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## **If Congress won't lead, states will**

By MELODY C. BARNES and JOHN BRIDGELAND | 08/16/13 05:07 AM EDT

Americans cringe at Washington's dysfunction, and rightly so: This Congress could become the least effective one in decades. Partisan divides are keeping much-needed solutions to immigration, education reform, and deficit reduction out of reach. So it's not surprising that state and local leaders across the country are bypassing Washington and charting their own course for action.

If Congress can't do the job, we can turn the corner on such challenges as lack of access to quality early childhood education, generational poverty, and restoration of aging infrastructure by taking a look at what's happening in places like Tulsa, New York City, and Milwaukee, where mayors and state legislators are collaborating with philanthropic and nonprofit organizations to develop innovative programs that are achieving real results on the ground.

In Tulsa, philanthropic leaders saw powerful evidence that early childhood education could help eliminate the achievement gap between rich and poor students; children who attended an early childhood education program were 29 percent more likely to graduate from high school than their peers. But good preschool programs were rare in the city, so in 2006, the George Kaiser Family Foundation established the first Tulsa Educare center to provide high-quality early childhood education to low-income students, and the State of Oklahoma contributed another \$10 million to improve pre-K education for low-income students. With evidence that students who spend 3-5 years in an Educare program are significantly better prepared for kindergarten than their peers, the George Kaiser Family Foundation has provided support to open additional Educare sites in recent years.

In New York City, Mayor Michael Bloomberg has used his foundation to take on the recalcitrant problem of poverty. Through the Center for Economic Opportunity (CEO), founded in 2006 to test innovative solutions to poverty challenges, the city has launched 64 anti-poverty programs, including Home Base, a homelessness prevention strategy that cut shelter applications nearly in half, reduced the number of days that families spent in shelters by 70 percent, and prevented 2,000 individuals from entering the system last year alone.

Of the original 64 CEO programs, 21 have already expanded beyond their initial scale and investment due to strong evidence of success, and three have been defunded after failing to significantly improve outcomes. With savings created from defunding these less effective programs, Bloomberg recently announced a pilot program to expand access to the Earned Income Tax Credit, which has been shown to increase employment and incomes by as much as 12 percent, keeping people off welfare and unemployment rolls. Through a four-year pilot, Bloomberg has committed resources to offer up to \$2,000 to participants earning up to \$26,500 per year. That's a 300 percent increase from the \$475 currently provided by the Federal Earned Income Tax Credit to single filers.

While too rarely seen, this kind of experimentation is a smart way to identify effective solutions. In the words of Center for Economic Opportunity Executive Director Kristin Morse, "It's time to build an evidence base to test whether even more low-income households can benefit from this critical resource."

Big cities and rural communities alike are facing the perfect storm: aging infrastructure, the threat of increasingly severe and frequent weather events, and tight budgets with little to no congressional action. To help cities invest in resilient infrastructure, the RE.invest Initiative brings together technical experts and aligns public resources with private investment – including \$3 million from the Rockefeller Foundation. A recent

report by the American Society of Civil Engineers gave the nation's infrastructure a D+ grade, showing many of the bridges, water systems, dams, and electric grids are in need of modernization. Recognizing the need to build stronger communities, eight cities, including Milwaukee, El Paso, and Honolulu, are partnering with the Re.Invest Initiative to create more resilient infrastructure and build comprehensive city plans. While city action plans are not unique, the focus on data and evaluation in the Re.Invest Initiative is.

Communities are measuring improvements in energy use and cost savings from increased efficiency in water treatment plants, tracking community engagement and transparency of public-private partnership structures, and monitoring on-the-ground indicators to reduce the impact of climate change. The lessons learned from these pilot cities can help other communities build their own integrated infrastructure plans and help the nation's infrastructure earn a passing grade.

The common thread running through these partnerships is a rigor that is frequently lacking in Washington. Far too often, government does not use evidence to invest in what works, to improve programs that could be more effective, or to cut what isn't working. Smart communities around the country are pointing the way. It's time for Washington to follow their lead.

*Melody Barnes and John Bridgeland were former directors of the White House Domestic Policy Council under President Barack Obama and George W. Bush, respectively. Both serve on the advisory board of Results for America, an initiative of America Achieves.*