

CASE
STUDY

King County, Washington Applies an Equity Lens to Design More Accessible, Collaborative, and Outcomes-Focused Contracting Processes



THE CHALLENGE: In 2014, King County, Washington began to re-evaluate its approach to delivering health and human services for kids and families in order to achieve its strategic goals for enhancing equity, health, and wellbeing outcomes among county residents. The County sought a game-changing approach using data and evidence to address geographic and racial disparities in the county and improve outcomes for all residents.

THE APPROACH: King County created the [Best Starts for Kids](#) initiative, which, among other things, introduced an entirely new way for the government to structure contracts and do business with human services providers. The County made their contracting process more accessible to community-based organizations that work with underserved residents. New contracting practices also promoted outcomes-focused, preventive, and early intervention services based on rigorous evidence of impact, while simultaneously allowing the County to test and build evidence for innovative and community-based approaches.

THE RESULTS: King County has achieved a more accessible, collaborative, and outcomes-focused contracting process. Preliminary results show that the County has been able to engage more community-based organizations in applying for Best Starts for Kids funding. Preliminary results from one of Best Starts for Kids' request for proposals (RFPs) show that 124 organizations have accessed the technical assistance resources, such as data analytics support and, of those, 52% had never applied for King County funding before and 33% had never applied for any grant before.¹ King County has shifted toward funding more promotion, prevention, and early intervention services through contracts across their health and human services departments. The County has also enhanced the use of data and evaluation among contracted human services providers.

RESULTS

FOR AMERICA

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INTRODUCTION

In 2014, King County, Washington began to re-evaluate its approach to delivering health and human services for kids and families to better reflect and serve its increasingly diverse and historically underrepresented residents. The County wanted to develop a game changer—a radically better way to both achieve its [strategic goals](#) for enhancing equity, health, and wellbeing outcomes among residents and use data and evidence to drive positive outcomes for county residents. The County recognized that a significant portion of health-related government services were delivered by human services providers who are contracted by the County to serve residents. Yet the government's approach to contracting ran counter to their strategic goals. Most government-funded services were focused on crisis intervention rather than prevention; funding was rarely awarded to smaller community-based organizations who typically serve historically underrepresented residents; and there were many gaps in understanding which services worked best for which resident population.

In 2015, King County residents passed the [Best Starts for Kids](#) levy ([Ordinance 18088](#)), which generates an average of \$65 million per year in new funding for County services. Best Starts for Kids is an outcomes-focused health and equity initiative grounded in early childhood and youth development research. It is a joint effort of King County's Department of Public Health and the Department of Community and Human Services. The development of the research- and equity-based approach of the Best Starts for Kids initiative was spearheaded by [Carrie S. Cihak](#), King County Chief of Policy and Results for America Local Government Fellow.

As an entirely new investment, Best Starts for Kids allowed the County to build its equity-



KING COUNTY FACTS

Total Population: 2.1 million people
(about one-third of people live in Seattle)

Poverty and Near-Poverty Rate: 24%

**Poverty and Near-Poverty Rate
by Neighborhood:**

Ranges from 6% to 46%

**County Residents Who Speak A Language
Other Than English At Home:** 26%

NOTE: POVERTY AND NEAR-POVERTY INDICATE HOUSEHOLDS WITH INCOME LESS THAN 200% OF THE FEDERAL POVERTY LEVEL
SOURCES: KING COUNTY REGIONAL PLANNING AND KING COUNTY COMMUNITY HEALTH INDICATORS, ACCESSED JULY 2018

driven approach into the initiative from the ground up and led to major shifts in the King County contracting process. King County's new contracting practices support services for historically underserved communities by increasing provider diversity and ensuring the County contracts with community-based organizations that are led by and reflect the communities they serve. Changes in contracting were designed based on consistent feedback King County received from the community while developing the Best Starts for Kids initiative. New contracting practices promote outcomes-focused, preventive, and early intervention services based on rigorous evidence of impact, while simultaneously allowing the county to test innovative and community-based approaches.

THE CHALLENGE

While Seattle represents about one-third of King County's population, the County also includes a large rural area and a growing suburban population characterized by increasing diversity as well as pockets of deep poverty and isolation. In 2010, under the direction of County Executive Dow Constantine, King County elevated the building of equity and opportunity for all residents as a key governing priority and integrated a focus on equity throughout their [strategic plan](#). However, it was not immediately clear to county staff how they could have the greatest impact in achieving King County's equity goals.

At the same time, leadership of key county departments recognized the need for a more intentional focus on achieving the government's desired health and human services strategic goals while addressing geographic and racial disparities in the County. County leaders convened a team of experts to review the latest research on brain development and prevention-oriented services, which led them to a focus on the early days and years of a child's life as a

“ *Best Starts for Kids is a promise I made to the people of King County: To invest in proven strategies that put more children and young people on a path toward lifelong success. Together with our partners, we are now delivering results that promote healthier, better-connected children, families, and communities.* ”

— **DOW CONSTANTINE**
King County Executive

critical factor shaping life outcomes. At the same time, a review of existing funding and services revealed that King County primarily invested in much-needed but late-stage crisis intervention services, with relatively little focus on promotion, prevention, or early intervention.



King County Executive Dow Constantine speaking with residents at the Seattle Children's PlayGarden.

THE CHALLENGE (CONTINUED)

In addition, analysis of contracting processes revealed that the lion's share of the County's contracts were awarded to larger, more established organizations who often have resources and staff dedicated to writing grant proposals. Meanwhile, County funding remained largely out of reach for smaller, community-based organizations who typically serve and work with some of the most underserved populations. As a result, the County's network of funded human services providers did not adequately represent the expertise and experience of the region's smaller, community-based organizations.

With the dual goals of prevention and equity in mind, the County turned their focus to how the role of contracting could impact the health and wellbeing of county residents.

THE APPROACH

In 2015, King County determined that they needed to shift the focus of their health and human services to promotion, prevention, and early intervention in order to address deep inequities in the region and improve the health and wellbeing outcomes for all residents. The County wanted to create a comprehensive continuum of services targeting early childhood and youth development that would respond to the different needs of communities in the region. They also recognized a need for greater investment in community-based organizations that both serve and reflect many of the county's residents who have faced underrepresentation and many other disadvantages. To address these inequities, King County designed and placed the Best Starts for Kids levy ([Ordinance 18088](#)) on the November 2015 ballot. The voters approved the levy, which now generates an average of

\$65 million per year in new funding to invest in the health and wellbeing of all King County residents.

From the beginning, Best Starts for Kids engaged a diverse range of residents and health and human services providers in guiding Best Starts for Kids' values, focus, and approach to change to create the initiative's [implementation plan](#). The County also established a community-oriented [Children and Youth Advisory Board](#) to ensure that Best Starts for Kids responds to community-prioritized needs.

King County also developed Best Starts for Kids' [comprehensive data and evaluation plan](#), which is used as a learning agenda guiding all of their work. The County sought to fund a continuum of services, including established programs with a strong evidence base; evidence-informed programs that are still building their base of evidence; and community-designed, innovative programs and practices. County staff co-develops evaluations with community-based organizations in a collaborative process to build capacity and knowledge of what works to improve outcomes for County residents.

In order to achieve their dual equity and prevention goals and in response to the feedback received through stakeholder engagement, King County redesigned how they structured their contracts and fundamentally changed the way that they work with government-funded service providers.

Their approach embeds an equity lens throughout all stages of contracting and provides a robust example of the five contracting recommendations outlined in [Results for America's What Works Toolkit: A State and Local Government Policymaker's Guide to Improving Human Services Contracting and Outcomes](#).

THE APPROACH (CONTINUED)

What follows are examples of how the Best Starts for Kids initiative puts into practice the five recommendations of the *What Works Toolkit: A State and Local Government Policymaker's Guide to Improving Human Services Contracting and Outcomes*.

Recommendation #1: Gather Feedback and Focus on Outcomes

Government agencies should engage human services providers, service recipients, and community groups to gather feedback, define desired objectives, and establish outcome goals for each key contract.

- In order to create the initiative's [implementation plan](#), King County conducted broad outreach into existing service provider networks to facilitate community conversations around Best Starts for Kids and the initiative's priorities, outcomes, and goals. Between July and December 2015, King County engaged over 1,000 residents in community gatherings, surveys, focus groups, and interviews. At larger community gatherings they used the [Community Café](#) model in an effort to strengthen partnerships with parents and communities. In April

and May 2016, the County returned to the community for additional feedback on the developing priorities, strategies, and implementation approaches.

- Best Starts for Kids uses a [results-based accountability approach](#) to evaluate whether and how the initiative is improving the quality of life in King County neighborhoods. Designed to build trust between the community, providers, and the County, the process begins by identifying the shared results that are desired and then works backward, step-by-step, to the actions needed to achieve a desired result.²

Recommendation #2: Break Down Government Funding Silos

Government agencies should allow for funding flexibility to permit human services providers to align programs and focus on holistic outcomes for the target populations.

- The \$65 million annually generated from the Best Starts for Kids levy is more flexible than the state and federal funding King County receives, which generally includes strict guidance on allowable uses. This flexible local funding allows the County to fill in gaps in promotion, prevention, and early intervention services and prioritize additional needs of residents.

HOW KING COUNTY ADDS FLEXIBILITY TO CONTRACTS:

County program managers have flexibility to adjust contracts based on the unique needs of an organization and the clients it serves. To make contracts more flexible, County program managers can:

- Approve indirect expenses that go beyond 10% of the direct funding award;
- Reduce the amount of insurance organizations are required to maintain based on the level of risk;
- Establish fixed, performance-based payment schedules so organizations are paid in more frequent intervals;
- Use a streamlined letter agreement process to rapidly award small grants with fewer terms and conditions; and
- Give awardees the option to request start-up funds up to 25% of the first year award amount – an option that is particularly beneficial to small community-based organizations facing cash flow challenges.

THE APPROACH (CONTINUED)

- The King County Council established a required 1% minimum funding set-aside for technical assistance and capacity building for service providers. The availability of [free technical assistance](#) to break down barriers to applying for government contracts has had a positive influence on community-based organizations beyond their involvement in Best Starts for Kids, and recipients report increased confidence in applying for other funding opportunities.
- Best Starts for Kids adds flexibility to its contracts. For example, County program managers have flexibility to approve indirect expenses that go beyond 10% of the direct funding award.
- Contract negotiation is approached as a process of partnership and dialogue in which government finance and contract monitoring staff work together with County program managers and service provider staff to ensure the needs of the community are being met.

Recommendation #3: Issue Clear Requests for Proposals Focused on Outcomes and Evidence

Government agencies should issue requests for proposals (RFPs) with clear outcomes and measures that meet validated community needs and preference evidence-based solutions.

- At the application phase, all providers have access to the same extensive collection of local data, which is linked to every RFP and is accessible on the Best Starts for Kids [website](#). This data helps establish a common baseline from which to measure progress and is used by service providers to develop their grant proposals.
- In King County, clear outcomes and measures are jointly developed and finalized as part of the contract negotiation process, rather than pre-determined in the RFP. The type of performance data required is directly related

to the desired outcomes and is agreed upon on an organization-by-organization basis during contract development between the County program manager and contracting organization. In some instances, there is planning time built into the contract scope of work. This allows more time for key decisions to be made about performance metrics and data sharing.

- King County funds a continuum of services, from innovative, community-designed programs to evidence-informed and evidence-based programs. For example, for home-based services, the County created a separate funding pool for evidence-based programs so that valuable evidence-building practices and community-based programs that have not yet been rigorously evaluated also have an opportunity to serve residents and undergo an evaluation of impact.

Recommendation #4: Fund Outcomes and Build Evidence

Government agencies should issue clear contracts that pay for outcomes, not outputs or process steps, while incentivizing providers to build and use evidence.

- Gradually, King County made significant changes, shifting a large percentage of their Best Starts for Kids' contracts from fixed-price- or cost-reimbursement- to performance-based contracts. This changes the focus from paying for quantity to paying for quality.
- King County also spent a lot of time reflecting upon and redesigning their RFP structure and processes—asking questions such as, is this a requirement or a practice, and is there a simpler way to ask this? As a result, Best Starts for Kids' [RFP applications](#) have significantly less bureaucratic language, making them more accessible to a broader audience.
- Each investment area is paired with an evaluator to determine performance measures, which is especially valuable for investment areas where there is not yet a lot of evidence.

THE APPROACH (CONTINUED)

Recommendation #5: Create Feedback Loops

Government agencies should use frequent data gathering and regular communication with providers to monitor implementation, identify progress, provide timely feedback, and make necessary adjustments to ensure contracts meet their outcome goals.

- The County actively monitors contracts on a regular basis, typically through monthly check-in calls and quarterly reports. In the event service providers are not achieving performance metrics mutually created with the County, staff work with the provider to identify opportunities for improvement. The focus is on working in partnership so that the investment and service providers can be successful.
- To track progress and impact, King County uses baseline [survey data](#) and creates data dashboards. Regular on-site meetings are held and providers are required to participate in evaluation to ensure they are meeting outcome goals. The County is currently exploring a client-level database to deepen the understanding of the impact of services.
- The County sets aside funding to help community-based organizations build their capacity to conduct evaluations and use data throughout their work.

The contracting changes have created internal shifts in the two primary departments responsible for Best Starts for Kids: Public Health – Seattle & King County and the Department of Community and Human Services. Although the two departments have overlapping goals and serve many of the same populations, historically their work has been siloed. As roles shifted and work became more collaborative under Best Starts for Kids, the two departments had to learn from each other's strengths and align their goals and processes.

“Through Best Starts for Kids, we have demonstrated that innovative community and equity-driven approaches can go hand-in-hand with data- and evidence-driven approaches. We are not only building a focus on equity and evidence within County government, but also with our community partners.”

— **CARRIE S. CIHAK**
King County
Chief of Policy

To encourage collaboration, King County Public Health hosts monthly interdepartmental meetings among County program managers, the finance team, and the administration team to provide updates on the RFP progress, finance and contracting changes, and to answer questions. The departments created an internal performance management and evaluation advisory group, as well as a cross-departmental contracting support group. These opportunities for conversation prevent work from becoming siloed and encourage frequent communication across departments and programs.



King County residents from the Somali community discuss Best Starts for Kids Health Survey data at a Community Café Data Dive.

TIPS FOR REPLICATION

- **Flexible Funding is a Game Changer:** The flexibility of Best Starts for Kids funding, in contrast with federal and state funding, has allowed King County to fund a continuum of services that includes both community-designed programs and evidence-based and evidence-informed models. Best Starts for Kids recognizes that existing evidence-based models may not be the best interventions for all communities, and they place equal value on innovative, community-based programs, providing them the support they need to evaluate their impact and build a base of evidence for new approaches. The flexibility to fund innovative, community-based programs and evaluate their impact has been key to diversifying King County's contract recipients while continuing to value evidence-based services.
- **Creating a Data and Evaluation Plan Drives Learning:** The Best Starts for Kids comprehensive data and evaluation plan

acts as a learning agenda for the entire initiative. The plan identifies investment areas for in-depth assessments of impact and performance to help address the many gaps in understanding which services work best for which resident populations. The plan guides the development of performance measures, promotes the collection and sharing of high quality data, and sets priorities for the allocation of evaluation resources.

- **Free Technical Assistance Levels the Playing Field:** Technical assistance helps organizations that have never applied for government funding to navigate the RFP process. King County accomplished this by mandating that at least 1% of Best Starts for Kids funding be set aside for technical assistance and capacity building. Potential applicants receive support with their program description, budget development, and overall editing. Awarded organizations also receive support with strategic planning and capacity building.

TIPS FOR REPLICATION (CONTINUED)

- **Innovative Programs Can Lead to Staffing Challenges:** Funding new and smaller organizations requires a different type of contract monitoring process because more support is needed. In King County, this is causing a culture shift—going from audits and invoices to relationship and capacity building. Contract loads also needed to be adjusted and King County has hired 30–40 new staff members to support the work. The hiring process has also changed to place a greater emphasis on equity and social justice values, a shift that is integral to the success of the County's new contracting practices.
- **Centralized Communication is Key:** A central location for communication is essential for keeping the community and providers

up-to-date. [The Best Starts for Kids blog](#) hosts webinars, blog posts about impacted residents, funding announcements, and more. King County also maintains an [awards database](#) listing funding recipients, which was created in response to community input and promotes transparency.

- **Community Engagement Builds Trust:** Community voices must be consistently included in decision-making. Best Starts for Kids engages with residents and service providers to shape the values and goals of the initiative, and they include youth and community members on RFP review panels whenever feasible. The evaluation team holds "[Data Dives](#)"—conversations with the community in which residents review survey data and interpret the findings through their cultural lenses and unique perspectives.

HOW KING COUNTY IS INCREASING DIVERSITY AMONG SERVICE PROVIDERS TO ACHIEVE EQUITY GOALS

One major barrier to achieving King County's goals for enhancing equity among residents was reaching a greater diversity of service providers. King County recognized that the evidence-based programs in their portfolio of funded services have historically been developed by those with access to resources and privilege.

To help address this disparity, the county created the Community Partnerships Manager Position. The Community Partnerships Manager works with the Best Starts for Kids communications team and uses innovative approaches to get the word out about funding opportunities to providers who have not previously or consistently received government contracts. The County is intentional about directing its communication efforts toward smaller

community-based organizations. It works with ethnic media and newspapers, and it uses the [Best Starts for Kids blog](#) as the central location for disseminating all information.

The County holds information sessions about RFP opportunities in community-based locations such as libraries and community centers and posts informational webinars on their website. The County also requires every panelist in the RFP review process to participate in a 3-hour Bias Awareness Workshop. These trainings allow reviewers to recognize their own implicit biases and the ways implicit biases can affect the application review process. They help reviewers recognize organizational strengths including strong connections to the community and experience serving diverse, underrepresented populations.

THE RESULTS

It is too early in the Best Starts for Kids initiative to have measurable outcome results, but process improvements have already been demonstrated. Process improvements include:

- **Diversifying Applicants and Awardees:**

King County has made promising efforts to enhance equity throughout the Best Starts for Kids initiative and diversify grant awardees, with an emphasis on leveling the playing field for smaller organizations. Preliminary results from one of Best Starts for Kids' request for proposals (RFPs) show that 124 organizations have accessed the technical assistance resources, such as data analytics support and, of those, 52% had never applied for King County funding before and 33% had never applied for any grant before.³

- **Program Focus Changes:** King County has shifted toward funding more promotion, prevention, and early intervention services through contracts across their health and human services departments, to balance the late-stage crisis intervention services the County had historically provided.

- **Streamlined Contracting Process:** By re-evaluating the steps in the contracting process, Best Starts for Kids has created a space for innovative thinking and approaches for improvement. For example, King County is in the process of implementing an electronic grants management system, ZoomGrants, to help streamline the RFP processes for both applicants and County program managers.

- **RFP Structure Changes:** Several changes were made to the Best Starts for Kids RFP



King County residents in Powell Barnett Park in Seattle's Central District.

THE RESULTS (CONTINUED)

template to make it easier for applicants to navigate. These changes include:

1. Moving the procurement terms and the contract boilerplate to the end of some RFPs and leading with the programmatic information that an applicant may find more relevant;
 2. Adding a table of contents to the cover page so that applicants can easily jump to particular sections during their review of the RFP;
 3. Adding a checklist for applicants to ensure that no required documents are omitted;
 4. Adopting a communications color scheme to give all BSK RFPs the same look and feel; and
 5. Consciously using clear, accessible language in the RFP to avoid using strategy-specific jargon that is not accessible to the general public.
- **RFP Review Changes:** The review panel process for an RFP now includes County staff and County Council staff as well as community members and youth, when feasible. All reviewers must participate in a bias awareness workshop prior to reviewing RFPs. The goal is to create a culture change that will have an impact well beyond the review process.
 - **Enhanced Use of Data and Evaluation in Contracting:** The County has also enhanced the use of data and evaluation among staff and contracted human services providers. The County provides opportunities for innovative, community-based programs and evidence-informed programs to be evaluated, especially in investment areas where there is not a lot of evidence. Human services providers also have more opportunities to learn about, provide

feedback on and build the capacity to use County data.

- **Cultural Shifts at the County:** At a larger county government level, a cultural shift is underway as other departments become engaged in and learn about the Best Starts for Kids initiative. For example, the use of results-based accountability models, new ways of community engagement, and new contracting models have proliferated in other King County departments.

Cities and counties across the country can learn from King County's approach to integrating equity, prevention, and evaluation into its contracting processes in order to improve the wellbeing of residents.



Mother and daughter at a Best Starts for Kids photo booth at a community event in Seattle's Rainier Beach neighborhood.

ABOUT RESULTS FOR AMERICA'S LOCAL GOVERNMENT FELLOWSHIP PROGRAM

Results for America's Local Government Fellows program was founded in September 2014 to provide an advanced group of local government leaders in diverse and influential cities and counties across the country the knowledge and support to implement strategies that consistently use data and evidence to drive policy and budget decisions on major policy challenges.

With the support and guidance of Results for America, the Local Government Fellows lead their governments toward advanced stages of data-driven and evidence-based policymaking in order to address major policy challenges in their communities. The **16 cities and counties** represented in the Fellowship collectively

represent more than **28 million** people and **\$148 billion** in local government spending.

RFA engages its Local Government Fellows in:

- Defining short- and long-term policy goals;
- Developing research partnerships with academics;
- Sharing best practices and demonstration projects;
- Problem solving among peers;
- Receiving individual feedback and coaching; and
- Participating in a national network and peer cohort.

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- Patty Hayes, Director, Public Health – Seattle & King County
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ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- Read about recent initiatives and successes on the Best Starts for Kids blog: <https://beststartsblog.com>.
- Visit the [King County indicators](https://www.kingcounty.gov/depts/community-human-services/initiatives/best-starts-for-kids/dashboards.aspx) website to discover the data that drives the population-level outcomes that Best Starts for Kids aims to impact: <https://www.kingcounty.gov/depts/community-human-services/initiatives/best-starts-for-kids/dashboards.aspx>.
- Read about the Community Café model from this Best Starts for Kids blog post: <https://beststartsblog.com/2018/06/12/whats-a-data-dive/>.
- Learn more about Results for America's *What Works Toolkit: A State and Local Government Policymaker's Guide to Improving Human Services Contracting and Outcomes* and **Local Government Fellowship** at <http://results4america.org>.

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REFERENCES

- 1:** King County, Washington, Healthy & Safe Environments RFP process survey.
- 2:** Results-based accountability is a disciplined way of thinking and taking action that is used to improve the quality of life in neighborhoods. It begins by helping you to identify the results that are desired and works backward, step-by-step, to the actions necessary to achieve desired result. "Building Neighborhood Capacity Program," <https://www.cssp.org/community/neighborhood-investment/place-based-initiatives/body/BNCP-Toolkit-Results-Based-Accountability.pdf>.
- 3:** King County, Washington, Healthy & Safe Environments RFP process survey.

PHOTOS

- Cover Photo:** King County Parks
Page 3: Photographer, King County Staff
Page 8: Photographer, King County Staff
Page 10: Photographer, King County Staff
Page 11: Photographer, King County Staff

ABOUT THE INVEST IN WHAT WORKS POLICY SERIES

This report is part of Results for America's Invest in What Works Policy Series, which provides ideas and supporting research to policymakers to drive public funds toward evidence-based, results-driven solutions. Results for America is committed to improving outcomes for young people, their families, and communities by shifting public resources toward programs and practices that use evidence and data to improve quality and get better results.



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