



A Conversation with Paul Fleissner, Director of Olmsted County Department of Health, Housing, and Human Services and Future Services Institute Co-Founder

A CASE STUDY BY THE
BEECK CENTER FOR SOCIAL
IMPACT + INNOVATION

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By Chad Smith

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About the Beeck Center for Social Impact + Innovation

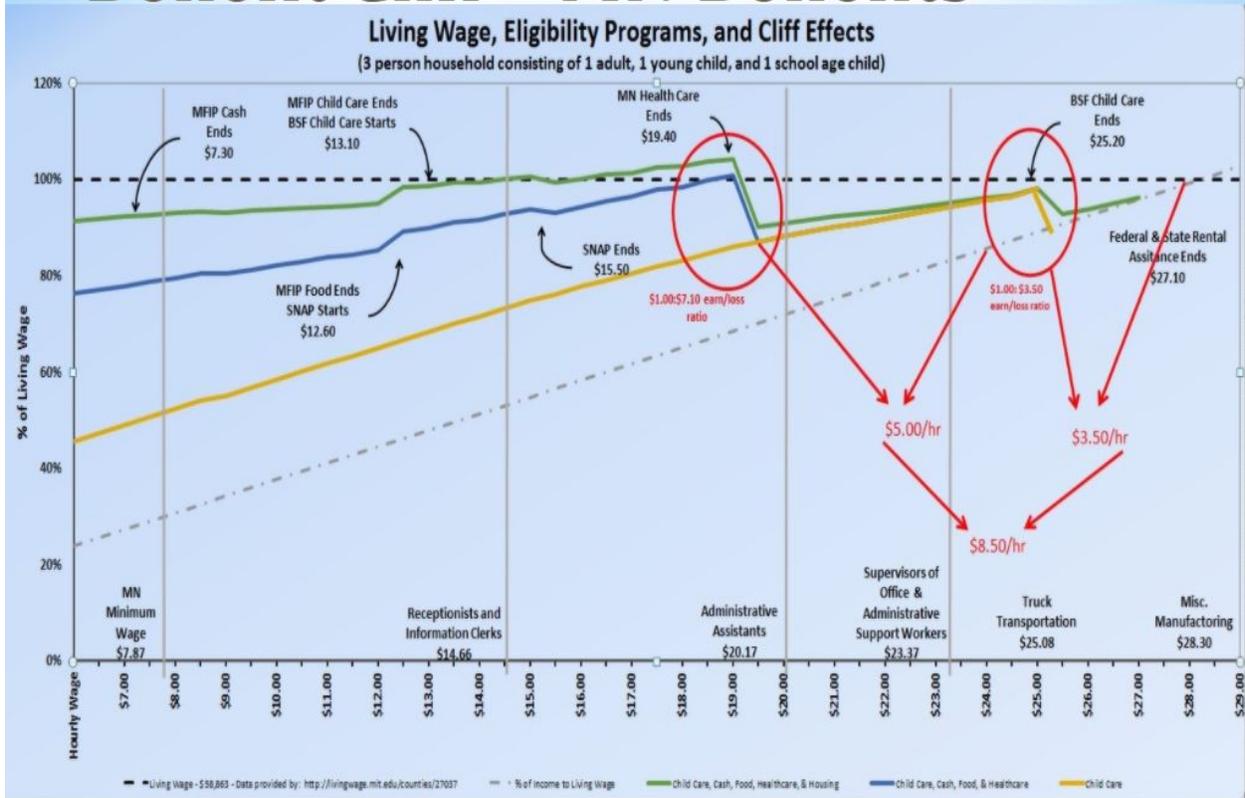
The Beeck Center is an experiential hub at Georgetown University that trains students and incubates scalable, leading-edge ideas for social change. We believe impact at scale requires the courage to think and behave differently. Our work centers on investing in outcomes for individuals and society. We equip future global leaders with the mindset to promote outcome-driven solutions, using tools such as data, design, and technology. We convene actors across the public, private, and civic sectors to advance new tools, frameworks, and approaches necessary to achieve these outcomes.

About this Case Study

This case study summarizes research by Data+Digital fellow Chad Smith from the Beeck Center's [Social Safety Net Benefits](#) project, portions of which are featured in the Beeck Center report, "[Technology, Data, and Design-Enabled Approaches for a More Responsive, Effective Social Safety Net.](#)"

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* Benefit Cliff – MN Benefits



Credit: "Pathways to Prosperity and Human Centered Design" by Paul Fleissner and Marti Fishbach of Dakota and Olmsted Counties

The following is the transcript of a discussion between Social Safety Net fellow [Chad Smith](#) and Olmsted County Department of Health, Housing, and Human Services Deputy County Administrator [Paul Fleissner](#). Some of the content has been edited for clarity and length.

The conversation focused on Olmsted County's experience undergoing technical assistance in evaluation, human centered design, community engagement to address [benefits cliffs](#) in their public programs. The images below are from the 2019 [Pathways to Prosperity and Human Centered Design](#) presentation by Paul Fleissner and Director Marti Fishbach from Dakota County, made available for counties also interested in pursuing human centered design; along with supporting departments in producing human centered program experiences, policies and new technologies, with considerations to commonly shared realities (e.g. staffing, budget, procurement). To that end, both strategic and direct service support was provided by University of Minnesota's [Future Services Institute](#); a Design Lab for local Health & Human Services departments, both counties

director served as co-founding team members.

At the end-product level, Olmsted County's human-centered transformation has led to their Public Health, Housing Authority, Correction, Social Services and Public Assistance all operating within one agency. For COVID response, Paul mentioned, "it's been huge to have an integrated organization as we had to develop alternative services, essential services, and stand up an incident command."

At the strategic level, Olmsted County's human-centered transformation has led to better partnering with the families they service through building practice models constructed around better engaging their families from the family's point of view. This translated into assessment to help Paul and his team monitor not only success of "where the families are going, but is the system helping that family get there. That's the first time I've seen an assessment that holds the system accountable too."

For other local Social Services agencies seeking similar transformations to human-centered design, consider the following building blocks below:

Success factors:

- Identify a singular goal or call-to-action that your organization is hoping to achieve with the support of user-centered training.
- Establish relationships with local universities that can contribute service evaluation and program support.
- Focus on evaluation methods that assess best practices for systems change, instead of relying exclusively on traditional methods of building scientific evidence, which can limit and exclude insightful findings.
- Commit to a team culture of understanding around how this new kind of partnership works (between a university, government agencies, and community).
- Be laser-focused on amplifying the voices of people who experience the system to learn whether the programs and services are doing what they intend to.

* Pathways to Prosperity and Human Centered Design

Paul Fleissner and Marti Fishbach
Dakota and Olmsted Counties

Credit: "Pathways to Prosperity and Human Centered Design"

Human-centered design is defined as a creative approach to problem-solving that starts with people and ends with innovative solutions that are tailor-made to suit their needs.¹ Although initially popularized in the world of technology, the approach is making its way into the health care and social service sectors. Community-based integrated primary and preventive health care provider, [The Ravenswood Family Health Center](#) (CCI), for example, uses human-centered design to strengthen program delivery to underserved communities through using human-centered design's open-ended interviewing, brainstorming, observations, shadowing, and journey mapping exercises to establish a better understanding of clients experiences, perspectives and specific needs.²

¹ (2018) [IDEO's human centered design process: How to make things people love](#), User Testing

² Spencer, A., Nuamah, A., (2019), [Co-Developing Solutions with the Community: The Power of Human-Centered Design](#), Center for Health Care Strategies

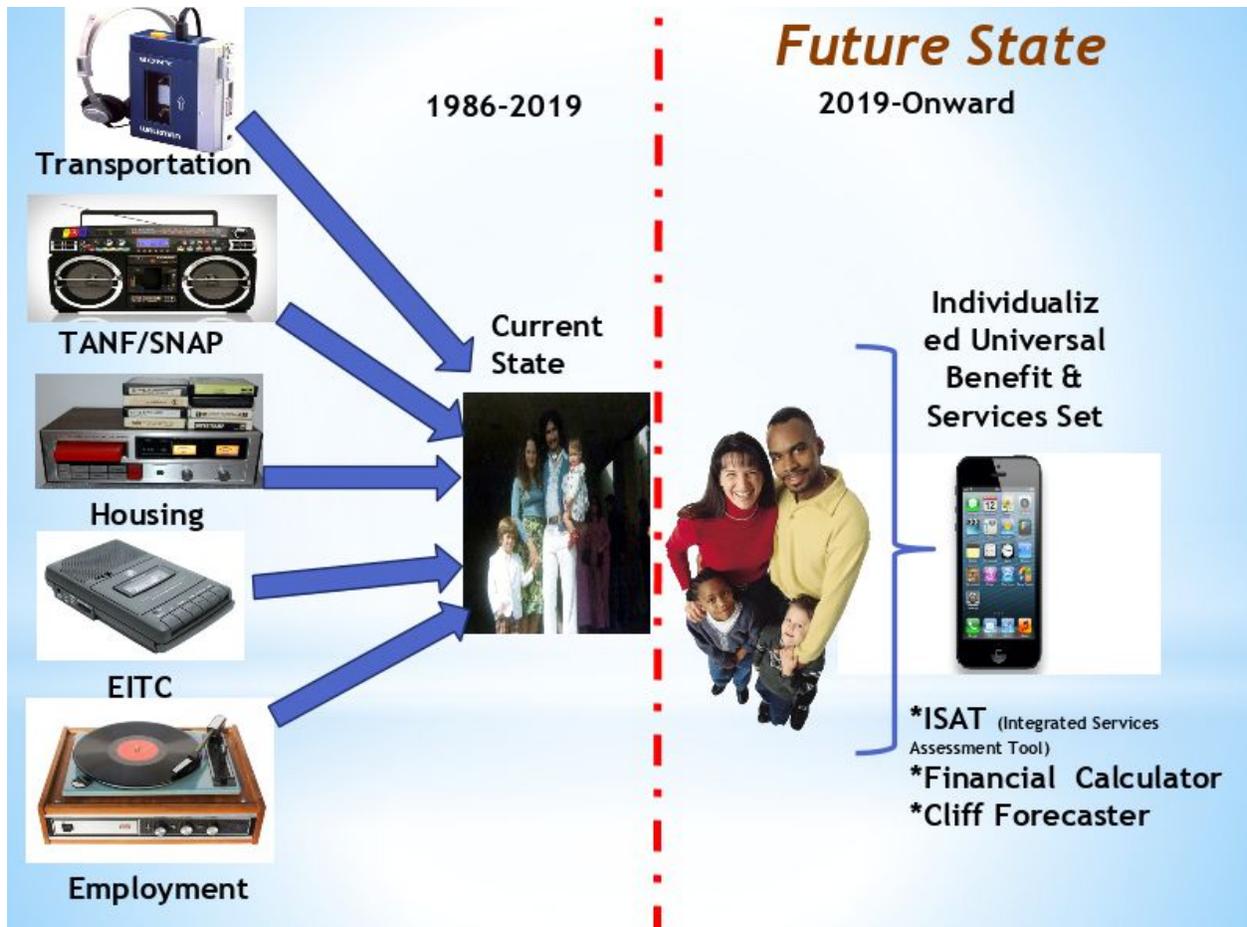
Chad Smith (Beeck Center): What is the University of Minnesota's Future Services Institute?

Paul Fleissner (Olmsted County Department of Health, Housing, and Human Service): The Humphrey School of Public Affairs created the Minnesota Future Services Institute in partnership with Dakota and Olmsted County to create a partnership opportunity that involved the University of Minnesota being able to provide technical assistance around things like evaluation, human-centered design, and community engagement. We also in partnership with them built the concept of how do we get people trained as leaders in the human services system around equity and integrated services.

They built a certificate program as part of the Future Service Institute that can also count towards your master's in public administration. They also discounted their tuition by a percentage for early counties and the Department of Human Services of Minnesota to get people into the program and make it more affordable. I've had several people go through the program. It's been transformational for them as leaders. We send a cohort through every year, along with a couple of other counties in the state of Minnesota. The third wing is a design lab where if you have an idea you want to vet, they can host that design lab and walk you through it. They have some other underlying technical assistance skills with things like art of hosting and some other tools they use that have really been helpful to us.

Chad Smith: You said art of hosting. What is that?

Paul Fleissner: It's a way to facilitate conversations. I'm no expert on it. It's a method they use and they teach.



Credit: "Pathways to Prosperity and Human Centered Design"

Chad Smith: How did your office get involved with the University of Minnesota's Future Services Institute?

Paul Fleissner: We had worked with the Humphrey School of Public Affairs before and had some good experiences in particular with one of their professors, Jody Sanford. We had struggled a little bit with other parts of the U of M really engaging us in the way we thought we needed to to build a partnership that would move our work forward. Jody was very interested. She had skills across human services, public health. She's a big champion of equity. She invited us to be part of a design lab to create the Future Services Institute. For example, myself and one of my senior leaders, along with two people from Dakota County sat down with folks from the Humphrey School of Public Affairs and we envisioned what this would be, but I give credit to Jody and her team for making it what it needed to be.

Chad Smith: Can you talk about some of the things that you and your team did before you had the conversation with Jody and her team?



Credit Future Services Institute at University of Minnesota

“The Humphrey School of Public Affairs created the Minnesota Future Services Institute in partnership with Dakota and Olmsted County. The program provides technical assistance around things like evaluation, human-centered design, and community engagement to get people trained as leaders in the human services system around equity and integrated services”. Paul Fleissner is also one of the co-founders of [Future Services Institute](#) at the University of Minnesota’s Humphrey School of Public Affairs

Paul Fleissner: Yeah. We really struggled in several areas. One, evaluation. We have some evaluators on our staff, but when you want to do a big outside evaluation, having that really good partner... There are a few in Minnesota, but it's not like we're on the East coast where there's one on every corner. There just weren't a lot of resources that would partner with counties around what they did well, what they needed to improve and those sorts of things. Given in Minnesota, our intersection with the nonprofits and the County may seem like a perfect fit for us, as we thought about how we move forward. Also, prior to working with them there wasn't a place to go to where you do these design lab things and create new solutions to system problems that we have. There really wasn't in my mind a really effective, thoughtful process for that or place or partner.

Chad Smith: You mentioned that you all were looking for evaluators to help you look at your programs, which brought you also to eventually working with the University of Minnesota, but were there other initiatives? A great example is I think

California. Their governor has really pushed whole person care. Were there other things driving that push towards human-centered design or really more evaluation driven?

Paul Fleissner: It was those things together. One of the first years I went to Leadership for a Networked World at Harvard, they showed us our data and how we hadn't moved the needle on poverty in 40 years. Then they showed us the disproportionality of families of color stuck in that system. That was a call to action. Then we were really looking for how do we get the tools in place, we didn't have them all in house, to transform a system?

Chad Smith: : That makes sense. When you went to the event at Harvard, had you all already started to merge your departments or was that after?

Paul Fleissner: That's a great question. That's insightful. This entity within Harvard called Leadership for a Network World started 10 or 11, maybe 11 or 12 years ago, bringing the folks together like I mentioned, city, county, state, human service agencies and health a lot of times, along with some nonprofits and some international folks doing that work, along with some industry partners, consultant kind of folks to see if they could create a secret sauce on how we transform the system. Some of us were in different places on the journey. We were invited because we were theoretically doing some creative work at the time, but nothing like what has happened since.



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Credit: Leadership for a Networked World at Harvard University

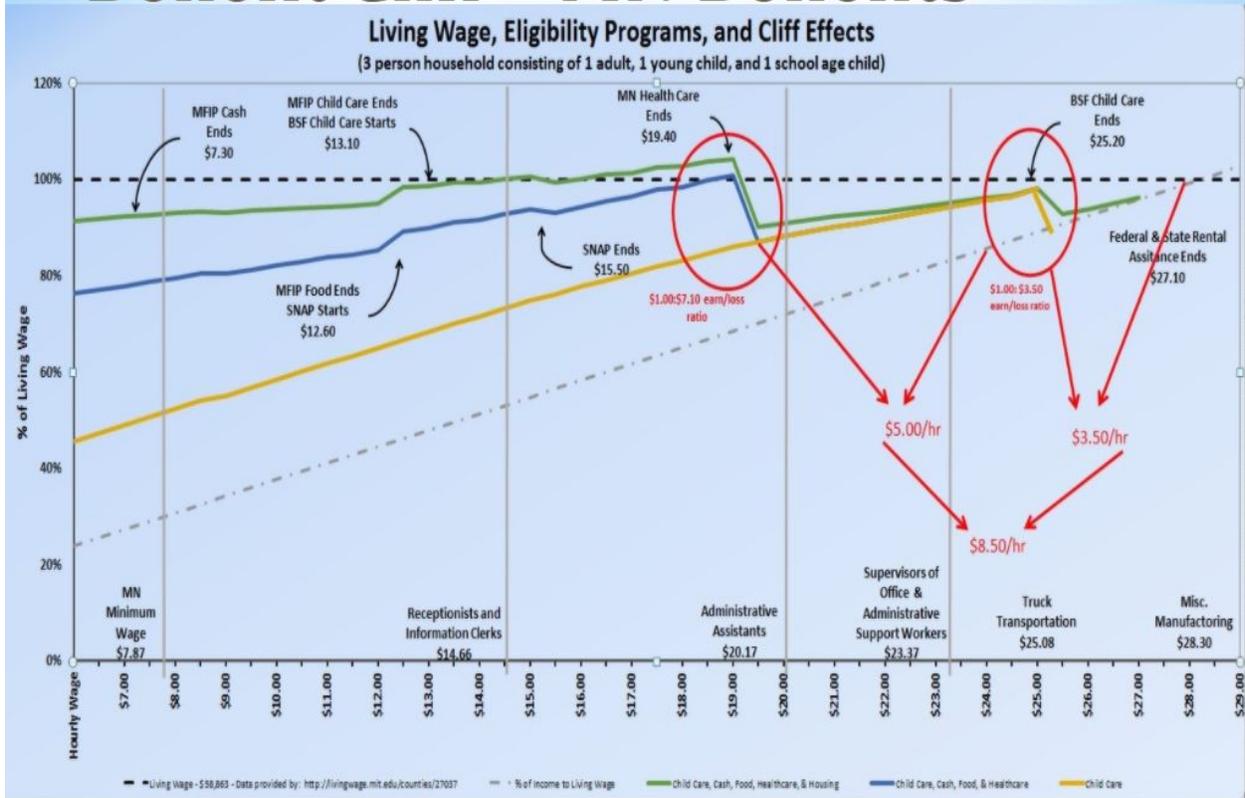
University-led training can help **identify a singular goal that the organization could build momentum around**. For Paul of Olmsted County, this was achieved by [Leadership for a Networked World at Harvard](#) showing Paul his department's data and how the department hadn't moved the needle on poverty in 40 years. Then they showed the disproportionality of families of color stuck in that system. "That was a call to action" Paul exclaimed. "Again, I want it on record. When I have that single mom with two kids, one in childcare, one in school and in Minnesota and in my County, when they hit 19 bucks an hour, they take the next buck and they try to improve their income, they start to lose benefits at a much higher rate than they earn income up to the point where for every dollar extra they're making, they're losing eight and a half in benefits. No one does that." The university's team then looked at how to get tools in place to fix discovered problems and map possible solutions.

Paul Fleissner: To answer your question, we already had some of our organization integrated, but since I went there 11 years ago, we've integrated public health along with our human services. Public health wasn't part of it before and the housing authority, which was really unique. I have corrections, social service, public assistance, all those things in one agency. I'll tell you responding to COVID, it's been huge to have an integrated organization as we had to develop alternative services, essential services, and stand up an incident command.

Chad Smith: Got it. I'll make sure to capture that part because I 100% agree on a lot of levels that integrated benefit systems are incredibly important right now. Just for the record, can we talk about the programs and solutions that you and your team have worked on in this kind of 11 year time span?

Paul Fleissner: Yeah. It's kind of two-fold. One, we were transforming our organization, then we were trying to transform the poverty system. We've built a strong culture around integration. I'll leave that on the side. At the same time, we wanted to blow up the poverty system and prove something else could work because as I said to you early in our talk before the recording, I believe we have a poverty prison. I compare our office where we have all our public assistance... It reminds me of the company store. We have a bunch of indentured servants that have to come for their food, their cash, their health care, child support, whatever it is. As I said, we all recognize that there's these fiscal cliffs out there, but why don't we remove them? Everybody knows they're there. Yet, we blame people for being in the system. Yet, we don't let them out.

* Benefit Cliff – MN Benefits



Credit: "Pathways to Prosperity and Human Centered Design"

Olmsted and Dakota Counties wanted to address the [benefits cliff](#) – when the working poor reach a point where a one-dollar increase in their hourly wage can result in a significant reduction in benefits. The outcome is that the added income will not make up for the loss of SNAP, Medicaid, EITC, TANF, subsidized housing, and other benefits designed to help people in or near poverty.³

Paul Fleissner: Again, I want it on record. When I have that single mom with two kids, one in childcare, one in school and in Minnesota and in my county, when they hit 19 bucks an hour, they take the next buck and they try to improve their income, they start to lose benefits at a much higher rate than they earn income up to the point where for every dollar extra they're making, they're losing eight and a half in benefits. No one does that. We always hear about the extraordinary effort when somebody gets out of the system. Well, maybe that happens once in a while, but why does our data look the same as it did as a nation 40 years ago? For us, the

³ Perez, P. (2018). [Examining, Understanding, and Mitigating the Benefits Cliff Effect](#), aha! Process Inc.

Future Services Institute, we may have had big dreams, but how do you get there?



Credit: "Pathways to Prosperity and Human Centered Design"

At the end-product level, the result of Olmsted County's human-centered transformation has led to Public Health, Housing Authority, Correction, Social Services and Public Assistance all operating within one agency. For COVID response, Paul mentioned, "it's been huge to have an integrated organization as we had to develop alternative services, essential services, and stand up an incident command."

Paul Fleissner: They helped us because we wanted to partner with the families we serve. They helped us build a practice model across the two counties. They helped us engage our families in building that practice model from their point of view. They helped us build the assessment that helps us monitor not only success of where the families are going, but is the system helping that family get there. That's the first time I've seen an assessment that holds the system accountable, too.

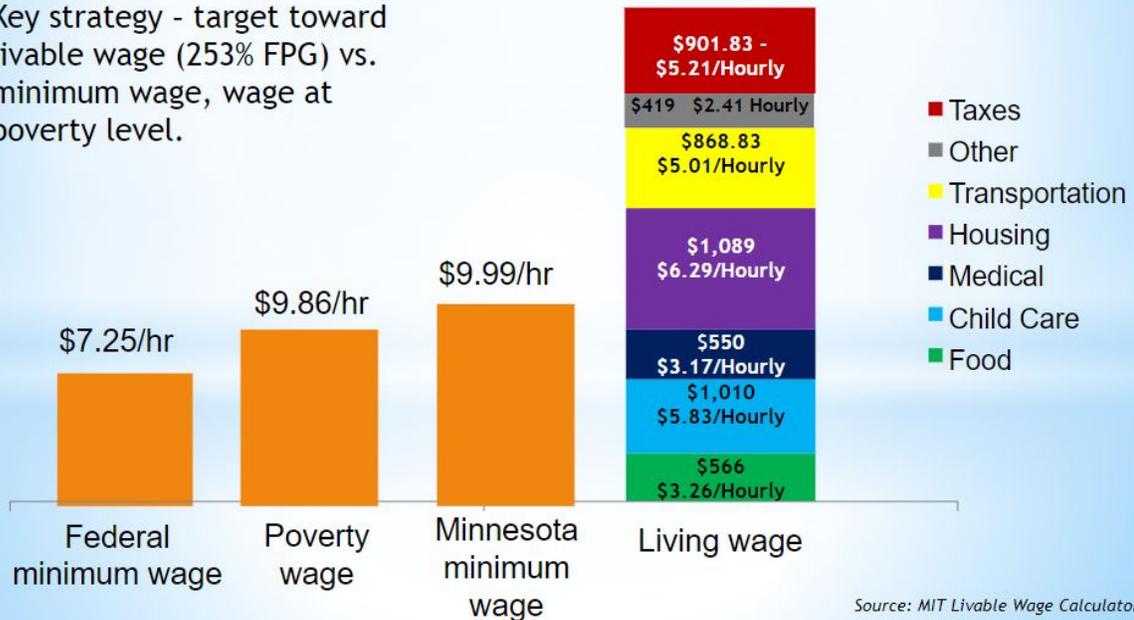
Chad Smith: You touched on the point around the things that the Future Service Institute does, like how they were able to come in and add value in certain areas. Were there any challenges you all faced working with an external group in that capacity?

Paul Fleissner: Yeah. We've hit bumps. I think, especially when you talk about universities and they're used to doing research, we don't do many full blown research studies in counties. We don't have the time or the resource. When you think about a whole random control trial kind of study, that's what they're used to. What evolved for us is actually more of an evaluation of our developmental approach to transforming a system rather than the outcomes. Well, that'll come later. There were some bumps there, I would say because academia is a little different than... We're very action oriented in service. They want to make sure all the things are in place so that you can obviously prove that whatever you're trying to suggest is either hitting the mark or not. There were some bumps there. In general, I think it's been an amazing partnership. I would encourage you in fact, to go to their website and take a look at it. They even have a whole bunch of videos of some things that we partnered on.

*Minimum wage is not living wage

Dakota County: 1- Adult, 2- Kids (1 child in child care)

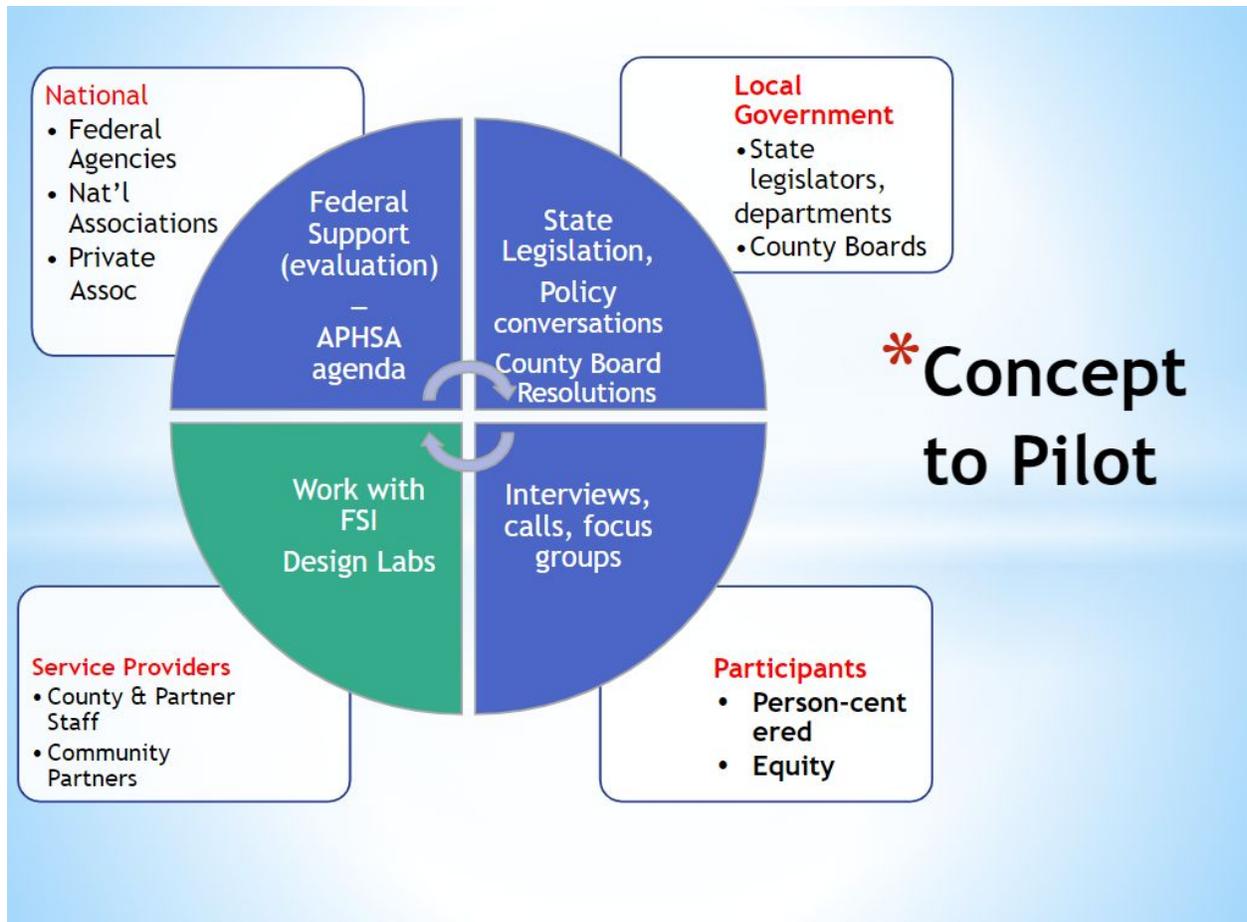
Key strategy - target toward livable wage (253% FPG) vs. minimum wage, wage at poverty level.



Credit: "Pathways to Prosperity and Human Centered Design"

Chad Smith: In terms of closing those focuses of being more action-oriented versus being more research-oriented, was there anything you all did to mend that gap, because I could imagine that's a challenge that social services departments may continue to face, particularly ones that may be doing things like user-centered policy design and working with the Brown universities of the world?

Paul Fleissner: Well, yeah. In fact, when I think about the call that you and I were going to have, I think we have to figure out a way in our modern world to take... Best practices aren't necessarily evidence-based practices. How do we accelerate change in our system? We cannot continue to be the government of old. It doesn't work. People need more immediate responses. We need to be more nimble. I think both of us have learned how do we transform in a way that makes us be able to not only articulate and document changes, but make them happen for people.



Credit: "Pathways to Prosperity and Human Centered Design"

At the strategic level, the result of Olmsted County’s human-centered transformation has led to better partnering with the families they service through building practice models constructed around better engaging their families from the family’s point of view. This translated into assessment to help Paul and his team monitor not only success of “where the families are going, but is the system helping that family get there. That’s the first time I’ve seen an assessment that holds the system accountable too.”

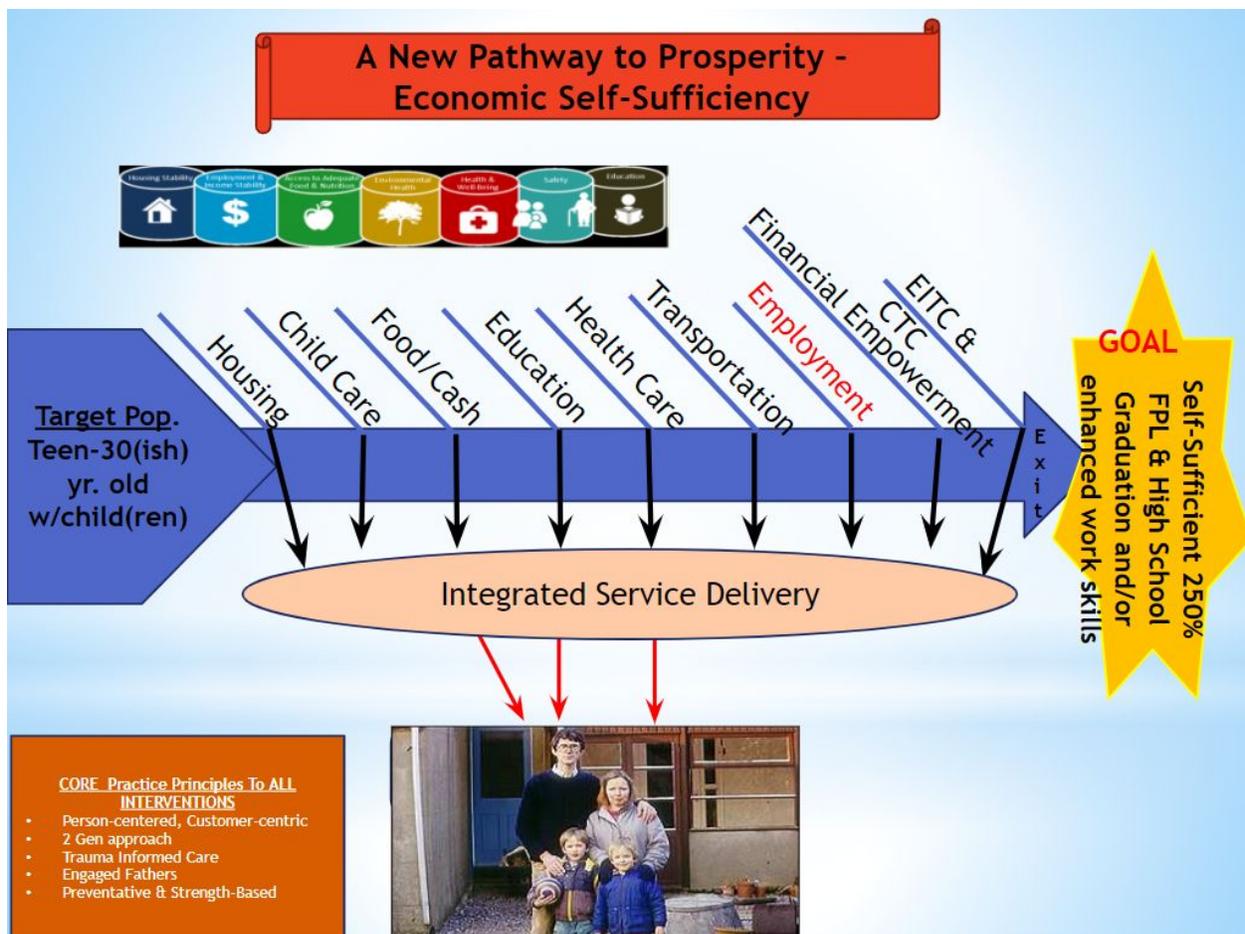
Chad Smith: Were there any service improvements? I know you talked about the integrated assessment, but was there any evidence that you all started to see as you worked more and more with the Future Services Institute?

Paul Fleissner: Well, I think the biggest one is raising the voice of people who experienced our system. While we had a desire, we quite honestly sucked at it. A lot of organizations talk about that, but doing it is really hard. Part of it is people don't

always trust the system. I understand why. When you come from a system with a bunch of disparities, why would you trust it? To me, the Future Services Institute was that bridge.

Chad Smith: That makes sense. Were there any culture, such as organization or policy changes your team needed to do to realize or sustain the Future Institute's work in your organization?

Paul Fleissner: Absolutely. Where do I start? You're not good at giving easy questions, are you? I think part of the challenge was when you think about a group of social workers and public health nurses and eligibility workers and stuff, they're not always used to another entity that is guiding a practice model, engaging in the community differently. A lot of our workers have been very receptive, but at times they just wanted to go run and do their social work and leave us behind, even though they saw the gaps in our system. I think we had to evolve our culture around how does this new kind of partnership work.



Credit: "Pathways to Prosperity and Human Centered Design"

When delivering piloted human-centered design programs, hire expertise in human-centered design technique, service design for creating experiences for both clients – service users and employees. Delivered exercises in designing, aligning, and optimizing an organization’s operations to better support clients’ experience journey helps in planning and organizing a department's resources (people, props, and processes) in order to (1) directly improve the employee’s experience, and (2) indirectly, the customer’s experience

Similar to Olmsted County, partner county Dakota County (MN) also responded to their lack of dedicated Service Design resources by partnering with Future Services Institute to conduct Service Design workshops focused on giving people living with disabilities more service and housing options to live in more independent living settings.

Paul Fleissner: Jin Ong, who is the director at FSI, has been just magical to work with. I don't know how else to describe it because she has weathered that stuff and helped us. She's adjusted as they have needed to. I think there's been give and take from the institutions, the University of Minnesota and us to make this work. In fact, we're gearing up for another contract with them. You mentioned earlier, the flexible benefits set has still been elusive for us. They're gearing us up to better define how that will work going forward. Anyway, they're wonderful partners, but we stubbed our toes.

Chad Smith: Are there any best practices you can share now after having gone through their process or gone through the process of working with this outside entity, and them transforming your organization?

Paul Fleissner: Well, it's funny. I didn't mention this at the beginning, but one of the things I've been jealous of... I have some colleagues on the East coast and they have amazing... This was one of my drivers. They have amazing university relationships that are not unlike what I've been describing. They're already there. I have a colleague in Pittsburgh who has amazing relationships with the University of Pittsburgh. We just have never had that. I don't exactly know how to say it as a best practice, other than I think any authentic relationship and a shared vision for what you're trying to accomplish and how you're trying to impact whatever you're working on... In our case, it's how do you reduce inequities? How do you reduce poverty? How do you engage the community authentically? Aligning those things to me are our best practice.