

**Executive Summary**

# Needle-Moving Community Collaboratives: Profiles in Persistence and Progress

Seven years into an ambitious initiative to halve Milwaukee’s teen birth rate—once one of the highest in the nation—a collaborative of business, government, philanthropic, and nonprofit leaders faced a big choice. The 2014 teen birth data showed that it had surpassed its goal, with a 56 percent reduction since 2007. What now? Should the collaborative, as one of the initiative’s leaders asked, “Go home, or go big?”

In an October 2014 announcement by Milwaukee’s mayor and the Teen Pregnancy Prevention Initiative’s other leaders, the collaborative went big— seeking another 50 percent drop in the teen birth rate over the next decade and vowing to reduce large racial and ethnic disparities in teen pregnancy. “Make no mistake, this new goal will be even more difficult to meet,” said *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel* Publisher Elizabeth Brenner, cochair of the teen initiative’s oversight committee, promising “a lot of hard work over the next 10 years.”

Milwaukee’s community collaborative, a cross-sector approach to addressing a community-wide problem, was among those featured in a 2012 report by The Bridgespan Group and the White House Council for Community Solutions, *Needle-Moving Community Collaboratives: A Promising Approach to Addressing America’s Biggest Challenges*. The report described similar communities that had worked collaboratively across business, government, philanthropy, and nonprofits to produce measurable improvement of *at least 10 percent* on a challenging community issue, such as a high rate of teen pregnancy, youth violence, or poor educational achievement. We looked at a very large number of multisector collaborations to find a small number that had actually achieved this kind of measurable impact. Indeed, our research led us to the same conclusion reached

by John Kania and Mark Kramer in their influential 2011 article on collective impact—namely, that examples of successful collective impact initiatives were rare.

In *Needle Moving Community Collaboratives* we focused on what these “rare birds” could teach us about the characteristics of successful community collaboratives. For this follow-up article we went back to the 11 communities whose collaborations remained active and looked at their patterns of persistence and progress over the past three years. We wanted to know whether these communities continued to work together with this collaborative approach. And if so, did they keep improving outcomes?

To answer these questions we reviewed local data, interviewed field leaders and key stakeholders in each community, and made site visits to several of the communities—conducting more than 40 interviews in all. What we found was a high degree of persistence across all of the collaboratives and noteworthy progress for two-thirds. We also found that progress didn’t come easily. The collaboratives faced a set of common challenges that forced them to learn and evolve in different ways.

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