PERSPECTIVES FROM THE NAVIGATION CENTER

Report #3: Navigating a Cross-Sector, Multi-Agency Collaboration

This is the third in a series of five reports from the San Francisco Controller's Office on the Navigation Center. The first four reports are based on interviews with clients, service providers and stakeholders. The fifth report will summarize the Navigation Center's performance based on quantitative outcomes and interview findings.

What is the Navigation Center?

The Navigation Center, which began operations in March 2015, is a pilot program designed to shelter and rapidly house San Francisco's difficult-to-serve homeless population. These individuals typically have material or psychological barriers to using traditional shelters. The Navigation Center provides these otherwise unsheltered San Franciscans room and board while case managers work to connect them to stable income, public benefits and permanent housing. The Navigation Center campus includes a common courtyard, storage for belongings, meals, showers and laundry, and dormitory accommodations for 75 clients and their pets.

The Navigation Center courtyard at 1950 Mission St.

What is unique about the Navigation Center's Collaborative Model?

Though inter-departmental collaboration on homeless programs is nothing new in San Francisco, two unusual program features make the Navigation Center unique and have contributed to its success. First, non-profit operational staff and case managers have been closely involved in planning meetings with City executive staff, a role not typically extended them. Second, the Mayor's Office has been unusually involved in the day-to-day operations of the program.

Collaboration Successes

Stakeholders praised several features of the Navigation Center collaboration:

1. On-site Navigation Center staff praised City leaders for mobilizing the resources needed to overcome clients' systemic barriers to housing, such as expedited access to benefits and housing units.
2. Departments have been generally willing to examine their own internal policies to identify and address inefficiencies that could streamline the housing process.
3. The Navigation Center has catalyzed broader efforts to expand and improve homelessness services in the City.

"We have a window of opportunity where we have all this momentum—let's take advantage of that."

Collaboration Challenges

We found that the multiple departments participating in the Navigation Center collaboration each bring differing perspectives and priorities regarding homelessness, translating into divergent, and sometimes competing, program goals. As one example, interviewees discussed the trade-offs associated with housing clients rapidly, which policy makers view as critical to program efficiency but case managers fear could undermine long-run housing retention for certain vulnerable clients. Relatedly, interviewees identified disagreements in how much case managers should advocate for their clients, as opposed to strictly brokering services and managing appointments. If left unexamined, these issues can translate into potentially serious operational disagreements in the future.

"Here at the Navigation Center, we're really expected to change people's minds about what they want—and to convince them that what they want is to live in an SRO in the Tenderloin…or they'll be back on the streets and forgotten about."

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REPORT #3: NAVIGATING A CROSS-SECTOR, MULTI-AGENCY COLLABORATION

Introduction

This report examines the Citywide collaboration that has been critical to the Navigation Center's operations. The Navigation Center relies on coordination from a number of agencies, including the Department of Public Works (DPW), San Francisco Police Department (SFPD), San Francisco Homeless Outreach Team (SFHOT, a program of the Department of Public Health), Human Services Agency (HSA), Mayor's Office of Housing Opportunity, Partnerships & Engagement (HOPE), Department of Technology (DT), and the Office of the Controller (Controller) in the public sector and Episcopal Community Services (ECS) and Mission Neighborhood Resource Center in the nonprofit sector. We analyze the areas in which these diverse agencies have succeeded in collaborating towards the common goal of housing San Francisco's unsheltered homeless population and highlight recurring difficulties in institutionalizing this type of collaboration. Direct quotes from interview participants are in italics.

Research Methodology

Our qualitative research consisted of 20 in-depth, semi-structured interviews with Navigation Center stakeholders and clients. We conducted six interviews with representatives from collaborating City Departments (Human Services Agency, San Francisco Homeless Outreach Team/Department of Public Health, Mayor's Office of Housing Opportunity, Partnerships, & Engagement (HOPE), Department of Public Works, and SFPD), three interviews with on-site service providers (from Episcopal Community Services and HOPE), and eleven interviews with Navigation Center clients (6 active clients, 5 clients—including one couple—who exited to permanent housing, and 1 client who was asked to leave the program). We analyzed the interviews to identify major themes common to multiple interviews.

What's Unique about the Navigation Center's Collaborative Model?

Interviewees pointed out that inter-departmental collaboration on homeless programs is nothing new in San Francisco. Department leaders have experience working with one another and coordinating cross-departmental efforts towards a common goal. In fact, City leaders interviewed for this report frequently cited their colleagues in other departments as critical to the Navigation Center's mission.

Nevertheless, two unusual program features have contributed to the Navigation Center's perceived success:

(i) Whereas City department leaders often collaborate on homelessness, the Navigation Center's close involvement of non-profit operational staff and case management in meetings with the City's executive staff is a new and noteworthy design feature.

(ii) Homelessness has been a major campaign issue in San Francisco mayoral politics for decades, and the Mayor's Office has regularly spearheaded initiatives to address the problem. However, the Mayor's Office has been unusually involved in the Navigation Center's day-to-day operations.

At the same time, we found that the various departments and agencies working with the Navigation Center have a tendency to view the same problem through very different lenses. This is expected given the various perspectives on homelessness each participant brings to the collaboration, but it can create serious programmatic tensions if left unaddressed.

Inclusion of operational and case management staff in executive meetings, as well as strong involvement from the Mayor's Office in day-to-day operations, are unique to the Navigation Center.

Collaboration Successes

City policy makers have mobilized resources for staff to better serve clients

Navigation Center stakeholders at all levels suggested that strong collaboration and Mayoral support have empowered case managers and program staff. First, the strong political support from the Mayor's Office and department heads has been critical for getting the program up and running so quickly. The Navigation Center Program Director, Julie Leadbetter, stated that she has been *"amazed from the beginning at the willingness, eagerness, and quick response time of all the departments involved"* in mobilizing resources to support operations and addressing systematic barriers to housing. For example:

- The Human Services Agency now prioritizes housing openings within its Master-Lease[1] portfolio for Navigation Center clients, meaning that case managers have a steady, reliable stream of stable exit options for their clients.
- When case managers recognized that a large number of clients entered the program with no government-issued identification, the HOPE office helped connect the program with leaders at the Department of Motor Vehicles to create standing weekly appointments for Navigation Center clients, helping streamline the ID-acquisition process.
- Public benefits and Homeward Bound program representatives from the Human Services Agency have offices on site, making it easier for case managers and clients alike to navigate the often complicated public assistance process.

Case managers and operations staff, especially those who previously worked in the shelter system, expressed awareness and gratitude that San Francisco policy makers have empowered them to perform their jobs successfully. Leadbetter confirmed that Navigation Center employees have responded to the City's support with fervor, describing the program staff's recognition that *"we have a window of opportunity where we have all this momentum—let's take advantage of that."* Clients were also aware of the Mayor's Office's deep involvement in the program, describing how it positively impacted their hope for improved housing prospects: *"Mayor Lee has a hook-up, and they're really putting the best foot*

[1] *The Master Lease Program establishes contracts between the Human Services Agency and nonprofit organizations to enter into master leases with private owners of Single Room Occupancy (SRO) hotels and provide property management and supportive services for residents.*

forward to house the homeless...this is the program he's focusing on, and this is where he wants his name to linger."

City leaders have addressed inefficiencies in their own departmental policies

Similarly, department leaders have recognized the opportunity provided by the Navigation Center to evaluate their own internal policies. For example, the County Adult Assistance Program (CAAP, San Francisco's General Assistance program) typically requires homeless clients to attend regular appointments verifying their homelessness, but this requirement has been waived for all CAAP recipients with confirmed residency at the Navigation Center. In general, ongoing Mayoral involvement in program operations means that "*these problems tend to get addressed a lot more quickly than they would if it were a less visible project*."

Collaboration successes include:

(i) Mobilization of resources to rapidly serve clients.
(ii) Willingness of participating departments to address internal policy inefficiencies.
(iii) Catalyzing broader City-wide policy change efforts.

The Navigation Center has catalyzed broader policy change efforts

The Human Services Agency has long recognized the difficulties that the heavily rules-based CAAP eligibility determination process poses for homeless clients. Interviewees confirmed that while efforts to reform CAAP had been underway prior to the Navigation Center's launch, the Navigation Center experience has instilled the effort with renewed urgency. Additionally, City leaders have begun efforts to bring more single room occupancy (SRO) hotel owners into the HSA Master-Lease program, expanding the City's housing portfolio. Members of the Board of Supervisors have reportedly expressed interest in bringing additional Navigation Centers online in their respective districts. And multiple interviewees expressed enthusiasm for the Controller's Office involvement from the project's inception, explaining that program data (such as the weekly dashboards) supported real-time management decisions. They hoped the Navigation Center evaluation would serve as a model for rethinking the way the City approaches program evaluation in general.

Collaboration Challenges

The multi-sector collaboration fueling the Navigation Center's operations has highlighted competing perspectives and goals regarding the same complex issue of homelessness. For example, representatives from the Department of Public Works encounter different aspects of encampment homelessness than do Navigation Center case managers or SFHOT workers. Viewing one problem through multiple different lenses, we found, has created important programmatic tensions and trade-offs that stem from different assumptions and goals.

Tension: Different departmental priorities motivate divergent goals for the Navigation Center

Our interviews made it clear that different stakeholders hold different underlying motivations and assumptions about the program's outcomes:

- **The Human Services Agency** oversees a large portfolio of housing units that are in high demand from San Francisco's poor and homeless residents. Consequently, HSA officials are concerned with

rapidly and efficiently filling vacancies. When Navigation Center clients "shop for housing" (i.e., turn down offers to hold out for something more desirable) or take longer to exit than anticipated, this prolongs vacancies and adversely impacts other clients who also need housing. Accordingly, *ensuring that Navigation Center clients are efficiently housed in the first available placement emerged as an important HSA motivation.*

- **Navigation Center case managers**, on the other hand, often feel pressured to house clients in SRO housing that they feel is inappropriate for the client or lacking in necessary support (like intensive case management for behavioral health or senior support services). Without these supports, such clients may be less likely to successfully maintain housing in the long-run, so case managers seemed more sympathetic to finding the right placement for clients. *Exit type and appropriateness emerged as an important motivation for Navigation Center case managers/staff.*
- **The Mayor's Office of HOPE**, the political face of the program, is concerned with the political appearances of having too many unstable exits (i.e., clients choosing to return to the street or being asked to leave), as this may send a message to the public of suboptimal program performance. Therefore, *maximizing the ratio of stable to unstable program exits emerged as an important HOPE motivation.*
- **Representatives from SFPD and DPW** are particularly sensitive to the thousands of unsheltered San Franciscans still on the streets and are under pressure from residents and businesses to remove their encampments. Interviewees expressed the desire for the Navigation Center to enhance its capacity so more clients could be referred more quickly. *Exit speed (and rapid program throughput) emerged as an important motivation for SFPD and DPW.*

These divergent goals do not represent their respective departments' only considerations regarding the Navigation Center. But multiple organizational goals were apparent throughout our interviews. These should serve to remind stakeholders that homelessness is a multi-faceted issue affecting participating departments in often very different ways. Stakeholders must be mindful of these different perspectives, lest differing implicit motivations translate into operational disagreements.

Collaboration challenges include:

(i) Addressing the different program goals of participating departments.
(ii) Balancing housing exit speed and appropriateness of placements.
(iii) Agreeing on an appropriate level of client advocacy by case managers.

Trade-Off: Focusing on rapid housing exits can sometimes compromise appropriateness of placements

If left unaddressed, these differing departmental goals can translate directly into operational trade-offs, with potentially serious consequences for clients. For example, one case manager we interviewed discussed balancing the policy directives for rapid exits against the social work mandate to empower and support the individual. **This interviewee feared that clients who are inappropriately housed are less likely to successfully maintain it, meaning a short-term focus on housing speed may undermine long-term housing maintenance rates:**

> *"Here at the Navigation Center, we're really expected to change people's minds about what they want—and to convince them that what they want is to live in a [Single Room Occupancy (SRO)*

hotel] in the Tenderloin. And to have them accept that that's what they have to do, or they'll be back on the streets and forgotten about—and that I have X number of days to make that happen."

We interviewed one former client, a recovering crack cocaine addict, who reported a relapse within her first week of moving into a Tenderloin SRO when she discovered that the hotel was infested with the drug. As a result of her heavy return to drug use, she stopped paying rent and was nearly evicted. Of course, some clients who were housed quickly eventually reported being happy with their placements. Still, San Francisco policy makers should consider the ethical and clinical trade-offs associated with a rapid-throughput housing program that focuses on housing efficiency, and whose available exits are largely constrained to a single type of housing (SROs) that may be inappropriate for certain clients' needs.

Tension: How much should case managers advocate for their clients?

Interviews uncovered a tendency for policy officials and program staff to define the case management relationship in fundamentally different terms. One stakeholder asserted:

"*The [Navigation Center] case managers are too much 'advocates' and not enough 'case managers.' They need to be right up front, saying [to clients], 'You're here because we're moving towards an exit. And it constantly remains your choice, but you need to know there are ramifications of your choices. And if you turn down the exits we are offering, we are not going to keep you here."*

For this stakeholder, case management should focus on managing appointments and brokering connections to services and housing. According to this view, the Navigation Center could benefit from drafting fair, consistent, and transparent standards for terminating clients who repeatedly demonstrate a lack of engagement in the housing process.

On the other hand, case managers recognize that the Navigation Center's client population is frequently disorganized, unreliable, and present-focused, and that not all cases will proceed efficiently and predictably. Many clients enter the Navigation Center with profound skepticism about a homeless services system they feel has failed them in the past. Case managers must spend time rebuilding trust, but many lamented that the City's housing process leaves little room for the flexibility that trust-building requires:

"I find myself negotiating whether we can try other options instead, and I find myself really having to defend that these are not frivolous requests. And when I try the other options that are given in place of what I'm requesting, I feel I have to let that experience fail to prove that we need to go back to the thing that I originally asked for!"

According to this view, policy makers should expect and embrace unpredictability in working with the unsheltered homeless population and should consider ways to build more flexibility into processes, policies, and outcome planning.

Unintended Consequences of Collaboration

Two unintended consequences of the Navigation Center's political profile surfaced during the course of the interviews.

- First, Navigation Center staff commented on emerging concerns from other homeless services providers, not directly involved in the Navigation Center, who feel their work is compromised by

the City's high-profile focus on the Navigation Center. For example, the Navigation Center has benefited from HSA's prioritization of housing vacancies in their SRO portfolio (assuming the client meets all eligibility criteria for the unit), but this leaves fewer resources available for other providers with clients who also need housing.

- Second, one client expressed discomfort with the program's high political profile in general, and the constant stream of media reporters, government officials, and out-of-town politicians wanting to tour the facility:

  "They say this is a confidential program, but every day they bring people through here on these little tours—how confidential is that? It's like we're in a petting zoo. 'Here's the Northern California Brown-Spotted Homeless People! Feel free to pet them—we've de-fanged them by feeding them Meals on Wheels!'"

While publicizing the success of the Navigation Center model is important, stakeholders should remain sensitive to the implications such a high profile may have for clients and the trade-offs it creates for other community providers.

Conclusion

We found that Navigation Center stakeholders hold different assumptions about operational priorities and outcome goals. With any new collaboration comes uncertainty surrounding role assignments and clarity; this is a common issue that has been well documented in the organizational collaboration literature,[2, 3] and it is no cause for alarm to find the Navigation Center's stakeholders struggling with it during the program's early stages. Interviewees at all levels had overwhelmingly positive reviews about the Navigation Center collaboration experience. Nevertheless, stakeholders offer differing perspectives and implicit motivations, which can translate into operational frustrations if left unexamined. Differing priorities from participating departments should be transparently communicated and addressed if the Navigation Center's collaborative model is to be institutionalized in San Francisco.

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[2] *Suter, E., Arndt, J., Arthur, N., Parboosingh, J., Taylor, E., & Deutschlander, S. (2009). Role understanding and effective communication as core competencies for collaborative practice. Journal of interprofessional care, 23(1), 41-51.*

[3] *Radu, P.T., Carnochan, S., & Austin, M.J. (In press). Obstacles to social service collaboration in response to the Great Recession: The case of the Contra Costa County Safety Net Initiative. Journal of Community Practice.*