

# HealthSpark Foundation

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I'm grateful to the HealthSpark Foundation for giving me this opportunity to share some insights and ideas that may be helpful to you as you build a community of practice around systems change and transformation.

I'm humbled to look around this room and see so many colleagues, peers and friends with whom I've shared the experience of transforming Montgomery County's homelessness safety net into Your Way Home, a unified housing crisis response system and partnership that is responsible for reducing literal homelessness in Montgomery County by 37% since its launch in January 2014.

# Five Insights

This morning I want to share five key insights about systems change based on my work with Your Way Home.

# #1 Start With Why

Systems change starts with the question WHY not HOW. Why change?

When you first bring people together to talk about systems change, you're going to here a lot of different whys. Whys like...

1. The needs or demographics of our community are changing
2. Resources are shrinking
3. There's too much duplication of services
4. The system is too complex & hard to navigate
5. More innovative and effective strategies, tools and best practices are out there
6. A funder told us too
7. We've been doing this for 10/20/30 years and the problem is worse now than ever

# Start With Why

Until people from across sectors - including funders, service providers, program participants and community partners - can agree on a shared answer to the question why that resonates with all of them, you can't go any further.

The short answer to the question “Why Change?” is usually something like: There's got to be a better way; we can do better; we can have more impact.

The longer answer should be a vision and a set of shared values. For YWH, our vision is to make the exp. of homelessness rare, brief & non-recurring. Our values are Housing First, progressive engagement, strength-based practices and equity.

It takes a lot of time, conversation, patience and will to get to why.

# #2 Embrace Uncertainty

Once you've answered the why, the rest is easy. Actually, that's not true. The rest is long, hard, non-linear and at times frustrating.

That's OK. In fact, it's more than OK. It means the changes you're making are meaningful and built to last.

Uncertainty allows for creativity and divergent thinking - an openness to new perspectives and paradigms, even if they challenge what you believe to be true.

# Embrace Uncertainty

Embracing uncertainty also means that you should not expect two things to happen quickly:

1. Better outcomes - systems change is measured in years, not months
2. A final form - systems change is iterative, meaning it constantly evolves at the idea stage, at the planning stage, and after implementation has begun.

# #3 Failure=Success

There are a lot of metaphors for systems change, mostly involving transportation:

- We're riding the bicycle without handlebars on OR
- We're building the rocketship while we're flying into outer space

If you ride a bicycle without handlebars, what are you guaranteed to do? Crash.

These metaphors work because failure leads to success.

Your Way Home uses pilot projects to test new concepts; we study what works in other communities - and what doesn't - and beg, steal or borrow the best bits; we use evidence-based tools; invest in research & evaluation to fail well.



# #4 Communications

Communications are essential to success. What I've learned in doing systems change work is that the more time and resources you invest in communicating with your partners, the more they'll tell you that you're not communicating enough.

YWH's strategies include a dedicated community outreach staff, cross-sector action teams to address specific issues/policies, community update meetings, email blasts, the web and social media to engage with its partners. Two lessons:

1. Don't just push information out, pull it in. Two-way conversation is key.
2. Don't concentrate systems change knowledge in one person in your organization. Tell everyone, up and down.

# #5 Everyone Must Change

My last insight is this: Systems change isn't about telling one sector, whether its government, philanthropy, nonprofits, schools, or the business community, to do something different while everyone else maintains their status quo.

Instead, systems change requires changes in attitudes, behaviors, decision-making, policy, practice and funding across all sectors.

# Everyone Must Change

Funders - both public and private - will have to change with the system.

For public funders, this might mean braiding funds that were previously siloed and using competitive RFP processes to search for new ideas and talented partners.

For private funders, it might be funding pilot projects, pooling funds to scale impact, and paying for “R&D - research & design”, a privilege of the corporate sector that allows everyone to have the smartest communications and computing tool in the history of human civilization in our front pocket but R&D is rarely an option for public and nonprofit organizations serving the most vulnerable residents in our communities.

# In Conclusion...

For Systems Change to succeed you need buy-in from leadership & frontline staff;

You need data to drive decisions and identify disparities in outcomes;

You need to make hard choices about resource allocation;

You need backbone support, and yes, maybe even a consultant;

You need to take risks;

You need to help bring along people who may be frightened, angry or confused.

That's how you build a movement. That's how you make real change. Thank you.