City of Seattle

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From: Steve Johnson, Director, OED
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Subject: Review of Career Bridge Draft Evaluation Plan, Dated August 15, 2013

Thank you for the opportunity to review and comment on the draft of the Career Bridge Evaluation Plan dated August 15, 2013 (MEF Report). MEF's Evaluation Plan identifies specific, measurable, target program outcomes for a comprehensive evaluation of Career Bridge over 2013 and 2014 in response to Green Sheet 120-2-A-1. These recommendations follow Preliminary Evaluation Report (July 9, 2013). As stated previously, we appreciate the depth, comprehensiveness and objectivity of the MEF Preliminary Evaluation Report.

The Office of Economic Development and Human Services Department are committed to ongoing and rigorous evaluation of Career Bridge. This response will provide information on OED's and HSD's evaluation framework and activities, comments related to MEF's proposed evaluation options, and specific recommendations for aligning those efforts with MEF's Evaluation Plan.

CC: Ben Noble, Director, Council Central Staff
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Career Bridge Internal Evaluation Framework and Approach

The Career Bridge model emerged out of a series of conversations between city staff and community leaders, focused on addressing the disproportionate impact of violent crime in the African-American community. The initial concept was to create an integrated system that prepares individuals and increases access to jobs and training needed to attain good-paying jobs that provide a pathway to longer-term career and economic opportunities and thus reduce violent crime. As described in MEF's Preliminary Evaluation Report, in addition to goals focused on the needs of individual program participants, Career Bridge seeks to affect community-level change as well as to advocate for policy and system changes that address systematic, race-based inequalities that have substantial implications for the target population including those specific to job attainment – and are further exacerbated by the difficulties facing former prisoners upon reentry.

We engaged ORS, an outcome-based planning and evaluation firm to facilitate the development of a Career Bridge theory of change and outcome map that would incorporate and articulate the comprehensive nature of this initiative and identify individual, community, and systems outcomes to provide the overarching evaluation framework. The Career Bridge Theory of Change is included in July 1 memorandum to the City Council (SLI 120 A-1 Request for Additional Information on the Career Bridge Program.)

Since early 2013, ongoing evaluation and assessment has been used as a tool for program and operational improvement, monitoring, and establishing merit and worth. Led by HSD's Director of Data Integrity, data collection has been implemented using a mixed methods approach which incorporates both quantitative and qualitative measures to obtain rich information regarding what is working well and what can be improved. Thorough analysis of data collected from participants, community sponsors, community supporters, and the Oversight Committee is providing a mechanism for identifying key facilitators of success, and informing any necessary modifications to the Career Bridge design. Data collection has been ongoing between participant cohorts for continuous quality improvement to identify lessons learned. The initiative has been and will continue to be refined as needed, according to what the data suggests.

Quantitative data is being collected via SJI using the standard enrollment form used for all SJI clients. Career Bridge participants, community sponsors, community supporters, and the Oversight Committee have collectively identified measures, in addition to the standard SJI enrollment form, that are now also collected to ensure participants' success upon intake and completion of Career Bridge. SJI also implements a written pre- and post-survey to collect quantitative data from participants at the beginning and end of the five-day job readiness training.

Qualitative data is also being collected to capture information that cannot be reflected through counts or statistics, and instead highlights vignettes from participants, community sponsors, community supporters, and the Oversight Committee. This qualitative data has been collected via focus groups conducted at both the conclusion of the five-day job readiness training (beginning with Cohort 2) and the Community Partners' Meetings. The stories shared via qualitative inquiries are critical to highlighting the importance of the relational model of the Career Bridge initiative and the culturally relevant components which may not be identified otherwise via quantitative measures.

The Career Bridge design and evaluation strategy allow all involved parties to collaborate in development of the data collection and evaluation processes. The emphasis on input from all stakeholders ensures cultural relevance beyond what exists from evidence-based models, which often do not account for the specific needs of diverse communities often underrepresented in research. This approach is critical for community capacity building, which has been clearly identified as a key goal for Career Bridge among all

stakeholders. Many elements of the Career Bridge design and evaluation have been tailored to be more comprehensive and culturally relevant than models which exist in the literature on best practices for similar efforts.

Comments on MEF Evaluation Plan

Study Design and Key Research Questions

MEF's proposed evaluation plan poses a number of quantitative outcome questions, based on its "employment-focused theory of change presented in the Preliminary Evaluation Report (Evaluation, p. 3)". Generally, we are in agreement with those quantitative measures, however, we are concerned that the approach is limited to the individual outcomes separate from the other dimensions of the intervention, including capacity and integration of a community support network and coordination in the multiple systems in which these individuals interact.

It is clear that MEF recognizes the comprehensive community approach imbedded in Career Bridge's program design and its "potential to have broader effects on low-income and historically disenfranchised communities in Seattle" (Plan, p. A-1) and then further recommends that HSD think through how to use their resources to "support documentation of key outcomes that align with the community-level goals that OED and HSD have articulated (Plan, p. A-2)." OED and HSD suggested a number of these measures in their July 1 memorandum to the City Council (SLI 120 A-1). Additional measures of this type would be appropriate to add to the Evaluation Plan in order to make it more complete. Of greatest concern, MEF's Evaluation Plan prioritizes participant outcomes over the community change outcomes and doesn't fit OED's and HSD's comprehensive perspective about interconnectedness of individual, community, and system changes which characterizes Career Bridge as a model.

There are some additional potential designs for them to consider in their planning for this evaluation. In particular, the theory of change strategy –or theory-driven evaluation—has been noted to have particular strength for addressing community change efforts. This is thoroughly documented in the Aspen Institute series and is also promoted in the Urban Institute's article authored by Robin Smith about How to Evaluate Choice and Promise Neighborhoods.

Theory of change evaluation is based on the idea that comprehensive change involves a series of testable hypotheses which are dynamic and evolving as an initiative grows and develops. The Urban Institute offers specific types of evaluation questions that theory of change evaluation can address including:

- What mix of services and investments was implemented and delivered?
- Did the intervention improve specific outcomes for people receiving services?
- Did the intervention improve neighborhood conditions?

Each of these seems relevant and can be done with mixed methods of both quantitative and qualitative studies. The qualitative methodology could also be significantly expanded. This would be particularly appropriate for evaluating shifts in community conditions, community engagement and leadership, development of partnerships with private employers, issues about trust, the multiple barriers that impede employability, the community assets that promote growth and development, and issues related to racial justice. These methodologies can span across many methodological strategies, including community logs, key informant interviews, focus groups, content analysis and observations of community meetings.

The comprehensive model that is articulated in HSD and OED's theory of change outcome map is highly research-based and is incorporated into a broad spectrum of best practices in public policy. The Aspen Institute wrote the hallmark publications about evaluation of community initiatives in their series on New Approaches to Evaluating Community Initiatives that grew out of the Roundtable on Comprehensive Initiatives for Children and Families in the late nineties. (See for example, Connell, James, Kubisch, Anne, Shorr, Lisbeth, and Weiss, Carol (Editors). New Approaches to Evaluating Community Initiatives: Concepts, Methods, and Contexts, Washington D.C.: The Aspen Insitute,1995). Importantly, many fields that are dealing with intractable and powerful societal issues have come to similar conclusions. Programs alone are not the solution. Programs are situated in a nexus of relationships, norms, processes, and structures that involves community contexts and institutional policies. This is well played out in the movement toward population-based public health, shifts in educational reform exemplified by the US Dept of Education's Promise Neighborhoods efforts modeled on the Harlem Children's Zone, and the U.S. Dept of Housing and Urban Development's Choice Neighborhoods's program that is part of a long suit of urban revitalization initiatives. These models all have in common that they are multidimensional and provide intensity of effort in a community development framework. They are also responsive to and inclusive of local opportunities and assets in communities and highly engaging of local residents, community leaders and resources.

Further, the comprehensive community change approach described by OED and HSD is aligned with prominent developments in the public policy sphere and is quite evident in a number of initiatives in which the City is highly engaged, including the Roadmap Collective Impact model in South Seattle, the Choice Neighborhood effort in Yesler Terrace and the Seattle Race and Social Justice Initiative. (See Appendix A for a Case Illustration of Yesler Terrace approach as part of Choice Neighborhoods.)

Recommendations

1. **Use the MEF Evaluation Plan as a springboard.** The draft evaluation plan provides a solid springboard from which to build out a more comprehensive plan. Its current focus on program participants is essential, but not sufficient in view of the nature of this intervention which is squarely situated in community and system changes as equally important dimensions to the work. Further revisions to this plan are warranted in order to capture the model as it has been developed by OED and HSD.

2. **Add a theory of change evaluative strategy.** In particular, a theory of change strategy for evaluating this program would be very promising to consider. It will allow for the complexity that characterizes this initiative to be more fully understood and tested and will provide important data for continuous learning, strategy improvements, and accountability. This theory of change model will identify the series of research questions that warrant testing in order to know whether Career Bridge is driving toward results and significant and lasting changes. Additionally, it will be important to consider the external factors that will influence progress and to incorporate those into the research questions as well. For example, changes in the business climate, changes in the neighborhood residents, public policies, etc.

3. **Consider merit and worth thinking as a longer-term play.** The time frame for merit and worth studies is usually more appropriate for efforts which are more fully developed and can be tested in a more rigorous methodology. Career Bridge is in its early years of development, as MEF Associates appropriately noted. It is possible to consider a more rigorous merit and work study

about particular program elements after a series of outcome studies have been completed and/or a theory of change strategy. It is simply too early, and there are too many unknowns for this to be a worthwhile effort at the current time.

4. **Develop agreement among key stakeholders and policymakers about the framework and key characteristics of Career Bridge.** The greatest challenge to the evaluation plan will be based on developing clear agreement on what Career Bridge is and what it is not. The current evaluation plan treats it as a stand-alone program and compares it to other interventions that have dealt with previously incarcerated populations in the cost analysis. While Career Bridge has clear program elements to it, and the individual outcomes are important to track, the fundamental approach to Career Bridge is rooted in transformative relationships and a community and systems context. The evaluation provides an opportunity to model an evaluation approach focused on addressing intractable problems like violence, racial disparities, and poverty. Career Bridge has the opportunity to incorporate these lessons about significant and lasting change into its model and therefore into the evaluation of the model's effectiveness.

5. **Deepen the collaboration between MEF and HSD evaluators.** Identify opportunities for MEF and HSD to develop an evaluation framework to test the assumptions about interconnectedness of individual, community, and system changes which characterizes Career Bridge as a model. It would be important to distinguish between what is best conducted by an external evaluator and what can be managed well by an internal evaluation effort. This would be a strategic way to consider which evaluation addresses which research question.

6. **Form a community of practice.** Finally, a stakeholder community of practice (or various communities of practice) is another opportunity that would be important to consider in the MEF evaluation plan. There is a ripe opportunity for strategic learning to be guided by the evaluation data and MEF, HSD, OED, and a community representative partnering in this effort. This learning would benefit not only Career Bridge, but the modeling for how the City addresses a variety of public issues—particularly when racial justice is a leading element of the work.

Thank you for this opportunity to comment. Please feel free to contact us if you have any follow-up questions.