



A Policy & Practice Profile of Human Service Leader Susan Dreyfus

Susan Dreyfus, former secretary of the Washington State Department of Social and Health Services, has been fortunate to achieve a career that has included leadership roles in both the public sector and the nonprofit human services sector.

She has recently rejoined the nonprofit sector, yet is committed to continuing to speak out on the need for systems change and larger impact. During the course of her career, which includes leading child welfare efforts in two states, she frequently shares

reforming the public child welfare response that we have forgotten the larger and more important community role,” said Dreyfus.

It was this focus on systems and impact that marked Dreyfus’ tenure in Washington State as part of Governor Christine Gregoire’s Cabinet. Dreyfus led an agency with an \$11 billion biennial budget and more than 16,000 employees for two-and-one-half years. “I loved my time in Washington State with Governor Gregoire. She is the real deal. She is focused on finding long-

building the capacity for lasting impact and advocating for vulnerable populations. She began her new role in January.

Dreyfus’ leadership also includes being chief executive officer of the nonprofits in the Families International group — the Alliance for Children and Families, Ways to Work, and United Neighborhood Centers of America. She is a board member of the other organization in the group, the for-profit FEI Behavioral Health. Back-office operations for the American Association of

Building Stronger Communities: Creating Public and Nonprofit Human Service Partnerships

that she has grown tired of trying to make programs and services within larger failed systems work, and that this is the time for us to commit ourselves to impact; impact that is measured by reducing poverty, and improving both people’s health and their opportunities for educational and employment success.

Using her experiences in child welfare, she believes states and the larger community have too narrowly defined it as simply the public child welfare response. Further, she believes that until we define child welfare more broadly as a major public health issue — while also engaging communities in true shared governance and responsibility — a truly effective system will never be achieved.

“There is no worse day in America than when a single child is not able to be cared for within his or her own home and family. Child Protective Services and the response of the states are but a part of the larger system called child welfare. We seem to have become so focused on constantly

term solutions to the issues we face, even during the height of our budget crisis,” Dreyfus said.

Yet, Dreyfus left Washington State earlier than she had intended due to the untimely death of Peter Goldberg. Goldberg was the president and CEO of Families International, a Milwaukee-based nonprofit parent organization of a group of national companies dedicated to working with nonprofit human service organizations for both high performance and the generation of impact in the communities they serve.

Dreyfus was very familiar with Families International. She had served as chief operating officer, with Goldberg as her mentor and superior, from 2003–2007. So when the board extended to her an offer to succeed Goldberg as president and CEO, she realized that the path her life had taken had prepared her for this new role because she believes in the importance of the nonprofit human service sector as it works in partnership with the public sector, not just providing services under contract, but creatively

Children’s Residential Centers are also housed within Families International.

“Leaving Washington State was bittersweet on a number of levels. While my husband and I are delighted to be living together full-time again, and I am having fun seeing my grandson more often, I truly loved my job there, and losing my friend Peter Goldberg was especially difficult,” said Dreyfus. “Yet, the nonprofit sector is at a critical moment in our history as we lead through this recession and its far reaching consequences. I see many potential risks for the sector, but I also see great opportunities, especially within health reform as it is implemented for vulnerable and high-need populations. I truly believe this is our moment to shine.”

Importance of Partnerships

Dreyfus provided leadership in Washington State through the toughest budget crisis since the Great Depression. During her tenure, she and her team were required to cut \$2.1 billion from the agency budget in two

years. This extraordinarily difficult process inspired her to closely take note of creative approaches that were making a difference in how the agency led change during a very difficult time.

One of those creative approaches Dreyfus described during the 2011 Human Services Summit at Harvard University (which was cosponsored by APHSA and held in conjunction with its retreat for state CEOs). Dreyfus explained that through a department-wide focus on one vision and one mission, and working through one core set of values, she and her team broke new ground in internal alignment, integration, and innovative partnerships, with a focus on impact beyond the outcomes of the array of programs and services for which they were responsible.

An example of the innovation that was achieved is highlighted by how Dreyfus and her team took to reexamining WorkFirst, Washington State's TANF program. They worked together to embrace a set of principles that included a child- and family-centered focus, engaged many partners, and used data and predictive analytics to better understand both the adults on TANF and their children.

"We had lost our way in this program. We had gotten so focused on counting participation as defined by the federal government, that we were not engaging people in ways that could truly help move them and their children out of poverty," Dreyfus observed.

Today, the WorkFirst redesign is a national example of how government can truly change these systems consistent with its values from the inside out, and not just keep trying to fix them through new requirements from the outside in. "We realized we needed to change the way we did our work, not just create new programs and services," Dreyfus said.

Another creative approach is utilizing partnerships and shared governance. Whether driven by budget cutting or social conditions, these will, according to Dreyfus, be the standard practice in years to come. "The fact is that not only are we facing a permanent reset in budgeting at the federal, state, and local government levels, but truly a renegotiation of the social compact. So we must continue to move beyond program outcomes to partner and leverage resources across sectors and within communities for impact," she explained.

"For me, this impact means reducing poverty, improving people's health, and improving their educational and employment success. These ultimately are the issues that hold so many children, families, and communities back from truly realizing their potential and dreams," she said. "Human service leaders need to feel as responsible for these areas of impact as they feel about the effective and efficient delivery of the programs and services they oversee."

New Social Compact Requires Civic Engagement

After going through major budget cuts in Washington State, Dreyfus knows firsthand that the social services safety net has been broken for many people, and that the advocacy responsibility of the nonprofit sector is now more important than ever.

For example, during one of several "town hall" meetings she held last summer to educate the public on the cumulative impact of the Great Recession and discuss yet another round of budget cuts, a woman confined to a wheelchair told Dreyfus how she now had to decide whether to go without lunch or without her bath due to another reduction in hours of in-home services for which she was eligible.

During conversations with nonprofit human service providers, Dreyfus has noted their concerns about the apathy toward the poor, near-poor, and vulnerable populations. This will be an area of focus for Dreyfus — getting more people civically engaged and modeling new approaches to advocacy so the sector remains true to its responsibility to advocate.

"The nonprofit sector bears part of the responsibility that American citizens at all levels are not seeing and understanding the cumulative impact of this Great Recession," she said. "We have to educate the public that the safety net isn't intact or even stressed, for many people, it is broken.

"The nonprofit human service sector overestimates what it takes to influence public policy and budgets, and underestimates its ability to influence them. We cannot have a passive mindset. We must mobilize and effectively engage our communities, staff, boards, and those we serve," she said.

Leveraging Unique Strengths

Blending her passionate belief in the independence and advocacy responsibility of the nonprofit human service sector with the critical importance of its impact for the people most in need, Dreyfus will use key pieces of her background to help Families International leverage the unique strengths of its affiliates and partnerships to maximize collaboration, synergy, and growth.

"We have one collective vision, and that is to have a healthy society and strong communities for all children and families," Dreyfus said. "Whatever we do, it must be focused on that one short, but powerful, statement of vision, yet also measured through the impact our sector helps to achieve."

Dreyfus' background and management strengths are being implemented

See Profile on page 14

House or Senate. Mostly members read prepared statements written by their staff. Members spend as little time in Washington as possible. As a result it is left up to committee leadership, staff, and lobbyists from special interest groups to draft amendments and bills. Many times lawmakers have only a very general knowledge of the provisions contained in the bills that do make it to a vote. In today's environment no one is willing to rely on trust and as a result, as Widow Wilson pointed out, it is impossible to hold anyone accountable.

The absence of attention to the admittedly difficult practice of legislating is

an indicator of the broader malady in Congress — the acceptance that true debate and legislative deliberation are impediments to the greater good of achieving political and party electoral successes. Lost in that practice are legislators who want to do what is right for the country and their constituents. The iconic movie, “Mr. Smith Goes to Washington” could never be made today.

Why is this important? The budget Control Act passed last August uses a mechanism called sequestration to cut spending for a number of important entitlement programs. Sequestration

cuts affected programs by applying an across-the-board percentage reduction, with absolutely no regard for the consequences of such cuts. Sequestration first occurs in January 2013. There is increasing discussion about amending the Budget Control Act to avoid or replace sequestration. However, at least until after the election and Congress meets in a “lame duck” session, there is little reason to be optimistic about its ability to find the political courage to overcome differences and do the right thing. 

Profile from page 11

at Families International at the perfect time. The Alliance for Children and Families and United Neighborhood Centers of America, two 100-year-old national membership organizations, boast a strong network of more than 525 combined member organizations. The combined “voice” for these organizations offers diversified strength and a stunning level of expertise.

“I am very excited to see what our member organizations and the people they serve can accomplish with and through the power of innovation, partnership, and advocacy,” said Dreyfus.

Another organization within the Families International group will continue to strengthen families through another avenue. Ways to Work is a unique Community Development Financial Institution that provides affordable loans, case management, and practical financial education to working families with challenging credit histories. Clients use the low-interest loans primarily to purchase reliable, used cars that help them retain jobs or move ahead in their careers, reduce tardiness and absenteeism at work, access additional education or job training, and meet the needs of their families. It

is administered locally by Alliance for Children and Families members in 53 sites around the country.

A 2011 Ways to Work program evaluation found that 82 percent of participants sustain themselves and their families without TANF cash assistance despite receiving it before receiving their Ways to Work loan.

Dreyfus commented, “This program is a living example of the Families International mission. It is a model for improving factors that push families into poverty, while at the same time teaching them how to remain self-sufficient.”

FEI Behavioral Health achieves the collective vision by protecting the most valuable asset an organization possesses — its workforce. “FEI has taken the traditional employee assistance program model and partners with organizations of all sizes to protect and enhance their workforce effectiveness and organizational resiliency,” said Dreyfus.

“FEI also provides for the ‘people side’ of crisis preparedness and response,” she continued. “It utilizes the strength of the Alliance for Children and Families network in both of these program areas. FEI has contracts within the

government, nonprofit, and for-profit sectors — including crisis management contracts with the U.S. Department of Justice, the National Transportation Safety Board, the U.S. House of Representatives, and the U.S. Senate.

Despite taking on these new leadership roles, Dreyfus, who was serving as vice president of the APHSA Board of Directors, will continue on the board as a member at large.

Working with APHSA and its public-sector members to engage in innovation and to have a more productive dialogue between sectors is something Dreyfus hopes to work on with APHSA.

“My experiences have led me to clearly understand it will take all of us — public, private, and nonprofit sectors — to be leaders and share governance and responsibility if we are to achieve the America we all aspire for,” she explained.

More information is available at Alliance for Children and Families:

www.alliance1.org

Ways to Work: www.waystowork.org

United Neighborhood Centers of America: www.unca.org

FEI Behavioral Health: www.feinet.com 