

Upstream Investments: A Sonoma County Case Study- A Model for Strategic Investment and Cross-Sector Partnership

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Sonoma County's Upstream Investments offers a model for how local governments can utilize principles of collective impact as a strategy for addressing challenging social issues. Established in 2007 to address the escalating costs of criminal justice, Upstream Investments played a crucial role in rethinking public investments. This initiative focused on shifting from intervention to prevention and emphasized the use of data to inform decision-making.

This case study serves to explore the history, implementation, and evolution of Upstream Investments and the potential for the "ALL IN Alameda County" initiative to serve a similar role in advancing a collective impact strategy grounded in equity, prevention, and collaboration. With existing infrastructure and deep ties grounded in the community, "ALL IN Alameda County" is well-positioned to adopt and adapt strategies from Sonoma County's model. Key opportunities include providing technical assistance to strengthen community-based organizations, convening cross-sector partnerships, and aligning public and private investments for greater impact. Upstream Investments demonstrates that with purposeful design, local governments can become catalysts for systems-level change. Alameda County can build on this foundation and strengthen its ecosystem of support for equitable and community-driven solutions.

Introduction

Due to cuts and uncertainty in the federal and state budgets, counties are being pushed to consider innovative ways to address challenges like poverty, racial inequity, and housing insecurity. As we enter the second term of the Trump Administration, we are witnessing unprecedented times, with unconstitutional freezes to federal funding and ongoing threats to cut public services. According to the California Budget and Policy Center, federal funds account for more than one-third of California's state budget.¹ Such reductions could have lasting consequences for the vulnerable communities that rely on these critical services. In the face of such uncertainty, Sonoma County's Upstream Investments Project represents a strategy focused on early, equitable, and collaborative investment.

This case study explores the origins, evolution, and lessons of Upstream Investments, a county-led effort rooted in the philosophy that social and economic challenges can be reduced by investing early, wisely, and collaboratively. Now nearly two decades into its implementation, the initiative offers insights for other counties seeking to implement or strengthen their collective impact.

Origins of the Upstream Investments Project

In 2007, Sonoma County faced a pivotal decision on whether to approve funding for the construction of a new jail.² With criminal justice costs accounting for over half of the County's discretionary general fund and significantly limiting the resources available for essential human services, the Board of Supervisors (BOS) was compelled to re-examine its approach to public investment. Recognizing that incarceration was often the result of unaddressed social and economic needs, the BOS questioned whether investments could be shifted toward the root causes in order to divert individuals from entering the criminal justice system in the first place.

The Upstream Investments Project began as a Board-chartered initiative created to identify and fund early interventions to reduce criminal justice costs. Guided by three core strategies, Upstream Investments aimed to shift both mindset and practice across county systems:

- 1. Invest Early:** Whenever possible, dedicate funding and other resources to prevention-focused policies and interventions.
- 2. Invest Wisely:** Ensure that upstream policies and interventions have the highest possible likelihood of success by selecting those that are backed by sound evidence.
- 3. Invest Together:** Focus on community-wide upstream policies and interventions on preventing six targeted factors and improving 26 indicators of success under four

¹ Graves S., Nair, N., Pryor, L., (February 2025). *California At Risk: Proposed Federal Funding Cuts Jeopardize Key Services*. California Budget and Policy Center. Retrieved May 7, 2025, from <https://calbudgetcenter.org/resources/california-at-risk-proposed-federal-funding-cuts-jeopardize-key-services/>

² Upstream Ad Hoc Board Committee. (November 8, 2011). *Upstream Investments Progress Report and Recommended Next Steps*, 2.

over-arching goals to achieve the Upstream vision, mission and goals and measurable impacts.³

Upstream Investments adopted a collective impact approach, emphasizing collaboration between public agencies, nonprofits, and philanthropy to address systemic issues with shared goals and coordinated strategies. Collective impact is defined as “a network of community members, organizations, and institutions that advance equity by learning together, aligning, and integrating their actions to achieve population and systems-level change.”⁴ In 2017, the BOS formally integrated Upstream Investments’ principles into the County’s strategic plan, solidifying their commitment to this collective impact approach and long-term change.

Program Development and Early Implementation

In 2010, under the BOS’ direction, a working group developed a policy framework and infrastructure for the initiative. This eventually led to creating the Ad Hoc Board Committee which further formalized the Upstream Investments’ mission, established a public outreach strategy, launched technical assistance efforts, and created the Portfolio of Model Upstream Programs (hereafter referred to as ‘Portfolio’).⁵

Initially, the Portfolio began as a curated repository of rigorously evaluated, evidence-based programs that were being implemented in Sonoma County before expanding to include evidence-informed programs. Community-based organizations (CBOs) were encouraged to submit their programs to the Portfolio. After undergoing a formal review process that assessed program design, methodology, and outcomes, as well as a thorough literature review, programs that met the criteria were deemed to be investment-ready and placed into one of three tiers: Evidence-Based Practice, Promising Practice, and Emerging Practice for funding consideration by the local funder network. This online clearinghouse of model programs allowed funders, stakeholders, and community partners to share valuable information and elevate promising practices. Furthermore, some funders would give bonus points or preferential consideration to Portfolio-listed programs in their grantmaking processes. Beyond visibility and the potential of funding opportunities, participating organizations benefited from technical assistance designed to build their capacity in evidence-based program design, implementation, and evaluation. Since its inception, there have been over 100 programs listed in the Portfolio.

However, in 2016, Learning for Action conducted a formal evaluation of Upstream Investments’ progress and impact, which revealed key recommendations including the reassessment of the Portfolio review process and expanding the capacity for shared measurement.⁶ Furthermore, community input demonstrated that while the Portfolio promoted a standard for evidence-based and evidence-informed programs in Sonoma County, the evaluation revealed that it also created inequitable access. The rigorous and resource-intensive application process unintentionally favored larger, well-resourced organizations, often at the expense of smaller

³ Upstream Investment Sonoma County. *A Funder’s Guide to Upstream Investments Policy*, 13-14.

⁴ Kania, J., & Kramer, M. (2022) “Centering Equity in Collective Impact.” *Stanford Social Innovation Review*, 38.

⁵ Upstream Investments Policy Committee. (February 26, 2013). *Progress Report and Next Steps for 2013*, 1.

⁶ County of Sonoma Agenda Item Summary Report. (August 30, 2016). *Upstream Investment Progress Report*.

organizations that lacked the financial means to hire consultants or dedicate staff to engage in the process.

Shifting Focus: Equity and Accessibility

In response to the results of the program evaluation, Upstream Investments began to reassess its model and shifted away from actively promoting the local clearinghouse. Upstream Investments introduced Results-Based Accountability (RBA) to Sonoma County as a standard framework for measuring outcomes and improving program effectiveness across departments and programs, which was officially adopted by the BOS in 2020.⁷

RBA shifted the focus from simply tracking outputs, such as the number of individuals served, to assessing the actual impact of services on community well-being. At its core, RBA posed a critical question: *Are the people we serve better off as a result of our investments?* To support this effort, Upstream Investments facilitated a series of technical assistance workshops designed to help both County departments and local service providers integrate RBA principles into procurement and performance measurement practices. This approach aimed to strengthen collective accountability, improve outcomes, and align public investments with the County's broader equity and prevention goals.

Public and Private Partnership: The Funders' Circle

Upstream Investments was invited to participate in the Funders' Circle, a collaborative space where funders discussed strategies for supporting CBOs more effectively. Over four years, the group tackled key challenges impacting the nonprofit sector, such as duplicative grant applications, complicated grant processes, and limited funding opportunities.⁸

In creating a shared space for dialogue and coordination, the Funders' Circle encouraged more strategic investment. Although the group disbanded before the COVID-19 pandemic, there is renewed interest in reviving this space. Recently, the President and CEO of the Community Foundation of Sonoma County emphasized that local government has a unique opportunity to bridge the gap between the philanthropic and nonprofit sectors. He noted that local governments are well-positioned to serve as strategic connectors, facilitating long-lasting partnerships that leverage the strengths of each sector.⁸

Pivoting to Community Need

In 2022, Upstream Investment—under the Policy, Research, Evaluation, and Engagement (PREE) Division—was tasked to administer \$40 million in American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) funds. The funding was distributed across 27 programs in eight service areas, including housing, mental health, small business support, educational disparities, and culturally responsive COVID-19

⁷ County of Sonoma Human Services Department. (March 10, 2020). Update on Contracting Principles for Safety Net Services Program and Results-Based Accountability (RBA). Retrieved April 23, 2025 from <https://sonoma-county.legistar.com/LegislationDetail.aspx?ID=4388232&GUID=64C25113-9FF5-4C48-A86A-C32A464190B8&Options=&Search=>

⁸ O. Chavez, personal communication, April 4, 2025.

recovery efforts.⁹ Learning from past lessons from the implementation of the Portfolio, priority was given to Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC)-led organizations and communities disproportionately impacted by the pandemic. To support these organizations and ensure their success, the PREE Division implemented a robust suite of support services, including learning communities, performance tracking using Anti-Racist RBA, and technical assistance. This effort demonstrated Upstream Investments' ability to respond to emerging needs while also building the capacity of organizations through targeted technical assistance to ensure their success in service delivery. This was proven to be significantly important, as many of the funded groups had never been contracted by the County. The Assistant Director of Human Services noted that in administering ARPA funds, Upstream Investments functioned more like a philanthropic partner than a government agency through their heavy emphasis on capacity building and meaningful.¹⁰ Their thoughtful approach offers a promising model for how counties can distribute funds equitably and in a way that builds long-term nonprofit capacity, ultimately enhancing community trust. With ARPA funding set to dissolve in 2026, Upstream Investments finds itself at another pivotal juncture. A new four-year strategic plan is planned to be in development to guide the initiative's next phase.

The Landscape in Alameda County

Alameda County's Social Services Agency (ACSSA) delivers critical services to nearly one in three Alameda County residents through its three core departments: Adult and Aging Services, Children and Family Services, and Workforce and Benefits Administration, with a significant portion of its direct services carried out through contracted partnerships with CBOs. In 2023, during a community resource meeting convened by former Supervisor Carson, CBO leaders voiced long-standing concerns about the County's contracting and request for proposal (RFP) processes. Many highlighted the challenges that smaller organizations face when competing against larger, more established entities that have historically received County funding.

Given the complex nature of many of today's social issues, from housing and food insecurity to economic instability, local governments cannot address these issues effectively on their own. A thriving and diverse ecosystem of CBOs is essential to meeting these challenges. These organizations often serve as trusted messengers, particularly in communities where growing distrust of government remains at an all-time high.

Strengthening ACSSA's support for local CBOs not only improves the quality and equity of service delivery, but also enhances their capacity to secure additional funding for critical services beyond County contracts. There is an opportunity for ACSSA to utilize and leverage existing infrastructure that already supports cross-sector collaboration and innovation to advance this work.

⁹ County of Sonoma Human Services Department. (December 6, 2022). American Rescue Plan Act Community Resilience Program Update and Program Administration Capacity Improvements. Retrieved May 5, 2025 from <https://sonoma-county.legistar.com/LegislationDetail.aspx?ID=5948417&GUID=63E476AA-80B5-4129-B84A-D31D52D7B8FC>

¹⁰ L. Peralta, personal communication, April 21, 2025.

Utilizing Existing Infrastructure

“All In Alameda County” (ALL IN) was established in 2014 under the leadership of the late Supervisor Chan, with the vision of creating a County without poverty, where every individual thrives in healthy, vibrant, and resilient communities. The initiative’s mission is to lead, innovate, and collaborate across public, private, and community sectors to catalyze equitable policy and systems-level change that addresses the root causes of poverty.

Since its inception, ALL IN has raised over \$5.1 million to implement strategies to address poverty and its interconnected issues. The initiative has fostered collaboration among community members, county agencies, industry sectors, and CBOs, focusing on areas such as food insecurity, community empowerment, workforce development, school readiness, and ensuring that children, youth, and families have the resources and support they need to achieve sustained health and well-being.¹¹

In 2022, the Alameda County Board of Supervisors approved the relocation of ALL IN staff to the ACSSA Department of Government and Community Relations, with key initiatives such as Recipe4Health and the Youth Action Board transitioning to Alameda County Health. Since it transitioned to ACSSA, several changes have occurred, including the loss of two key staff members, ALL IN’s Executive Director and its Neighborhood and Youth Engagement Coordinator, as well as the sunseting of the ALL IN Steering Committee. These changes have presented an opportunity to re-evaluate the future of the ALL IN initiative and its place within ACSSA.

Currently, ALL IN is staffed by one full-time Program Development Manager, who has been with the initiative since its transition to ACSSA and holds critical institutional knowledge, and two recently hired full-time Program Specialists contracted for a limited term. As ALL IN works to disburse the remainder of its funds from the Hellman Foundation by 2026, the initiative finds itself at a critical crossroads. There is an opportunity for ALL IN to reimagine its identity, role, and strategic direction, drawing from lessons learned through Upstream Investments while responding to the current needs of the community, to inform its next phase.

Recommendations and Implications for Alameda County

Utilizing ALL IN, or a designated special project unit, the following three strategies are recommended for consideration:

1. **Serve as a Convener for Public and Private Collaboration:** ACSSA can play a pivotal role in bridging the gap between the nonprofit and philanthropic sectors around a common purpose to drive systems-level change. By facilitating intentional spaces for dialogue and connection, ACSSA can help build trust and relationships across silos and ensure that diverse voices and perspectives are represented. Partners can convene around specific issues or emerging community needs that require timely collective action.

¹¹ ALL IN Alameda County. (2021) History of ALL IN. Accessed May 5, 2025 from <https://allin.acgov.org/history-of-all-in/>

2. **Facilitate Technical Assistance to CBOs:** ACSSA can support the capacity building of CBOs to effectively design, implement, and measure their programs. By offering technical assistance and training on performance measurement, ACSSA can ensure that organizations are equipped to demonstrate proven strategies and meaningful impacts to increase capacity to secure funding. This could include:
 - Offering training in the development of logic models and RBA.
 - Guiding the collection and usage of data for continuous improvement.
 - Facilitating workshops on topics such as financial management and sustainability planning for smaller or emerging organizations.

With these resources, CBOs can build stronger foundations for long-term sustainability and demonstrate outcomes to funders and other partners, which in turn increases their funding potential.

3. **Engage with the Local Network of Funders:** Much like the Funders' Circle in Sonoma County's Upstream Investments, ACSSA could actively participate in existing collaborative spaces where funders are already convening. By engaging in these conversations, the ACSSA can better understand funders' current challenges, emerging trends, and shared priorities. This involvement can help ACSSA align its efforts with broader philanthropic strategies and identify opportunities to support CBOs in ways that complement existing investments.

The agency may decide to phase in these strategies over time and focus on achieving one at a time. However, implementing all three in tandem would create greater potential for systemic change.

To support this work, it is important to acknowledge that ALL IN's historical identity may present challenges in adopting a renewed role. To address this, establishing a special projects unit, drawing on the successful elements of both ALL IN and Sonoma County's Upstream Investments, could serve as a neutral, forward-looking vehicle to carry this work without the constraints of past associations. However, whether through ALL IN or a newly structured unit, successful implementation will require clear, strong and sustained support from leadership.

Designating one or more advocates to lead this work is essential, as evidenced by the success of Upstream Investments, where political commitment and consistent support made it possible to institutionalize. Furthermore, to ensure these strategies endure through leadership transitions and organizational changes, they must be institutionalized into the agency's core operations and culture. This includes aligning departmental practices, fostering cross-sector partnerships, and committing to a shared vision of community-centered, measurable impact. Additionally, adequate and sustained staffing is vital. With the current Program Specialists employed on a limited-term basis, the agency must commit to designating sufficient staff. Without this investment in personnel, implementation efforts may stall or lose momentum.

It is also important to recognize that there may be opposition to this initiative. Some may question whether it aligns with the agency's mission and vision, particularly as a new strategic plan is currently being developed. There may be concerns that this work falls outside the agency's scope and would be better housed elsewhere within the County. Addressing these concerns openly and collaboratively will be key to building support and ensuring the initiative's long-term success.

Conclusion

Upstream Investments demonstrates how local government can reimagine its role as a convener, technical assistance provider, and catalyst for systemic change. With a foundation already laid through initiatives like ALL IN, ACSSA is well-positioned to adapt key lessons from Sonoma County's model to advance a countywide collective impact strategy. Amid increasing threats to vital public services and uncertainty in federal and state funding, it is critical for local government to evolve into a more strategic and collaborative partner. As ACSSA develops its next four-year strategic plan, it has a unique opportunity to establish its role as a connector between the nonprofit and philanthropic sectors to help uplift community-driven solutions and drive collective impact across Alameda County.

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