clients. Roberts’ series of stakeholder consultations all pointed in one direction. With the geographic sprawl of Los Angeles—a county where the homeless often spend hours on buses commuting from one end of the city to the other to receive the most basic services—this new transitional center needed to offer a full-range of essential services under one roof. Yet in order to address this need while tackling the host of challenges before him, Roberts recognized that he would have to be innovative and think about

collaboration and the coordination of services in different ways.

1 THE IDEA

While one-stop social service provision is not a new idea in-and-of-itself, it was PATH's take on the one-stop that was so innovative. "From the outset we knew that we wanted a theme," a unifying concept that would help 'brand' the project and give it a distinct feel and identity. Why was a theme so important to Roberts? "We want everything to communicate our message: the way we run our programs, the way we write grant proposals, the way our building is designed, everything. That is a value of ours. We wanted a building that, when people walked in the front door, without talking to anyone, without having to read a brochure, they would know immediately what we were about."

After a number of brainstorming sessions with his board and staff, a simple metaphor—that of a train station—helped Roberts to begin to conceptualize the new facility. "The people who come to PATH are on a journey; we are a cross-roads or a weigh station for them and we help them along on their journey. Depending on their individual needs – mental health care or treatment for substance abuse or resolving court matters – with our guidance, they can decide what track to take," explains Roberts. "Initially I envisioned a train station with banners showing which track you are taking and a list of all of the train times, or services, we would offer."

With the help of his architects, Robert's train metaphor evolved into that of a mall. "When the architects looked at the building layout, they liked the train theme, but felt that the space looked more like a mall than a train station," says Roberts. "So we worked with that. Instead of choosing different tracks, the idea was that

people would be shopping for services....really shopping for a new life. I wanted the mall theme to carry throughout and insisted that the agencies look like actual storefronts and that the design be bright and open with curving walls and bold colors like a mall. I didn't want it to look like an institution." He adds, "We even have a mall map."

Yet the innovation didn't stop with the mall idea. Rather than attempt to provide all of the services themselves, at the PATHMall, homeless clients could receive all of the services that they needed in one place from nearly two-dozen different nonprofit and public service providers. Not only would this approach keep PATH's overhead costs manageable, improve efficiencies, and allow service providers to better leverage funding, but the mall model would also reflect the driving philosophy behind PATH's work. "We believe that the battle against homelessness can be won, but the problem will only be solved when the entire community commits to solving homelessness and works together." Roberts and his staff see the mall as a "working collaborative," or a model of the kind of cross-sector collaboration—involving nonprofits, government agencies, and the private sector—that will be needed to end homelessness.

2 THE MODEL

In developing the colorful and immaculate mall, PATH took a problem-solving approach and with input from frontline staff, senior management, the board, and clients, identified the various obstacles that homeless families and individuals face. Today service providers housed in the PATHMall include the CLARE Foundation, which provides substance abuse treatment; the Department of Public Social Services (DPSS), which helps families

and individuals to access public assistance; Gateways Mental Health, which provides case management and mental health treatment; the Homeless Veterans Services, which helps veterans access their benefits; the Los Angeles County Employment Development Department (EDD), which runs weekly job training workshops and provides placement assistance; a beauty salon, showers and toiletries are available at the Vera Brown Personal Care Center; and once a month, the LA County Superior Court holds the PATH Homeless Court in the mall, where people have the opportunity to settle non-violent charges and warrants. Client services are integrated through a computerized database as well as through routine case management meetings among the various agencies.

The top floors of the facility are a more traditional homeless shelter, with 98 beds, including men's quarters and women's quarters as well as family rooms. In addition, in two other facilities, one in Hollywood and one in West Los Angeles, PATH has over 90 beds available for transitional housing. In its three locations, the \$4 million a year agency serves over 10,000 homeless individuals, places nearly 1,000 people in full-time jobs, and provides transitional housing to 750 people each year. In some regards, it is surprising that the PATHMall was the first of its kind in the United States. Homelessness is a complex issue: for some individuals and families housing alone is the primary obstacle, but for most it is some combination of affordable housing, substance abuse, mental illness, domestic violence, health problems, job placement challenges, and a lack of education, soft skills, and job training. Given this complex picture of the causes and contributors to homelessness, having

diverse public and private service providers under one roof in a shelter may seem like an obvious solution.

However, in a field where resources are limited, government agencies can see themselves at odds with nonprofit service providers, and competition for individual, foundation, and public funding can be intense, true collaboration, like the mall model requires, can be difficult to achieve. What is more, collaborations are often time-consuming, challenging to manage, and a drain on limited resources. In order to make the mall work, Roberts realized that it had to be structured to offset these challenges. PATH would not ask nonprofit agencies housed in the mall to pay rent, and they would even help service providers to find funding from a variety of City and County agencies and from private individuals and foundations to support their operations in the mall. To ensure long-term buy-in and on-going support by the local government and elected officials, public agencies would be invited to have staff and offices in the mall as well.

"The mall was designed to maximize efficiencies," explains Roberts. "All of the overhead—the rent, utilities, maintenance and security—can be shared. PATH gives the agencies the space rent-free and in return they provide their own staff and systems, so, for example, PATH doesn't have to hire mental health staff, because Gateways takes care of this. It is also an efficiency gain in terms of case management. Case managers from the different agencies get together regularly to discuss clients both formally and informally. Our in-take system helps the case managers to track clients more effectively because all of the clients are in the same computer network. Right now we're

seeking funding to build an evaluation system into our tracking.”

Still, perhaps most surprising are the fundraising advantages that Roberts reports. “We actually have a competitive edge with grants, because so many funders like to support collaborative projects, and with more than 20 agencies under one roof, they see the PATHMall as a true collaboration.” The mall also allows PATH and other partner agencies to “double-dip” among funders. “We will write a grant with a collaborative of two or three agencies in the mall. We write it, but they get a part of it. Then we encourage them to write grants, often times to those same funders, where PATH is a partner. PATH and its partners are actually better positioned to leverage funding.”

Completed in early 2002, the three-story, 40,000 square foot PATHMall has been recognized nationally and internationally as an innovative, effective model for serving the homeless and has been featured by ABC “World News Tonight,” National Public Radio, the British Broadcasting Corporation, and the Los Angeles Times. As a result, Roberts and his staff are asked to consult with nonprofit leaders and public officials nationwide about how to build similar facilities in their own communities. “When I meet with people from other cities who want to copy PATH down to the blueprints,” says Roberts, “I tell them that it won’t work. They have to figure out the needs of the homeless in their own community by bringing together the stakeholders.” Roberts’ understated style and modesty belie the considerable attention that PATH has received in the past three years, “I tell my staff we don’t have to wave our own flag. It’s not about them, it’s not about me, it’s about our mission and if we do good work then the recognition will come.”

3 **INNOVATION AS ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURE**

While the pioneering PATHMall is clearly innovative, innovation also permeates PATH’s organizational culture: Roberts’ looked at a set of challenges that would have discouraged most nonprofit CEOs— limited funding, competition among nonprofits, a tendency for stakeholders to point fingers rather than solve problems, and strained and ill-defined nonprofit and government relations—and saw opportunity. He concluded that the mall model would actually improve participating organizations’ competitive advantages, allow agencies to better leverage limited funding, encourage stakeholder buy-in through a consultative process, and improve and strengthen relations with local government by making them a vested partner in the mall.

As a learning organization, or one that continuously innovates, PATH’s latest venture, the Streets or Services (SOS) pilot program, as one would expect, takes an innovative, systems approach. Homeless people are often caught in a continuous cycle of citation, arrest, jail time, and then released back onto the streets. Inspired by PATH’s Homeless Court, the SOS program has a PATH caseworker stationed at the downtown Los Angeles Police Department station. When homeless people are processed for nonviolent, non-drug-related crimes, they are presented with a choice: they can either receive a citation and go into the traditional court system or meet with a caseworker and develop an individualized social service plan. Their plan may include housing, mental health care, substance abuse treatment, and employment assistance. If the individual fails to complete his or her plan, then the citation is issued, and they go into the court system.



GOOD PRACTICES For Innovations

Yet, the SOS program almost never was. Originally envisioned as being part of the court system, with the PATH caseworker housed directly in the Los Angeles County Court House, when Roberts approached the courts, he was turned down because he was told that it was too expensive. Rather than giving up and scrapping their plans altogether, he and his staff went back to the drawing board and came up with the idea to put SOS into place before the cases even reached the courts. Roberts went to the LAPD to see if the Police Department would allow PATH to house their caseworker in the police station, so that when homeless people were arrested they would be given the option from the outset: go into the court system or work with a PATH social worker. Today the LAPD is the key partner in the SOS program.

Roberts explains the philosophy that keeps him moving his organization forward: “We believe that if a door closes, a window opens.” What does this nonprofit leader see as the secret to PATH’s success? “We don’t take ‘no’ for an answer.” He smiles, “I guess you could say we’re stubborn.”

- ① Successful innovations involve a significant degree of uncertainty in the sense that both processes and outcomes may be difficult to predict; innovations involve risk, which makes it important to create early on a sense of wider ownership of both the potential risk and pay-off among takeholders.
- ② They are knowledge-intensive in the sense that they require a familiarity not only of the problem but also of the wider context and related fields; innovations are more likely in organizations that encourage staff to ‘look outside the box’ of professional silos.
- ③ They are controversial as they tend to face established interests and may take away resources from some stakeholders; successful innovation requires leadership capable of negotiating the complex politics of organizational change.

The Center for Civil Society is the focal point for the UCLA School of Public Affairs’ programs and activities in nonprofit leadership and management. “If You Build It, They Will Come” is one in a series of “good practices” of Southern California nonprofits developed by the Center for nonprofit practitioners and community leaders. These vignettes, covering a range of topics from governance to innovation to volunteer management, are available for download, free of charge, on the Center for Civil Society’s Web. Visit us online to read other Good Practices or to sign up for the next session of the Nonprofit Leadership Program. <http://www.spa.ucla.edu/ccs>