

New York City, like most cities, counts on government, business, and nonprofit organizations to work together to create supportive, safe, and productive environments. In particular, local government and nonprofit agencies often address many of the same social issues, serve the same clients, and, therefore, have reason to support each other in the process. Moreover, both government and nonprofit agencies have valuable resources they can offer each other to enhance service delivery. Local governments, for instance, have financial resources they can allocate to address social problems and community needs. Nonprofit agencies have unique insight and expertise working with specific populations; they can mobilize volunteers and have greater flexibility to act faster and with greater reach through their networks than government agencies. Although building and sustaining effective partnerships can be mutually beneficial, it is seldom easy to achieve. Research documents the complexities of investing time and resources into making connections, building trust among partners, making tough decisions about the allocation of funds, and strengthening the organizational infrastructure and capacity of nonprofit organizations.¹

NYC 311-211, GreaterNY, and the Strengthening Nonprofits Task Force illustrate three approaches to collaboration that are improving New York City's services and efficiency. The NYC 311-211 call system uses technology efficiently without losing the human touch; GreaterNY aims to grow strong nonprofit leaders through peer partnering with high-level executives from the business community; and the Strengthening Nonprofits Task Force promotes innovation, problem solving, and accountability by shaping and guiding initiatives to build the capacity of New York City's nonprofit sector and strengthen the government-nonprofit relationship.

This policy brief describes how New York City government and area nonprofits worked together to build meaningful partnerships and collaborations during Mayor Michael Bloomberg's administration while strengthening the capacity of nonprofit agencies. Two partnership models (i.e., NYC 311-211 and the Strengthening Nonprofits Task Force) are described below, noting the accomplishments and challenges experienced in each initiative. A third model (GreaterNY) is described in appendix A. The information in this brief is based on a review of publicly available documents and interviews with key stakeholders, including staff from city government, nonprofit agencies, and Task Force members with intimate knowledge and involvement in these efforts.

Context

When the Great Recession hit in 2007–09, there was concern in New York City about whether the nonprofit human services sector would be able to ride out the financial downturn while addressing a growing demand for services. Because the city spends roughly \$5 billion in human services contracts that go to approximately 1,600 nonprofit organizations, the city wanted to ensure that New Yorkers are aware of these services and that the city's service delivery investment is well spent.

Policy Response

History of NYC 311-211

Making service information readily available to local constituents is an essential first step in service delivery. Too often, people don't know where to turn for help and have trouble finding their way through a sometimes fragmented and complex service delivery maze. In 2003, New York City launched the nation's largest 311 system, a city-operated call center initially established to take non-emergency calls and provide quick and easy access to New York City government services. These calls address such questions as when the local library branch is open, how to pay a parking ticket, or what dates garbage is picked up.

At the same time 311 was launched, the United Way of New York City and local nonprofit agencies were discussing implementing a city 211 system² to provide information and referrals specific to social service needs. Although many cities operate separate systems, it was decided to consolidate 311 and 211 because 85 percent of New York City's human services programs (i.e., services for children, the elderly, veterans, the homeless, job seekers, substance abusers, and more) are contracted through nonprofit organizations. Having a centralized call center staff that could respond to both government and nonprofit service requests gave New Yorkers easy access to services by requiring them to call only one phone number.

In 2006, Mayor Bloomberg announced plans to collaborate with the United Way and expand the 311 system to include health and human services information and referrals. A year later, New York City residents could dial 311 or 211 to access government services along with information and referrals to the programs and services provided by nonprofit and community-based organizations. According to the United Way, the goals of New York City's blended 311-211 model are to

- link callers to social services through the NYC 311 system,
- increase use of social services through increased access to city and community health and human services nonprofits for both clients and professionals,
- provide quality customer service through live call representatives, and
- collect information on service demand, identify gaps in service, and inform service delivery policy and planning decisions.

History of the Strengthening Nonprofits Task Force

The Great Recession of 2007–09 is often described as the most severe economic downturn since the Great Depression. The collapse of the financial and housing markets in New York City had far-reaching effects, including skyrocketing unemployment, increased poverty, and widespread revenue loss in all sectors. While policymakers debate how to restore economic and labor market vitality, the need for social services continues to grow,³ especially among the most vulnerable populations. So, it comes as no surprise that during and after the recession, nonprofits have faced huge demands for their programs and services.

New York City government has a long tradition of using nonprofit agencies as a vehicle for delivering services to city residents. However, with the city government and area nonprofits both trying to meet increasing demand for service while facing reductions in revenues, there was broad concern about the ability of nonprofits to withstand the economic downturn and provide services to people in need.

Because federal and state funding cuts caused significant budget constraints for the city, there were fewer resources to fund nonprofit programs. The city had to find innovative, nonbudgetary ways to bolster the nonprofit sector and improve service delivery. To help nonprofits better position themselves to survive the recession and its aftermath, Mayor Bloomberg announced in 2009 the launch of the Strengthening Nonprofits Task Force to shape and guide initiatives in four critical areas:

- reducing fixed costs for nonprofit organizations
- expanding loan programs
- improving city contracting and procurement procedures
- building new partnerships to help foster stronger nonprofit management

The Task Force is a collaborative effort to increase communication and build knowledge and trust between city government and area nonprofits as they work to deliver critical services and promote healthy and safe communities. Under the leadership of the Deputy Mayor for Health and Human Services, the United Way of New York City, and the Deputy Executive Director of the Human Services Council of New York City (HSC), the Task Force brings together city and nonprofit leaders to explore new ways of improving procurement practices and strengthening nonprofit organizations that contract with the city. One Task Force member pointed to the convening power of the Task Force to improve a system or change the way things are done. She further noted that in the past, if the city government convened nonprofit and government stakeholders, it traditionally did so around specific issues, such as hunger or domestic violence. This was the first time the government actually looked at the capacity and infrastructure needs necessary for nonprofits to better serve their clients and communities. For example, the Task Force addressed the immediate needs of nonprofits dealing with financial problems exacerbated by the recession by improving access to and availability of gap financing loans to help nonprofits balance government contract payments and cash flow issues. The Task Force also tackled longer-term needs of nonprofits by looking at ways to streamline procurement processes and reporting requirements in order to lessen administrative burdens and allow nonprofits to invest more time and resources into being better service providers.

Structure of NYC 311-211

NYC 311 is available 24 hours a day, seven days a week, so quantity and quality of staff are crucial to its operations. The call center is staffed by over 300 paid employees, no volunteers. Call center representatives, who are on the front lines handling calls from the public, make up about two-thirds of the staff.

The decision to expand 311 to include 211 capabilities surfaced the concern that call center representatives might need a different skill set to handle social services calls, especially from individuals in the midst of a crisis. To ensure quality customer service, NYC 311 met the accreditation standards of the Alliance of Information and Referral Systems (AIRS).⁴ NYC 311 call center representatives now receive specialized, AIRS-based training in health and human service information and referral (I&R) so they are better equipped to assist callers by identifying additional needs and related services beyond what the caller initially requests. Representatives are trained to obtain essential information in order to refer callers to the appropriate government or nonprofit agency and reduce the number of misdirected calls.

To ensure the vast network of nonprofit agencies was accessible through NYC 311, the City of New York and the United Way surveyed nonprofits regarding their interest in participating in NYC 311. The data from this survey were used to create an extensive list of organizations providing health and human services in New York City. In addition, the United Way received a grant from the state of New York to help nonprofits interested in participating in NYC 311 upgrade their technology or professionally train their staff. United Way also offered free training workshops to ensure that I&R services met AIRS quality standards.

Structure of the Strengthening Nonprofits Task Force

The city government and HSC provide resources to support this effort including use of facilities, technology, equipment, and staff. The Task Force meets at City Hall, and city government and HSC staff handle the administrative arrangements, such as coordinating the logistics and meeting venue and preparing the agenda and other meeting materials. Task Force members meet at least quarterly to review data, make

decisions, provide updates and track progress on initiatives, and share feedback and concerns from the nonprofit community at large.

The Task Force has about thirty members representing a mix of nonprofit leaders of large inclusive umbrella and membership organizations, direct service providers with city government contracts, funding entities, academic thought leaders, and city government staff. City officials make sure the key leadership of the nonprofit sector is at the table to represent the needs and concerns of their members and stakeholders. Task Force members are vetted on their expertise, knowledge, and experience, and then invited to join the group. The membership has remained fairly constant, with only a few additions and departures since the Task Force's inception in 2009.

To focus on several initiatives simultaneously, the Task Force either created work groups or partnered with already established work groups to address specific issues. For example, the Task Force created a work group to focus on data-related issues; to improve the city's purchasing and contracting practices with nonprofits, the Task Force partnered with HSC's business solutions work group made up of nonprofit contract and financial staff with direct experience handling city contracts. Task Force meetings were primarily a way for the group to check in and make sure projects and initiatives were on track. The real work on the initiatives occurred between the quarterly Task Force meetings, through regular conversations, meetings, and emails between HSC and the city staff. Having regular Task Force meetings kept the group accountable and ensured the necessary planning and project implementation took place.

From the start, the Task Force set goals and targeted outcomes to guide the short-, mid- and long-term direction of the group. Progress is tracked regularly. One interviewee noted the importance of data and the sophisticated use of technology by Mayor Bloomberg's administration: *"Whenever we went to a meeting there were all these graphics that depicted what was going on. The fact the mayor valued and put money into that was exceptional."*

Challenges for NYC 311-211

At least three challenges had to be addressed during 311-211 start-up. First, meeting AIRS 211 standards was a concern. Not many consolidated 311-211 systems exist, so there was some apprehension that the expansion could adequately meet client I&R needs for human services. However, after AIRS experts looked at the call center and the ways the city hired and trained the representatives, they thought NYC 311 was fully capable of handling the expansion. This helped ease some of the initial tension.

Second, because 311 merged two established programs, branding issues surfaced. NYC 311 was a familiar brand for local New York City residents; 211 was a national and state brand. Although it took some time to resolve this issue, the parties involved recognized the value of having one number for residents to call. The service is marketed as NYC 311, but when residents call 311, they get their social service needs seamlessly addressed in one call. Essentially, individuals can call either 311 or 211 to access social services information and referrals.

Staffing was a third challenge. With the 24-7 staffing model, call center representatives have to be available during off-peak hours and weekends. To help keep NYC 311 fully functional, the call center staff is supplemented with a paid internship program through the City University of New York (CUNY). The collaboration with CUNY provides college students part-time work as call center representatives. Students work 12 to 18 hours a week while enrolled in school, but they can work up to 35 hours a week during their breaks. To be eligible for an internship, students must be enrolled in classes, be at least a sophomore, and have at least a 2.0 grade point average. Over 100 students from various academic majors have interned with NYC 311.

Challenges for the Strengthening Nonprofits Task Force

The Task Force faced three critical challenges. First, membership had to represent the various needs and issues of nonprofit organizations that operate throughout the five boroughs. New York City has roughly 40,000 nonprofit organizations that vary by type, size, and age. To address the diversity of the sector and keep the size of the Task Force manageable, representatives from inclusive umbrella organizations that have a wide reach and scope of members were invited to join the Task Force. Such organizations represented the viewpoints of many groups and could communicate information about the initiatives back to their membership.

Second, the Task Force had to create an environment conducive to open and honest conversation. Some nonprofit members, for example, were uncomfortable having major funders, including government, in the room. The umbrella and membership organizations that participated on the Task Force played an important role since they represented the collective interests of nonprofits. This composition of participants allowed the group to communicate candidly and honestly on broad issues affecting nonprofits rather than concerns and issues of specific organizations. Frequent, open and honest communication helped establish trust, which alleviated such concerns. City government and nonprofit sector leaders openly discussed difficulties and gave each other regular feedback. This open dialogue helped ensure accurate information was being shared and processes were transparent. Moreover, the Task Force was not just a place to talk through solutions; members were expected to help implement measures that would improve and strengthen the nonprofit-government relationship. At Task Force meetings, individuals had to report on project updates and progress. The increased accountability helped build trust and gave government and nonprofit leaders the opportunity to demonstrate their commitment to these efforts. One interviewee stated that it was important to have senior leadership involved to make sure things happened.

Third, achieving consensus among a group of stakeholders with diverse and sometimes competing views at times was difficult. The Task Force was formed with the expectation that the members work cooperatively toward successful outcomes. When stakeholders faced potential impasses, government and nonprofits representatives talked with their constituents to build consensus and keep the Task Force on course. Building trust was also a part of building consensus.

Results

Over the past decade, New York City has been at the forefront of efforts to facilitate and streamline government and nonprofit interactions and to strengthen the local nonprofit sector. Many of these initiatives are just beginning to take hold and cannot yet be fully assessed. However, by all accounts, the initiatives to date have increased trust between the public and nonprofit sectors and show promise of producing greater efficiencies for both parties. These initiatives are highly creative and transparent attempts to make city government and the nonprofit sector work better and smarter. They lay the groundwork for building future efforts to better serve city residents and should be viewed as models for other cities interested in creating strong partnerships between local government and the nonprofit sector. Additional information about these initiatives is located on the NYC Nonprofit Assistance web page (<http://www.nyc.gov/html/nonprofit/html/home/home.shtml>).

NYC 311-211

New York City's consolidated 311-211 model increases awareness of and access to health and human services by offering New Yorkers in all five boroughs accurate and consistent information and referrals to a vast network of social services. NYC 311 provides greater outreach and information on both government and nongovernment services. As one interviewee put it, *"24-hour access to social services has become very important, especially these days."*

Additionally, the expansion of NYC 311 to include social services information and referrals is advantageous to nonprofits. By leveraging the training and accessibility of the NYC 311 call center representatives, nonprofits can increase client access and the number of people they serve without hiring additional staff or expanding their outreach efforts.

Because NYC 311 collects a wealth of data, it gives city government a way to assess current and future community needs and decide how to allocate resources. Expanding the NYC 311 system to include nonprofit and community-based organizations increases the scope of these data to allow more in-depth analysis. Moreover, the data provide government and nonprofits insight into ways to improve their services through accurate, consistent measurement and analysis. One interviewee shared that NYC 311 data are regularly examined for trends and that call center data are *“used as a barometer for what is going on in the environment.”*

Part of the reason that NYC 311-211 works so well is that it provides mutual benefit to both the city and the nonprofit sector, including the following:

- The collaboration allows government and nonprofits to build on each other’s strengths and resources, especially during times of widespread funding cuts. The incorporation of 211 into the NYC 311 infrastructure produces greater efficiencies by saving time and costs. Streamlining processes creates a single point of contact for residents and facilitates rapid response by call center representatives, who are trained to respond to each caller’s needs. Moreover, a consolidated structure avoids the high costs of duplicating services and running two separate but similar operations.
- Having a good technology platform is critical for keeping the system up and running smoothly. The city had already invested in NYC 311 technology; thus, 211 capabilities could be incorporated cost-effectively and with fewer resources.
- The nonprofit I&R experience has helped professionalize the call center and make it more efficient and effective. A centralized staff simplifies training and quality assurance monitoring and promotes consistent and accurate responses. Having specially trained, AIRS-certified staff reduces the number of times a caller has to be transferred. Since representatives are trained to handle all types of calls, callers do not have to be handed off multiple times to have their questions answered.

Strengthening Nonprofits Task Force

To date, the Task Force has helped shape two major initiatives:

- **The HHS Accelerator** system is an online portal that allows government contractors to electronically share and store frequently requested documents, apply for prequalification, and receive information about solicitations. City agencies are using the HHS Accelerator system to manage the entire request for proposal process, which includes releasing requests, receiving submissions, evaluating proposals, and selecting awardees (see separate brief on this topic).
- **GreaterNY** is a cross-sector partnership program intended to provide nonprofit leaders opportunities to develop relationships with and learn from their peers in the business sector. It helps nonprofit leaders position their organizations to withstand the negative impact of the economic downturn and build stronger organizations for the future. The program pairs business executives with nonprofit executive directors to address strategic issues and build organizational capacity. The nonprofit leader determines the specific skill or issue addressed (see appendix A for description).

In addition to these projects, the dialogue and interaction between city government and the nonprofits is now more collegial. According to one interviewee, *“Since the Task Force launched, there’s been a shift; nonprofits went from being referred to as vendors to being referred to as partners.”*

Interviewees cited many reasons for the success of these initiatives, but the following stand out as particularly critical factors:

- The city government prioritized the Strengthening Nonprofits Task Force by committing resources to it. Several people agreed that having a designated senior-level government official involved *“helps ensure that things will happen and also lets the nonprofit leaders know that the city thinks they are important.”* Also, the city’s willingness to dedicate staff, space, and equipment helped cultivate an environment of trust and respect.
- Task Force members are expected to roll up their sleeves and use their collective skills, talents, and resources to make a difference. As one interviewee put it: *“The Task Force was never a policy forum; it was a technical business relationship forum. It was effective because it stuck to the goal to strengthen the nonprofit sector.”*
- The Task Force maintains a strong connection to the nonprofit sector by encouraging open conversations and the exchange of ideas with nonprofits. Several interviewees described the Task Force as providing a safe environment to have honest and realistic discussions. In the words of one interviewee, *“They built a lot of trust around the table...a lot of legitimacy to sit down and talk with nonprofits.”* Another said, *“There was a fair amount of scrutiny by the nonprofits and input from the field. The nonprofit involvement was genuine and influential.”*

Related Policies and Programs

To improve the procurement process, save money, and help city agencies and local nonprofits function more efficiently, the city, with guidance from the Task Force, undertook three major initiatives: the Standard Human Services Contract, HHS Accelerator, and the Office of Support, Accountability and Value-Enhancement. These initiatives are discussed in greater detail in a separate brief.

Looking Ahead

NYC 311-211

The demand for NYC 311 services has soared in the past 10 years. Starting at roughly 4.5 million calls in 2003, the call center handled more than 19 million calls in 2012. As demand for NYC 311 services continues to grow, finding ways to manage the call volume will be a primary concern. Currently, there are plans to enhance the parallel NYC 311 web site to make more information available online as well as via text, Twitter, and other social media. Younger residents accustomed to finding information a click away are likely to find such electronic tools a benefit. But, as one interviewee noted, a key to the success of NYC 311 is the dialogue between the caller and a call center representative who can listen to the caller’s request, sort through specific or sometimes multiple concerns, and find appropriate information and services to meet those needs. Maintaining the call center with trained representatives will be an essential element in the continued success of this program. NYC 311 has already begun to renew its AIRS accreditation to maintain its high level of customer service.

Strengthening Nonprofits Task Force

Through the HHS Accelerator and other reforms, New York City has dramatically transformed how its local government works with nonprofit organizations that hold city contracts and provide services to countless residents. But real change does not happen overnight, and the progress made could slip away if not nurtured and sustained. A key question is how to institutionalize successful mechanisms for improving government-nonprofit relations.

One approach might be to make the Task Force (or similar structure) a permanent part of the Mayor’s office. The Task Force would continue to serve as a sounding board and problem solver for streamlining the

mechanisms for receiving city-issued contracts. It also can serve as a facilitator for strengthening the capacity of nonprofit service providers through workshops and peer coaching. Making the Task Force a permanent structure within the Mayor's office would signal that the nonprofit sector is a vital "constituent" for the city.

To keep the Task Force from becoming insular and stagnant, it might be helpful to create a rotating membership system. New members often bring fresh perspectives. A potential structure might have a core set of permanent members to provide institutional memory and a rotating set of members who would reflect new and evolving issues or ways of doing business.

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Notes

¹ See for example, Pettijohn et al. (2013) and De Vita and Cory Fleming (2001).

² 211 is a national partnership between the United Way of America and the Alliance of Information and Referral Systems (AIRS) that develops individual local, state, and regional call centers.

³ According to data from a new US Census Bureau report, poverty in New York City increased from 20.1 percent in 2010 to 21.2 percent in 2012 (Sam Roberts, "Poverty Rate Is Up in New York City, and Income Gap Is Wide, Census Data Show," *New York Times*, September 19, 2013, <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/09/19/nyregion/poverty-rate-in-city-rises-to-21-2.html>).

⁴ Over the years, AIRS has established an in-depth accreditation process for 211 call centers, and its quality assurance standards are a benchmark for I&R providers nationally. AIRS has codified how 211 call centers provide services and collect and store information. In many states an AIRS accreditation is a requirement for funding 211 systems.

Appendix A. GreaterNY: An Initiative to Grow Nonprofit Leadership

During the Great Recession, corporate executives that served on nonprofit boards saw first hand the challenges facing New York City's nonprofit sector. Nonprofit executives were often struggling to address the financial crisis and keep services operating. In this context, a group of New York City business and financial leaders approached Mayor Bloomberg's Office about using their skills and expertise to help nonprofits build capacity and get through the recession. Their ideas, shared with the Strengthening Nonprofits Task Force, shaped the GreaterNY program.

Launched in 2009, GreaterNY is a public-private partnership that pairs business and nonprofit executives to collaboratively address strategic issues and build organizational capacity. Through one-on-one partnerships, corporate leaders provide high-level advisory support to nonprofit executives and work with them for two years to develop and implement innovative solutions that can strengthen nonprofit operations. As one interviewee explained, *"This is not a mentoring program; these are peer partnerships between high-level executives."*

GreaterNY is coordinated by the Office of the Deputy Mayor for Health and Human Services in partnership with the Department of Cultural Affairs. Private funding supports the program: GreaterNY corporate partners contribute financially in addition to volunteering their time. The contribution is designed to be equivalent to a Board "give-get" policy of a medium-sized nonprofit organization (roughly \$30,000 a year for two years). Of this contribution, \$15,000 is allocated to the nonprofit organization matched with the corporate executive. The balance goes into a Sustainability Grant fund. The fund awards competitive grants for innovative capacity-building projects. GreaterNY has awarded a total of 28 grants since 2010.

To participate, nonprofits submit an expression of interest form and meet eligibility criteria—for example, they must receive city funding, they must have an annual operating budget of \$2 million to \$20 million, and their executive must be willing to commit roughly 10 hours a month to partnership activities.

GreaterNY makes every effort to match executives with the appropriate partner given skills and capacity-building needs. According to one interviewee, *"It's not just a working relationship, but the partners become trusted colleagues and confidants."* The program seeks to provide the best possible support to help nonprofits address pressing organizational challenges or dilemmas. Commonalities in service delivery areas and executive backgrounds and working styles are also taken into consideration.

Using best practices from the business and nonprofit sectors, executive partners set goals and meet regularly to work on implementing high-impact strategic initiatives. Nonprofits may then compete for grant funding to support capacity-building projects developed through their GreaterNY partnership. Since 2009, 39 nonprofit leaders have participated in this program. Key accomplishments to emerge from the GreaterNY initiative include the development of earned income revenue streams, new marketing and branding strategies, targeted individual donor campaigns and membership programs, and new corporate partnerships. As one interviewee noted, *"For the corporate partners, it is high-impact civic engagement that they find attractive. It's about doing real hands-on work where they can apply their skills to help people."*