



CASE STUDY

From instability to prosperity: this nonprofit improves the lives of families

Urban Strategies, Inc. (USI) is a national nonprofit with extensive experience designing and implementing place-based human capital development strategies in communities undergoing comprehensive physical revitalization.



Founded in 1978, [USI](#) is a leader in community development, supporting more than 30,000 low- to moderate-income families, approximately 100,000 individuals, in 40 communities in 23 major metropolitan areas. Based in St. Louis, Missouri, USI supports communities and develops economic opportunities by offering cradle-to-college and career success, access to high-quality health services, and a range of comprehensive human service support. USI works with public housing authorities, city government officials, institutions, foundations, developers, property managers, community members, and other stakeholders to build comprehensive plans around neighborhood conditions and human service needs. In addition, the nonprofit works concurrently with developers to create new physical facilities and amenities that complement human service systems and improve the capacity of existing community systems.

USI believes in equitable opportunities that allow all children and families to thrive, all voices to be heard and elevated, and all systems to positively align and equally contribute. USI believes families remain at the center of data usage to support their work, and their expertise and assembly of professionals support their contributions as thought leaders.

Urban Strategies, Inc. developed a performance management system entitled Learning for Effective Actions to Revitalize Neighborhoods (LEARN) that amasses data and obtains information necessary to provide high-quality services. Through comprehensive neighborhood revitalization, this model helps guide decisions and operations, builds a culture of learning and change, and improves outcomes for people and communities.

LEARN builds evidence of impact measures. As risks to stability are mitigated, the developmental assets framework measures the impact on family systems. The results-based accountability model governs the approach to their five-pillar service delivery. Together, the two frameworks drive evidence-based practices.

CLIENT
Urban Strategies, Inc.

SECTOR
Housing and community development



Challenges

Siloed information

Before using Bonterra Impact Management, USI's work and information were siloed. Staff entered data in spreadsheets and featured accomplishments in marketing documents. The agency worked within communities but had no way to track their work. They needed a system to track, report, and share data effectively.

Real-time sharing issues

Before employing their current impact management solution, USI needed to communicate their most current information and their developed best practices more effectively between the communities and cities where they worked. This communication primarily took place in frequent company-wide meetings. USI needed a way to share real-time data within their organization. They required a solution that allowed instantaneous data sharing and improved communication between all their service locations.

Need for customizable intake questions and software

Previously, the intake process followed a standard form of questions. USI desired a personalized process for asking participants questions relevant to the unique situations they are in. USI's previous software didn't offer this capability, which resulted in limited information gathering on the people the organization serves.



Solutions and impact

A customized impact management solution

LEARN and the five pillars of programming service — economic mobility, education, health and wellness, housing stability, policy, and influence—are the foundation USI uses to support people and help them thrive. Bonterra Impact Management provides data that informs goals, hardships, and progress for families and communities. USI uses the data to decide which family-supportive strategies would best assist those they serve. They then build a plan that connects families to the proper resources, moving them along the pathway to stability.

Improved intake and support provided

The support of USI's impact management solution in the implementation of LEARN was an opportunity for the agency to solidify its work and increase the success of their model. Esther Shin, president and CEO of USI, says, "We're not just doing work to do work. The data has to tell us what to do; if the data isn't there, we need to get it. That means frontline staff must meet with families and ensure their notes make it back into LEARN in the right places." The agency's intake process, as well as its ability to provide all necessary support services, reflects this accomplishment.

USI's commitment to building caring relationships with those they serve is supported by LEARN and Bonterra Impact Management. USI customized its impact management solution to reflect the LEARN model, which enables staff to understand and assist people and their specific needs. For example, during the intake process, the staff is trained to interact with families to listen for needs that a person may not be mentioning. In addition, LEARN's unique set-up allows staff to connect participants with other services a family may need.

There is no wrong door to walk through for families who work with USI. If a family needs child care and enters through education, they have access to all the other "doors" of USI's pillars. Knowing that all services are available to a family in crisis helps participants realize everything is possible for their family and themselves. Erika adds, "It helps people understand that because you are alive and breathing, you have every right to dream greater than whatever your circumstance may be."



The fact that we can build out our impact management solution to meet the needs of families is important to us because it's not a cookie-cutter, one-size-fits all type of support.

— Erika Wilson,
director of communications
and marketing at USI

Benefits of real-time customized questions

The LEARN platform, built into Bonterra Impact Management, allows USI to develop more customized and conversational questions. This ability was essential during the COVID-19 pandemic. For example, instead of asking a family if they had food or medicine, they could specifically ask if they had food or medicine to get them to the end of the week. The ability to ask specific questions helps USI identify the needs and gaps that families experience in real-time and then use that information to advocate for the individualized support families need week to week from partners and policymakers.

The impact management software also allows staff to move around within intake questionnaires. “Some systems don’t allow you to do that. But this system allows us to move throughout, based on the conversation we’re having,” notes Erika. Additionally, the solution allows USI to ensure that the questions they ask are appropriate for the situation a family may be in. Erika adds, “Using this system to support the challenges in real-time has been the difference maker for us because we can look at the successes and the baseline and move families at their comfort towards whatever stability and thriving looks like for them.”

The impact management solution also equips USI to compile data for service partners. For example, the San Antonio community experienced a nearly 94% employment rate for the population they were working with. However, several families in the city were not employed. USI wanted to see a 100% employment rate for its community, so leadership looked more deeply into the data to strategize around how they could help move that 6% to employment.

Through the customization of the questions applied to their impact management solution, staff asked pointed questions to look at the whole picture and understand the root cause of the unemployment. Staff discovered that each of the household heads of the unemployed families had experienced trauma as a child under the care of someone else. This trauma kept them from enrolling their children in childcare and, consequently, from working. This newfound knowledge allowed USI staff to provide the unique support and partners these families needed. Staff proposed that one or two of these families take early childhood courses to become childcare providers. These families, previously bound by trauma, now feel safe and have been liberated through customized, real-time data discovered through USI’s impact management solution. This data is now part of USI’s knowledge base that staff can use to advise similar situations. In addition, USI shares this information with partners to help all families improve their situations.

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USI COMMUNITIES
DOUBLED
OVER THE LAST FIVE YEARS



Real-time sharing

Real-time data sharing within USI and outside the agency has dramatically improved its ability to serve families. With their current impact management solution, USI communities across the nation can share with other internal organizations real-time data, best practices, policies, processes, and information about existing programs and partners, which leads staff and teams to success. This ability allows USI to work smarter and improve strategies developed with families. Moreover, sharing strategies gives staff across the country pride in the organization's work. During the pandemic, USI was one of the few national organizations with real-time data on how households were faring week to week. With the ability to share learned data and best practices with partners and other organizations, USI helped mobilize critical assistance needed for families across the country.

Advocacy for families

LEARN and impact management enabled the agency to better advocate for communities by meeting families where they are, supporting them in other pillars of program service, and helping them on their way to a successful life.

Looking at their data, USI sees a strong interest in homeownership for families. The Housing and Urban Development (HUD) Section 8 Voucher program enables people to transition into homeownership. Using the HUD program, USI has built a pipeline for families ready for homeownership by partnering with other organizations to provide the additional funds they need to make that a reality. USI then takes this data to federal legislative groups to propose expanding the use of the Section 8 Voucher program so that more families can have an opportunity to get into homeownership programs.

Advocacy at local and national level

USI's use of its impact management solution has evolved the agency from tracking data to strategic planning. It's also allowed USI to take its advocacy from the local level to the national level. The agency's real-time, robust data on families they support throughout the country allows USI to have informed conversations with organizations such as foundations and legislative and federal bodies. USI's data is sought after by organizations nationwide, and they share it with these partners in the form of helpful toolkits.

USI has a strong track record of success across its nationwide communities. "Anywhere USI works, the annual income rate in that community is going to double. That is the trajectory seen across the country: Wherever USI works, our staff moves the needle for families," says Erika. Moreover, information pulled from LEARN goes to federal legislators near USI locations, giving them complex data, such as how the families in USI communities are doing what the service gaps are, and what funding is needed.

Strategic planning and growth

Cities across the country solicit USI to be development partners in their communities. City leaders have seen the impact of USI's work and know that families will do better in their community if Urban Strategies, Inc. is a part of their team.



**ANNUAL INCOMES
DOUBLED
FOR USI COMMUNITIES**

Funding increases

The Choice Neighborhoods program, a national grant through the Department of HUD, has been instrumental to the organization's growth, with offices in the last five years doubling under the CEO's leadership. Because USI meets people where they are and uses the LEARN model to center on data and equity, the agency leads the way nationally in the number of people-lead grants received through Choice Neighborhoods.

Thought leadership

With its success using LEARN, its access to real-time data, and its nationwide presence, USI is an influential thought leader. HUD recently asked USI to be a convener for a national conference to share their knowledge with other organizations and leaders. USI has taken on the People Lead Aspect of the conference to allow attending organizations to learn from each other, provide best practices, and understand what's working and not working within the field. During the pandemic, USI successfully advocated for extended HUD and government grants. USI leaders penned a letter and shared it with other grantees so they could communicate with legislative bodies during a time when community engagement was limited due to COVID-19 lockdowns. As a result of this effort stewarded by USI, valuable grant funds were retained for many organizations.



100%
EMPLOYMENT
FOR SAN ANTONIO FAMILIES
ENROLLED IN USI PROGRAMS

Summary

USI's foundational approach is about people, relationships, and trust. Bonterra Impact Management, customized to support the LEARN model, provides real-time data, enabling the agency to work one-on-one with participants and expand to serve over 100,000 people across its communities.

Through developing LEARN and sharing this success-proven model with partner agencies, USI has established itself as a thought leader in community planning and development. USI is a leader in helping individual families and communities, doubling participant income and advocating for communities at the local and national levels.

Working with USI is a difference-maker because of the caring staff, partnerships, and data "that allow people to move from what seems like the worst time in their lives to simply a chapter in their lives," says Erika. Together with its partners, USI continues to boldly promote equity in the communities they serve and ensure that individuals and families are safe, supported, and able to thrive.



Ready to create lasting social change?

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