

Vera Institute of Justice

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://www.vera.org/blog/how-to-help-public-sector-innovation-take-root>

Public Facing Advocacy Writing

[The Center for American Progress](#) and the [Young Foundation](#) recently released an important report on public-sector innovation titled [Capital Ideas: How to Generate Innovation in the Public Sector](#) that presents five ways to generate great ideas for addressing public problems, giving useful examples of where they have been implemented by government. As director of planning and government innovation at the Vera Institute of Justice, I have worked with numerous government agencies to develop ideas to improve our justice systems and to test those ideas through [demonstration projects](#). My colleagues and I have worked with many government employees who have great ideas and want to put them into practice, but the lack of models for government innovation makes their already difficult task harder.

While there are numerous resources to help private-sector companies innovate, there are far fewer resources for public-sector leaders. Why is that?

Because our economy is built on innovation, our government, universities, and private companies have devoted time and resources to understanding how to generate, implement, and disseminate innovations in the private sector. There are models that businesses can apply to innovate successfully, and a growing set of acknowledged good practices. For example:

For every successful, breakthrough idea, businesses explore and even pilot many others that never take off. Business journals routinely inventory methods for developing good ideas. Innovators have specific skills and attributes, and there's a body of literature about how best to groom, support, and create career paths for them.

Successful innovation requires investment. According to [Booz & Co.'s Global Innovation 1000 report](#), on average, businesses spend 3.6 percent of their sales revenue on research and development; the health-care and software/Internet industries spend 12 percent and 11.4 percent respectively. Does the public sector have similar expectations and models for innovation?

To be sure, there are publications, people, and organizations doing good work on public-sector innovation. The burgeoning social entrepreneurship field has brought much-needed attention and resources to innovators around the globe and has begun to apply some of the private-sector models of innovation to social problems. And President Obama created a [White House Office of Social Innovation](#) and a [Social Innovation Fund](#) within the Corporation for National and Community Service to promote and disseminate innovations that address public problems--a good sign of the federal government's willingness to support government innovation.

But the body of knowledge about how to develop and implement successful innovations in government is still slim. If you were a cabinet secretary or commissioner of an executive branch agency, or even a legislator, who wanted to use bold new approaches to tackle public problems, you might want to know:

What percent of my budget should I invest in developing and implementing innovations? What organizational structures will enable me to innovate successfully? Should I have a special innovation unit? Should I form an innovation working group with representation from multiple agency units? Should I contract out innovation development to a business or a nonprofit? (The Vera Institute of Justice's [innovation work](#) is one example of this model.) How can I recruit or identify innovators in my agency? What should the process of developing and testing innovations look like? What should the criteria be for determining whether to move an idea to pilot? What is a reasonable failure rate? How much should I invest at each stage of development? How can I most effectively institutionalize new approaches throughout my jurisdiction? To what extent do models for innovation in business apply to government?

There are currently no solid answers to most of these questions. The good news is that there are institutions, foundations, and publications that focus on government innovation, such as [the Ash Institute for Democratic Governance and Innovation](#) at Harvard, the [Stanford Social Innovation Review](#), the Young Foundation, the [Ford Foundation](#), the [Rockefeller Foundation](#), and the [Ewing Marion Kauffman Foundation](#).

But to make more than incremental progress in addressing pressing public problems, those of us who study and assist the development of the public sector should set as a priority the development of a discipline of public-sector innovation. We need to study the process, write and talk about it, invest in it. The new report from the Center for American Progress and the Young Foundation is an important contribution to what I hope is a growing field.

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