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CROSS-SECTOR COLLABORATIONS AND GOVERNANCE STRUCTURES

Obstacles to Social Service Collaboration in Response to the Great Recession: The Case of the Contra Costa County Safety Net Initiative

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This case study examines the experiences and dynamics of the Safety Net Initiative, a multisector collaboration in Contra Costa County, California. The Great Recession hit social services in Contra Costa County especially hard, and local stakeholders launched the Safety Net Initiative in an effort to repair and reimagine the county's understaffed and underfunded safety net. The case study is based on 14 stakeholder interviews and extensive document review to address 2 questions: (a) What are the challenges to social services collaboration that are unique to suburban jurisdictions such as Contra Costa County? (b) What were the interpersonal and interagency dynamics that facilitated or hindered the collaboration's process? Findings are reported within the context of four major themes or tensions (short-term vs. long-term; awareness vs. action; process-focus vs. outcome-focus; centralized vs. decentralized authority). Practice implications for social service collaboration in suburban jurisdictions are also identified.

KEYWORDS case study, Contra Costa County, cross-sector collaboration, Great Recession, safety net, suburban, Social service collaboration

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This case study describes the evolution of the Safety Net Initiative, a multisector collaborative to reimagine and rebuild the social safety net in response to the Great Recession in Contra Costa County, California. Contra Costa County, a predominantly suburban county in the San Francisco-Oakland-Hayward Metropolitan Statistical Area, lies east and across the bay from San Francisco; with a population of just over 1 million in 2013, the county includes 19 incorporated cities spanning a landmass of 716 total square miles. Though noted for its pockets of affluence, Contra Costa was also severely impacted by the home foreclosure crisis that sparked the Great Recession nationally. Coupled with the rising poverty rates that the county has experienced over the past 2 decades, the increase in demand for safety net services came at the same time that the Recession was forcing dramatic budget cuts to social programs. The Safety Net Initiative (and Safety Net Task Force, its steering committee) was formed by county social service administrators, nonprofit leaders, and philanthropic executives in response to this crisis.

This case study presents the results of a document analysis and a set of qualitative interviews with 14 Initiative stakeholders. We sought to (a) explore the sociopolitical context of the Safety Net Initiative—namely, the unique challenges to social service collaborations in suburban locales like Contra Costa County and (b) understand the interpersonal and cross-sector dynamics that both facilitated and hindered the collaboration's process. We argue that the contemporary emergence of suburban poverty as a dominant national trend underscores critical differences between suburbs and cities in terms of their capacity for social services collaboration. The relatively recent emergence of service providers in suburbs relative to cities, and the resultant lack of robust suburban service provision networks, interact with institutional funding biases that sheer geographic distance from traditional urban centers can create. The outcome is a landscape that is especially challenging for suburban collaboration formation. We conclude by assessing practice implications for social service collaboration formation in suburban jurisdictions, understanding that collaboration is becoming essential to address increasingly complex social problems (Einbinder, Robertson, Garcia, Vuckovic, & Patti, 2000; Kania & Kramer, 2011).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Contra Costa County and the Suburbanization of Bay Area Poverty

Traditional American images of suburbia have left little room for poverty and unmet needs among vulnerable populations. This is especially true in suburban California, where rapid realization of the mid-20th century American Dream made the Golden State the envy of the nation and helped ensconce the very idea of suburbia as sitting atop the American economic ladder. The structural and racial inequities in accessing suburbia, however, catalyzed

White flight from the nation's inner cities and created the poor, minority city/wealthy, White suburb dichotomy that has stubbornly persisted as the dominant narrative in American urban thought (Schafran, 2013a).

Over the past 25 years, however, the geography of wealth and poverty has inverted itself, such that by the mid-2000s (and into the present), there were more poor people living in America's suburbs than in the inner cities (Allard & Roth, 2010; Kneebone & Berube, 2013). This trend has been especially pronounced in the San Francisco Bay Area: between 2000 and 2009, the number of people living in poverty rose 16% in Bay Area suburbs, but only 7% in urban areas (Soursourian, 2012). And nowhere has this demographic shift been more evident than in Contra Costa County. The eastern part of the county (East County), as a whole, experienced a shocking 70% increase in poverty during the 2000s (Kneebone & Berube, 2013), with several Contra Costa cities landing at the top of various Bay Area poverty indices during this decade (Soursourian, 2012).

The factors underlying the growth of poverty in Contra Costa County are multifaceted and complex, reflecting major national trends of gentrification in the region's urban cores, the loss of high-paying manufacturing jobs, and the in-migration of lower-income families in search of affordable housing (Kneebone & Berube, 2013). Although heavy manufacturing once defined the county's proudly industrial economy, postwar (and ongoing) deindustrialization has left local economies stagnant (Bedroussian, Klowden, & Zhu, 2012). For example, as the population in East County grew by more than 50,000 between 2000 and 2010, only 4,000 jobs were added during that time (Schildt, 2012). Since 2003, lower-paying jobs have grown more rapidly in Contra Costa overall compared to the Bay Area as a whole (Bedroussian et al., 2012), and this disparity in employment opportunities underlies a growing regional income inequality. By 2009, at the beginning of the Safety Net Initiative, the county's local workforce was paid, on average, only slightly less than the Bay Area as a whole ($36,200 compared to $36,800); however, within-county earnings variation was stark, with the per-capita income of the three poorest cities in the county less than $25,000 (Bedroussian et al., 2012).

But perhaps the biggest factor underlying the increase in the county's poverty rate has been the county's heavy reliance on housing construction as a source of economic growth, and the regional socioeconomic inequities that have catalyzed it (Schafran, 2009, 2012, 2013a, 2013b). In the wake of Proposition 13 (a 1978 taxpayer revolt and state ballot initiative dramatically limiting property taxes), local Bay Area governments have increasingly based land-use decisions on the potential for generating tax revenues. Furthermore, residents of established, wealthier suburbs, endorsing a strict *no-growth* stance, have repeatedly thwarted denser housing development near the region's major job centers. Consequently, new housing starts have shifted to the area's geographical fringe—including East Contra Costa (Schafran, 2013b). Indeed, since the passage of Prop 13, fledgling East

County communities depended almost exclusively on massive housing development to shore up economic activity and local tax revenues (Kneebone & Berube, 2013; Schafran, 2012). Many of the new residents were low-income families of color who were priced out of San Francisco and the East Bay and were seeking their first taste of homeownership (Schafran & Wegmann, 2012; Wegmann & Schildt, 2012). Thanks to subprime and predatory lending practices that disproportionately targeted low-income communities of color, however, the foreclosure crisis hit them with disproportionate intensity (Rugh & Massey, 2010) and created a new wave of individuals in need of county social services.

The Great Recession and concomitant wave of home foreclosures hit Contra Costa harder than any other Bay Area county. In 2007, at the beginning of the crisis, Contra Costa had the highest rate of increase in foreclosures, at 290% (Perkins, 2008), and by 2008, foreclosure rates in East Contra Costa County were 100 times higher than those in San Francisco and Silicon Valley (Schafran, Lopez, & Gin, 2013). Nor was the downturn a transient one: by 2013, median home values in Contra Costa were still 34% lower than they were at the bubble's peak in 2006, even though much of the rest of the Bay Area's housing market had long since recovered (Johnson & Mejia, 2014).

What this meant for the county's coffers was a dramatic and sustained decline in property tax revenue, along with drastic cuts to the human services programs it supports. The Employment and Human Services Department, for example—the county's chief provider of public safety net programs and a participating stakeholder in the Safety Net Task Force—faced a $16 million shortfall in 2008 and, over the ensuing 3–4 years, a drop in County General Fund support from $32 million to $18 million. Sixty-eight percent of all general assistance staff and 40% of the public child welfare workforce were laid off (Graaf, Hengeveld-Bidmon, Carnochan, & Austin, 2014). Local private philanthropic foundations (funding a proportionally smaller share of the safety net to begin with) also suffered decreases in portfolio values of up to 20% in 2008 and 2009. Unfortunately, all of these declines coincided with a nationwide increase in the number of individuals in need of services, many of whom had never before had contact with safety net service organizations (Allard & Roth, 2010). This one–two punch—rising poverty at a time of steeply declining resources—overwhelmed the network of service providers in Contra Costa County.

Interorganizational Collaboration Formation in Suburbia

Human service organization leaders in Contra Costa County quickly recognized that the county's economic crisis was beyond the scope of any individual agency to address, and that the formation of a multisector collaboration would be necessary to meaningfully address the social service retrenchment. The formation of interorganizational relationships, in fact, is

often predicated on the emergence of a common problem (or set of problems) that is beyond the capabilities of any individual stakeholder to address (Aldrich, 1976; Gray, 1985). Indeed, some social problems, such as poverty, are themselves too large and multifaceted to be addressed by any single organization, necessitating interorganizational collaboration (Trist, 1983). During times of crisis—when collective problems (such as poverty) become more acute—collaborations become more frequent (Gray, 1985).

Recognizing the difficulties in establishing the foundation for interorganizational collaboration, scholars have acknowledged and emphasized the process of collaboration formation as an important area of study (Gray, 1985, 1989; Huxham & Vangen, 2000a). The development of positive interpersonal factors, including trust (Perrault, McClelland, Austin, & Sieppert, 2011; Thomas-Breitfeld & Brady, 2014), personal relationships (Laing, Irwin, & Toivonen, 2012; Rogers, 2009), and "institutional empathy" (i.e., the ability to understand the perspective of another sector; Laing et al., 2012; Perrault et al., 2011) are critical elements of this process, and sufficient time needs to be set aside by collaboration leaders to allow for their gestation (Einbinder et al., 2000). Consequently, and perhaps unsurprisingly, the cost, time, and patience required to undertake such a process may threaten collaborations from developing successfully, or at all (Perrault et al., 2011; cf. Prins, 2010).

Importantly, however, the existing research on collaboration formation is relatively devoid of formal treatment of the geopolitical contexts in which they emerge, and the critical role such contexts play in shaping and constraining their development. Social service availability in suburban jurisdictions is limited relative to urban areas (Allard, 2004); social service infrastructure is underdeveloped in suburbs, and the greater geographic dispersion of providers can create spatial mismatches with need that create costly travel burdens to consumers (Andrulis, Duchon, & Reid, 2004; Allard, 2004; Howell & Timberlake, 2014). Emerging scholarship suggests that this disparity results from limited access to government and philanthropic funding in suburban areas with high degrees of jurisdictional fragmentation (Esparza & Hamilton, 2012; Schildt, 2012). That is, when local governments are fragmented into smaller, independent municipalities—as is the case in heavily suburban counties—ample and stable sources of funding are more difficult to piece together. Coupled with individual donors' propensity to fund initiatives within their own political jurisdictions (Wolpert, 1993), high degrees of jurisdictional fragmentation and geographical dispersion can constrain the ability of nonprofit providers to expand beyond their immediate municipal boundaries (Esparza & Hamilton, 2012). As a result, services do not always locate where demand is greatest, but rather where supply can be supported (Grønbjerg & Paarlberg, 2001).

New research has determined that federal and state fiscal transfers stimulate county–nonprofit collaboration in service provision, and that this effect is more pronounced in areas with less population density (i.e., suburban

areas; Farmer, 2015). Because smaller, fragmented jurisdictions have weaker tax bases than large cities, they must rely on external funding more, and governmental transfers may thus have a more stimulative effect on cross-sector collaboration (Farmer, 2015). By the same logic, within-region disparities in funding within lower-density places may deter robust network formation (cf. Allard, 2004). Contra Costa County provides an excellent natural experiment to this effect. In West County (which includes the City of Richmond), entrenched poverty and violence are long-standing issues that date back to post-WWII deindustrialization, so service providers have long focused on Richmond and the immediate surrounding areas. On the other hand, extensive poverty in East County, as documented previously, is a more recent phenomenon, and funding has not yet caught up to this emerging trend. For every dollar of social service funding in East County, there are 8 dollars available in West County (Schildt, 2012). Because American suburbs and exurbs are simply newer relative to more central urban areas, social service funding in those areas is more sparse, intermittent, and inconsistent (Schildt, 2012), with negative ramifications for county–nonprofit collaboration formation (cf. Farmer, 2015). Logically, the unprecedented retrenchment in public fiscal support for social services during the Great Recession only exacerbated this disparity. This case study focuses on the challenges faced by stakeholders in Contra Costa County during the process of forming the Safety Net Task Force and creating the Safety Net Initiative. We discuss the unique challenges that suburban leaders face when launching such a collaboration, and report on the interorganizational dynamics related to addressing them. We found that feelings of frustrations and concerns about productivity, expressed by many of the participants who contributed to the case, were necessary growing pains in bridging historically wide, cross-sector gaps in power and trust. We argue that such cross-sector gaps are especially likely in relatively new and recently impoverished suburban counties like Contra Costa, and call for increased research into this phenomenon—one that may well be a new norm in American poverty alleviation efforts.

METHODS

We gathered data for this exploratory case study by (a) interviewing stakeholders who participated in the Safety Net Initiative and/or Safety Net Task Force (the Initiative's executive steering committee); and (b) analyzing meeting agendas and minutes, white papers and memos, internal communications, presentation slides, typed event summaries and notes, and other documents provided to the authors by interview participants. We posed the following two research questions: (a) What are the challenges to social services collaboration that are unique to suburban jurisdictions such as Contra Costa County? And (b) what were the interpersonal and

interagency dynamics that facilitated or hindered the collaboration process? These research questions guided the development of an interview protocol that was continually refined as data were gathered and themes identified (Rubin & Rubin, 2011).

We employed a purposive, stratified, snowball sampling methodology to build our interview sample. New participants were contacted upon being recommended and introduced to the researcher by previous participants, and sampling was halted once content saturation was reached (Rubin & Rubin, 2011). We purposively constructed a sample that represented the diversity of the Safety Net Initiative itself, stratified by sector and including leaders from the private philanthropic, county, and nonprofit agencies who staffed the Safety Net Task Force. We also interviewed representatives from nonprofits who participated in the Initiative's events in 2011 and 2012 but who themselves did not play a central role in the actual Task Force. As such, our analysis is informed by input from those who planned the Initiative (Task Force members), as well as those who simply participated as service providers. This resulted in a total sample of 14 participants (summary information on their sector, role in the Initiative, and centrality of role is provided in Table 1). Participation levels in the Task Force and Initiative events have varied widely over time, but we estimate that roughly 45 individuals from over 40 organizations have been stably engaged in the Task Force and its associated work groups and committees.

Interviews were conducted in person or over the phone during the months of June and July of 2014 and averaged roughly 1 hr apiece (See Appendix for a list of interview questions/themes). Thirteen of the 14 interviews were recorded and later transcribed. Participants were given the opportunity to review and edit their transcripts prior to analysis.

We analyzed transcripts, recordings, personal notes, and roughly 75 internal documents (including meeting minutes and agendas, internal

TABLE 1 List of Interview Participants by Sector and Role Centrality

Sector	Role	Role Centrality
County (Public sector)	Task Force Member	Major
County (Public sector)	Task Force Member (Phase III)	Major
County (Public sector)	Task Force Member	Major
County (Public sector)	Task Force Member	Minor
Former CAO	Task Force Initiator	Major
Non-profit (CBO)	Task Force Member	Major
Non-profit (CBO)	Task Force Member (Phase I)	Minor
Non-profit (CBO)	Phase I and II Participant	Peripheral
Non-profit (CBO)	Phase I and II Participant	Peripheral
Non-profit (CBO)	Task Force Member	Major
Private consultant	Project Manager	Medium
Private philanthropic	Task Force Member	Major
Private philanthropic	Task Force Member	Major
Private philanthropic	Task Force Member	Major

memos and e-mails, draft reports, presentation slides, and event summary notes) to identify themes and emergent patterns in the data. Themes were identified by the lead author (who developed the interview protocol and conducted all the interviews) and iteratively triangulated by the research team. Formal content coding was not employed, as the case study was not intended to generate or test existing theory; instead, we employed a case description technique (Yin, 2003), which focuses more on synthesizing the general narrative content of the interviews rather than the generation of theory.

Given that Contra Costa County has features and challenges that may be unique with respect to culture and landscape, it is not possible to generalize our results to other suburban counties, even if they have similar demographics. Another limitation is that our sample may not represent the views of all of the individuals and organizations participating in the Initiative, although emergent content saturation did mitigate this concern. In addition, because the nonprofits in the county vary in their size and organizational histories, we might have gained an incomplete view of the entire experience, especially in drawing conclusions about the county's collaborative climate.

FINDINGS

Overview of the Safety Net Initiative

An overview of the history (to date) of the Safety Net Initiative is located in Figure 1 and illustrates the various milestones and key events since the launch of the Task Force. Task Force participants describe the Initiative's efforts as occurring in three phases. In 2009, the County Administrative Officer (CAO) gave a speech to the Funders' Forum—a network and quarterly gathering of funding executives from the public and private philanthropic sectors—that served as the catalyst for the creation of the Safety Net Task Force. The CAO's speech stressed the urgency and magnitude of the Great Recession as more than an ordinary economic downturn and called for reimagining the way social services were conceived, funded, and delivered (Cullen, 2009). The Safety Net Initiative, then, was started by those Funders' Forum members who began meeting in 2009 to address this call to action.

The meetings in the beginning of Phase I consisted almost entirely of members of the Funders' Forum, though the Task Force was soon opened up to include leaders from community-based organizations and faith communities. The culmination of Phase I was the Safety Net Summit, a day-and-a-half long convening of roughly 100 invited stakeholders (from private philanthropy, county social services, nonprofits, and the faith community) for the stated purpose of reimagining, reinventing, and strengthening the safety net in Contra Costa County. This event was planned with the assistance of a

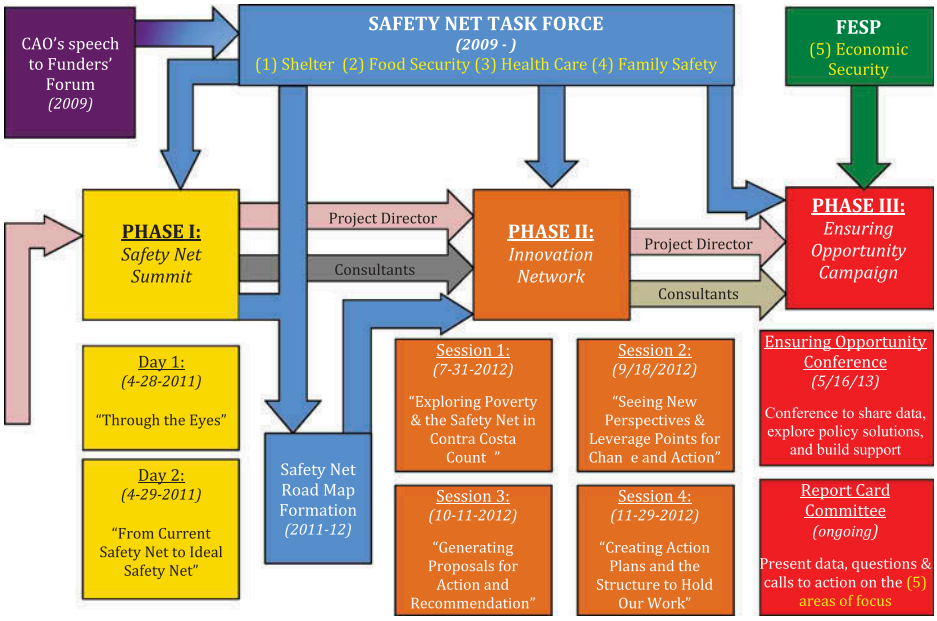

FIGURE 1 Major events and milestones in the Contra Costa County safety net initiative.

third-party project facilitator, hired from an independent nonprofit consulting firm, who later became Project Director by taking on an administrative and coordination role.

After Phase I, and as a culmination of the individual work group efforts during the Safety Net Summit, the Task Force created the Safety Net Road Map. This document identified four specific community needs of focus (namely, shelter, food security, healthcare, and family safety; see Figure 1) to organize primary strategies and proposed changes to key facets of the safety net serving the county's poor. They also helped the Initiative gain traction in defining the scope and parameters of its work. From this document, the Innovation Network was conceived and thereby signaled the beginning of Phase II.

The Innovation Network consisted of four workshops (taking place between July-November of 2012) which were intended to serve as *idea incubators* for the express purpose of creating collaborations and recommended actions for enhancing the safety net. The four need areas of the Road Map created space for focused workshop subgroups, with participants representing providers from that sector. Each event was designed to build off the outcomes of the last, with the ultimate goal of moving from shared understanding to concrete action plans (see Figure 1). Event invitees were challenged with the following overarching focus question, as taken from the Innovation Network documentation: "In this challenging economic climate, where our traditional approaches to providing a 'safety net' are insufficient,

how can we rethink our assumptions and work collaboratively with each other to achieve our aims?"

Roughly 150 public, private, and nonprofit stakeholders, as well as select consumers, received an open invitation to the four events, with participation averaging roughly 60 at each workshop. Invitees were expected to commit to attending all four workshops. Provider agencies invited select consumers by identifying individuals currently in the safety net or who "have navigated the system and are currently in a place of stability [and] who have a bit of distance and can advise on how the system can better serve safety net consumers" (from the instructional document on consumer outreach provided to providers). However, interviewees indicated that consumers of services did not participate as widely as was hoped, citing the prohibitive time commitment required to attend.

Phase III began with a partnership between the Task Force and the Family Economic Security Partnership (FESP), an existing Contra Costa County antipoverty collaborative founded in 2003. Now known as the Campaign to Cut Poverty in Contra Costa County, the Initiative is pursuing a public-policy-oriented agenda to address the collaboration's five focus areas (with the fifth focus area, economic security, adopted upon merging with FESP). With private philanthropic funding to support Task Force administrative duties drying up after Phase II, FESP provided both an aligned strategic vision as well as the administrative capacity to sustain the Initiative's ongoing efforts.

Challenges to Social Service Collaboration in Contra Costa County

It is important to note that none of these events and outcomes was achieved quickly or easily. Schafran, Lopez, and Gin (2013), also highlighting Contra Costa County as a case study, have proposed four place-specific challenges that make community organizing in suburban and exurban jurisdictions particularly challenging. Task Force participants corroborated these same challenges to their efforts to form a collaboration, and we present the parallels below.

The first challenge to suburban community building highlighted by Schafran et al. (2013) is the geography of a suburban region itself; namely, that suburban sprawl helps to explain the dispersed network of social service agencies in Contra Costa County. Several participants noted how the sheer geographic size of the county often means that service providers in one part of the county do not know about others providing similar services elsewhere, and how the very idea that poverty could exist at all in Contra Costa varied greatly by county subregion. Noted one participant,

> This county is like three counties—so there's the East, and the West, and the Central—and actually four counties if you want to include South

> Contra Costa, where San Ramon is [headquarters of the global oil corporation, Chevron]. . . . Contra Costa is big, and each part of the County has really different interests and a different picture of who the population is.

With limited knowledge of the County's entire network of services, client referrals and overlap between certain regions can be nonexistent. This was confirmed by another participant: "People in Richmond don't think about getting services in Martinez, and people in Antioch and Brentwood [East County] don't think about services in West or Central County."

Additionally, interviewees noted that the County's lack of reliable, robust public transit infrastructure creates seriously congested highway commutes that hamper the ability of stakeholders from different parts of the County to meet regularly and on-time. Consequently, "getting the Richmond and the Brentwood people in the same room is almost impossible."

A second challenge in suburban locales is a "less deeply rooted progressive ideology" toward social change needed to address such significant issues as poverty (Schafran et al., 2013, p. 2841). Although Contra Costa is by no means a conservative stronghold, several participants reported that the wealthier communities in the county, and the elected officials who represent them, tend to be more conservative than other parts of the Bay Area. Although this has not necessarily translated into direct opposition to safety net efforts *per se*, it has meant a less unified orientation to policy innovation among elected representatives. Furthermore, because poverty in Contra Costa County tends to be highly localized, residents in exclusive, wealthier areas are less likely to even

> be aware that they're living in a community where people don't get enough to eat. There's all these hot meal programs—did you know that? You know, we don't see the poor—it's not like San Francisco, when you get off BART and there they are.

Not surprisingly, the *not-in-my-backyard* sentiment—stemming from misconceptions about the very existence and extent of need in the county—was cited as an obstacle to service provision efforts.

Third, Schafran and colleagues (2013) described how organized, politically conservative grassroots efforts can derail community-building efforts in suburbia. Safety Net Initiative participants agreed that this has not yet been an issue. However, some participants also noted that political opposition has not yet emerged, because the Initiative has produced little in the way of actionable recommendations (e.g., passing a countywide living-wage ordinance, now a specific focus of Phase III) that could garner such opposition. As Phase III of the Initiative solidifies its focus on policy issues, the reality of political opposition may become a challenge: "Now, at what point do people

start to oppose [our efforts] when the concept becomes specific and there's things that people have to give up? I don't know."

Fourth, suburban areas tend to invest comparatively less financial support in social services than urbanized regions with extensive and visible poverty issues (Allard & Roth, 2010; Schafran et al., 2013), a phenomenon referred to as the *urban bias* in social service funding (Schafran & Schildt, 2011). Philanthropic networks, then, are less robust than in urban centers and less likely and/or willing to invest in suburban poverty alleviation. For example, participants were quick to contrast their funding struggles with the financial situation in San Francisco, a wealthy county with substantial philanthropic investment ("Unlike San Francisco, there's not a bazillion foundations that are like, 'Hey, let me pour money on that problem.'"). Even within Contra Costa, West County receives eight times more social service funding than do the growing areas of need in eastern areas of the county (Schildt, 2012). As one participant noted,

> The closer to San Francisco you are, the more money you get. So San Francisco's just got a ton of money in lots of different ways. Then Alameda County gets more, and Silicon Valley, too. And then further out here in Contra Costa, there's less, and within Contra Costa, West County gets much more than East County.

In addition to these four challenges, participants largely agreed that Contra Costa County lacks a strong history of collaborative social service efforts, resulting in an ongoing level of mistrust across the sectors. One participant described a relationship with the county that was, at times, "antagonistic" and "adversarial," reported being referred to as "county vendors, the same way you would refer to a copier salesperson," as opposed to county partners, conveying a generally noncollaborative relationship. Such perceptions were echoed by all of our nonprofit representatives. As a result of these perceptions, the interests of some nonprofits tended, at times, to sidetrack the conversation at the Safety Net Summit and Innovation Network. Participants described how entrenched power imbalances between funders and fundees challenged efforts to create an inclusive and honest discourse at Initiative events, as some attendees reportedly viewed them as opportunities to network with funders rather than engage as partners in dialogue about the common goal of poverty reduction. These perceptions may have contributed to a general skepticism, even disillusionment, among certain attendees at the events.

Contra Costa stakeholders, in launching the Safety Net Initiative, faced a series of obstacles that made their collaborative efforts especially difficult to initiate. Such circumstances slowed the Initiative's pace of progress; in so logistically challenging an environment, a collaborative antipoverty network

can, in fact, take years to build (Schildt, 2012). Without a preexisting foundation of a *cross-sector thought partnership* in Contra Costa County, the process of establishing common goals was delayed by the necessary prerequisite processes of building relationships and trust, as noted below.

Tensions in the Formation of Collaborative Processes

At times exciting and at times "excruciating," the Task Force's efforts represent an ambitious attempt to address a multifaceted problem with no singular point of intervention: poverty in a diverse and dispersed county. In reflecting on the history of the Initiative, Task Force members commented on the confusion, uncertainty, and frustration that they have felt from the beginning of the collaborative process. Nevertheless, they generally agreed that their efforts improved the county's collaborative climate. This section is a synthesis of their rich reflections on the processes and dynamics of the Safety Net Initiative. We present key themes as a series of four tensions that capture the complex and nuanced dynamics of the Initiative's functioning and the experiences of its participants.

Short-term versus long-term. First, the Task Force members debated early on whether they should focus primarily on short-term strategies to shore up existing services and programs, or take a long-term approach to policies and interventions that would reduce the need for the safety net in the first place. The group settled on a *both/and* approach, and Phase I and II events were designed to encourage attendees to organically form their own action groups for both program enhancement and systems change. For example, nearly all participants cited the partnership between the County Employment and Human Services Department and the nonprofit food bank to increase CalFresh (formerly food stamps) enrollment as an example of a short-term change effort. In contrast, the long-term goal relates to changes in public policy that have become the focus of Phase III.

Some confusion remains among participants regarding the location of leadership to address changes in policy. For example, one nonprofit leader questioned why the County's private philanthropic organizations have not yet "linked arms" to ask for policy changes before the County Board of Supervisors, which would be seen as a powerful political move; in response, a leader from a philanthropic organization pointed out that these foundations are legally barred from engaging in formal policy advocacy. Additionally, some felt as though it were incumbent on the county alone to implement policy changes, but county leaders explained that their latitude to implement change is often restricted by state and federal mandates. Nevertheless, the orientation to upstream intervention has become more unified as stakeholders recognize that truly "moving the needle" on poverty reduction requires public policy reform, which has converged to become the focus of Phase III.

Awareness versus action. Second, Task Force members struggled with whether the content and purpose of their community-wide meetings should primarily raise awareness about poverty issues or formulate goal-specific action plans for change. Participants again selected a *both/and* approach. The agenda for the Phase I Safety Net Summit, the Initiative's first multi-stakeholder convening in 2011, lists awareness-raising as a primary outcome: "Primary Outcome: Exchange of information and data for shared understanding of the current reality of the safety net in Contra Costa County, to provide a foundation for the work moving forward in the Summit day and beyond."

In addition to this specific awareness-raising goal, though, the event's formal invitation asked attendees to plan on committing to the creation of action plans:

> The goal of our summit is to provide an opportunity for a diverse and influential group of stakeholders to reflect on the crisis and the opportunity presented by the continuing diminution of the safety net, set aside their individual agendas and differences in pursuit of the common good, and commit to creating an action plan for strengthening the safety net in Contra Costa.

Nevertheless, interviewees often expressed disappointment in their collective inability to translate awareness into action. Although it was agreed that Phase I and II events were successful in educating various community stakeholders about suburban poverty issues and raising awareness about safety net needs, general consensus was that actionable agendas were lacking: "We weren't getting anywhere. We did the poverty simulation [in Phase I], and so what? People were definitely affected—we got a lot of feedback—but so what, in terms of having any real change?"

Task Force members wondered whether the scope of the Initiative's four focus areas was too broad to accomplish at one time. By focusing on an all-inclusive, "big-tent approach" (as one participant described it), the Task Force may have inadvertently delayed the development of a focused, tangible agenda. This approach may have also alienated some key participants, particularly business community representatives (seen by most participants as the Initiative's biggest missed opportunity to date). Many participants expressed steadfast optimism, though, about channeling newly cultivated public awareness about the county's poverty issues into support for policy change in Phase III. One participant indeed recognized that "policy is driven by public will, and public will comes from education and understanding of the issues and the solutions." In addition, the Report Card Committee, a key component of Phase III (see Figure 1), has learned the valuable lesson of "not doing too much at once" by focusing on presentations and calls to action for one of the five focus areas at a time.

Process-focus versus outcome-focus. Closely related to the awareness/action theme, most participants expressed frustration with the

Initiative's heavy focus on process, at the expense of formulating common outcomes. Some participants perceived the pace of meetings as "excruciating" at times, wishing that common goals could have been defined more quickly. The original Safety Net Task Force members had little trouble initiating challenging discussions among themselves, having had years to develop personal relationships through the Funders' Forum. However, when other stakeholders were invited to participate (particularly the nonprofit sector, which was not historically invited to participate in such "thought partnerships"), the planning process slowed considerably, due in part to the cross-sector power imbalances.

Two major challenges emerged: (a) a lack of truly nonhierarchical, open discourse (commented one respondent, "If you're a community-based organization representative and you've got your foundation funder and your public agency contractor there, you feel somewhat constrained in being able to speak your total truth"), and (b) intrusion of individual agency interests that distracted from the common goal of creating innovative poverty reduction strategies. Regarding the latter, a participant noted,

> Some people used the opportunity, sitting side by side with influential funders, as a chance to put in a plug for their agency. Others looked at it as a chance to start to develop a personal relationship with a funder that they didn't have a relationship with before.

Again, such self-serving stood in direct opposition to the Phase I summit call to "set aside [our] individual agendas and differences in pursuit of the common good" (taken from the Phase I invitation).

Nevertheless, the majority of those interviewed agreed that the Initiative has helped to improve the county's social service climate by laying the groundwork for future collaboration. This foundation of collaboration and dialogue constitutes perhaps the most important accomplishment of the Initiative to date, one that is seen by participants as having foreshadowed the more focused efforts in Phase III. The takeaway from a nonprofit interviewee conveys a sense that cross-sector divides have begun to be bridged:

> I don't know that I can point to a thing that happened as a result of [the Initiative] that's different in this county now, other than—I think dialogue is more open. I think people who historically saw themselves on very different sides of the fence begin to see that maybe this isn't as black and white as they thought. And that's valuable to me, even though there is not a thing I can point to that says, "Oh yeah, that's the building we created," or "That's the new program that we did" or whatever.

This quote represents a critical but easily overlooked lesson, one shared by all interviewees except those participating on the periphery (who lacked

enough familiarity with the Initiative's internal developments to comment; see Table 1): although it may be easy to dismiss the Safety Net Initiative for lack of tangible, identifiable outcomes, such a conclusion would miss the purpose of the collaborative efforts. The Task Force had to first lay the foundation for collaboration and close working relationships on the particularly challenging suburban landscape of Contra Costa County.

Centralized versus decentralized authority. Finally, Task Force members struggled with whether to adopt a centralized backbone agency that would steer the Initiative's strategic direction, or to primarily utilize decentralized, nonhierarchical decision-making strategies. Task Force interviewees reported having read an influential and timely paper on the five conditions of a collective impact model (e.g. common agenda, shared measurement systems, mutually reinforcing activities, continuous communications, and backbone support organizations; Kania & Kramer, 2011). There were several group discussions about whether or not to formally adopt this model. Although it was appealing to the Task Force, they realized early on that they lacked the capacity to implement some of the five conditions for collective impact (such as shared data systems). One of the paper's conditions that did lead to serious discussions of feasibility, though, was organizing and funding a central backbone agency to provide strategic direction and administrative support for the collaboration. Every interviewee consulted for this report commented on this theme, underscoring its critical importance to the Initiative's history.

Early on, the Task Force recognized that they needed some form of third-party assistance, because a multisystemic "effort of this size really benefits from someone at least doing the administration." To this end, a Project Director (from a nonprofit consulting firm) was hired after the Phase I Summit to assume an administrative and supportive role that did not include responsibilities for assuming strategic Task Force leadership functions. Although one participant explicitly valued the group's decentralized decision-making structure to support the extensive sharing of ideas from all voices in the room, all participants sharing their views for this case study agreed that a backbone agency was needed to increase the pace and progress of the Initiative: "There wasn't a central force, and I think that's a major reason why the Task Force, during my time and prior to my time, really struggled to define itself and develop goals and a to-do list."

Some stakeholders noted that logistical challenges constrained their abilities to secure funding (e.g., "Funding a backbone agency is tremendously difficult because boards of foundations take pride in talking about how little they fund administration. . . . Everybody wants an intermediary, but nobody wants to pay for it"). As of this writing, however, a funding proposal to formally staff such a backbone agency for Phase III and beyond has been approved, and the effort has rebranded itself as the *Ensuring Opportunity Campaign*. Accordingly, the lengthy lead-up process and the "excruciating"

pace of the early meetings were perhaps a necessary prerequisite to formally beginning a multisector social service collaboration in earnest, especially given the wide trust gap between sectors in the county. Often, "participants need several years of regular meetings to build up enough experience with each other to recognize and appreciate the common motivation behind their different efforts" (Kania & Kramer, 2011, p. 40).

DISCUSSION AND PRACTICE IMPLICATIONS

The Great Recession created a significant crisis in Contra Costa County. Poverty and the need for social services (on the rise in the county well before the Recession started) increased substantially and the decrease in funding simultaneously reduced the county's capacity to meet the demand for services. In the midst of this crisis, the Safety Net Task Force undertook a multisector collaboration to reimagine the county's understaffed and underfunded safety net. Their experiences have important implications for community practitioners engaged in collaborative efforts to address suburban poverty. The four tensions/themes noted in this case study reflect the inherently challenging process that any collaboration needs to address before it can succeed (cf. Huxham & Vangen, 2000b). And although the specific theoretical content behind these themes is of limited generalizability because of the nature of our dataset, we believe this case study of one suburban county's struggles in the wake of the Great Recession highlights the complexities of suburban social service collaboration formation more broadly, complexities that are likely encountered in every such environment.

Suburban Challenges to Collaboration Formation

A key finding of this study is that power imbalances—and specifically those stemming from funding—hampered the early efforts of the collaboration to build prerequisite trust (Huxham & Vangen, 2000b). In a place like Contra Costa County, which had a limited history of thought partnership and cross-sector collaboration and where the benefits of engaging in the difficult work of collaboration may not have been readily apparent, it is no surprise that certain participants saw the Initiative's events as opportunities to promote their own agency's agenda with funders. This type of self-promotion was not surprising, even despite the fact that the Funders' Forum network (the county's financial power, itself) spawned the Task Force and took the early initiative to catalyze nonhierarchical, change-oriented discourse. Despite the best efforts of the Task Force leaders to discourage them, though, these resource-dependent behaviors were not entirely avoided.

This finding, in and of itself, is not especially ground-breaking; social service collaboration theorists have long suggested that satisfaction of

organizational self-interests is a key prerequisite for initiation and maintenance of successful collaborations (Einbinder et al., 2000; Garrow, 2011; Gray, 1985). Nor is resource dependency and the self-promotion it may engender unique to suburban locales, even though resources tend to be scarcer in suburban areas (Allard & Roth, 2010; Schafran & Schildt, 2011). In fact, few of the challenges that our participants cited as impediments to collaboration—geographic dispersion, socioeconomic segregation, pockets of politically conservative inclination—can rightly be considered only suburban phenomena; service providers in urban municipalities around the country struggle with these very same challenges. The sprawling municipalities of Dallas, Phoenix, and Los Angeles, for example, would rival any American suburb in terms of geographic dispersion, political diversity, and restricted resource availability (re: the latter in Los Angeles, cf. Allard, 2004). What, then, can be considered unique about the struggles of the Contra Costa Safety Net Initiative to grow and thrive? We posit two unique impediments that make social services collaboration more difficult to accomplish in suburbia: the thinness of the service provider network, and the jurisdictional fragmentation that exacerbates resource scarcity.

First, suburban areas experiencing newfound increases in poverty over the past 20 years, as has been the case in Contra Costa, have social service provider networks that are simply less equipped than those in established urban municipalities with longer histories of poverty (Schafran & Schildt, 2011). Consequently, service providers in the suburbs may be less aware of the existence, let alone the operations, of neighboring agencies. One of the outcomes of the Phase I Summit praised by several participants, for example, was the creation of a Contra Costa County-wide resource map, literally a map on which providers listed their agency and its focus under the city of its location for all to see. With such a limited-knowledge baseline, the slow pace of collaboration formation in Contra Costa may not have been entirely attributable to the seemingly unproductive meetings or "excruciating pace" that Task Force participants reported; awareness-raising toward a common goal took longer because an underresourced network of providers with little history of cross-county collaboration simply takes longer to mobilize. If agency interdependence in striving toward a common goal is a necessary prerequisite for collaboration formation, as scholars have long suggested (Gray, 1989), then collaborations in suburban municipalities with thin provider networks and little history of social service need should theoretically take longer to coalesce. This claim remains anecdotal, given the limitations of our dataset, but the rapid rise of suburban poverty as the dominant national trend (Kneebone & Berube, 2013) and the essential role of collaboration in addressing complex social problems (Einbinder et al., 2000; Kania & Kramer, 2011) suggest that this is an important topic for future research.

Second, high degrees of jurisdictional fragmentation, a uniquely suburban phenomenon, may seriously inhibit the financial resources and community support needed to build collaborations. Contra Costa County consists of 19 incorporated cities and several additional unincorporated areas with no clear *urban center*. West County (especially the City of Richmond) is an area with deeply entrenched poverty and violence problems stemming from post-WWII deindustrialization, while systemic poverty in East County is a relatively recent phenomenon. Service providers and funders, then, have seen Richmond as a high priority area, creating a within-county social service funding disparity of only 1 dollar available in East County for every 8 dollars in West County (Schildt, 2012), a finding also corroborated by one of our county-level interviewees.

Although socioeconomic hyper-segregation is certainly not unique in suburbs, what is unique is the degree to which affluent enclaves can and do constitute independent municipalities, a highly decentralized governance structure that inhibits regional resource sharing (cf. Schafran, 2009). In Contra Costa, as one participant explained, this creates "microenvironments of race, poverty, lifestyle, dot dot dot" in which well-to-do municipalities are unlikely to share their tax base with separate, poorer communities just down the freeway, thus perpetuating cross-county resource inequities. As a result, individual service providers operating within a smaller and less robust tax base must supplement their budgets with external resources, creating an even more important role for the county (Farmer, 2015). And although recent research suggests that the receipt of external (state or federal) funding can indeed stimulate cross-sector collaboration in low-density counties (Farmer, 2015), it is also known that intermittent or inconsistent government funding undermines the focus of a provider network on supra-organizational issues such as policy change or safety net re-structuring (Farmer, 2015; Garrow, 2011). The unprecedented federal-, state-, and county-level social service cutbacks in Contra Costa during the Great Recession are certainly an illustrative example of this latter point. With newly impoverished suburban regions less likely to draw in critical resources to begin with (Allard, 2004), organizational self-interests, unsurprisingly, can inhibit collaboration formation in such environments.

Institutionalizing Suburban Collaboration: Toward a Role for the County

Additionally, many of the Safety Net participants lamented the inability of the Task Force to fund a backbone agency to provide administrative coordination and planning. In decades past, the primary early responders to economic crises impacting vulnerable populations were the local social planning councils associated with United Way agencies (the backbone agency in many locales that helped launch local anti-poverty community action

agencies funded by the federal War on Poverty). These councils created community forums inviting all major stakeholders to the planning process (including the representatives from the business community, especially those whose employees used payroll deductions to contribute to the United Way).

Although the United Way continues to exist in many of these locales, these social planning councils have been defunct for decades (cf. Agranoff, 1991), creating somewhat of a regional social planning vacuum that has yet to be consistently filled by an organization with similar institutional clout. In an attempt to fill the void in the fiscal wake of the Recession, the Safety Net Initiative held community gatherings designed to build momentum for systemic change. As espoused by every one of our participants, they soon found that their efforts were hampered without a dedicated administrative/planning component—a realization underscoring the need for recreation of the social planning and coordination element once filled by the United Way but since lost to history. How, then, can suburban regions—whose newfound poverty, relatively underdeveloped (and certainly under-resourced) provider network, and jurisdictional fragmentation seem to hinder collaborations from being developed and sustained—institutionalize a community collaboration in the social services?

We suggest that the chief, publicly-funded human service agency (or regional variant thereof) within many counties is in a unique position to fill this role, for several reasons. In many states nationally (and throughout California), counties are already the administrative vehicles for pass-throughs of state and federal moneys and mandates, and are thus well positioned to begin incentivizing and institutionalizing collaboration through restructured grants and CBO contracts. Additionally, the county as a political unit provides arguably the closest embodiment of a regional governance structure that already exists within the American federalist state. It thus has some potential to begin rectifying the fiscal externalities associated with the jurisdictional fragmentation, so common in suburbia, by setting a clear, unified agenda in collaboration with nonprofit stakeholders and private philanthropists. By using the data, it already collects for a number of social service programs, the county may also be able to coordinate the shared data systems so fundamental for collective impact collaboration (Kania & Kramer, 2011). If our safety net case study is any indication, county social service agencies already have the visionary planning skills necessary to fulfill such a coordinative leadership role. In his 2009 speech to the Funders' Forum that catalyzed the Safety Net Initiative, the Contra Costa CAO seemingly suggested such a role for the county by framing the Great Recession as "one that will redefine the financial capacities and roles of government in the provision of public human services" (Cullen, 2009).

CONCLUSION

As of this writing, Phase III has received funding from a local philanthropic organization to support backbone staffing, suggesting that the Initiative may well be cementing itself as an institutionalized presence in Contra Costa County. To this point, participants overwhelmingly agreed that a solid foundation for ongoing social services collaboration has been built in Contra Costa County. Though slow, confusing, and frustrating at times, this process was necessary to overcome a history of power imbalances and even cross-sectoral mistrust—one that was all the more problematic given the unique challenges to suburban collaboration formation (cf. Schafran et al., 2013). This case study argues that the lengthy formation process experienced by the Safety Net Initiative was all the more lengthy precisely because of the systemic disadvantages this network faced in a suburban environment. Future research is needed to extend the generalizability of these findings, but we argue that by carving out a specific role for community collaboration coordination at the county level, county social service agencies may be able to institutionalize the successes that the Safety Net Initiative is just beginning to experience.

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APPENDIX

List of interview questions:
What is your role in the Safety Net Task Force?
How did you get involved? How long have you been involved?
How would you describe your/your organization's contributions & activities?
How would you describe the Safety Net Task Force?
What were the conditions like in the county when the initiative started (or when you were asked to join)?
How would you describe the original purpose/goals? How have they evolved over time?
How would you describe the planning process and various activities?
What do you think are the biggest issues facing those in poverty in Contra Costa County?
How do you think that the Task Force has begun to address those issues?
Are there particular areas of the county that are receiving more attention in the discussions?
How would you describe the collaborative process among those involved and its evolution over time?
What have been some of the biggest challenges to building consensus?
What do you think might have been the reasons that one or more members discontinued their involvement?
How would you describe the most important outcomes of the Task Force to date?
Are there any changes either in organizational or inter-organizational processes resulting from the collaboration (e.g. new referral processes, or new funding partnerships)?
What are the major contributions made by this Task Force?
What are some of its major limitations?
Do you see any missed opportunities?
Do you see any negative consequences emerging out of the Task Force?
What do you predict for the future of the Task Force over the next several months and years?

What might prove to be the most sustainable changes that can be traced to the work of the Task Force?
What recommendations would you make to other counties attempting to adapt your approach?
Is the concept of a safety net for the most vulnerable populations still a viable idea? Why or why not?
Is there a question that I did not raise that you think should be mentioned and addressed?