

CASE STUDY

AN INSIDE LOOK AT ONE ORGANIZATION

Social Innovation Comes to Pennsylvania Avenue

President Obama experimented with radically new ways of leveraging taxpayer dollars and applying data to maximize the impact of social programs. As his policies face an uncertain future under President Trump, what can we learn from these initiatives?

BY MONICA POTTS

Three weeks to the day after Donald Trump's surprise victory in the US presidential election, David Wilkinson stood before an anxious audience of leaders in philanthropy, technology, and social policy to address the dramatic turn that the nation's politics had taken.

Then director of the White House Office of Social Innovation and Civic Participation, Wilkinson was serving as a sort of master of ceremonies. The White House was cohosting a "Summit on Technology and Opportunity" at Stanford University with the Chan-Zuckerberg Initiative and the Stanford Center on Poverty and Inequality. If Hillary Clinton had won, the attendees, many of whom were there because of their ties to the White House and its initiatives, could have expected continuing executive support for their ideas on how to address the country's most pressing social problems.

"I wasn't planning on doing this," Wilkinson began, "but why don't I quickly start with the elephant in the room—no pun intended."

Like the president he served, Wilkinson has a professorial air. Wearing glasses, a beard, and a skewed tie, he paced before two note boards, smiled affably, but spoke haltingly and with forced humor. As the head of a start-up that Obama himself created to try new and innovative ideas for domestic policy, he was facing the prospect of having those newly birthed initiatives smothered in the crib. President-elect Trump had promised to dismantle numerous agencies and change the entire way that government worked, largely in tune with the Republican-led Congress' vision for shrinking the federal government.

"One thing that is good news is there was broad agreement at the presidential campaign level and at every level, among Republicans

and Democrats, that inequality is a problem, that poverty is a problem," Wilkinson said. "And what we also know is that there are vastly different visions of the solutions to those problems."

Sitting in the audience waiting to participate on a subsequent panel was Michele Jolin, the person who first imagined the office that Wilkinson would eventually head. A social entrepreneur focusing on results-based solutions in the policy world, Jolin proposed in this magazine that government itself could harness and boost the ideas of social innovation and social entrepreneurship. In "Innovating the White House," in the Spring 2008 issue, Jolin laid out a plan for the White House to establish an office and an investment fund to help promote new and better ideas for helping people through competitive grants.

The office would find ways to measure the outcomes from various social interventions so that policymakers would actually have a way of knowing what worked and what failed. The government itself would reward what worked best by investing more money in the most effective programs and dropping the ideas that did not pan out. It would also promote the ideas that worked best to other organizations, so that entire fields of service would adopt proven techniques and ideas quickly. Jolin further argued that housing such an office within the White House, so close to the president, would give the nonprofit sector an important voice in policymaking and would also help people across government to understand how to overcome any regulatory barriers to change, either in government or in the tax code for nonprofits.

When Obama won, he adopted Jolin's ideas and created the very White House office she had called for. He would use his position as president to help improve lives and move people out of poverty, and he would do it through competition and innovation. Obama embraced all of the ideals we usually associate more with Silicon Valley startups than with government, using them to try to change

 President Barack Obama meets with My Brother's Keeper mentees during a lunch in the White House Diplomatic Reception Room.



the way government works from the top down.

It was an ambitious goal, and the office worked for eight years to find the best ways to influence the social services sector, and to start to change the way public dollars could serve people in need. Each of the office's three directors had to push against the inertia of government bureaucracy, as well as skepticism within the non-profit world toward changing the way that government would fund their efforts. Before Obama's election, there had been wide bipartisan consensus on the kinds of programs that worked well—such as food stamps, which fed people effectively and pumped money into communities—and areas that could use reform—such as education. There had been a long history of bipartisan interest in using the White House to push for social services and engaging people in a sense of civic responsibility. Obama had finally taken up that bipartisan interest.

And now November's electoral revolution had put that bipartisan resolve into question. Would Trump continue an office that has efficiency in government spending as its core mission? Or would the work of the past eight years just fade and disappear?

Wilkinson tried to offer the audience a reason for optimism: "Solutions that respond to poverty and inequality using data and evidence, getting better value for the taxpayer dollar, may be uniquely well positioned to make unique progress."

AN AFFIRMATION OF NONPROFITS

The idea of promoting volunteerism from the White House, and coupling a national service program with an office that helped fund and promote a particular kind of social service agency, dates at least as far back as George H. W. Bush and his Points of Light Foundation. When Bill Clinton was elected, he founded the AmeriCorps national service program; George W. Bush continued it and added the Office of Faith-Based and Community Initiatives.

Each president put his own spin on these initiatives, speaking to his own political bases and experiences. Obama was elected in a spirit of hope for real change throughout government and on the idea that government worked well in helping people. It may be hard to remember now, but Obama's election did seem like the dawn of a new era. He promised then to engage all of his voters in a new spirit

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of civic responsibility, of people chipping in to help each other out, and of unity based on our ideals. It really did seem possible, then, that a fundamental shift in the way that government tried to improve the lives of its neediest citizens might work.

In pursuing this vision, Obama had found sources for ideas not only in Jolin's proposal of an office for social innovation but also in Paul Schmitz, the CEO of Public Allies in Milwaukee. Schmitz, who is, like Wilkinson, bespectacled and bearded, got his start in community service as a student at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee and has stayed in that field in Milwaukee since. The world of do-gooding organizations in the Midwest is one that the Obamas also inhabited, so Schmitz thought the future president and first lady would be especially likely to listen to his ideas. Schmitz had long been an advocate of promoting community leadership from the ground up and was doing that work at Public Allies, an organization that aims to inspire people from diverse communities to rise up and be leaders in the community service and nonprofit worlds. Schmitz wanted grassroots organizations such as his to find equal footing in the nonprofit sector with the bigger organizations that had access to annual government grants.

Public Allies was also part of a consortium of similar groups within an organization called America Forward. It championed a new idea that was taking hold in the nonprofit world: social innovation. Schmitz had seen the ways in which federal and state governments' awarding of big grants to the same big service providers every year—without checking to see whether those organizations actually performed as well as they said they would—could hinder the kind of organic inspiration among members of communities that Public Allies wanted.

Schmitz believed that government grants—the lifeblood of service organizations—desperately needed fresh thinking. Parts of the government too often ran on autopilot, handing out the same grants to the same organizations every year, based primarily on how many people the organizations served. An organization that vowed to fight homelessness, for example, would be awarded grants based on how many clients they housed. Whether they actually helped their clients to find long-term housing and stop being homeless was rarely part of the equation. If one group sheltered 1,000 people every month, while another group helped 10 homeless families to find permanent housing every year, the former group might receive more money based only on the sheer number of people it served, while the latter group failed to be rewarded for its lasting successes.

"We had people running programs achieving better results, but couldn't get capital to scale and couldn't get into these federal programs," Schmitz says.

In 2007 and 2008, as the presidential campaigns were getting under way, Schmitz and his colleagues met with members of as many of the campaigns as they could—anyone who would agree to meet with them—in conference rooms in hotels around the country, with books and presentations in hand ready to prove the strength of their ideas. They found bipartisan interest, and many of the campaigns



were receptive. In the end, both major party nominees, John McCain and Barack Obama, listened. But they found a natural ally in Obama, who had gotten his start as a community organizer and whose wife, Michelle Obama, had been on the board of Public Allies in Chicago.

"We knew he cared about this stuff," Schmitz recalls. "We said, 'Here's a platform we built, that a lot of thought went through, that can make these ideas happen.'"

Not everyone was on board with the White House Office of Social Innovation and Civic Participation, as it was soon called. But the idea of making government dollars more efficient—an implicit part of the promise of focusing on initiatives that were more effective and got more results was that the government would get more bang for every dollar spent on social services—did garner a lot of bipartisan support. "The whole 'Moneyball for Government' agenda, we're wildly behind," says John Bridgeland, who describes himself as a moderate and led the Office of Faith-Based and Community Initiatives under Bush. "It holds the promise of bridging Republicans and Democrats."

Some conservatives, however, believe that any government dollar spent is a dollar wasted, and generally that government involvement ruins anything. When the Tea Party faction of extreme conservatives grew in the 2010 midterm elections, dismantling all government programs came into focus. At the other end of the spectrum, there were also liberals who worried about the focus of the new office. Allison Fine, a senior fellow at the liberal think tank Demos who writes about philanthropy, expressed skepticism at the very notion of such an office. She wrote on her blog, in response to the office's creation, that real social change is hard to measure, and was skeptical that the office could really measure "results" in a fair way.

 David Wilkinson, the third director of the White House Office of Social Innovation, shakes hands with President Barack Obama.

 Sonal Shah (right), the first director of the White House Office of Social Innovation, speaks at the Women in Finance Investment Symposium, hosted by the U.S. Treasury Department.

Fine also doubted that the government would truly take the kinds of risks that innovation requires, and pointed to the office's goal of promoting ideas that had already been proven to work. "That's creating a small business administration for nonprofits out of the White House," she told NPR. "It's funding very tried and true approaches." She continued by saying that there would be better ways to spend the money that the White House would devote to the office. "Just give the money to a food bank and be done."

But for those who had been working in the social innovation field or in social enterprises that had a hard time getting the government's attention and accessing the kinds of grants that bigger organizations received, the office represented an important affirmation of their work. Not only would it help change the way programs were funded, but it promised that the entire nonprofit sector, which constitutes more than 10 percent of the nation's workforce and 5.4 percent of GPD, would finally have a say in policymaking, the way businesses did.

"It was recognized by the federal government that nonprofits are important and that we deserve our seat at the table like everyone else has," says Antony Bugg-Levine, CEO of the Nonprofit Finance Fund, an organization that funds social innovation and re-grants money from the office's Social Innovation Fund. "In the office we have found a powerful ally for thoughtful, committed, and reasonable ways to improve the way the government tries to drive the social sector."

FUNDING GREATER IMPACT

The Obama administration was inventing something new, and it had to fight doubters, as well as the inertia of a gigantic government used to operating the same way year after year. Obama hired Sonal Shah, a former public official and economist who had been

running the global philanthropic arm of Google, dubbed Google.org, to set up the new office during the transition. Jolin would serve as Shah's deputy, and the office would take shape under the auspices of Melody Barnes, the head of Obama's Domestic Policy Council. They wanted to set up quickly so that they could harness the energy of the Obama campaign. "People of all ages, but certainly young people in particular, who had participated in the campaign, wanted to act on the president's message that we, you, can change things," Barnes says.

To do that, the office first had to organize the legislation that would make their office work. This happened quickly and with bipartisan support under the Edward M. Kennedy Serve America Act, legislation that Obama signed in April 2009, just three months after his inauguration and four months before the death of longtime Massachusetts Senator Ted Kennedy, after whom the law was named. The act expanded the AmeriCorps national service program from 75,000 to 250,000 members and beefed up the umbrella organization that runs AmeriCorps and other programs like it. That office would be under the leadership of Shah at the White House Office of Social Innovation and Civic Participation. The legislation also created the Social Innovation Fund, which would be the financing tool for social innovation.

Paul Carttar, a cofounder of The Bridgespan Group who was working at New Profit, one of the champions of social innovation, was hired to lead the Social Innovation Fund, or SIF. "The SIF was never intended to in and of itself become a big department," he says. "It was piloting this method of making grants, a leveraged way of making federal grants."

The idea of "leverage" builds on the principles of venture philanthropy. SIF would not make grants to direct-service organizations such as Habitat for Humanity. Instead, it would make a grant to an organization that might make grants to organizations like Habitat for Humanity. That intermediary organization would be required to get a one-to-one match for the government dollars before granting them down to the next level and would, in turn, require its grantees to also get a one-to-one match. The idea was that, for every dollar of government money spent, two more dollars would come in from the philanthropic world, either businesses or foundations.

Those dollars would, hopefully, be easy to get, because the government would only award grants in a competitive process, in which the organizations demonstrated that they had evidence that their programs worked. Finally, the ideas that got great results for people would be spread throughout the world. The SIF, and more broadly the White House Office of Social Innovation and Civic Participation, would serve as a kind of clearinghouse, giving its imprimatur to the best methods for solving any particular social problem and promoting those ideas from its giant megaphone. "Imagine a world where the best, most effective poverty programs, dollar for dollar, the ones that transform people's lives, are known, can prove that they're the best, and funders can fund and build on them," says Carttar.

Carttar ran the SIF for two years. Grants were, and still are,



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 AmeriCorps members remove storm debris as Mississippi Emergency Management Agency worker Todd Demuth observes.

awarded to newer programs that are still testing out whether they work as well as promised, and to older programs that have a track record. They include tried and true initiatives such as providing permanent, supportive housing to chronically homeless people nationwide, a method of solving homelessness that has proved to be less expensive, and to lead to better outcomes, than temporary shelters. And it funded newer initiatives, such as grants to the US Soccer Foundation, which applies its funding to youth Soccer for Success programs in at-risk, low-income communities in, for instance, Camden, N.J., and Atlanta, to fight childhood obesity. In Camden alone, for example, The Boys and Girls Club of Camden County will use Soccer for Success to serve 800 young people, promoting nutrition and physical activity and then reporting results through cardiovascular health tests, nutrition surveys, and statistics such as the average body mass index of participants. If it works, Camden grant recipients hope to promote the same ideas throughout the entire Boys and Girls Club network there.

As of March 2016, the government says that the SIF has generated \$627.5 million in investments from the private sector, more than double the original federal investment of \$295 million for nonprofits across its programs. “We wanted to define a style of grantmaking where ... if the federal government did more of it this way, it would be able to generate greater impact,” says Carttar.

CRISIS AND RESISTANCE

The office had many more tasks beyond SIF, and nothing else ran as smoothly. To begin with, as Carttar says, the office was meant to be a demonstration of how the government could do things differently. Everyone knew that the real federal spending power lay within the departments—the Departments of Education, Labor, and Health and Human Services, to name just a few. Combined, these departments dole out more than \$800 billion a year to programs in the social services sector that are designed to improve people’s lives and move them out of poverty, such as early-childhood literacy programs and initiatives designed to keep young black men out of the criminal justice system. That money does not even include safety-net items such as food stamps.

Advocates of social innovation always wanted to find a way to incorporate competitive grantmaking, leveraging private funds and demonstrating what actually works, and what does not, with



data, inside these bigger agencies. The White House Office of Social Innovation and Civic Participation and the SIF are tiny by comparison.

Incorporating these ideas throughout government proved challenging, Shah says. “There were a lot of innovative people within agencies who wanted to talk to each other. There were people doing innovation in technology and other places who also wanted to be able to talk to agencies.” The White House office started to convene these groups across agencies so that they could learn from each other, she says. “A lot of the time they were trying to figure out, ‘How did you get through that legal barrier? How did you get the authority to do that?’” says Shah. “It was, at first, mundane stuff, mundane things that were also barriers to things.”

The office could empower individual people within agencies to try to innovate and spur innovation, but it could not single-handedly change the entire government culture and regulatory structure that might then stifle it.

One of the office’s biggest successes within government was the Investing in Innovation Fund, or I3, in the Department of Education. I3 was created in the stimulus act in 2009, but it was heavily shaped over the years by the ideas that came from the White House Office of Social Innovation. Education was one of the few areas that attracted bipartisan support for trying out new ideas, and there was a lot of political energy behind supporting education. It also helped that the Department of Education already awarded competitive grants for some programs that existed before Obama. These circumstances combined to enhance the enthusiasm with which the Department of Education adopted the ideas of social innovation.

For I3 grants, there are competitive application processes for everything from after-school programs that improve literacy to private charter schools such as the Knowledge is Power Program (KIPP). Grantmaking happens at all levels—from organizations that are trying out new ideas but lack the data to validate what they are doing; organizations that had early validation but still need to scale up and continue measuring results; and organizations with ideas that have proven track records and need money to expand.

The challenge for I3 was defining, exactly, how to measure success at every level. The gold standard for the final level of funding would be the randomized controlled trial, which is a familiar concept in most social science research. But even there, the department struggled to find actual researchers who could review applications and apply that standard to education. “There were lots and lots and lots of applications, and we needed lots of peer reviewers,” says Joanne Weiss, who was chief of staff to the Secretary of Education, Arne Duncan, from 2010 to 2013. “There is not a great stable of reviewers in the education world that understood this world deeply enough.”

I3 represented entirely new money, so it did not inspire skepticism and fear among organizations that they would lose longtime funding if they participated. Shah and the Office of Social Innovation tried to take big successes like I3 and help other departments, such as the Department of Labor and the Department of Health and Human Services, to adapt them for their needs.

While the office was trying to do this fundamental, cross-agency work, it also had to deal with the civic-participation side of its duties. It took more than a year to find a permanent head for the Corporation for National and Community Service, the organization that runs the greatly expanded AmeriCorps program, and just dealing with that ate up a lot of the office’s time. AmeriCorps was a legacy that Obama had inherited—previous administrations had run it out of the Domestic Policy Council, and Bush had run it alongside the Office of Faith-Based and Community Initiatives. Whether these two initiatives should be married was not part of the early debate.

But the bigger problem was that in early 2009, shortly after Obama became president and the office and the fund were created, the economy was still in the midst of a free fall from the housing crash. “When you’re trying to stop a crisis, it’s just harder to think about innovation and experimentation, and that was the main challenge we faced early on, the environment we were working in. It was crisis oriented,” says Jolin.

Added to that, the nonprofit world that the government was trying to build a relationship with was going through a similar crisis. Their funding—from both government and private sources—was down after the crash, just as the need for social services for low-income families across the country shot up. The White House was trying to build new relationships with nonprofits at a time when the sector was hurting a great deal, and there were growing pains.

“The one big misstep was this national service summer program, United We Serve,” Schmitz remembers. The office did not

launch the event but had to run it. The effort was trying to drum up volunteers for organizations during the summer, and the White House convened major grantees and nonprofits, asking these organizations to take volunteers and participate. “All these organizations were there because they’re like, ‘What are you going to do for us?’” Schmitz says. The nonprofit world needed help, and, he says, it seemed as though the White House didn’t fully understand the state of emergency that their nonprofit partners were in. Instead, “[The White House] asked everyone to enroll in this United We Serve campaign. ... This event was very tone deaf.”

Melody Barnes, who oversaw the office as chief of Obama’s Domestic Policy Council, says that some of the office’s early problems were simply inherent to the challenges of building anything novel, based on a new idea, in the middle of an emergency from inside the bubble of the White House. “With the benefit of hindsight, I wish it had been possible to articulate more clearly and quickly what the objectives of the office would be,” says Barnes. “I wish we’d been more clear and more crisp coming out of the gate with what we wanted to accomplish. ... But even as I say that, I recognize that when you are innovating and starting something new, you try and pursue things, you see what doesn’t work or what needs a little tweaking, and you adjust differently. ... We tried to do the best we could.”

PROMOTING PAY FOR SUCCESS

Shah led the office for most of its first two years, leaving in late 2011. She and her team worked to build the office’s foundation; it became clear that one of the most fruitful endeavors would be to keep working to integrate the ideas of social innovation throughout government.

Thanks to her efforts, her successor, Jonathan Greenblatt, did not have to worry about building the office from scratch. He had been a cofounder of Ethos Water, a bottled water company that donates a portion of its profits to help clean water initiatives around the world, and had run the media company GOOD. When he led the office for two and a half years beginning in September 2011, he could concentrate on what he thought were its most important elements.

“Social entrepreneurship had gone from being this very marginal fringy thing,” says Greenblatt. “By 2011, it had really moved into the mainstream.” He thinks that, in no small part, this was due to the White House’s work on it and the idea of social innovation in general. When he was asked to take over after Shah left, in 2011, he concentrated on two things the office could accomplish, especially in the face of Washington gridlock.

First, he leveraged the office’s success by promoting its ideas even more across government and by further engaging the private sector. Fights over the federal budget, and problems like the sequester, shrank funds and ground bipartisan cooperation to a halt. It became clearer than ever that getting more impact for each government dollar would be more important than ever. In addition to improving outcomes for each dollar spent, the office had to harness investment from the business and philanthropic worlds through

matching grants and through promoting ideas that worked to investors outside the government, the way SIF did. Greenblatt calls this “convening power,” which meant that he could call meetings of people from different sectors together to talk about the ways they could help each other. That included members of the financial and business communities, the nonprofit sector, and government agencies. “I don’t know that the sectors really understand what the others do and how they work,” he says, and he wanted to change that.

Second, Greenblatt championed funding social innovation on a “pay for success” model through ideas such as social impact bonds—an idea first promoted by the New Zealand economist Ronnie Horesh in 1988 that had started taking off around the world. Here is how a social impact bond works: A private investor will provide funding to a nonprofit service provider who has a “contract” with the government to provide a service with a guaranteed set of outcomes—for example, keeping a certain percentage of recently released prisoners out of prison. An independent evaluator then determines whether the nonprofit delivered on its promised outcomes. If the results of the evaluation are favorable—which can take years to determine—the government pays the investor the original investment along with some profit. If the goals are not met, the investor loses some or all of his money. The funding system helps insulate the government from the risks of innovations that might not work. For the service provider, too, it lifts the burden of worrying about operating costs if the government grant does not materialize years down the road.

Greenblatt and his deputy, Wilkinson, who took over the office in February 2015, also wanted to continue pushing the idea that government agencies could make all of their grants competitive, could evaluate them and find the best practices, and could get matching funds from the outside world with the government’s own money.

In many departments, though, the idea of measuring successes, of using data, remained a frightening concept, like a Trojan horse for allowing the government to disinvest from social services. “Social sector innovation was a politically contentious and scary concept” to many nonprofit leaders, says Bugg-Levine. “Many of them have been taught not to trust government.” Part of what the office has done over the years is to try to work with nonprofits to not be nervous about trials that might show what they’re doing doesn’t work, to adopt better practices, and to be part of the feedback loop that constantly improves what government funds through data.

The status quo for many nonprofits that work with government is a rigorous set of compliance rules. Most nonprofits that receive government grants have to spend a lot of time and money filling out paperwork to show that they are meeting government requirements and using money in specific ways for a specific amount of people. Wilkinson said that results-oriented data collection, not just showing outputs—how many people are served—but also demonstrating good outcomes for people—this many clients were moved into permanent housing, for example—is a more humane way to treat nonprofits as well as the communities they serve.

THE SHOWCASE

In October, 2016, the White House hosted an event meant to showcase the exemplar of their social innovation experiments, the president’s initiative known as My Brother’s Keeper. President Obama launched the effort in 2014 to address the specific challenges faced by young men of color and to promote racial justice. “There are a lot of kids out there who need help, who are getting a lot of negative reinforcement,” Obama said shortly before launching the initiative. “[I]s there more that we can do to give them the sense that their country cares about them and values them and is willing to invest in them?”

What Obama left unsaid was that My Brother’s Keeper would also exhibit the way that government could incorporate data, randomized controlled trials, and evaluations in these types of programs. The October event, held in a small, windowless auditorium at the White House, offered a progress report of sorts. The audience began to hear from different groups that had been doing work in various fields designed to help with the specific challenges faced by young men of color. These included nonprofits dedicated to improving their educational outcomes; to keep them out of, or help them transition out of, the criminal justice system; and to get better jobs and earn more money.

Among the presenters was A. J. Watson from Becoming a Man, a Chicago organization that mentors young men of color to keep them on track in school. During the presentation, Watson shared a PowerPoint slide with results from its second randomized controlled trial. There had been a 50 percent reduction in violent crime arrests for young men who had participated in the program versus those who had not, as well as a 35 percent reduction in all arrests. Participants were also 19 percent more likely to graduate on time from high school than their counterparts not in the program. “It is a cost-effective program that has ROIs, just on violent crime alone, of over \$30 for every \$1 invested,” Watson told the group.

Presenting evidence using business-oriented language such as “returns on investment” was, in fact, part of the point. In a statement, President Obama said that these kinds of measures were built into the DNA of My Brother’s Keeper. Many of the groups that presented that day had been funded through the SIF or through Department of Education Initiatives like I3. “We’ve applied data and evidence to social policy, to find out what works, to scale up when it works,” Obama said. “[A]nd stop funding things that don’t, thereby fostering a new era of social innovation.”

Nearly every person involved in the White House Office of Social Innovation, from the early days to today, said that the office’s next challenge was to bring nonprofit and government agencies together so that social innovation becomes the way—rather than the exception to—how most of government works. Advocates want the White House to continue to set a policy agenda that incorporates the rigors of competition and evaluation through government programs.

According to this vision, programs should be funded when, and only when, they genuinely help the communities they are trying to serve, the way that Becoming a Man did in Chicago. While proving

 Jonathan Greenblatt, the second director of the White House Office of Social Innovation, speaks at a PopTech conference in Camden, Maine.



success is a scary concept for many nonprofits, the White House has been trying to show that it is a better way to operate. Advocates of social innovation said the task was more urgent than ever after it became clear with the Republican-led Congress that new funding for such programs would not be easily available. Now with Trump in the White House, they face the prospect of losing the office that sparked their efforts in the first place.

HOPING FOR THE BEST

The ideas of the office retain a lot of bipartisan support—at least in theory. The goal of making the \$800 billion that the government spends on social services more efficient, of doing more with less, has appealed to many conservatives who care about policies that help the poor, most notably House Speaker Paul Ryan.

“We have certainly seen many legislators and elected officials from both parties who have gone out to see the powerful results on the ground in their own communities, throughout the country,” says Carla Javits, president of REDF, a nonprofit venture capital firm that invests in social enterprises that focus on hiring people who would otherwise be excluded from the job market. “Effectiveness and efficiency, that’s what people want to see. These programs are pointing the direction to the future.”

As Wilkinson said at Stanford last November, many policy professionals are hopeful that there will be a bipartisan path forward for the ideas of social innovation, finding bipartisan cooperation to help the White House office grow and continue its mission of changing the ways that all government works for the better, of measuring the results in ways that show whether programs really and truly are making people’s lives better.

Bridgeland, who ran the Office of Faith-Based and Community Initiatives under George W. Bush, points to similar programs’ long legacy as a reason for hope. “In each case the president renamed what it was to own it and give it fresh life,” he says. “The hope would be this next president and administration would create the enterprise fund,” or something similar. Republicans will want to rebrand it away from social innovation, but many of the ideas could stay the same.

Yet the biggest fear for advocates of government and the social services sector is that the Trump administration will come in with a wrecking ball, which is not too far from what his campaign promised it would do when its rallying cry became “Drain the swamp.” The vague slogan included a promise to clear out government corruption, but it also seemed to focus Trump’s ire, and that of his supporters, on any government agency they disliked.

Even Paul Ryan, who has voiced concern about poverty, has said in public that he plans to trim programs such as school nutrition and food stamps, which have proved to succeed in improving educational outcomes for children, boosting local economies, and feeding people. Bridgeland says that antipoverty experts used to be able to obtain Republican support for programs like those by showing evidence that they worked. “That kind of data and evidence takes you beyond a social program.”

Bridgeland also sees problems in the way the White House Office of Social Innovation and Civic Participation was structured, underneath the Domestic Policy Council. Its leaders did not directly report to the president, which means the office is less powerful than it could have been, and vulnerable. “The SIF is a little program that’s at high risk of not being funded, or not being carried on by the new administration,” he says.

No one knows what the presidential election means for small offices inside the Domestic Policy Council. Even in early January, at this writing, Trump’s cabinet was not fully staffed, and his policy agenda was not clear. “I would say, ‘Hope for the best and plan for the worst,’” says Antony Bugg-Levine. “We have to open ourselves up to the possibility that ... we cannot get this agenda to be bipartisan.”

Though the future is uncertain, the ideas of the White House office have spread throughout the nonprofit world. Sonal Shah now works for a center at Georgetown University designed to promote the ideas of social innovation globally. Jonathan Greenblatt is the national director and CEO of the Anti-Defamation League. And Melody Barnes is chair of the Aspen Institute Forum for Community Solutions.

Losing the White House Office of Social Innovation and Civic Participation would represent a big setback, however. It has a platform that no other nonprofit could possibly have, and provided a way for the nonprofit sector to get government to listen. Bugg-Levine says that he remains optimistic. “If there is one thing we should be able to create bipartisan support for, surely it is the fundamental idea that we can work together in new ways to create a more productive relationship between government and the social sector so we can get better results with taxpayer dollars for marginalized communities.” ■

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