**Meeting the Moment: How Federal Recovery Funds Helped Accelerate Place-Based Strategies for Improving Economic Mobility**

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In March 2021, Congress passed the American Rescue Plan (ARP) Act, sending an influx of federal dollars to state and local governments for pandemic recovery. Within six months, Spartanburg, SC was already putting a portion of its ARP money to work improving outcomes for families and young children.

The city was able to quickly identify and invest in a community priority, and to use ARP funds to leverage philanthropic dollars thanks, in part, to strong place-based partnerships (PBPs) with organizations like Spartanburg Academic Movement (SAM).

ARP funding has created a unique moment of both opportunity and challenge for local governments. The one-time money has the potential to kick-start lasting long-term change in communities, but only if they have the capacity and focus to identify and apply it effectively to address their areas of greatest need. This is not a small task and requires cross-sector, community-driven partnerships like those in Spartanburg.

Recognizing the important role place-based partnerships could play in moving ARP funds to their transformative potential, Results for America (RFA) with support from Blue Meridian Partners (BMP) launched Meet the Moment (MTM) to support community organizations in using federal recovery funds to advance economic mobility and build stronger relationships with government partners. RFA provided support and coordinated technical assistance to 14 regional backbone organizations from July 2021 through June 2022. A backbone organization brings together diverse stakeholders to work towards a common goal.

The goals of MTM were as follows:

1. Connect backbone organizations to technical assistance providers and subject matter experts to help them collaborate with their public sector partners on ARP strategy and implementation.
2. Support and advise backbone public sector partners on ARP spending plans and implementation.
3. Facilitate and support shared learning across backbone organizations and public sector partners in Place Matters Communities.

RFA worked closely with backbone partners to understand their economic and social mobility goals, and then to collaboratively determine if technical assistance (TA) specific to ARP would support their goals. Just over half of the backbone organizations created and implemented action plans, and the remainder chose to participate in shared learning opportunities.

A defining feature of MTM was to be responsive to each organization's needs and assets. Therefore, RFA looked to each backbone organization to identify the needs of their community and the highest leverage point to advance their economic mobility priorities.

**Improving Economic and Social Mobility**

Meet the Moment builds on RFA's and BMP's prior work on economic and social mobility.

The Opportunity Accelerator is an RFA-led initiative that works with government to build its capacity to collaborate with community partners and directly with residents to identify barriers to economic mobility, co-design programs and solutions, and ensure those programs and solutions deliver on outcomes that ultimately increase community wellbeing.

Place Matters is a BMP initiative that aims to improve economic and social mobility in a portfolio of communities through investments in place-based partnerships and catalytic supports].

**Technical Assistance Needs and Policy Areas**

For backbone organizations that created and implemented action plans, RFA connected them with TA providers with expertise in the community's specific needs. Four **categories of TA** emerged for backbone organizations:

- **Fiscal Mapping**: Support analyzing ARP funding streams that support children, youth, and families. Through the MTM Initiative several communities requested analysis of State and Local Fiscal Recovery Fund (SLFRF), Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief (ESSER) Fund, and other opportunities available through ARP.
- **Policy Advocacy**: Support connecting public sector leaders and effectively advocating for policy change. Power mapping to identify the highest leverage government leaders/offices, introductions to key public officials, support designing political strategy, etc.
- **Policy Coaching**: Support through high-level feedback and guidance on ARP funding requests/proposals to government, explanations of allowable uses for various relief funds, sharing best practice/latest research, and providing examples from or introductions to other communities.
- **Proposal Development**: Deep, technical support developing and submitting ARP funding requests.

In addition to the TA categories, several **policy areas** emerged. Cradle-to-career funding was the primary policy area followed by early childhood education and infant and maternal health. See below for an overview **of policy areas** and **TA categories** for **backbone organizations** that implemented TA action plans.

| Place Matters Community | Backbone Organization | Policy Area | TA Category |
|---|---|---|---|
| Atlanta, GA | United Way of Greater Atlanta | Cradle-to-Career Funding | Fiscal Mapping |
| Fresno, CA | Fresno Cradle-to-Career | Cradle-to-Career Funding | Policy Coaching |
| Guilford, NC | Ready for School, Ready for Life | Infant and Maternal Health | Proposal Development |
| Oakland, CA | Oakland Thrives | Cradle-to-Career Funding | Fiscal Mapping |
| Salt Lake City, UT | United Way of Salt Lake | Cradle-to-Career Funding | Policy Advocacy |
| Spartanburg, SC | Spartanburg Academic Movement | Cradle-to-Career Funding | Fiscal Mapping |
| Tulsa, OK | George Kaiser Family Foundation | Early Childhood Education | Policy Coaching |

**ARP Strategy and Implementation**

Through the MTM Initiative, RFA uncovered important considerations for three approaches place-based organizations commonly used to influence ARP strategy and implementation in their communities: 1) applying for funds; 2) influencing fund disbursement; and 3) collaboratively implementing ARP-funded initiatives.

**1. Applying for Funds**

Several backbone organizations participating in MTM pursued ARP strategy and implementation by applying for ARP funds directly from their city or county governments. These applications were largely geared towards ARP SLFRF because of the flexibility afforded to local leaders in disbursing these funds. Ready for School, Ready for Life (Ready, Ready) in Guilford County, NC is a strong example of this approach. RFA connected Ready, Ready with TA provider, WestEd, to develop a proposal to expand Ready, Ready's Navigator Program. The Navigator Program places professionals in each OB/GYN and pediatric practice in Guilford County who act as liaisons between families, local service providers, and government representatives. With WestEd's support, Ready, Ready successfully applied for and was awarded $1.5M in ARP funds in October 2022 and intends to apply for additional funding in the future.

**2. Influencing Fund Disbursement**

Another approach backbones pursued to affect ARP strategy and implementation was influencing the allocations of ARP funds.

Prior to the launch of MTM, the Up Partnership, a BMP Place Matters grantee in San Antonio, TX, collaborated with the Children's Funding Project (CFP) and PFM to create a fiscal map. The analysis conducted by CFP and PFM and the resulting advocacy by the UP Partnership led to a $10M ARP investment in Youth Success in San Antonio.

Inspired by the UP Partnership's success, many backbones pursued fiscal mapping as a means to influence how ARP funds were allocated in their communities. Backbones believed fiscal maps would help a broad range of local actors arrive at a shared understanding of the possibilities available through ARP when aligned with the other local, state, federal, and private funding sources.

**3. Collaboratively Implementing ARP-funded Initiatives**

Finally, backbone organizations partnered with the public sector to implement ARP-funded initiatives. In these instances, backbones were invited by the public sector to help administer funds, contribute funding to an effort, or implement a program on the government's behalf. The United Way of Greater Atlanta (UWGA) played nearly all these roles for local governments in the Metro Atlanta area, but one implementation role that stands out is their partnership with Mayor Andre Dickens of Atlanta, which focused on early childhood education. In April 2022, Mayor Dickens made a call for a $20M investment in early childhood, $5M of which would come from the City of Atlanta's SLFRF funds, another $5M from Atlanta Public Schools, and $10M from the private and philanthropic sectors, to which UWGA answered Mayor Dickens' call in partnership with the Whitehead Foundation with $4.5M.

**Considerations for Place-based Efforts**

In addition to the approaches outlined above, RFA identified several important considerations for key stakeholders–philanthropy, government, and TA organizations–when supporting or participating in place-based efforts.

- **Government and place-based organizations must center community:** When identifying and prioritizing sectors to focus policy change and ultimately funding, the public sector should not only have representatives from place-based organizations at the table but individuals and families affected by policy decisions as well.
- **Government and place-based organizations should understand and consider all funding options:** Public and private funding streams at the local, state, and federal levels can be complicated and intimidating. Fiscal mapping is an extremely useful tool to understand available resources, how they align with key organizational priorities, and where there are gaps.

- **Relationships matter for government and backbone organizations**: Relationships can produce a safer space for all stakeholders to be clear and honest about data and barriers and opportunities to attain equitable results for communities. Often, government and public sector entities work independently from external partners, but the public sector's work processes and outcomes are strengthened by strong relationships with other stakeholders, especially groups connected to underserved communities.
- **Philanthropy should consider organizational context:** From the beginning, BMP established a clear intention around listening to and centering the context of backbone organizations. Rather than encouraging the ultimate aims of the work, BMP, in partnership with RFA, recognized the importance of supporting backbones in accessing ARP funding based on the needs and assets they identified.
- **Technical assistance organizations should prioritize responsiveness:** As a source of TA, RFA recognized the importance of facilitating support rather than forcing or dictating specific scopes of work. Through the assessment and consultative nature of RFA's TA matching process, backbones were empowered to pursue the TA providers and services that best fit their needs. In some cases, backbones made the strategic choice to decline RFA's support either due to internal capacity limitations or because they did not require the specific support RFA offered.

**Exemplar — Spartanburg Academic Movement (SAM) and the city of Spartanburg, SC:**

SAM's deep and collaborative relationship with public sector leaders, particularly Spartanburg's City Manager Chris Story, made it unique among MTM participants. SAM's Executive Director, Russell Booker, met weekly with Chris, housing authority officials, school district superintendents, and economic development leaders during the COVID-19 pandemic to support their community and organizations. Chris and other public leaders were involved in RFA's meetings with SAM from the beginning. After initial diagnostic discussions, RFA determined SAM would benefit most from fiscal mapping TA to help them and their public sector partners maximize ARP spending in conjunction with other resources. RFA then secured TA from the Children's Funding Project (CFP) to help SAM and the City Manager identify ARP goals, strategies, and tools that could accelerate ongoing economic and social mobility efforts in Spartanburg.

SAM and the City Manager landed on two main priorities for their work with CFP and MTM:

1. Targeted support for SAM and the City of Spartanburg regarding potential child and youth-focused uses for the city's American Rescue Plan State and Local Fiscal Recovery Funds (SLFRF).
2. A comprehensive local fiscal map as well as a state-level fiscal map focused on federal and state funding available for children and youth ages 0–24 in South Carolina.

As of August 2022, the City of Spartanburg has allocated $1.5M in ARP funds to support an infant and maternal health program–Hello Family. CFP fiscal maps and support will guide SAM

and the City Manager in identifying the best use of the city's approximately $15M in remaining ARP funding. CFP is currently in the process of conducting

and analysis to do the following: inform the city's SLFRF spending strategy for children and youth; develop cost estimates for potential components of a spending strategy; and identify national examples of uses of SLFRF funds consistent with SAM and the city's priority focus areas. CFP is also working to ensure its technical assistance is responsive to community needs by collaborating with other local TA providers and stakeholders.

**Lessons Learned from Spartanburg and SAM**

While Spartanburg represents a specific context, the city serves as an example for other communities looking to distribute ARP resources collectively. The relationship between Chris and Russell, in particular, offers insight into the types of leadership necessary for trusting, cross-sector collaboration. In a talk for government and civic leaders about how ARP could facilitate authentic government-community partnerships, Chris and Russell offered the following:

1. **Relationships Matter:** Connecting with other leaders, sharing current events, and creating space for organic conversations can result in the identification of synergistic efforts. These relationships can also produce a safer space for all stakeholders to be clear and honest about data and barriers, as well as opportunities to attain equitable results for communities.
2. **Balance urgency with authentic community engagement**: The creation of space and time, as well as a history of deep listening, provides a way to look at past community engagement and input and use it as an opportunity for reflection.
3. **Community engagement done well can redirect mounting pressures toward productive ends.** By building relationships with community networks, governments can identify important community priorities and secure clear mandates for difficult budget choices that advance equitable policies and programs. When city leaders match goals to the right engagement approaches, there can be powerful results.

**Conclusion**

The organizations that participated in MTM were already working to improve economic and social mobility in their communities. MTM was designed like a moving walkway, to pick them up where they were and to help them leverage ARP funds to move more quickly along a portion of their journey. The technical assistance RFA was providing through MTM has ended. The window for obligating and using ARP funds will similarly end. But the tools and skills backbone organizations developed and the relationships they built with public sector partners will continue

to serve them on the next leg of their journey towards long-term, sustainable improvement in the lives of young people and families in their communities.
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