# Want to Tackle a Big Problem?

# Start Small.

**Creating effective public benefit services** and lasting structural changes to address poor societal outcomes can seem daunting. And rightly so. Many policymakers, administrations, non-profits, entrepreneurs, and others have tried – and failed – to tackle persistent societal challenges like poverty, equality, and threats to democratic institutions. Experience shows that sometimes the best way to make progress on big, thorny societal issues is to *start small*. This article draws from the successes and failures of three public benefit programs to highlight some potential benefits of starting small, approaches that have worked in practice, and pitfalls to look out for at scale.

## Example #1: Piloting a Novel, National Service

A nonprofit sought to tackle a nation-wide need by offering services to the victims of a novel type of crime. They had confidence in the need for these services and several ideas for how to construct a program based on existing, successful models. But providing those services would be risky to try at scale.

To mature their program concept, the organization executed a **pilot of a subset of the services** they envisioned. They further constrained parts of the initial pilot to **a portion of their expected beneficiaries** based in a few geographic regions. And throughout the pilot, they researched existing efforts and comparable program models.

The limited-scope initiative allowed the organization to **provide immediate value** to their expected beneficiaries while they **developed deeper insights** into underlying needs and challenges. Importantly, the organization learned that services it had viewed as "secondary" had an outsized impact on their mission, while the primary program model provided relatively little value to constituents. They switched their focus to the secondary services, and because the initiative was a pilot, they could **switch gears with lower risk** to the organization than if they had jumped into full implementation.

Moreover, the group's research into existing efforts uncovered other groups with the ability to meet many of victim needs known to the nonprofit. **Partnering** with these groups will free up the nonprofit to **focus on meeting unmet needs**: vetting and connecting providers with victims and building services not already being provided.

This nonprofit is preparing to scale up its services and is on track to implement a new national program. They will do so with hard-won knowledge of **what services will scale, which won't** (and so won't be continued), and what parts of their infrastructure will have to be **redesigned to start over**

### Key Take-Aways

► Approaches to starting small:
- Pilot limited functionality
- Work with a limited constituency
- Tackle one part of the problem
- Build from what already works
- Test risky concepts pre-launch

► Benefits of starting small:
- Learn while you serve
- Shift gears less riskily
- Identify partners and specialize
- Increase confidence in your program
- Build trust with beneficiaries

► What to be prepared for at scale:
- Understand what worked and why
- Know what will and won't scale
- Be prepared to start some things over
- Grow at an intentional pace
- Have a realistic long-term outlook

to support their beneficiaries at scale. They have also gathered enough information to **develop a realistic outlook** of what program services will cost to implement and support long-term.

## Example #2: Tackling Trust One Issue at a Time

A federal agency is charged with providing security support to tens of thousands of non-federal organizations through information sharing and technical services. The number of constituents poses significant challenges of scale – particularly the logistics and cost of serving thousands of organizations with different systems and levels of maturity. Moreover, the agency faces a big hurdle with *trust*. Its authorities to offer help are relatively new, and its constituents are often skeptical or even openly hostile.

A recent event that affected many of these constituent organizations posed an opportunity for the federal agency to start small as it sought to build its capacity provide services and to increase trust. The agency prioritized its resources into helping to secure this one event, demonstrating the idea of **tackling one problem** instead of addressing all of its security services at once. The event also **limited the constituency** to a subset of groups involved in the event.

> Demonstrating competence, even if in just one part of its mission, bred trust and confidence from even the organization's most skeptical stakeholders.

The approach paid off. The security of the event was unparalleled and widely hailed as a huge success. The federal agency **provided top-notch services even while it learned** the finer points of how to serve its new constituency. The organization **strengthened its partnerships** with other federal agencies and **clarified its unique role** by exercising its capabilities. Most importantly, by demonstrating competence, even if in just one part of its mission, the agency bred trust and confidence from even its most skeptical beneficiaries.

Looking to build on this success, the agency commissioned formal after-action reports to learn **what had gone right** with this event and **what factors contributed** to the results. Agency leadership identified challenges within its current structure and processes that staff supporting the special initiative had overcome. Replicating success might mean **scrapping some recent changes** that had been intended as improvements. At the very least, leadership acknowledged that the approach of focusing agency resources on a single event **would not scale**. The organization took a **realistic view of the future** in recognizing that further changes would have to be made to achieve the same level of success in other security missions.

## Example #3: Accelerating Too Quickly

A different federal agency struggled to form a similarly grounded view of how to leverage its successes on a smaller scale.

The agency, faced with a mandate to create a better system for sharing mission-critical information among its peer agencies, had conducted a very successful pilot. It had developed a **limited-capability system**, **focused on just one important challenge area** (incident handling), and **tested new information sharing approaches** prior to system deployment in a controlled event. End users from peer agencies were **engaged and enthusiastic**.

When it came time to prepare the pilot system for production fielding, the agency piled on the requirements for the developers. Agency leadership chose to make the pilot system part of a larger, untested platform of applications intended to satisfy other agency missions. Momentum ground to a halt. Pilot system components were replaced to conform to the new host platform. Security compliance challenges dragged on limited resources. Developer time was diverted from implementing incident handling features that had been promised to end users, in favor of designing complex capabilities with no clear use case. System launch dates were delayed.

What went wrong? The agency may have failed to **understand *why* the pilot had been successful** at a small scale, such as engaging end users to design narrow, well-defined use cases. Agency leadership also allowed requirements to multiply quickly, rather than **carefully managing the growth of the system**. And the scope of the added functionality suggests that, rather than a **realistic outlook** for what it would take to develop a much more complex system, the agency had fantastical notions of what was possible.

## Starting Small in Practice

If your organization is about to embark on a new program or initiative, here are some key questions to consider:

- Which service models do we *know* will work? Which are still untested?

- What is the single most important problem we think we can help solve?

- What services could we deliver right away to serve our beneficiaries while refining our delivery models?

- How will we gather feedback about the effectiveness of our services?

- How will we decide which services to scale up, and when?

## About the Author

David M. Wagner has more than fifteen years' experience helping clients devise and execute effective social impact strategies. A "reformed engineer," David brings a unique viewpoint combining his leadership, systems thinking, and public policy experience. He is passionate about helping public service organizations conceive compelling futures for their communities and themselves and forge ambitious paths to realize those visions.

## About Clear Mission Consulting, LLC

Clear Mission Consulting is committed to advancing social outcomes through holistic, systems-based strategies. We partner with public service-oriented organizations to make social programs more impactful by aligning services, public policy, and stakeholder needs.

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