

## CITY SQUARE: CASE STUDY IN TRANSFORMATION

### Background

The revelation of a data-driven study released in 2012 was a wake-up call for area nonprofits, including CitySquare. Communities Foundation of Texas (CFT) and the Thomson Family Foundation engaged the Corporation for Enterprise Development (CFED) to complete the study, the Dallas Asset & Opportunity Profile. The study looked at Dallas and the North Texas Region and revealed that the region's poverty level was higher than the national average. The profile showed that two out of every five households (39%) in Dallas live in asset poverty, which means the households do not have sufficient assets available to last 90 days should they lose their main source of income. In addition, almost half of Dallas residents with a high school diploma are living at or below the Federal poverty level. This creates a problem where many residents have too few resources — savings, investments, credit, insurance — to fall back on in the event of a job loss. Financial insecurity destabilize families and jeopardizes the long-term stability of local economies.

Following the release of the profile, CFT laid out a plan to convene and align social service agencies and foundations around the issue of asset building. The plan included providing training and capacity building to the organizations that support low income working families with the goal of teaching them to use data to make informed programming decisions. The plan was administered through the Data Driven Decision-Making Institute, known among participants as D3. The institute was designed to empower social service organizations with the ability to accelerate the development of enhanced solutions for the social and economic problems facing their clients.

The D3 Institute consisted of targeted learning opportunities for personnel at all levels of participating organizations, including leadership and program staff. Participants were selected through a competitive grant process and asked to make a 12-month commitment to program participation. Forty-six nonprofits have participated in D3 since 2012, and leaders of many of the organizations have called it a game-changing experience.

CFT also researched best practices across the country and found the Working Families Success model based on the

work of the Annie E. Casey Foundation. The model provides a framework for delivering a “bundled” set of three core services with the goal of helping clients overcome barriers and advance economically. In 2014, CFT launched the Working Families Success cohort and provided technical assistance, training and coaching for agencies interested in moving toward this integrated service delivery model for their clients.

### CitySquare's Participation

CitySquare, formerly Central Dallas Ministries, participated in both D3 and the Working Families Success cohort. The nonprofit, which started as a food pantry in 1988, was in the trenches of offering such social services as foster care and workforce development when the study was released. But data in the profile made it clear that the nonprofits were losing the battle. Despite all that was being done, Dallas had the sobering distinction of ranking first among cities in Texas with the largest number of children living in poverty.

By 2012, CitySquare had grown into one of the city's leading poverty-fighting agencies that also offered programming in Houston, San Antonio, Austin and Denver. Over the years, it had expanded its services and even changed its name to support its evolving identity. When CFT kicked off its initial D3 cohort, CitySquare was in the early planning stages for a new idea called the Opportunity Center. This project funded in partnership with PepsiCo, was to create a single location

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CitySquare's Opportunity Center (above) is a multi-service 52,000 square foot facility originally envisioned as a solution to overcrowding in the growing number of social services and community development programs. After participating in D3 and the Working Families Success cohort with CFT, CitySquare adopted the “quarterback approach” to create a center that uses data to develop comprehensive programs for clients.

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that would include a food distribution center, a state of the art wellness center, a comprehensive employment training center, AmeriCorps offices and staging areas for the non-profit's growing Food on the Move program, which is funded by the Texas Department of Agriculture.

The Opportunity Center was originally conceived as a "mall of nonprofits," where local agencies could be co-located together to support clients. But through its involvement in the D3, CitySquare began to see the Opportunity Center as a way to deliver more integrated and connected services, based on data. CitySquare moved from seeing itself as a landlord who merely houses nonprofits together to being the quarterback of a team of service providers who help clients navigate an integrated system of economic services and supports, mutually aligned around a shared vision.

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*- John Siburt,  
President & Chief Operations Officer,  
CitySquare*

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Suzanne Smith, founder of Social Impact Architects and a D3 facilitator and coach, was assigned to work with CitySquare as part of its participation in D3. Smith has worked with other communities, including Cincinnati which had established a series of integrated service models through its United Way-led Place Matters Project. Smith and CFT staff arranged for CitySquare to tour Cincinnati's integrated service delivery locations as a way to demonstrate what could be possible for the Opportunity Center.

After participating in D3, CitySquare was eager to join CFT's Working Families Success cohort. While the organization philosophically supported the idea of co-creating with its clients (whom the nonprofit calls neighbors), the Working Families Success cohort helped CitySquare focus in on the seamless integration of services, and develop the full range of services now provided at the Opportunity Center to support neighbors around the achievement of economic outcomes. Once the CitySquare team gets the model refined at

the Opportunity Center, they hope to expand it to other CitySquare locations and populations.

CitySquare developed a unique model for Dallas, but also now uses greater collaboration and data-driven decision-making internally, because of the CFT cohort work, said John Siburt, CitySquare's president and chief operations officer.

“We had grown so fast and had become siloed in our thinking internally,” Siburt said. “We needed a vision and language to drive us to the next level, and both D3 and Working Families got us there.”

## Lessons Learned

The CFED report lit a fuse within CitySquare's team, as well as the larger nonprofit community, that transformed people's understanding of the economic challenges facing local households. Additionally, the report triggered an interest in providers, such as CitySquare, to look at the services they provided, and evaluate if those offerings were making the real and lasting impact that they were striving to help their neighbors achieve. The CitySquare team reflected on the key lessons learned so far:

- **Co-creation** was always important to the CitySquare ethos, but the Working Families Success model and intense technical assistance and support provided by CFT took the idea and made it tangible for the staff, especially through the financial coaching approach to serving clients.
- **Adoption of best practices** allowed CitySquare to leapfrog existing practices and dream bigger for its work. CFT, through its funding and support, brought in local and national experts who provided learning and best practices, which made the process more impactful and efficient for CitySquare and other participating agencies.
- Data was always being collected at CitySquare, but now CitySquare leaders are **intentional about their use of data and outcomes** to evaluate programs and better understand how they can improve all internal and external work. The expanded focus on outcomes through the agency has created a reinforcing loop of continuous improvement, transparency and shared language for staff at all levels.