

How Rockford Changed Course to Tackle Veterans' Homelessness

Using Data to Diagnose and Remedy Complex Problems

Practitioner Guide

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Overview

A case study is a story about how a person or group of people faced and dealt with challenges or opportunities. It is based on desk research and interviews with key actors but does not provide analysis or conclusions. Written from the perspective of the protagonist(s), it is designed to raise questions and generate discussion about the issues they faced. Cases are meant to help participants develop analytic reasoning, listening, and judgment skills to strengthen their decision-making ability in other contexts.

A case-based conversation is a way to anchor a conceptual discussion to concrete examples. It can bring a case to life and allow participants to place themselves in the shoes of the case protagonist(s), while also allowing a variety of perspectives to surface. This guide is designed to help you lead a conversation about the case, "How Rockford Changed Course to Tackle Veterans' Homelessness."

Role of Facilitator

The facilitator leads the conversation with a clear beginning and end, ensures that everyone is heard, and keeps the group focused. The conversation can be broken into three distinct segments: exploring the case, applying the central questions of the case to your organization's challenges, and formulating takeaway lessons. Some facilitation tips and tricks to keep in mind are below.

BEFORE the discussion

Make sure everyone takes the time to read the case. Participants also have the option to fill out the attached worksheet to prepare themselves for the case discussion. If you choose to use the worksheet, make sure you bring enough printouts for all. When setting up the room, think about situating participants where they can see you and each other. Designate a notetaker as well as a place where you can take notes on a flipchart or white board. Plan for at least sixty to seventy-five minutes to discuss the case and takeaways and have a clock in the room and/or an assigned timekeeper. Mention that you may interrupt participants in the interest of progressing the conversation.

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DURING the discussion

Encourage participants to debate and share opinions. State very clearly that there's no right or wrong "answer" to the case; cases are written so that reasonable people can disagree and debate different ideas and approaches. Be careful not to allow yourself or others to dominate the discussion. If the conversation is getting heated or bogged down on a particular issue, consider allowing participants to talk in pairs for a few minutes before returning to a full group discussion. Do not worry about reaching consensus, just make the most of this opportunity to practice thinking and learning together!

Case Synopsis

In late 2014, Rockford, Illinois Mayor Larry Morrissey signed on to Michelle Obama's challenge to end veterans' homelessness. Rockford Human Services director Jennifer Jaeger and homeless program coordinator Angie Walker were tasked with the primary responsibility of "functionally" eliminating veterans' homelessness in Rockford. This meant ensuring that no veteran, from that time onward, would spend more than thirty days unhoused.

Rockford, the third largest city in Illinois, was hit hard by deindustrialization starting in the 1980s, struggling ever since with job loss, blight, and attendant social ills. When elected as Rockford's mayor in 2005, Morrissey made tackling homelessness a priority, but, along with the city's local and regional partners in homelessness services, seemed to be getting bogged down, often in small-scale issues like juggling their cloud-based case-management system. When Jaeger and Walker approached Morrissey in 2014 to sign onto First Lady Michelle Obama's Mayor's Challenge, he did so only after considerable hesitation.

Once the mayor had made a political commitment, he was under pressure to deliver. On the one hand, Rockford had already been making changes: devising a coordinated-entry system to centralize information within the local ecosystem of service providers for people experiencing homelessness; and endorsing a "Housing First" approach which, as the name suggested, meant the first obligation was to offer people housing, and from there determine what other services (e.g., counseling, substance abuse treatment) were needed.

On the other hand, however, was a hard truth: No one knew how many unhoused veterans lived in Rockford at a given time, much less how to house them all. Navigating bureaucracy and housing, each veteran would take resources and persistence in a fatigued system with little to no accountability. This was the task before Jaeger and Walker.

Conversation Plan

Part 1: Exploring the Case (30 minutes)

Begin by asking if someone will volunteer to summarize the facts of the case and the question facing the reader, without stating an opinion. The goal here is to review the case from the point of view of the people involved. Suggested questions:

- *Could Mayor Larry Morrissey have solved homelessness on his own?*
- *What were Rockford's problems with data? How did this affect arriving at solutions?*

Introduce the general questions raised by the case:

- *What did Rockford need to do to solve the problem of veterans' homelessness? What was the data component of the solution?*
- *How could the trio of mayor, human services manager, and outreach worker (described in the case) have worked with partners to solve the problem?*

Part 2: Application (20 minutes)

Invite participants to break into pairs or work as a group applying the central questions of the case to their own line of work; then bring the group back for general discussion.

Questions to help the group focus appear on the attached worksheet, and include:

- *How do you use data in your work or in one specific project? How do you know if you're getting the right information?*
- *What would be a simple data solution to this or another problem you're facing? What partners and resources do you need to achieve it?*

Part 3: Formulating Lessons (15–20 minutes)

This part of the conversation focuses on the lessons of the case that participants will continue to reflect on and apply to challenges in their work. High-level takeaways to review after a productive discussion might include:

- Effective leaders use collaborative inquiry to diagnose a problem before trying to solve it. (Data is usually part of the diagnosis, but it needs to be highly specific.)
- Data collection requires a collaborative effort; it must be collected, shared, and analyzed to devise solutions from it.
- Even a cheap or simple technological solution—e.g., a Google spreadsheet—can become a workhorse for systemic improvement. Don't sign on for more expense, complexity, or technology than you really need.
- Even what is perceived as a "broken" system is producing results or value for someone.

Appendix

Worksheet

In the “Application” section of this session, you’ll be invited to work in pairs or small groups to apply the central questions of the case to your current projects.

1. *How do you use data in your work or in one specific project? How do you know if you’re getting the right information?*

2. *What would be a simple data solution to this or another problem you’re facing? What partners and resources do you need to achieve it?*