IF WE KNOW WHAT IT TAKES TO MOVE THE NEEDLE, WHY DON’T WE?

By Evelyn Diaz

Heartland Alliance President Evelyn Diaz was named 2016 Making a Difference honoree by Chicago Women in Philanthropy. The award recognized Evelyn’s service record in Chicago’s public and philanthropic sectors and her commitment to advancing causes that impact the lives of women and girls. This essay is based on the keynote address originally prepared by Evelyn for the organization’s annual luncheon and award ceremony, which took place on March 3, 2016.
In order to move the needle and make progress in the social sector, we need to look at things through a different lens than we’ve been offered, and work together in new, mutually reinforcing ways.
Even in a diverse city like Chicago, growing up with darker skin than everyone else in my family was “a thing.”

My Puerto-Rican mother, who raised my brothers and me alone and went to great lengths to move our family out of poverty, noticed how the continual stream of insensitive comments about my skin color affected me as a young girl. Determined that I would have a strong self-image and a positive view of my brownness, she would do all kinds of things to reinforce a message popular in the 1970s African American community that “Black is Beautiful.” On some Saturdays, she would take me shopping on Madison Street on Chicago’s West Side where the streets and shops were teeming with people, food, colors and music all celebrating Black culture. I loved those trips because they did make me feel beautiful and proud of my color. I didn’t realize until much later how extraordinary it was for my mother to insert herself into another culture and community – one in which she had no connections – just so her daughter could learn to appreciate and feel proud of her appearance.

My mother was instrumental in teaching me how to view the world through a different lens than the one I was being offered, and also how important it is to have the support of someone who has your best interests at heart. Nonprofits work under the same premise. In order to move the needle and make progress in the social sector, we need to look at things through a different lens than we’ve been offered, and work together in new, mutually reinforcing ways.
I have a deep and abiding love for the social sector and I share a vision with a growing number of people committed to making the sector stronger.

I fell in love with social work right on the front lines, counseling sexual assault and domestic violence survivors, and homeless women and children. For those who have done direct service work and carried a caseload, you know how powerful it is to watch the transformation of a person who walks through the door without hope and unable to see a better life for herself, and how, with a little support and a few resources, she blossoms and becomes unstoppable.

Seeing that transformation happen over and over again is what hooked me, and it’s the proof that motivates me to this day that our sector is an essential part of solving some of our society’s most challenging problems.

The Chicago Jobs Council is where I learned how to run a nonprofit, how to think about entire systems, and how to change them. It’s also where I got a front row seat watching a great leader create a great workplace. My mentor — who I also call my second dad, Bob Wordlaw — nurtured me as a young leader; he gave me room to lead and he coached me through the tricky spots.
Working for two Chicago mayors was a significant step in my career. In the Mayor’s Office, I learned how city government operates, and I learned how to get things done effectively in what can be a very challenging environment. Running the city’s social services department, I got a bird’s eye view of the vast landscape of service providers. I was able to see all the variation in approach, models, quality, and performance. And, I learned to see our work through the eyes of an investor.

Now I have the privilege to serve as president of one of the world’s leading anti-poverty organizations, and one of the oldest and largest in Chicago. I’ve been thinking a lot about the 400,000 vulnerable people we serve each year, about the demoralizing environment in which the social sector now finds itself, and about what it’s going to take for us to achieve breakthrough results for the people we serve.

The situation of women and girls is a useful illustration.
WOMEN STRIDE AHEAD //

// AND REMAIN STUCK
Women in the U.S. have been doing better on nearly every indicator of social and economic well-being over time.

in college //

Women age 25-34 are now more likely than men to have attained a college degree.

We now receive the majority of doctoral degrees, a reversal from just 18 years ago.

in the workforce //

Since the 1950s, women’s participation in the workforce has nearly doubled (it holds steady at 61%). In contrast, men’s has steadily declined by 14 percentage points.

Women lead major corporations, we are astronauts, and we are 4 out of the 8 Ivy League University presidents.

in government //

Women have been Secretaries of State and are US Supreme Court justices. Hillary Clinton represents the first real chance for a woman President of the United States.

For more information, see detailed sources and notes at the end of this report.
The World Economic Forum recently reported that women won’t achieve economic equality for another 118 years. This means that unless something changes, my great-granddaughter’s granddaughter will be among the first women to see wage parity.

We know that women are still more likely to experience poverty throughout their lifetime.

We continue to be at greater risk for depression, domestic and sexual abuse, human trafficking, domestic homicides, stalking and sexual harassment — and that now includes all forms of online harassment as well.

Women make up 59% of minimum-wage workers, they confront unfair work scheduling practices, wage theft, and denial of paid sick days.

Certainly, there is real progress of which to be proud. Yet, there are places where we’ve stalled out.

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As some of you might have guessed, for women of color, all of these statistics look worse. Heartland Alliance’s recent poverty report points out shocking disparities for people of color across every single dimension of well-being: Education, Employment, Housing, Health, Safety, Justice, and Wealth.

Clearly, our work is not done.
WE’RE MAKING A DIFFERENCE

The work of the social sector is generating real impact in our city. It’s important not to lose sight of the fact that we already have many nonprofit organizations doing amazing, innovative work. Chicago is home to a large number of impact-oriented programs driven by powerful missions, dedicated leaders, and committed staff. We have MacArthur Fellows, and each year the Chicago Innovation Awards recognize deserving winners committed to improving our city.

We are also leveraging substantial new resources to bring to life promising projects and initiatives citywide, dedicated to improving the lives of Chicagoland residents. WINGS Metro just cut the ribbon on the first new domestic violence shelter in decades. Soon, North Lawndale will have a new arts and training center, replicating the world-renowned Manchester-Bidwell campus in Pittsburgh. WomenOnCall has unleashed 3,000 women to lend their professional skills and expertise to support nonprofits. And the University of Chicago’s Urban Labs is making it possible for us to rigorously test our programs, so that our field can begin to generate evidence about what works, for whom, and why.

BUT, WE’RE NOT MOVING THE NEEDLE FAR ENOUGH

It’s time for Chicago nonprofits and their philanthropic supporters to confront what’s not working, to invest in what is, and to figure out how to work together to make real and sustained progress.

For all the difference we make, it hasn’t been enough to really move the needle. In fact, things are getting worse for many of the women we serve; and it’s getting harder for us to do our work to support them.

- We have fewer staff than we’ve ever had, we’re stretched thin, and it’s harder and harder to retain top talent.
- Government budget cuts are eviscerating safety net programs and hurting our most vulnerable.
- At the same time, private funders are overwhelmed with funding requests.
- And there is a whole group of potential donors who are just plain skeptical of our ability to have a real impact on society’s problems, so they stay away.
If we continue along the current path, we’re going to be spinning our wheels frantically for the next decade just to stay in place. When I think about what can be done, and the barriers to making meaningful progress on the outcomes we care so much about, I keep coming back to the people who are skeptical about our ability — and the ability of the social sector broadly — to make a difference. And unfortunately, I believe there is some good cause for their skepticism.

But it is not too late to come together to beat back that skepticism and create a stronger social sector dedicated to figuring out, and implementing, what works.
We need to start figuring out how to create incentives, alliances, and partnerships — to keep good programs operating where they’re needed most.

I see three areas that need our immediate attention, without which we are unlikely to see real progress:

(1) we need to be more responsive and more equitable in how we do our work;

(2) we need to be more collaborative; and

(3) we need to confront our data challenges.
Today in Illinois we have about 35,000 charitable organizations. They use different models, have different goals, and they track or don’t track data. While some are aptly located to serve communities that need their support, we continue to have neighborhoods around the city starving for basic services.

This dramatic variation and inequity is part of the problem. Our system has been expanding unchecked for 160 years. It doesn’t self-regulate and it doesn’t distribute itself equitably. This has contributed to service “deserts,” that to this day exist in communities with great need, many of which are struggling. On the other hand, we have several hundred youth providers in our city, enough to pair with each and every Chicago Public School. But because that is not how our sector is organized, we instead have historically spread our resources thinly across many providers, consistently failing to reach all of those youth who need support in and after school. And that problem doesn’t fix itself, either. We need to start figuring out how to create incentives and alliances to keep good programs operating where they’re needed most.

Last summer I was invited to a meeting with a group of law firms and consultancies to explore the issue of nonprofit sustainability. One of the law firm partners mentioned that he has served on nonprofit boards and for-profit boards and noticed that at a typical nonprofit board meeting there is zero talk of consolidations while at a typical for-profit board meeting there is rarely talk of anything else. That struck me, because it really isn’t in our culture to talk about such things. But why couldn’t it be?

Why couldn’t there be an intentional and permanent conversation at each of our board meetings about locating services where they are needed most? And about how more stable organizations can help chronically struggling ones?

And how about a cross-sector collaboration to pool resources for these kinds of transactions? It has been working in Los Angeles, why not Chicago? Eric Weinheimer, CEO of Forefront (formerly the Donor’s Forum) and the man who convened that first meeting with the law firms, is setting the table for an on-going conversation about this topic. Supporting this effort would go a long way to helping the social sector work more effectively for our city’s most vulnerable residents.

Another problem we have to confront, if we’re going to push past the areas where we’ve been stuck, is the way that competition has kept us from working together on some of our biggest challenges.

No single policy, government department, organization or program can tackle or solve the increasingly complex social problems we face as a society — even if it’s really good. To solve complex social problems, we need multiple organizations from different sectors to abandon their own, often siloed, agendas in favor of a common agenda, shared measurement norms, and general alignment of effort. It’s called Collective Impact, and when it’s done well, it works.
Last year, the City of Chicago joined many cities in the U.S. in setting a goal to end veteran homelessness by 2015. We brought together six public agencies and coalitions, rolled up our sleeves and got to work. Soon after we started, we realized that we had grossly underestimated the resources we would need to accomplish our goal — what we had in hand was nowhere near sufficient.

With the best intentions, we had used federal formulas and multipliers to estimate the number of homeless vets in Chicago. However, since our goal was to house every single veteran, we began compiling a list with everyone’s name. It was only by going through that exercise that we realized the actual number of homeless veterans was double our previous estimate.

Further complicating our efforts, about 66 veterans per month were becoming newly homeless. This meant that as we were housing veterans, more were entering homelessness, at a rate of 1 new homeless vet entering our system for every 1.5 housed. It quickly became clear that we were not going to hit our initial goal by 2015. But all was not lost. By embracing a collective impact approach we successfully moved 1,800 homeless veterans into permanent housing by the close of 2015, more than twice our original goal of 700.

While names are still on the list today, and the partners have set a more realistic goal of ending veteran homelessness by Veterans Day 2016, more than doubling our performance through Collective Impact is unequivocally a big accomplishment. But only by working together were we able to understand the full scope of the problem, pull together more resources than we thought possible, and execute impressively in less than 12 months.

This experience has made me wonder: how many other complicated issues, beyond veteran homelessness, could we solve by working as a collective?

We cannot move the needle without each other. It’s that simple.
Collecting, warehousing, and analyzing data hasn’t been a strong suit in our industry. Painfully, nonprofit service organizations are very far behind, making it nearly impossible to grasp the scope of our problems and measure our progress.

While our sector struggles to collect and understand our data, the rest of the world is harnessing the power of data to rigorously measure impact, make better predictions and make exciting discoveries that revolutionize how we help people to succeed.

Major corporations and investors spend billions of dollars every year on research and development to develop new products, technologies, and services. They are also using data creatively to learn more and more about how to solve complex problems, improve their performance, and how to motivate and incentivize human behavior, mostly to get the rest of us to buy their products.
In our collective data are stories about what works and answers that have eluded us.

A young man I knew was a data analyst for a well-known and large cereal company. Part of his job was to match data about grocery buying habits to a very unlikely data point: whether or not one plays Angry Birds. What does your Angry Bird addiction have to do with your choice of cereal? And how does this company use the correlation to sell customers their cereal? When you think about it, this is really a tremendous amount of money and brain power dedicated to selling us a box of cereal.

Imagine that same commitment of resources but instead in the context of using data to change school or health behaviors — how it could help us get homeless or HIV-infected people to keep taking their meds, or help us reduce hiring bias, or improve any other complicated issues that we face on a daily basis. In our collective data are stories about what works and answers that have eluded us. We need to start mining the data to see how it can help us achieve better results.

DATA FOR IMPACT MEASUREMENT CAN SAVE MILLIONS

Just before I came to Heartland Alliance, I worked on designing four randomized controlled trials with the University of Chicago’s Crime Lab to evaluate a variety of the city’s new violence prevention programs. Our first effort targeted at-risk youth in high schools and gave them an eight-week summer job and a full-time mentor. The One Summer Chicago PLUS program reduced violent crime arrests by 43%, even sixteen months after the summer job ended.

Not only were these results impressive – they were real. Not anecdotes, not a gut feeling. They were real, rigorously measured impacts. Our team learned several lessons from that project, including:

(1) People pay attention when you present strong, unimpeachable evidence of effectiveness.

But, perhaps more importantly, investors want evidence of impact. Within a month of the study being published in the prestigious journal Science, the mayor had leveraged those results to secure a $10 million donation to quadruple the program. By 2017, 4,000 youth will be able to participate.

(2) A model that works for one group, doesn’t necessarily work for another.

Our exciting results from the first study motivated us to try offering the program to a higher-risk group of kids the following year. At the time, we were coming off a very violent 2012, when the city had experienced its highest murder rate in decades. There was great pressure and urgency to stop the bloodshed on our streets, and to do so right away.
I really wanted this program to reach those youth who were the most likely to be involved in violence. To reach them, we offered the program to older and more justice-involved youth in summer 2013. We ran the program, we did the study, and it didn’t reduce their involvement in violence. So, we didn’t offer that program to that group again. Lesson learned.

This is how data can save us. As a sector, we have an obligation to learn which models work and for whom, and we must stop spending precious, scarce resources where they aren’t generating the results we want and need. Evaluation results, whatever they are — good, bad or mixed — should always be seen as an opening to more questions and more study, and all of it pushes us closer to the impact we want and our clients deserve.

Million-dollar social sector mistakes can impact thousands of lives. We can’t afford to make those mistakes, let alone repeat them.

**DATA CAN MAKE PREDICTIVE ANALYTICS POSSIBLE**

Some of the most exciting social sector discoveries involve using large data sets and cutting-edge analytical techniques to greatly improve our ability to make more accurate predictions about things like: When should child protective services take a child out of her home for her own safety? Which families or students should be prioritized for program slots when there aren’t enough to go around?

Using a national dataset, researchers at the University of Chicago Urban Labs have built a tool that can help judges make better decisions when deciding between jail and bail for the defendants who come before them. A tool like this has the potential to allow us to either improve public safety without increasing the jail population, or reduce the current jail population without compromising public safety — all without spending a single extra dollar — simply by making better predictions about risk. They are also working with Chicago Public Schools on a project that uses large datasets to identify, with incredible accuracy, the students who are most likely to drop out of high school, and to do so while these children are still in middle school. By identifying drop out risk with such accuracy, we can better target interventions and resources to serve our highest-risk youth.

Taking this one step further, consider the insights we could gain in our work with women and girls. What if we could predict who is at highest risk of domestic homicide or teen pregnancy or better target and stop human traffickers?

**BUT DATA CAN’T DO IT ALONE, CAPACITY REMAINS A TOP PRIORITY**

It would be irresponsible to bring up all the promise of big data without acknowledging that we are not currently organized to take advantage of this promise. The reality is that this work requires both institutional and technological infrastructure and people with technical skill sets that are not well represented in our sector. It’s also expensive; data systems cost money, especially on the front-end.

Even when they are motivated and understand the importance of data and evidence, nonprofits need help. For years, organizations on the front lines have been receiving public and private grants that don’t fully cover costs, leading to a slow but steady erosion of our operational capacity. We need to invest seriously in building the capacity of nonprofits to re-tool for the future. That means more funding for operations and infrastructure, not less.

This also means we have to recalibrate people’s expectations about what it takes to operate high-performance organizations.
I think about what the data on women and girls would look like if we spent the next twenty years collaborating on common goals instead of competing against each other.
Twenty years. I figure I have about that amount of time left to contribute to this work. That’s the time that it takes for a baby girl to become a young woman. What if every baby girl born into poverty this year had at least one person in her life, guaranteed, who played the cheerleader role that my mother played for me? And what would a future for women and girls look like if we did the same for our young boys — who are so lost, so thirsting for positive male attention and guidance, and so critical to shaping positive environments for girls and women?

I think about what the data on women and girls would look like if we spent the next twenty years collaborating on common goals instead of competing against each other. Twenty years strategically consolidating and redistributing services to where they are most needed. Twenty years of using our own treasure trove of data to innovate, precision-target services, and consistently measure our impact.

I know we can break through in the areas where we’ve been stuck, even at a time like this. That’s the legacy I want for us; and we are very capable of achieving it.

The time is now. We know what it will take, so what’s stopping us?

I look forward to having new conversations with you, conversations about changing how our sector operates and conversations about how we can have greater and greater impact by working differently and by working together.
Below are select comments from the March 3, 2016 Chicago Women in Philanthropy luncheon based on small group discussions during which attendees were asked to respond to three questions related to points from the essay above.

**HOW CAN WE CONFRONT OUR DATA CHALLENGES FOR GREATER IMPACT?**

“When it comes to data, the question is do we need more or do we need to do better things with it? The answer is likely both. There are organizations that collect data, but it has to be current and accessible, and it has to show our impact.”

“Data is crucial in determining what is working well and in making sure that resources are flowing to programs that are having an impact.”

“Embrace the thrill of discovery that happens when you apply data analytics! So many of our organizations are sitting on good data, they just need the resources to tap into its potential.”

**HOW CAN WE BE MORE COLLABORATIVE AND WHAT WOULD WE ACHIEVE IF WE ARE?**

“We are often pitted against each other as competitors, struggling for resources. Nonprofits need to work collectively to get more resources and advocate for common needs. Trust is created by putting on the table what we each want and creating shared goals.”

“Everyone seems to be in their own silos, even within organizations. We should challenge ourselves to collaborate across departments, as well as with partner organizations.”

“Collaborating makes it easier for philanthropic entities to decide where to fund because there is a bigger impact. Multiple organizations working on the same issue creates increased focus and draws the attention of funders.”

**HOW CAN WE BE LEANER AND MORE EQUITABLE IN HOW WE DO OUR WORK?**

“Lots of 501c3’s are afraid of mergers — don’t be. Organizations can come together with a shared purpose.”

“We have to promote fiscal responsibility and eliminate silos.”

“Nonprofits should be taking best practices from the corporate sector. We have to get rid of the anti-corporate attitude.”
ABOUT EVELYN DIAZ

Evelyn J. Diaz is the President of Heartland Alliance, one of the world’s leading anti-poverty organizations. Before being named president in September of 2015, Evelyn led the City of Chicago’s Department of Family and Support Services as Commissioner, under Mayor Rahm Emanuel. In that role she was responsible for administering a budget of $330 million to deliver social service programs in the areas of children, youth, homelessness, domestic violence, aging, workforce development, and human services. She also served the city as Deputy Chief of Staff for former Mayor Richard M. Daley, as the Mayor’s liaison to the City’s human capital departments and overseeing initiatives related to poverty, jobs, and economic security. She has had leadership positions as CEO of the Chicago Workforce Investment Council and Associate Director of the Chicago Jobs Council. She has also worked as a direct practitioner providing individual and group counseling to domestic violence victims; managing programs for homeless women; and coordinating economic development initiatives and homeless, childcare, and domestic violence projects in Chicago’s 46th Ward.

More about Evelyn at HeartlandAlliance.org
DETAILED SOURCES AND NOTES

page 6: in college //


[1] National Center for Education Statistics: Percentage of Adults Age 25-34 with a Bachelor’s degree or higher (1968-2009), ~36% women vs ~28% men in 2009

[2] National Center for Education Statistics: Number of Bachelor’s Degrees Conf ered by Field of Study (1998 and 2008), ~900k women vs ~675k men

page 6: in the workplace //


(1) Bureau of Labor Statistics: Labor Force Participation (Percent of Persons Age 20 or Older, 1948-2009), from [men’s participation down from 90% to 76%]

page 7: inequality //

Paragraph #1:

Paragraph #2:

**Paragraph #3:**  


[5] STALKING & SEXUAL HARASSMENT: page 59 data from Bureau of Justice Statistics, “Stalking and Harassment Victimization” (Rate per 1,000 persons age 18+, 2006)

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**Paragraph #4:**  
National Women’s Law Center Data.


The term “minimum wage workers” refers to workers making the federal minimum wage or less.

page 8: clearly, our work is not done //