



Innovation Award Application 2014



Upstream Investments

Oscar Chavez

Assistant Director

Sonoma County Human Services Department

3600 Westwind Boulevard, Santa Rosa, CA 95402

707.565.5800

ochavez@schsd.org

Describe the Program/project/ product/ service innovation:

Upstream Investments is a policy initiative that seeks to eliminate poverty in Sonoma County and ensure equal opportunity for quality education and good health in nurturing home and community environments. In the context of this initiative, the concept of “upstream” refers to any services that help community members prevent or overcome challenges or hardships in a way that reduces their first or ongoing need for an array of services. Sponsored by the Sonoma County Board of Supervisors and widely supported throughout the community, Upstream Investments employs three primary strategies: Invest Early, Invest Wisely, and Invest Together. These strategies ensure that 1) whenever possible, funding and other resources are dedicated to prevention-focused policies and interventions, 2) the community embraces policies and interventions that have the highest likelihood of success as indicated by sound evidence, and 3) community-wide policies and interventions are focused on preventing six targeted factors and improving twenty-two indicators of success to achieve the Upstream vision. Upstream Investments provides a roadmap for ensuring that programs and services are making a lasting positive difference in the community, and for amplifying the collective impact of the hundreds of organizations working daily to make Sonoma County a place where everyone has the opportunity to thrive.

Short description of the importance, internal impact, and community benefits:

Upstream Investments benefits all residents of Sonoma County through prevention-focused policies and interventions that increase equality and reduce monetary and societal costs. Internally, the County’s own services and interventions are improved by prioritizing programs that are evidence-based and preventive. Anticipated measurable benefits to the community include a decrease in child maltreatment, youth substance abuse, youth depression, teen births, homelessness, arrests, domestic violence, gang membership, poverty, and unemployment, and an increase in educational attainment, housing affordability, youth connectedness, and positive health outcomes. These personal and community benefits correlate with funding impacts that include a reduction in

costs associated with criminal justice, public assistance, child welfare, substance abuse, and mental health, leading to improved economic outcomes countywide.

What makes this a quantum leap of creativity?

A shared vision of collective well-being using science to inform services and policies propels Sonoma County to new heights of creativity in redefining the role of local government. Rather than strictly administering services that are reactive to symptoms of poverty and inequality, Sonoma County is breaking the mold by purposefully and strategically focusing on the use of evidence-based preventive practices to address root causes. One major innovative leap is the integration of this focus into the practices of community funders. The County, non-profits, and local foundations have all demonstrated their commitment to this approach in an unprecedented effort to make lasting, measurable change through a collaborative, unified strategy. Human Services has embedded the Upstream Investments initiative in its procurement process, by rewarding organizations that have programs on the Portfolio of Model Upstream Programs. The Portfolio is a comprehensive collection of outcomes- and evidence-based upstream programs throughout Sonoma County. A rigorous vetting process is required to ensure that programs are prevention-focused and locally relevant, and that they address identified factors that contribute to downstream need for services and shared indicators that measure positive effects. Ten local funders currently provide bonus points in their grant evaluation processes for organizations with programs on the Portfolio, and several require application to the Portfolio as a qualifying condition for funding consideration. This demonstration of the value of upstream principles elevates Upstream Investments as a shared priority with the potential to have an immense positive impact on the future of Sonoma County.

Who benefits?

The Upstream Investments policy initiative benefits members of the community receiving services, as well as the community as a whole. Effective upstream approaches reduce crime and other factors – such as child abuse, substance abuse, domestic violence, teen pregnancy, poverty, and unemployment – that lead people to use county services. When targeted to at-risk children and families, early childhood interventions reduce crime, substance abuse, child

abuse, and welfare dependency, while improving educational attainment, health outcomes, and lifetime incomes.

How was the program/project/product/service initiated and implemented?

The 2007 Sonoma County Strategic Plan found that rising criminal justice costs comprised over half of the discretionary general fund, diminishing the funding available for other County services. The Board of Supervisors chartered the Upstream Investments project to understand the antecedents to criminal behavior and to identify upstream interventions that reduce downstream criminal justice costs. The initial Upstream Team reviewed published literature, collected relevant Sonoma County data, invited regular input from relevant County Departments, surveyed community partners, and conducted a criminal justice cost benefit analysis. These activities led to findings and recommendations in the areas of evidence-based practice, partnerships and collaboration, investing in upstream interventions, and ongoing committee work. Staff members from Human Services were designated to support the implementation of these recommendations countywide. The Upstream Investments team – which includes committees composed of an array of County Departments and community organizations – works to expand the County's evaluation of existing and potential health and human service and criminal justice programs using published evidence, outcome monitoring, and cost benefit analyses. Twenty-two indicators that reflect upstream principles were identified to measure progress. Acknowledging that effective intervention requires solid partnerships between service delivery providers throughout the community, the Upstream Investments team explores ways to coordinate and leverage the work of related County and community initiatives. Two formalized mechanisms for participation and recognition have been established: the Resolution of Alignment and the Portfolio of Model Upstream Programs. The Resolution of Alignment is a formal statement of an organization's support of upstream principles. Since Upstream Investments was launched in 2010, a total of 68 organizations have adopted Resolutions of Alignment to demonstrate their commitment to investing early, wisely, and together. Seventy-three community-based organizations serving Sonoma County have been recognized for providing evidence-informed, prevention-focused programs with inclusion in the Portfolio

of Model Upstream Programs. The Portfolio helps county and community partners increase capacity to apply for and receive funding for upstream programs, target funding and resources to effective and cost beneficial programs, identify and address gaps and duplications in upstream services throughout the community, strengthen partnerships, demonstrate responsible and forward-thinking fiscal decision-making, and increase community commitment to upstream programs. Human Services staff provides free technical assistance to nonprofit organizations and public agencies interested in submitting a program for inclusion in the Portfolio. Upstream Investments continues to gain momentum across sectors, with a constant focus on addressing the root causes of poverty and inequality using evidence to maximize the collective impact of a community united to create a better tomorrow for all of its residents.

What risks were taken?

The development of the Portfolio of Model Upstream Programs, with its rigorous high standards and expectations of model fidelity and measurable impacts, posed the risk of alienating some community partners by challenging them to change the way they do business. However, because the evidence speaks volumes and partner organizations are largely compelled by a shared vision of a Sonoma County where everyone has the chance to thrive, Upstream Investments has found great support in the community. Upstream Investments also poses a challenge to County Departments to examine their own practices and outcomes, and to constantly strive to invest early, wisely, and together whenever possible.

What, if any were the costs and/or savings?

Costs to implement Upstream Investments include ongoing staffing to provide leadership, technical assistance, outreach, evaluation, analysis, and administrative support. While the savings from this type of long-term investment will likely not be evident until years ahead, evidence supports the anticipation of reduced costs in the areas of criminal justice, public assistance, substance abuse, and mental health. Savings will grow exponentially as generations experience increased equity and access to the kinds of positive supports that lead to more prosperous futures.

What are the lessons learned that other local governments can learn from?

Investing in cost-saving preventive policies and interventions not only demonstrates sound financial decision making, but also reaps great individual and societal rewards. County sponsorship of Upstream Investments provides a foundation for forging cross-sector alliances among governmental agencies and community organizations that have already proven to be an invaluable and critical component in creating the systemic change required to achieve the Upstream Investments vision.

What department and/or individual(s) championed the innovation? If a contractor was used, please list the name and their contact information.

The Sonoma County Human Services Department championed the initiative, partnering with the Departments of Health Services and Probation, the County Administrator's Office, and the County Office of Education.

Any additional information you would like to share?

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