

The Creation of the Washington County Vision Action Network: The Need to Build Civic Infrastructure and Capacity-Building *

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This case study describes one county's response to the adverse consequences created by New Public Management's success in getting public sector organizations to "run like a business". The first section of the case describes the conditions that have created mission-driven public organizations and the adverse consequences that result from being successful. The second and third sections describe one county's path into the "mission driven" world of public management and its transition back into the world of community engagement, collaboration and civic-capacity building.

The Challenge of Relevance

Cities, counties and special districts are at the epicenter of community building. Through the policies and spending priorities of elected officials, these agencies play a decisive role in shaping the civic infrastructure and the identity of the communities they serve. Through vision and execution, local governments build and maintain physical infrastructure, public safety and justice systems, health and human services systems, and various other services. Local governments are generally not an amorphous "somewhere out there" institution, but more commonly an intimate, transparent and accessible presence that ideally reflects the values and sentiments of a community.

Due to this intimacy, local governments strive to maintain a positive and relevant connection with residents, issues, and solutions. Organizations are challenged to provide the right types and mix of services, and to do so in an effective and efficient manner. It is not enough to merely do the right things; agencies must do them well. Failure to successfully navigate this relevance challenge introduces a number of risks, including the erosion of public trust and confidence.

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Without the support and consent of voters, local governments are hamstrung to generate the necessary service structures and revenues. Even in good times, securing voter approval for money measures can be fraught with difficulty and uncertainty. Overlay this challenge with a crisis in voter confidence and the difficulty of maintaining voter support compounds exponentially.

The relevance challenge is pronounced in communities experiencing rapid growth and demographic shifts. Maintaining relevance in these communities requires a firm grasp of, and response to, the present challenges, as well as a vision and commitment to future-oriented planning. Like a savvy chess player, local governments must plan ahead, anticipating and plotting the next several moves. Whether these issues involve jail capacity, width of roads, diameter of pipe, staff-to-client ratios, or use of technology and automation, anticipating future needs and incorporating them into current planning is essential to maintaining effectiveness and currency.

Spurred by calls to "reinvent government" and "run government like a business," many agencies over the last decades embraced the notion of a "Business Plan" as a vehicle to articulate their specific and unique values, mission and strategies. Instead of navigating the wide end of the funnel where the risk of mission creep and inefficiency is considerable, agencies migrated to the narrow end where they could winnow down the field of play, and focus on select community priorities and service areas. As a result, agency efforts were typically directed towards those services required by statute, or firmly based on public interest, community need, available funding and ability to be effective. This meant that various pressing community needs were often left unmet by local agencies. These service voids, left unchecked, ultimately affect a community's quality of life, especially as the community's population grows without associated infrastructure development.

With the adoption of a Business Plan, local agencies were green-lighted to focus on a shorter list of priority services with a shared understanding that this strategy would result in things not

getting done that were important to the well-being of the community. Policy makers and the public were generally supportive of these winnowing efforts because in many communities the demand for services far outstripped the ability to fund them; and while the request to expand services occurred among some sections of the community, by and large voters favored focusing on core and priority services. Under these pressures policy makers feared diluting existing services and service levels by attempting to respond to a myriad of costly, complex, and ever-evolving new challenges.....

While limiting mission and focus in an environment of community growth and expansion may seem counterintuitive for governments designed to serve a broad community of interests, it has proven to be necessary to ensure the financial feasibility of agencies over the long haul, especially during difficult economic times. What seemingly contributed to the comfort level of many policy makers during this transition was the notion that other organizations would fill the service voids. This was a logical assumption given the number of high-quality, well-positioned government and non-government organizations in many communities. Most of these efforts, however, were underfunded, suffered from lack of coordination and did not generate broad community concern or support.

Although the implementation of business plans was effective in resolving the relevance challenges for many local agencies, it also contributed to a growing community myopathy, a loss in the metabolic capacity of the community to maintain its civic infrastructure muscles. Being mission driven obscured some subtle and not-so-subtle changes occurring in the community. These changes became most evident in the voids between organizational missions. With nowhere else to turn, community advocacy fell on the ears of already consumed and tapped out local governments. Many agencies deftly deflected these concerns by restating their limited mission and role, and arguing that some other entity should address the breach. Organizations took solace in navigating their own mission and accepted the inevitability of unmet community needs. Organizational relevance was typically gauged by whether the limited mission was fulfilled, not how well service voids were navigated, resulting in ever-growing service voids in the community. As local governments continue to face serious resource constraints for the foreseeable future, the new relevance challenge is figuring out how local governments can use

their tangible and intangible resources to navigate these service voids rather than deflect or ignore them. Given that no one organization has the capacity to solve these community problems alone, the answer begins to emerge when organizations across multiple sectors tackle these service voids collectively and collaboratively. Government can play a key role as catalyst and motivator for this collaborative problem-solving. But it cannot, and should not, navigate these service voids alone. It must do so in partnership with other community organizations in order to create meaningful and sustainable change that effectively leverages existing community resources and expertise.

This new role for government is not an easy one. It means that government must shift community expectations about its role, navigate the difficult waters of cross-sector relationship-building and ask everyone to take on at least a piece of the solution. While government itself clearly understands that it cannot be all things to all people, community advocates often express a belief that government can and should solve all community problems regardless of mission and resource restrictions. Until and unless these community expectations are shifted, and a new narrative is embraced that encourages mutual responsibility to address community needs, the service voids will not be effectively navigated. It is now about catalyzing a collaborative community response in order to address service voids that will negatively affect communities if left unaddressed....

The New Path to Relevance

Washington County's path to relevance was not a straight line. It was a process of discovery, of trial and error over nearly three decades of effort to align the work of government with the growing and rapidly changing needs of the community and of creating a process of engagement with community organizations that would result in shared ownership.

1970s to 1980s: Rapid Growth and Changing Demographics

A focus and challenge for many organizations is staying abreast of community changes, including demographic shifts and impacts related to population growth. In Washington County, a population explosion over a thirty-year period challenged the capacity of the organization to respond to the growing demands. During the initial years of the unprecedented growth, voters rejected short-term operating levies, introducing chaos and uncertainty as pink slips and service reductions were contemplated and often implemented. The lack of voter support created an aura of uncertainty for service recipients, partners and employees, not the sort of foundation on which to effectively serve a community or run an organization.

The County was not alone in confronting these challenges. In the 1980s many organizations were in the same boat – attempting to navigate accelerated demand for services in an environment of static or diminishing resources. In many states this was the era of voter-imposed property tax limitations, restricting local revenues. The devolution efforts of the federal government introduced an extra level of uncertainty as fewer federal dollars were making their way into local coffers.

Due to the constraints on revenues, the County concluded that maintaining service levels was challenging enough, let alone adding anything new to the mix. The hard truth was that governments needed to do more with less, and accept a diminished role in overall service provision. Becoming strategically focused and prioritizing services was the first step. The second was establishing service levels based on available resources. The mantra to “run it like a business” played perfectly into the new realities. The County leadership embraced the dual goals of implementing a strategic vision while also developing a bottom-line-oriented business model.

1983 to 1986: Business Plan Development

While in the throes of growth and change, the elected board of the County initiated the first business plan development process in 1983. The process was fairly conventional, with active outreach to other elected officials, business leaders, advisory boards/committees, citizen involvement members, government and non-profit partners and various other civic leaders. The

plan garnered much interest as the decisions and directions outlined in the document would steer the County for years to come.

A key question of the business plan process was how government services would be funded. The Board determined that discretionary resources would be allocated toward priority, countywide services not otherwise provided by federal or state funds. The federal and state programs would be delivered at a level commensurate with the allocated funding. This decision particularly impacted affordable housing, community development block grant and a variety of health and human services, including mental health and services to seniors. As the federal and state governments reduced or modified funding, the County was not in a position to back-fill with local discretionary resources.

Based on the underlying philosophy that the County “could not be all things to all people,” and recognizing that the agency cannot “go it alone” in serving the public and fulfilling its mission, the County formalized three levels of service delivery. These levels represented the degree to which the County would be involved, as a single organization, in attempting to meet the wider range of community needs. The levels included:

- Direct Service, in which the County would be involved in the direct provision of countywide services;
- Partnerships, in which the agency would work in partnership and collaboration with other organization to provide services to the community; and
- Supporting the Agenda, in which the County would support activities that lead to the development of services to the community.

In anticipation of criticism for defining the mission and financial strategies in such restrictive ways, the business plan added a degree of flexibility to sanction collaborative work with other organizations and sectors. This provided the organization with the ability to provide limited support to community partners that went beyond the role of direct service provider. Overall, the plan was well received by voters, partners and stakeholders and became the basis for both internal and external messaging. On the heels of plan adoption in 1986, the voters approved a new and expanded tax base for the first time since 1916.

1986 to 1998: Business Plan Implementation

After formal adoption of the business plan, the County was single-minded in creating a lean, well-trained, highly motivated workforce and relatively well-resourced organization with a keen focus on mission fulfillment and execution. The County became known for quality services and strong partnerships. It relied on a host of organizations and sectors to do their part in providing the array of essential services in the growing community. The hope remained that the sum of all these efforts would eventually coalesce to form a more complete, healthy and safe community, where quality of life would continue to be a positive factor in attracting and retaining residents and businesses.

Beyond public policy and resource allocation, the business plan also guided the management decisions of a fiscally conservative organization. The County focused on the bottom-line and innovated and managed the County's finances in a manner that was highly regarded by rating agencies. The County managed healthy reserves and avoided the impulse of expanding services beyond available resources.

As the demographic and economic shifts became more pronounced, the elected board began to hear audible calls for the organization to adjust the business plan and allow discretionary local resources to augment federal and state funding for key social services. Many from the advocacy community had come to the conclusion that the County was becoming irrelevant in providing services to the most vulnerable. By defaulting to whatever service level could be purchased through federal and state funding, the County was failing to account for the actual service demands and impacts being experienced in households and neighborhoods. Advocates wanted the County to assume a leadership role in these areas and not limit its obligations to the amount of "pass-through" funding available from the state and federal government.

The County, being good stewards of the business plan, deflected many of these requests. But elected board recognized the disparity between the have and have not's and the growing disconnect between service demands and funding levels. As passionate and caring members of the community, the board of commissioners acknowledged something had to be done and looked to the business plan for guidance.

In response, the County applied elements of the business plan to support legislative changes to funding formulas, grant applications and the efforts of other service providers to expand the social safety net. The County walked a fine line between reinforcing the principles outlined in the business plan, and maintaining sensitivity to the issues and a willingness to stay engaged where appropriate.

As the business plan contemplated a few degrees of mission flexibility, the County identified a number of areas in which it could become more relevant to the broader community without diverting focus from its established mission. To accomplish this, the organization orchestrated a number of program and service enhancements with its not-for-profit partners. Examples of these activities included:

- Providing funding for five homeless shelters in a voter-approved public safety and justice levy,
- Investing a modest amount of discretionary revenue to capitalize building replacement funds for these five homeless shelters,
- Investing discretionary revenue to augment crisis mental health services, and
- Providing key, but modest, operational funding to social service agencies addressing basic needs such as dental and medical care within the community.

Although the County remained mission-focused, it was able to maintain some relevancy in the above service areas. The County referred to this maneuverability as the “degrees of flexibility.” This “relief valve” was an effective tool to maintain relevance in addressing some of the service void needs. However, as community needs increased and the service voids became more pronounced, staff spent considerable time discussing the varied demographic, economic and social challenges with elected officials. While a common and understandable sentiment expressed by a few advocates was the “County just needs to do more,” the board of commissioners understood the County had little capacity or bandwidth to simply take on additional programs and services unless others were abandoned or reduced.

It was evident that the status quo was not good enough. What was less clear was how to move forward in addressing these needs when organizations throughout the community were

already doing all they could. Everyone seemed to be facing the same wall of limited resource capacity. The issue was not how to get organizations to do more in relative isolation, but rather how these varied and diverse organizations could leverage their unique passion, resources and expertise for the good of the community by working together. This vague vision of “doing more together” led to some early brainstorming about what the next iteration of civic capacity might look like and how it would function in Washington County.

1998 to 2000: Community Engagement and Planning Process

In 1998 the elected board directed staff to engage in a process to update the County’s business plan for the third time. The original intention was to orchestrate a routine process that included outreach to familiar partners and stakeholders. There was a shared assumption by board members and administrative staff that the goal was to validate the existing business plan. At the time, the notion of tackling the larger community relevance issues seemed too vague. If anything, staff had learned to keep it simple and straightforward.

The elected officials, however, decided on a process that was far broader, more innovative and future focused. The process would reach out and engage traditional and non-traditional perspectives, and open the door to cross-sector and cross-organizational problem solving. It was an opportunity to throw everything on the table and engage the diverse resources and perspectives in the community in the goal of ultimately developing community-based solutions. This process introduced a number of challenges and risks. First, the process was going to rely upon the engagement of a broad cross section of the community, including those not typically involved in County deliberations. Second, the engagement process was going to be wide open and not limited to the issues over which the County had some control and influence. This had the potential of raising community expectations that could not be met as well as suspicions about the County’s motivation. It was common for participants in government planning processes to seek assurance that their participation mattered. In this case, issues and solutions were going to be identified that might not have a primary champion or sponsor. The purpose statement for the effort described the process as

An inclusive, relationship building and problem-solving effort built on the belief that we can more efficiently and creatively address the issues in our communities by pooling our expertise, resources and energy. The effort is about nurturing a spirit of partnership that will leverage and build upon existing good works. It is purposeful and strategic collaboration directed towards thoughtful and effective community action. The process was created for individuals and organizations to come to the table (VisionWest 2000-2002).

The County wanted to reach out to representatives from all sectors of the community, ranging from migrant farm workers to corporate executives, from the homeless to homebuilders and from the mentally and physically ill to the healthy and vibrant. The idea was to invite individuals and organizations to represent both their self-interest and what they perceived as the community's interest.

The community engagement process, called VisionWest, was organized around the following three sequential steps: *Imagine It*, *Shape It* and *Live It*. The *Imagine It* stage was multi-faceted and included various media and outreach opportunities, such as video, Internet, as well as facilitated discussions with select community leaders and more than 1,400 residents representing business, education, faith, not-for-profit and civic organizations. Participants identified issues they considered essential to the community's health and livability. Along the way, connections were strengthened among many different sectors and organizations, and a strong desire was expressed to work together more effectively. This stage culminated with a community celebration where the concerns identified in the discussions were categorized and presented as "issue areas."

The next stage was *Shape It*. During this phase, issue teams comprised of more than 400 volunteers considered opportunities and obstacles that confronted the community and others that were anticipated in the future. Pragmatic innovations were identified that could assist the community to address problems that had plagued similar communities across the country. Thousands of hours of donated time were expended researching and adapting best practices that have worked well in other places.

The final stage was *Live it*. This stage was intended to provide an opportunity to move beyond good ideas to action. As the first two stages of the project were in full swing, the County began to discuss strategies to sustain the energy, passion and collaboration. A few hurdles,

however, needed to be overcome. The majority of participants in the engagement process were not familiar with the County, or with other participants. People did not know each other and did not know the mission, goals and capacity of the various organizations at the table. Even within sectors and among organizations with parallel or complementary missions, there was a high level of unfamiliarity and lack of commonly shared information. The County heard stories of similarly situated organizations located across the street from one another, which had not met, let alone discussed opportunities for collaboration.

With the support of the board, the County initiated a new standing forum to strengthen the “connective tissue” among the various mission-driven organizations, regardless of sector. For both the elected officials and staff, this proved to be a highly valued part of the engagement process. Building the structure and capacity to formalize the collaborative efforts was important to sustain the effort and to maintain momentum. Most important of all, perhaps, the forum provided a vehicle for a dialogical process that could gradually shift the perspective of participants towards community problem solving and capacity building. Other sector and organization leaders increasingly began to acknowledge the limits of existing organizations and resources (already mission strained), and saw the merits in exploring collaborations and partnerships across organizational sectoral boundaries. The forum provided an opportunity to validate and recognize the contributions and limitations of the mission-driven organizations, while actively probing the untapped potential of the “between” space or voids.

To complement the work of the forum, County administrative staff initiated outreach to unfamiliar organizations and sectors to share values, perspective on community change and unrealized opportunities for collaboration. This journey began in earnest with the faith community.

Engaging the Faith Community

As the work of the issue teams was in full swing, the County began to informally inventory potential collaborators for the eight issue areas that had been identified during the VisionWest engagement process. These areas included Aging, Housing, Children and Families, Education,

Environment, Basic Needs, Primary Health Care and Behavioral Health Care. When looking to potential partners who had an interest in and could make contributions to these identified issue areas, it grew increasingly obvious that the faith community had been an overlooked and undervalued partner. In many ways, work with the faith community represented the canary in the coal mine. In reaching out to this group, the County was initiating contact with a large and important segment of the community with which it had no legal or even informal relationships. Contact with this group would serve as an early indicator of whether or not the notion of “working together” could pay dividends in addressing service voids in the community. It was not an easy first assignment. Members of the faith community, did not equally share a social service mission, did not have much experience in working together with other community groups and, in some cases, had little history of working cooperatively with one another.

With the support of elected officials and a healthy dose of naiveté, County staff cold-called more than forty faith leaders, requesting an introductory meeting. The initial outreach included the Catholic, United Methodist, Episcopalian, Presbyterian, Evangelical Christian, Muslim, Jewish, Church of the Latter Day Saints, Unitarian Universalist, Unity, United Church of Christ and Scientology communities.

Marked by the awkwardness of a blind date, the initial one-on-one meetings included a dose of healthy skepticism of government, and queries into the County’s true intentions. A frequent question was, “Why are you here and why now?” Needless to say, this made for spirited and somewhat challenging meet-and-greets. It put the County on notice that it needed to improve communication about the “why” and “how.”

The faith leaders wanted to hear the County’s perspective on why the *status quo* was not good enough, and understand the potential benefits and outcomes of faith-based organizations participating with other groups in the community’s planning process. The County left these meetings both affirmed and encouraged, as a common passion for community service emerged. The potential of collaboration and partnership existed, but would not be easy.

There exists a natural and sometimes uneasy distance between many faith organizations and government. In order to engage the faith community, the County needed to bridge this gap through relationship building and showing the relevance of a “pooled resource” approach to

meeting the needs of the community. It also needed to set aside the bureaucratic speak and learn to communicate from the heart. The County was now in uncharted waters of non-traditional community building and needed to tap into the inspirational and motivational dimensions of public service if it were to convince others to join the experiment. This was particularly important with the faith community, for it was through inspiration and passion that they exercised good works.

Although somewhat skeptical of the results, the County followed up the meetings with individual faith leaders by sponsoring a breakfast to explore the opportunities of partnership and collaboration with the entire group. Of the forty faith leaders invited to the breakfast, thirty-nine participated. The County presented the findings of the engagement process and offered suggestions about how the faith community might strategically connect with others in addressing community needs. After much discussion, the participating faith leaders unanimously supported moving the dialogue forward. This, however, was not as straightforward as it appeared.

Some faith organizations were comfortable working together at a common table, and others were interested in working with the County and other community partners one-on-one. In response, the County organized itself to create the common table for those interested, and continued individual dialogue with the others. The County had already decided that flexibility was going to be a hallmark of the effort and recognized that it would need to “follow” as much as “lead” the process.

To address the faith community’s desire to continue the dialog, the County offered to sponsor and staff an ongoing forum to foster relationships and meaningfully explore opportunities to work together and with others. Soon, the County and faith leaders met biweekly. The group developed a mission statement and goals and became known as the Interreligious Action Network of Washington County (Inter-religious Action Network, 2013). Their goals included:

- Providing a forum for ongoing relationship building, information sharing and community problem solving;
- Developing sustainable relationships with other community leaders and participating in efforts to identify, discuss and mobilize around concerns of mutual interest;

- Providing a network of faith leaders that can be accessed easily and efficiently;
- Creating settings where new and innovative expressions of community leadership by faith-based organizations or individuals may be freely offered; and
- Providing opportunities for group information-sharing and other activities.

In the first several meetings, the faith leaders spent considerable time getting to know each other and forging new relationships. The group also received briefings of the issue areas, including demographics and trends. They also discussed their individual passions and the mission work of their respective organizations. In this context, it came to light that a number of faith organizations participated in international and out-of-county mission work, but did little locally. Through detailed discussions of the Washington County community, leaders became aware of the myriad of challenges and the discreet opportunities to engage local issues. As one leader stated, “I had no idea all these unmet needs existed in Washington County.” The gears were slowly turning as the leaders began to discuss specific service opportunities.

A few months after the first meeting, the unforgettable and regrettable events of September 11, 2001 occurred. In the confusing days that followed, the Interreligious Action Network provided visible and vocal community leadership in supporting the local Muslim community and provided solace to many concerned and grieving residents. Their credibility and network relationships eased the confusion of the day and provided another springboard for developing even stronger relationships and additional partnerships.

Through the Interreligious Action Network and/or the one-on-one work with the County and other partners, the faith community has become active collaborators in creating the following partnerships:

- Partnering with Washington County and other not-for-profits to expand inclement weather shelters throughout the County,
- Combining and expanding food pantries and clothing closets,
- Developing housing units to assist alcohol- and drug-addicted residents, including those in government-sponsored programs,
- Advocating for the homeless and raising resources for the Community Housing Fund,

- Providing services and support to the alcohol and drug addicted, and
- Focusing on diversity and human rights.

While these are only a few examples of the good works of the faith community, they continue to explore ways to fill the community service void by working together with each other and the myriad of other community service partners. The canary exited the coal mine under its own power. The County applied the lessons-learned from this work to guide the development of a larger table for leaders from all sectors of the community.

The Vision Action Network: Transforming Visions into Action

Buoyed by the relationships and collaborations with the faith community, the County was more convinced than ever of the merits and benefits of building partnerships to collaboratively address community needs. It could not magically eliminate the voids and gaps in services, but it could add service capacity through the redirection of existing community resources. These additive features were not reliant on outside investments, legislation or voter approval. They simply happened because someone decided to make them happen.

Throughout the phases of the process described above, many regarded the collaborative process as a County effort. However, for its part, the County was actively attempting to divest itself of this image and institutionalize a shared-ownership model. This goal was complicated by the fact that the County was still taking a leadership role in articulating the model, advocating its benefits and facilitating the process. County leaders realized that to stand the test of time, the community capacity building effort required passionate and committed champions from the various sectors. Indeed, leaders were needed who could make the business case and persuade other organizations to jump on board and participate.

The County was hopeful that the notion of a “degree of flexibility” would resonate with as many mission-driven organizations as possible. The collaborative work with the faith community was evidence that the approach had merit. Not surprisingly, it also exposed the inflexibility of some organizations to expand their perspective and roles. Not every organization was ready to

embrace the concept of collaborative problem-solving. Some organizations were more inclined to accept and maintain the *status quo* and continue to focus on defined mission objectives.

Not wanting to leave the collaborative infrastructure to chance, Washington County formed a not-for-profit agency to serve as a catalyst, incubator, facilitator and champion. The Vision Action Network (VAN) was incorporated with the mission to “promote and support community-based problem solving through relationship building, planning and implementation processes that coordinate and optimize public, private and individual actions and resources” (Vision Action Network 2013). Washington County provided administrative, legal and financial support to the incorporation process and the initial organizational development efforts. This included the preparation of bylaws, budget, policies, procedures and marketing materials. In 2002, the board hired an executive director. For the first time, the effort had a vocal champion that was not a County employee.

Washington County transferred the leadership reins to a sixteen-member board of directors. This group represented leadership from all sectors, including education, social services, healthcare, business, government and the faith community. It was tasked to provide the vision, enthusiasm and fuel to keep value-added collaboration alive and well.

The VAN utilized the eight Issue Papers that emerged from the VisionWest process as a starting point to identify opportunities for immediate successes. To the frustration of some, the effort was focused on incremental changes over time and participation of the willing, rather than on big flashy initiatives. The approach was based on collaborative dialogue, problem solving and mobilization. It was not quick, not easy and certainly did not produce the “big bang” revolution that some had hoped for. It was, however, a viable method to enhance services and capacity where it otherwise would not exist. The County never envisioned the effort as revolutionary, but more aptly, saw it as transformative.

The VAN described three stages to its work. They included:

- 1) “Listen” – gathering input, data and perspectives.
- 2) “Focus” – issue identification, collaborative planning and problem solving.
- 3) “Act” – a catalyst for implementation.

By design, the VAN continues to serve as an intermediary and civic capacity builder. It is not a direct service provider. It is both process and outcome oriented. Following is an illustrative list of VAN's achievements:

- Support to the Inter-religious Action Network,
- The creation and incorporation of a fund to raise resources for affordable housing,
- Coordination and participation in a collaborative project to connect the homeless to critical resources and services,
- Partnership with various agencies to address food security issues.
- Coordination of planning efforts to create the Partners for a Sustainable Washington County Community,
- Coordination and support of planning efforts to create the Human Rights Coalition of Washington County,
- Initiation of planning efforts with mental health, health care, emergency response and law enforcement agencies to create the Behavioral Health Crisis Response Team.

Although still a work in progress, the VAN has become a vital component of the civic infrastructure and continues to be an effective resource in championing cross-sector and organizational collaborations. Over the years, local governments have recommitted to their mission-oriented business plans and look to the VAN, Interreligious Action Network and other partners as important conduits to coordinate service enhancements within the voids.

Over time, the VAN has evolved in its role. As a neutral convener, VAN's work was most often behind the scenes and relatively invisible except to those who were most actively engaged in the process. The general community could see the collaborative solutions that were created, but many did not understand or appreciate the important role VAN played in the building process. Because of this relative invisibility, the commitment from VAN leadership became more and more crucial to maintaining the momentum of the movement.

Over just a few decades, what began as a challenge of relevance for one local government has now become the new frontier of service delivery for the broader community. It represents an underappreciated opportunity to enhance service capacity without an infusion of new resources.

Leveraging the allocation and use of existing community assets through collaboration is sensible and effective, and for many communities a better answer than waiting for someone else to fix the problem. Some may call it visionary, others just a good business practice. If the *status quo* is not good enough, then one should ask “What else?”

Rising to the Challenge: Some Conclusions and Reflections

The overriding priority for local government is mission fulfillment. We hire administrators, supervisors and discipline experts to accomplish our stated goals and objectives. A second and closely related priority for some agencies is to maintain relevance to the body of community needs that falls outside of our business plan. Fulfilling this role takes a different skill set, vernacular and communication style.

The collaborative problem-solving process challenges participants to be more flexible, patient and relevant on a personal and professional level. Hiring the right employees to do this work is an important ingredient for success. At the end of the day, it is all about relationships and the commitment to “do what otherwise would not get done”. During the work with the faith community, Washington County staff was routinely invited to speak during any number of Friday, Saturday or Sunday faith services. Little in a public employee’s professional training or background prepares one for this role, but in this case the requests were fulfilled, and contributed greatly to the relationships being built.

Members of the County staff recognized early on that they were not only representing the County, but were representing the notion of public service and a passion for tending to the community’s needs. The message was not bureaucratic, but focused on an overriding commitment to community, passion for service, helping those most in need and the fundamental belief that we do better when we work together. The message resonated and partnerships were created as a result.

Through these types of occasions, the County came to understand the level of flexibility and open mindedness it was going to take to nurture the non-traditional relationships that formed the bedrock of the effort. It was not going to be easy getting the varied community sectors to the

table, and keeping them at the table was going to be a challenge in its own right. From the County's perspective the formula for success required strong relationships and a commitment to action – to getting things done.

The collaborative process is iterative. Success relies upon agencies forging relationships with traditional and non-traditional organizations one small step at a time and, in some, cases taking the same step several times. Trust is not built in a day. It also requires flexibility and the ability to customize an approach depending on the participant. Working with the faith community is not like working with the chamber of commerce. With some sectors, a little passion, inspiration and persuasion can go a long way. In addition, these relationships need to be tended and personal. Governments cannot be detached and distant, but must be accessible and engaged. All participants need to be comfortable with being uncomfortable at times.

These types of efforts cannot be executed without the support and acquiescence of organizational and other community leaders and their uncompromising commitment to the process and outcomes. This includes the leadership and support of elected officials who are comfortable with the notion of “degrees of flexibility” and willing to entertain unconventional relationships and solutions. This work needs to be resourced and communicated as an organizational priority. It will not be successful if seen as a second- or third-tier function.

To be fully engaged, organizations need to actively, and regularly, participate in the entire process. This includes data collection and analysis, issue identification and collaborative problem solving. It takes time, patience and resources. The process is continual and not episodic.

Whether providing political or administrative leadership, the issues confronting public sector organizations are increasingly challenging. If public employees are to remain relevant to the communities they serve, they must continue to build credible, trusted, high-quality institutions that fulfill organizational missions. But they must also successfully navigate their community's services voids by transforming themselves into the relationship-builders and collaborative problem-solvers their communities need them to be. For those in public service, this call to relevance is the new challenge.

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