

# **Rising to the Challenge: *The Strategies of Social Service Intermediaries***

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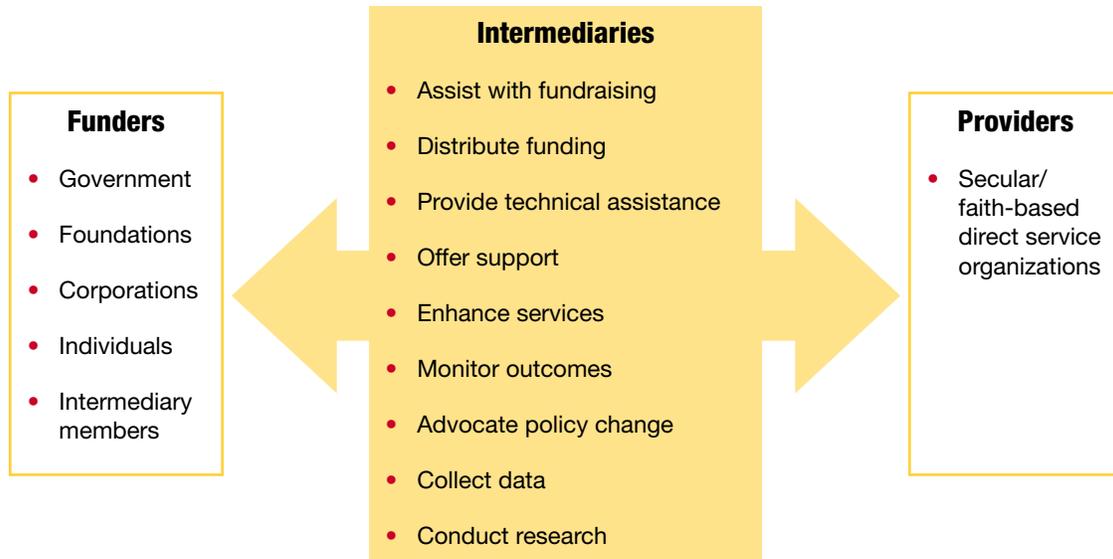
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# Introduction

During the past decade, intermediary organizations have proliferated across the nonprofit sector. Extensive funding from the federal government, including programs supporting the creation of intermediaries by the departments of Justice, Labor, and Housing and Urban Development,<sup>1</sup> as well as millions of dollars in private foundation investments,<sup>2</sup> have spurred the growth of intermediaries as a means to connect funding sources and direct service providers. At the same time, the recent recession has led to funding cuts across many organizations, and intermediaries have not been exempted. This economic reality has forced both newer and more established intermediaries to prove their worth and think strategically about how to obtain funding and remain viable.

In the social service field, intermediary organizations are “nonprofit organizations that distribute funding they receive from other sources, as well as provide technical assistance and other services to support services offered by (other) nonprofits.”<sup>3</sup> They are typically positioned between funding entities (e.g., the federal government, foundations and corporations) and secular or faith-based direct service organizations. Intermediaries play an important role in connecting organizations that share a common interest, both to enhance the services these organizations provide and to build larger service networks. They often also promote quality standards and monitor programs on behalf of funders. (See the figure on the next page.) While intermediaries all hold a similar position—between funders and direct service providers—they can look very different in both their structure and reach, with some working locally and others taking a statewide or even nationwide approach. These differences affect their expected roles and the challenges they face.

The use of intermediaries has expanded in recent years in part because of an increasingly complex social service landscape and the delegation of decision-making and the organization of services from the federal to the state level.<sup>4</sup> It is also rooted in a greater focus on accountability, quality control and evidence-based programs among public and private funders. Intermediaries have distinguished themselves in this environment by establishing platforms for collecting data and providing vital technical assistance that supports the implementation of evidence-based models.<sup>5</sup>



Recent studies attempting to understand the impact of the funding and technical assistance intermediary organizations provide have found that it has made “enormous contributions to the scope, scale, and effectiveness of grassroots, faith-based social service agencies, and often do[es] so at [a] low cost.”<sup>6</sup> Moreover, the work that intermediaries do often helps the federal government provide resources to community-based organizations more efficiently.<sup>7</sup> The research, however, reflects varying levels of rigor and offers few definitive conclusions about intermediaries’ effectiveness, relying primarily on intermediary staffs’ self-reports about their contributions. In a developing field, this is a typical first step toward understanding the potential benefits of the work, though more rigorous research into intermediaries’ effectiveness will ultimately be needed.

This report adds to the growing body of literature on intermediary practice and helps illuminate the potential value derived from intermediaries’ work. It highlights the primary challenges intermediaries face as well as the strategies they are using to address them. In addition, we provide several recommendations for how intermediaries can both improve and continue their efforts.

## Past Research

Previous evaluations of intermediaries suggest that an effective funder–intermediary relationship will have several key characteristics.<sup>8</sup> Dare Mighty Things, for example, has outlined seven such features, including developing a common understanding of roles and responsibilities and establishing clear and agreed-upon goals and procedures (see text box that follows).<sup>9</sup>

### Key Aspects of Intermediary Relationships

*(Adapted from “Establishing Partnerships”, Dare Mighty Things.)*

1. **Leadership:** Determine early and follow respectfully.
2. **Common Understanding:** Know the framework of organization and role assignment that was agreed upon.
3. **Purpose:** Agree upon a common vision that enhances openness, creativity and collaboration.
4. **Culture and Values:** Identify strengths and weaknesses that exist between organizations.
5. **Learning and Development:** Invest in the partnership through flexible management and a desire to work collaboratively.
6. **Communication:** Agree upon a form of open communication between partners.
7. **Performance Management:** Evaluate and assess amply to ensure performance.

Intermediaries support direct service providers in a variety of ways: by minimizing service duplication and leveraging and coordinating funds from multiple sources;<sup>10</sup> by bringing together networks of providers within a field and often establishing or promoting evidence about effective programming; and by providing valuable technical assistance services informed by the intermediaries’ broader vantage point over the respective providers. When intermediaries function effectively, they provide a voice for each member of the partnership—by creating a solid organizational structure, with common operating procedures, a proper reporting system and a forum to discuss and resolve conflicts.<sup>11</sup>

## The Current Study

This paper was funded by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation as part of the evaluation of the Children's Futures (CF) initiative, which aims to improve the health and well-being of children from birth to age three in Trenton, NJ. Children's Futures, Inc. (CF, Inc.), the organization created to oversee the CF initiative, began its life as a funding agency and later transformed into an intermediary organization that not only provides funding but also brings together relevant parties and offers training and technical assistance. Correspondingly, this report focuses on distilling lessons from CF's experiences and those of other intermediaries, as well as the multiple parties that work with and support them. Further, the report is aimed at illuminating the ways in which intermediaries function and the challenges they face in a rapidly expanding landscape. Using data from interviews conducted with high-level staff at intermediary organizations across the country, the report identifies common challenges and strategies used to overcome them; it also examines a number of more specific issues that emerge based on the intermediary's scope (e.g., local, statewide or national), a distinction that has not yet been addressed in the literature.

The data for this report come from interviews with 31 lead staff members from 22 social service intermediaries across the United States. The intermediaries included in this study represent a range of fields: after-school and out-of-school-time programming; child health and welfare; parenting and early childhood development; K–12 education; and youth workforce development. We chose the intermediaries based on the following criteria:

1. They aim to coordinate services in geographic areas (local intermediaries), at a statewide (statewide intermediaries) or national (national intermediaries) level;
2. They focus on issues affecting children or youth; and
3. They have been in operation for five or more years.

We then narrowed the field further, selecting intermediaries across the country to ensure geographic diversity. We made sure to include groups that use varying strategies and structures to provide a more complete picture of intermediaries' work. Although the sample is not exhaustive, it offers insight into the varied tactics intermediaries employ at different levels.

From the 22 selected intermediaries, we identified high-level staff involved in either the operation and decision-making processes or the internal evaluation of the intermediary and/or the service providers with which it works. For all but two intermediary

organizations, the interview occurred with the CEO, president or executive director. In seven cases, we interviewed an additional staff member, based on his or her coordinating role, to enhance our understanding of the intermediary's work.

Given our other evaluation work of CF, Inc., in Trenton, our most in-depth and detailed knowledge in this report comes from that intermediary—along with its multiple agency partners. Although we do not know if these organizations' experiences are typical, we highlight those points that suggest the potential for broader insight into the nature of intermediaries' work.

The interviews with representatives of the 22 selected intermediaries focused on three primary topics: engaging with communities; assessing and prioritizing social service needs; and measuring the effectiveness of intermediaries and the service-providing organizations with which they work.<sup>12</sup> This report draws on these interviews to outline the ways in which social service intermediaries balance the potentially competing interests of the parties they serve. It describes how the intermediaries lay the groundwork for improving social services and building both internal and field-wide capacity. Based on this understanding, the report makes recommendations for intermediaries and their partners to more successfully meet their challenges.

## Overview of the Intermediaries in the Study

While all intermediaries in this study focus on children and youth, they reported a variety of different operating structures, funding sources and roles. The staff sizes, for example, ranged from 1.5<sup>13</sup> to 60, with a median of 8.5 staff members. Many of those we interviewed indicated that a combination of recent funding cuts and an overall desire to stay “lean” had resulted in staff engaging in multiple roles and the frequent use of consultants and part-time employees;

some organizations had received targeted staffing support (e.g., through AmeriCorps grants) for specific aspects of their operations.

The intermediaries in the study reported budgets

Intermediaries in the Study		
Staff Size	Range	1.5–60
	Median	8.5
Annual Budget	Range	\$0–\$200 million
	Median	\$2.3 million
Reach	City/County	10
	State	10
	National	2

ranging from \$0 (in which case all support came from in-kind work from partner organizations) to \$200 million. This funding came from a variety of sources, including local, state and federal grants; private foundations; corporations (direct and in-kind support); individual donations; and direct service and membership fees. Funding cuts or reductions, which will be discussed in more depth later in this report, have been pervasive across the organizations in the study and have forced many intermediaries to reach beyond their traditional funding sources.

At the time of our interviews, 10 of the intermediaries took a city or county perspective, including Children's Futures, Inc.; 10 operated on the state level; and 2 took more of a national perspective (although both of these played a separate intermediary role at the state level). The two nationally focused intermediary organizations also served as intermediaries to other intermediaries—that is, they convened and offered technical assistance to other intermediary organizations.

The specific activities these intermediaries engage in are guided by their focus, mission and position. Some provide funding, some convene other organizations and deliver technical assistance, and others engage in only one or two of these activities. Five of the 22 intermediaries in this study said they do not provide funding, though they do facilitate it in some way (e.g., by helping direct service providers apply for grants; supporting other fundraising efforts, etc.). All 22 intermediaries convene parties for the purpose of collective learning. And all provide technical assistance, though this assistance ranges from informal troubleshooting to very structured training and support.

# Intermediaries Face Common Challenges

Because of their position between funders and social service providers, intermediaries face common challenges. In particular, they reported that the space they occupy “between” multiple parties means that goals must constantly be reassessed and reasserted, and that the ability to skillfully negotiate and coordinate varying interests is essential. This work was seen as at the core of the intermediary role. In contrast, other challenges were viewed as more problematic, potentially hindering the ability to function. These challenges included decreased funding, the need to constantly redefine their role and the ability to measure their impact. The following sections explore these challenges, as well as potential solutions, in further detail.

## **Common Challenge 1: *Decreased Funding***

The first challenge, discussed by almost all intermediaries in the study, was funding. Despite their rapid growth, intermediaries have been affected by the faltering national economy and resulting budget cuts among government agencies, private foundations and direct service providers. In addition, intermediaries are sometimes perceived as being in competition for funding with their social service–providing partners.<sup>14</sup> Because intermediaries assert themselves as valuable partners that support, enhance and guide the work of social service providers, the perception of competition for funding poses an obvious challenge that must be addressed openly for intermediaries to be effective.

Funding is both the most concrete and the most ubiquitous challenge that intermediaries face. Many intermediaries indicated that cuts in funding across programs are hitting them particularly hard, and they are increasingly cutting staff, reducing or eliminating funding to service providers and decreasing certain outreach efforts. In a 2010 interview, Paul Light of the Robert F. Wagner Graduate School of Public Service at NYU noted that results of the economic downturn include a “hollowing out” of capacity within nonprofit organizations as they struggle to cut expenses, and our interviews suggest that most intermediaries are experiencing just that kind of hollowing out.<sup>15</sup> Two important exceptions to this trend have been intermediaries focused on work supported by the economic stimulus

package of 2009 and intermediaries engaged in scaling up evidence-based programs across their respective states. While these intermediaries are comparatively flush with resources, their representatives worry that this prosperity may be short-lived.

### **Strategies to Obtain Funding**

Although few lead staff members cited funding as an explicit reason they chose to engage in certain areas, all recognized its influence on the direction of their work. Acknowledging that the funding horizon was bleak, intermediaries in the study used a number of strategies to maximize their funding and thus their ability to have an impact. The first strategy was to become more flexible in attempts to secure funding. While all 31 individuals with whom we spoke indicated that they were not “chasing the dollars” and would not try to procure funding that was too much of a “stretch” in terms of focus or ideology, four noted that their mission was crafted as a result of funding opportunities or with particular funding streams in mind, or that it evolved with trends in the field that were connected in some way to funding. An example of this was an interest in science, technology, engineering and math (STEM) among education and after-school/out-of-school-time service providers, because the area had both an acknowledged need and increased resources.

Faced with fundraising challenges, intermediaries were also increasingly mobilizing resources through strategic partnerships. For example, one intermediary connected with local businesses to coordinate a back-to-school fair; two others drew on the interests of students and researchers at a local university to enlist both part-time staff and evaluation resources, including experienced program evaluators; and Children’s Futures, Inc., collaborated with local agencies to sponsor in-service training sessions for staff. Such partnerships stretched beyond the usual triad of funder, intermediary and service provider to include other organizations offering in-kind contributions, space, part-time staff and, in a few instances, funds. These alliances also provided visibility to both intermediaries and partners, and—especially when the collaboration occurred between the intermediary and service provider—sent a message that the relationship was not unidirectional and unequal, with all benefits flowing from intermediary to provider. This effect may be especially important for local intermediaries; for Children’s Futures, Inc., it established a sense of interdependence and equality among partners, facilitating future collaboration.

Intermediaries also worked to get funders, service providers and the communities they serve to understand their value. Cultivating this understanding has become increasingly important for many intermediaries as they face funding cuts and need families, parents or other members of the public to advocate on their behalf with policymakers. Similarly,

several intermediaries indicated that they were mobilizing their current partners (including both private funders and direct service providers) to lobby for maintained or increased resources from state and local governments.

Finally, in addition to these strategies, some intermediaries said they use their training and technical assistance to attract revenue by offering fee-for-service assistance to nonpartner agencies. For example, some charge a consulting fee for nonconnected or nonmember service providers to attend a training that is already being offered to partner agencies.

## **Common Challenge 2: *Defining Their Role***

Intermediary staff indicated that among their primary duties was the coordination of all organizations with a vested interest in their targeted program area(s) or specific population(s). Across intermediaries, this role represents both a challenge and a key function, and although different intermediaries address this challenge in different ways, all acknowledged its importance. Intermediaries, as several staff members told us, are in a position to see the “big picture” and thus can determine where organizations have the potential to come together and implement initiatives that are broader than any one organization could handle alone. Yet a lack of alignment between different organizations’ stated priorities can make this task difficult, suggesting possible disagreement on the big picture. To address this challenge, intermediaries must “sell” partners on the value of working together and learning from one another. Doing so enables an intermediary to work effectively with its partners and pursue its mission. In a nutshell, prospective partners need to understand what intermediaries do to effectively “use” the services they provide.

Intermediaries take different approaches to defining their role, in part due to the varying ways in which they are created. The intermediaries in this study were created in five different ways: through legislative action; through a community effort; by a funder; by service providers; and by multiple parties that include other intermediaries, service providers and funders. These differing origins mean that while the need to establish value is a common challenge, *for whom* intermediaries have to establish their value may vary depending on which organization(s) saw the need for their existence in the first place. Intermediaries are less likely to have to define their role or “sell” their value to the parties that created them. A strong exception comes when the leadership of these entities changes hands—such as with the election or appointment of new state and local government officials.

## **Strategies to Better Define Their Role**

To establish or maintain their value, intermediaries must find ways to continuously identify “key” players and get them in the same room (whether literally or figuratively) to determine common interests, goals and strategies. These players vary based on the intermediary, but in addition to direct service providers, they often include local businesses, state and local government officials, community residents, funders and potential funders, and leaders of other intermediaries. The intermediaries in this study offered a few potentially useful strategies to identify and draw in the key players in a given field and/or community, including inviting them to join the intermediary’s board of directors and offering relevant trainings or conferences.

Intermediaries must also work to develop a common language so that all parties understand the terms of the discussion. Doing this requires that they develop shared definitions and goals among organizations serving similar populations or doing complementary work. It also requires that comparable outcomes and related measures be generated, so that everyone understands success in common terms. (For more on this, see P/PV’s report, *Using Data in Multi-Agency Collaborations*.) Building and disseminating shared knowledge through such vehicles as websites, webinars and print materials is an important aspect of this work.

## **Common Challenge 3: *Measuring Their Impact***

To demonstrate their value—and, often, to maintain funding—intermediaries must measure their impact across a variety of outcomes and types of activities. The intermediaries in our study see the monitoring of benchmarks and frequent assessments as fundamental parts of their role, both to meet funder requirements and to track their own and their partners’ accomplishments. They do this in several ways: conducting customer satisfaction surveys; collecting outcomes across a state or specific region; collecting outcomes across different programs; and establishing and measuring progress against benchmarks.

Regardless of the strategy, intermediaries are often several steps removed from the outcomes of service providers with which they work, making it difficult for intermediaries to assess their own impact and complicating efforts to ensure accountability. Because one of their primary functions is to help service providers improve their performance, funders may require intermediaries to demonstrate that their work is leading to better outcomes for the service providers’ clientele. Intermediaries that provide funding to their service-provider partners can compel them to report data on client outcomes under the terms of the grant, but in situations in which intermediaries are not the funder, they are limited in

their ability to impose data collection and evaluation requirements. As a result, intermediaries often use whatever outcomes service providers must report to their funders as measures of the intermediary's impact.

In truth, hard data on intermediaries' effectiveness is difficult to come by, particularly if the intermediaries have ambitious, broad-scale goals, such as improving youth outcomes across an entire community or state, or bringing about particular policy changes. The most rigorous methods of evaluating impact—experimental designs—are largely unavailable to intermediaries for practical reasons (e.g., it might require randomly assigning intermediaries to locales or states). As one respondent indicated, intermediaries often use far less robust measures akin to “customer satisfaction” ratings—that is, formal or informal surveys that gather information about how various stakeholders perceive the intermediary's effectiveness, including surveys of its staff, the staff of the agencies it serves or members of the larger community.

State or national intermediaries may use common measures drawing on comprehensive statewide systems that serve all or very nearly all of a particular type of provider in a state, such as information collected for a specific home-visiting program. These intermediaries use the aggregate outcomes of these providers and changes in outcomes across these providers as evidence of their impact. Similarly, local intermediaries may have data on outcomes collected across local organizations. One of the major challenges associated with these two strategies, and not fully recognized by our interviewees, is that such systems usually collect information only on active clients. If clients leave programs before completing the full program cycle (a common occurrence), programs rarely track what happens to those clients.

### **Strategies to Measure Their Impact**

Although the intermediaries in the study use a range of strategies to assess their impact, few would assert that they have fully satisfactory measures. All the intermediaries we spoke with maintain, at minimum, a basic data management system that has varying levels of detail about their activities, the population of service providers or other organizations they have served, and any feedback provided on their services. They also maintain records related to the goals and outcomes established by their funders.

In addition, intermediaries may collect information about the clients served by their partner organizations. Several intermediaries have worked with providers to develop or improve data systems that allow providers to track their outcomes and assess their strengths and

weaknesses. The ways in which they do so vary. Intermediaries may develop common indicators for which providers report aggregated information about their clients. Less often, they develop or use shared databases that collect common indicators, and the intermediary analyzes the information within the system. These systems may exist for external reporting alone or for both external reporting and internal management.

In addition to these approaches, some intermediaries enlist outside evaluators to assess their work (usually in response to specific funder requirements). Others draw from the larger outcomes they see at a community level (e.g., improvements in education or reductions in violence) or statewide level (e.g., policy changes, newly established networks or new funding streams), under the assumption that their role contributed to the successful outcomes. However, measuring community-level change is risky. Many steps exist between the intermediary's actions and the community members' outcomes, and the intermediary may be unable to accurately detect its influence on the outcomes of individuals served by the organizations with which it works. If community-level outcomes are used to assess change, then extensive work must be completed up front to ensure that resources, planned activities and expected outcomes align closely. Two intermediaries in the study acknowledged their uncertainty as to whether they were successful, due to the difficulty in measuring "success."

## Working at Different Levels: Specific Challenges and Strategies

While all the intermediary organizations we interviewed faced challenges, it was clear that certain challenges were linked with whether the intermediary worked at the local, statewide or national level. In response to these distinct challenges, intermediaries can deploy different strategies depending on their level of operation. Because the intermediaries in our study operate mostly at the local or state level, this report offers more insight into their challenges and strategies than it does into those experienced by national-level intermediaries.

### **The Local Level**

At the local level, which includes both city- and county-wide organizations, intermediaries face both the advantages and disadvantages of having greater knowledge and direct contact with their stakeholders, including providers, politicians and the larger community.

#### **Local Challenge—*Limited Number and Capacity of Providers***

Interviewees from local intermediaries in our study indicated that they are sometimes challenged by the limited number and capacity of providers available for collaboration; the struggle to get providers and the community to connect with larger trends in the field; and high staff turnover in the organizations they work with. While situations vary depending on city size and availability of funding, most cities and counties have a limited number of providers. Intermediaries at this level sometimes have to work with all the providers in a given area, meaning they have partners with varying capacities to implement programs and serve the community.

#### **Strategies to Increase Provider Capacity**

Local intermediaries employ a number of strategies to compensate for limited local capacity and enhance providers' expertise. The first seeks to forge "one-on-one" connections. Intermediaries work to build relationships and focus on getting to know and connect with staff in agencies and the broader community. They also work to build relationships *across* direct service providers so they can learn from one another. This approach not only uses existing local expertise to increase capacity, it enhances the spirit

of collaboration and strengthens networks among agencies, which ultimately supports the intermediary's work. A number of interagency relationships in Trenton were catalyzed and developed by the work that Children's Futures, Inc., did in the city.

Some intermediaries adopt a report card process, in which they work together with providers to establish benchmarks and interim goals, and then offer regular feedback about agencies' progress toward those goals. Intermediaries in our study indicated that requiring interim progress reports allows them to help providers make small steps toward improving their programming.

### **Local Challenge—*Connecting to Larger Trends and Policies***

At the local level, intermediaries face the challenge of connecting direct service providers to the larger field in which their service falls. Due to time and funding limitations, as well as frequent policy changes and new programming trends, it can be difficult for intermediaries to help providers keep up and see the potential value of implementing particular practices or programs. In addition, intermediaries in our study indicated that direct service providers often feel powerless and unable to effect larger change within a field or influence funding or public policy decisions.

### **Strategies to Connect to Larger Trends**

To meet the challenge of connecting to larger efforts at the state and national level, local intermediaries employ a number of strategies. Depending on their funding, they may encourage and pay for service providers and other staff to attend state or national conferences, engage in networking on a state or national level, or participate in relevant webinars. Staff from Children's Futures, Inc., greatly appreciated these efforts. Another strategy is implemented at the administrative level, in which intermediaries connect administrative benchmarks to larger youth data and outcomes to see where individual providers fit (i.e., comparing providers' outcomes against particular benchmarks, as well as larger trends). Finally, when possible, intermediaries link service providers to their local political representatives—in particular, the mayor's office and school district administration—to provide time and opportunities for these entities to develop direct relationships.

### **Local Challenge—*Staff Turnover***

Intermediaries in this study reported high turnover for staff in the direct service organizations in their fields. At the local level, where an intermediary's primary role is to help build the capacity of these direct service organizations and to bring together their staff

for training, technical assistance and peer learning, turnover complicates the process of establishing long-term knowledge and relationships. Trainings and workshops often build individual capacity, which then leaves when the individual moves to another organization. Yet it is important to acknowledge that staff may move to positions in other agencies served by the intermediary, which happened in a number of cases in Trenton. Such transfers ranged from executives to direct providers—which meant that the capacity remained in the network, even if a given agency lost a valuable employee.

### **Strategies to Train New Staff and Reduce Turnover**

Larger capacity-building initiatives span organizations and become ingrained in the community of providers served by the intermediary and beyond. To do this, the local intermediaries in our study reported building linked networks of providers and generating accessible stores of knowledge, such as websites, training manuals and other systems for organizing documents that last beyond the tenure of individual staff. One local intermediary, acknowledging the difficulty posed by turnover, offered a slightly different solution: providing incentives for staying in a position, including training opportunities and stipends for staff who stay in their roles for a year or more.

## **The State Level**

Intermediaries that operate at the state level are often charged, either explicitly or implicitly, with the task of spreading successful models across an entire state. Closely related to this role, they often work to influence state policy in their field. They also serve both individual communities and the broader state and, as such, must figure out ways to link these two appropriately.

### **Statewide Challenge—*Scaling Up and Policy Impact***

In this study, four of the ten statewide intermediaries focused explicitly on scaling up one or more evidence-based program and extending its reach across the state. This effort included training and support for program implementation. Along similar lines, but less explicitly focused on a specific evidence-based program, the remaining six statewide intermediaries gathered and analyzed data to both create and extend successful programming, identifying the programs that seemed most successful and expanding their reach into additional communities. Further, all ten focused on establishing some kind of legislative influence and/or lobbying, largely as a way to generate resources for their field.

### **Strategies to Scale Up**

In attempting to scale up evidence-based programming, statewide intermediaries faced a number of challenges, including the limited capacity of potential providers to implement and monitor evidence-based programs. To combat these challenges, intermediaries tried a number of strategies. One involved maintaining a group of staff with extensive community connections and partnerships. These staff were familiar with both the programs and implementation contexts, as well as the intermediary's big-picture efforts; as a result they were able to offer programmatic troubleshooting to the providers, while also conveying a sense of the successes and challenges of program implementation to the intermediary. Another strategy was to give extensive technical assistance before, during and after launching an evidence-based program. Intermediaries also created opportunities for cross-organization training, with stronger organizations helping weaker ones. Finally, intermediaries utilized other sources of assistance, such as websites and relevant literature, to help providers when they could not offer targeted technical assistance or when they saw that similar issues had arisen frequently across providers. As indicated by one of the staff respondents, these initiatives then generated something greater than the sum of their parts, with capacity-building efforts identifying and helping address broader areas in which the field lacked knowledge.

### **Statewide Challenge—*Connecting to the Field and the Community***

Statewide intermediaries face the challenge of maintaining a hand in both the national arena and the specific communities across the state where their service-provider partners operate. This is particularly challenging because the organizations working at the national, state and local levels are themselves often quite disconnected from one another and are consumed with their everyday functions. Therefore, it often falls to the intermediary to be the primary link between organizations and to demonstrate the value of making such connections.

### **Strategies to Connect to the Field and Local Community**

More than half of the statewide intermediaries in the study expressed pride in their knowledge of or contributions to the larger fields in which they were involved. They acknowledged that trends in their field influenced what activities they wanted to undertake. For some, "trends" referred to whatever areas were receiving growing funding, with resources acting as a signal that this was an important or soon-to-be-important topic.

Others relied more heavily on research, including some that they generated themselves. They used this research to understand the larger field and connect it to both their immediate experience and that of the communities in which they were operating.

To connect with these local communities, intermediaries administered surveys, held meetings and used provider feedback to gauge the pulse of the community as well as identify unmet needs and desired services. In some cases, intermediary staff talked directly to the beneficiaries of the direct service providers to assess their needs and wants. Then they used their understanding of the field to respond to these needs.

## **The National Level**

At the national level, intermediaries take a “bird’s eye” view and connect to other intermediaries operating at the state and local levels, as well as to funders, policymakers and researchers. National intermediaries are charged not only with helping generate innovative ideas but also with disseminating them, while trying to avoid spreading themselves too thin.

### **National Challenge—*Spreading Innovative Ideas***

Although intermediaries at all levels seek to facilitate innovation—indeed, this is part of their reason for being—national intermediaries have the additional responsibility of furthering the reach of innovative ideas. Both of the national intermediaries in this study brought together other intermediaries (in addition to other partners), which offered many opportunities to generate and explore ideas. But helping disseminate and ultimately institutionalize innovative ideas proved more challenging.

### **Strategies to Spread Innovative Ideas**

To spread innovation, national intermediaries have to communicate effectively with different audiences, including funders, providers, researchers, government officials, other intermediaries and the public. National intermediaries used a variety of formats to achieve this goal, such as research briefs, service models, technical assistance guides and webinars. They also used their role as conveners to address groups, including local and state intermediaries, which in turn could help spread ideas to their funding partners and direct service providers.

### **National Challenge—*Maintaining Focus***

The national intermediaries in the study also discussed the hazard of overextending themselves. One staff member made several references to the difficulty of not spreading their organizational resources (i.e., staff) too thin by being involved in every related or peripherally related project and innovation.

### **Strategies to Maintain Focus**

The intermediaries in our study made clear that secure funding was vital to staying focused. To this end, intermediaries engaged in fee-for-service activities, which (due to a fairly constant need in the field) was successful at generating steady revenue. This option is primarily available to national organizations that have a large client base. Intermediaries also tried to secure multiyear funding that was linked to larger initiatives and was thus more likely to be stable. Another way to maintain depth was to engage partners with similar interests or goals but potentially different strengths; this allowed national intermediaries to explore many facets of one issue while sustaining their core area of expertise.

## Key Lessons and Recommendations

Many factors are beyond the control or influence of intermediaries, and even intermediaries that achieve success may not be able to counteract funding cuts or completely avoid the other challenges described here. Yet an understanding of these challenges and how some intermediaries are addressing them suggests a few key lessons for both intermediaries and their funders and partners.

### **Coordination and Communication Among Intermediaries**

Intermediaries at all levels are experiencing similar or complementary challenges. Developing intentional relationships with one another would allow intermediaries to address these challenges more effectively. A number of efforts are underway to coordinate intermediaries working at the same level and in the same field (e.g., cross-state networking by after-school intermediaries). Such coordination has allowed these intermediaries to learn from one another and set broader agendas than any individual intermediary could address. It also provides a support system for the intermediaries that participate in these networks. Thus far, however, efforts to connect national, state and local intermediaries working on the same issues have been limited. Fostering such connections would be beneficial for intermediaries at all levels—for example, allowing national and statewide intermediaries a direct link to local practice, while offering local intermediaries easier access to research and trends in their field.

### **Promising Practices**

Currently, intermediary practice is developed through trial and error of individual intermediaries, which is a realistic approach for a newly developing field. However, the growth of intermediaries and the increasing need to demonstrate that scarce resources are being spent wisely suggests that the trial-and-error period will need to be replaced by approaches that have documented evidence of success, even if the evidence does not meet the highest standards of rigor. Intermediaries' work is challenging, and evaluations could be helpful in identifying "promising practices" that could then be adopted more broadly. In addition, knowledge gained through efforts to coordinate intermediaries' work (discussed earlier) may be useful for developing promising practices.

## Outside Strategic Partnerships

By definition, intermediaries facilitate partnerships and relationships between funders and service providers. This frequently involves bringing additional partners, such as other nonprofits, government officials, businesses or community members, to the table. Intermediaries need to work more explicitly to foster strategic partnerships with these outside entities. Creative partnerships, including those developed through larger-scale events or lobbying with “competing” intermediaries, offer the possibility of:

- Enhancing credibility for all partners by creating a more extensive and varied network;
- Combating potential funding and staffing loss by tapping into the partners’ financial and in-kind resources;
- Extending awareness of both the issues addressed by the intermediary and its immediate triad, as well as the intermediary’s direct work; and
- Offering outside partners the opportunity to have a role in the larger conversation about serving community needs.

There has been an increase in larger-scale funding opportunities that work across program areas—such as Promise Neighborhoods through the Department of Education and Choice Neighborhoods and Hope VI through the Department of Housing and Urban Development. Partnerships that extend beyond the triad would allow for both more competitive proposals for such funding, as well as better use of these resources. In addition, intermediaries would be well served to encourage and facilitate similar partnerships for their direct service providers, both to strengthen the larger network and to help providers address any funding and other relevant challenges they may be facing.

## Research-Based Trends

Although some intermediaries worry about not being true to their mission when following topical trends, all intermediaries could benefit from understanding current research—to enhance their operations, maintain funding and spread more effective practices. Understanding the latest findings on program effectiveness and incorporating evidence-based or evidence-informed programming are central to tapping many funding streams.

Where they haven't already done so, intermediaries should:

- Determine the evidence base of the program models they are helping direct service providers to implement;
- Ensure their own practice is rooted in research-based methods; and
- Determine the feasibility and usefulness of scaling up programs and practices with this evidence.

This recommendation points to the value of a continued connection to the larger field and the creation of research institutes and clearinghouses that can review program models for their effectiveness.

## **Core Operating Funds**

Funding for intermediaries—especially in a tough economy—is challenging because many of their core functions are not easily supported through traditional social services' funding mechanisms. Intermediaries' efforts facilitate the work of other organizations. Some national intermediaries are membership organizations and spread their costs across a large number of organizations, but this is not an option for all national intermediaries, nor is it very feasible for local and state intermediaries. Funding models that can support local, state and national intermediaries' core functions need to be developed.

## **Collecting and Using Data for Performance Management and Evaluation**

The need for intermediaries to evaluate their programs, functions and outcomes early in their organizational life and as often as financially feasible cannot be overstated. Well-designed evaluations at two levels—both program level and intermediary level—will enable intermediaries to:

- Measure their impact;
- Strengthen and improve their programs and offerings;
- Increase their access to and likelihood of receiving and maintaining funding;
- Streamline activities and reduce operational costs; and
- Identify successful operational strategies.

Because evaluating the effectiveness of intermediaries' efforts presents unique challenges (discussed earlier), anticipating and addressing these challenges would strengthen potential evaluations. Two major types of evaluations are required. First, intermediaries must be able to measure their own success. A strong intermediary evaluation would include: developing a logic model and theory of change offering insight into the goals of the intermediary and the ways its work purportedly yields outcomes; identifying the indicators and desired outcomes that would signal change or "success"; and undertaking an implementation evaluation to understand the work in which the intermediary was engaging, as well as the relationships and needs across partner organizations.

A second type of evaluation would involve more in-depth studies of intermediaries' operations to investigate the potential benefits of various strategies for addressing the common challenges identified in this report. This research could include individual case studies of intermediaries or cross-site analyses of intermediaries' operations.

### **In Sum: Recommendations to Address Intermediaries' Challenges**

1. **Coordination and Communication Among Intermediaries:** *Strengthen and clarify connections across local, state and national intermediaries.*
2. **Promising Practices:** *Develop agreed-upon strategies for identifying areas of need and prioritizing activities.*
3. **Outside Strategic Partnerships:** *Forge connections beyond the funder–intermediary–provider triad to extend reach, resources and credibility.*
4. **Research-Based Trends:** *Draw from current research to maintain relevance and funding.*
5. **Core Operating Funds:** *Identify core operating funds to support intermediaries' work.*
6. **Collecting and Using Data for Performance Management and Evaluation:** *Formally assess work and intermediary role early and often to strengthen effectiveness.*

## Conclusions

This report focused on the challenges that social service intermediaries face and some of the strategies they use to address them. Some of these challenges are common to other organizations in the social sector—e.g., decreased funding and the need to demonstrate impact. Other challenges are unique to the intermediary role—e.g., the need to connect across local, state and national levels. Intermediaries that successfully navigate these challenges will be in a much better position to demonstrate their value to funders and social service providers. Although there is no certain path to success for intermediaries, the recommendations presented here offer a good starting point for improving their practice.

## Endnotes

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