

**Administrative Reform to Overcome Institutional Racism:  
Exploring Government's Trust Building Tactics to Renew  
Relationships with Community-based Organizations**

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**Funding:** This work was supported by the University of Minnesota Center for Urban and Regional Affairs Faculty Interactive Research Program.

**Acknowledgement:** This paper draws upon work undertaken at the Future Services Institute at the Humphrey School of Public Affairs at the University of Minnesota. We are grateful to our colleagues Sook Jin Ong, Henriët Hendriks, Trupti Sarode, Jovon Perry, Nikki Kovan, and Jane Tigan for all they have taught us over the last few years. We also wish to thank the excellent research assistance by David Ambuel. We thank Carrie Oelberger, Melissa Stone, Kathy Quick and the participants of the 2020 ARNOVA Conference for their helpful comments.

# **Administrative Reform to Overcome Institutional Racism: Exploring Government's Trust Building Tactics to Renew Relationships with Community-based Organizations**

## **Abstract:**

Institutional racism embedded in the existing public management practices has systematically created distrust between community-based organizations serving Black, Indigenous, and other people of color (BIPOC). However, little is known about how the government could reform public bureaucracies to renew their relationship with these important community-based organizations. Through a process-oriented inductive study of Minnesota's 2-Generation Policy Network, we find that government's intentional tactics both inside the bureaucracy and with BIPOC community-based organizations allowed them to create new collaborative infrastructure that both changed organizational routines and built power to address racial inequities in the existing human service system. This study documents the importance of public managers' intentionality in addressing the historical legacy that is an outgrowth of conventional practice and assessing their own identities to assess and challenge the mechanism of traditional, bureaucratic authority. Trust between the government and BIPOC community-based organizations needs to be earned and rebuilt.

**Keywords:** Trust, administrative reform, institutional racism, government-nonprofit relations

There is growing recognition that public organizations need to experience significant changes to respond to the “nervous area of government”: racial equity (Gooden, 2014). While these agencies evoke impressions of security, stability, and predictability, the trust in them is at an all-time low, particularly from Black, Indigenous, and other people of color (BIPOC) (Kettl, 2017). To implement any meaningful administrative reform and overcome institutional racism, it is imperative to regain trust from BIPOC communities. In fact, trust building between government agencies and BIPOC communities may be one of the most daunting public management challenges in the United States given the legacy of historical institutional racism (Stivers, 2007; Kendi, 2016). However, little attention has focused upon understanding the incremental ways that trust is built within administrative contexts with little collaborative capacity, where the history of racialized institutional distrust is apparent. Yet this is the reality now facing many public bureaucracies grappling with both the neoliberalism legacies of new public management and the racial reckoning in the COVID-era.

Beyond the normative impulse to advance racial equity, the need to address persistent inequities is clear in many policy domains including human services, which is the focus of this research. In child welfare where the state has the authority to remove children from their parents and terminate parental rights, the over-representation of Black and American Indian children is well documented (Children’s Bureau, 2016; Wells, 2011), and racial biases exist at each decision points in the service continuum (Font, 2013; Putnam-Hornstein et al., 2013). In early childhood education, there are significant racial disparities in the diagnosis of developmental and behavioral conditions, with white children much more likely to benefit from early detection that enables treatment (Morgan,

et al, 2016). Additionally, racial disparities in almost every measure of educational attainment – including kindergarten readiness –persist over time (Reardon and Portilla, 2016).

In these human services policy fields, collaborative networks have long served as the institutional arrangement for service provision (Milward & Provan, 2003; Sandfort & Milward, 2008). These networks depend upon contracts between state and non-governmental actors to deliver public services and often state attention focuses upon negotiating principal-agent relationships one by one without considering the larger systemic consequences of the contracting regime (Smith, 2010). Yet, the consequences of ‘the system’ is widely understood by nonprofit organizations who struggle both with persistent underinvestment and contradictory performance criteria created by local, state, and national governments (Marwell & Calabrese, 2015). These administrative arrangements are more likely to generate distrust instead of trusted partnerships in public services (Kettl, 2017; Salamon, 1995). Furthermore, given structured racialization (Powell, 2013), organizations serving BIPOC experience unique dynamics navigating engagement with public agencies (Barnes, 2020).

In this study, we take advantage of a unique initiative focused upon trying to address these specific challenges, to build more durable, trusting relationships between a state government agency and community-based organizations with expertise serving BIPOC families. Minnesota’s 2-Generation Policy Network is an attempt to collaboratively redesign systems, policies, and practices to address racial disparities through integrating health and human services. Our in-depth, multi-method study provides a window into how trust is built at the early stages of such a collaborative governance initiative,

particularly one focused on overcoming the legacy of racial inequities that strains the relationship between government and community-based organizations serving BIPOC families.

Through our inductive analysis we build a conceptual model that recognizes that while trust operates as a resource in public service collaborations, it must be purposively built through cascading administrative tactics, some of which are successful, others which are not. Analytically, we considered a number of descriptive questions: How did existing legacy public management practices and administrative rules strain the building of trust? What happened when these practices and rules were altered? How did community partners respond initially and overtime? In answering these questions, this research uncovers that for community-based organizations working with BIPOC communities, trust building begins with interpersonal relationships. While there may be a goal of building institutional trust, this often requires alignment of formal mechanisms within the bureaucracy which take longer to change.

By careful examination of micro-processes - the tactics and strategies undertaken by the state government to build trust and what resulted from the perspective of community-based organizations - we seek to overcome a gap in the scholarly account of this social mechanism. Our findings indicate that these efforts must start at the beginning. Public administrators must consider the operation of their agencies, altering existing structures, routines and practices.

## Previous Research

Trust is considered a key to the success of partnerships and it holds collaboration together (Bryson et al., 2006; Van Slyke, 2007). It is often associated with increasing productivity, improving communication, lowering transaction costs, reducing stress, and enhancing problem-solving (Alexander & Nank, 2009). Yet trust is often absent especially at the beginning stage of collaboration. What we are more likely to observe in collaboration is uncertainty among partners, conflicts, and the misuse of power (Purdy, 2012). Between the crude reality in practice and normative proposition of trust in the literature, there are big gaps in our understanding of how collaborative partners can build and maintain trust over time (Huxham & Vangen, 2013; Emerson, Nabatchi, & Bardach, 1998; Klijn, 2010; Osborne, 2006). This gap of knowledge is particularly salient for public management as the existing contracting regime systematically marginalize BIPOC community-based organizations and distrust is likely to dominate these relationships.

Ever since the New Public Management movement, service contracting has been a predominant practice of how local governments interact with community-based organizations, especially in human services (Fabricant & Fisher, 2002; Gazley & Brudney, 2007; Salamon, 1995; Sandfort, 1999; Smith, 2010). Despite its premises in complementing the insufficiencies of the public sector, scholars have questioned the effectiveness of the contracting regime in building a genuine relationship between the government and community-based organizations. In fact, the existing contracting regime systematically marginalizes agencies serving BIPOC communities. For one, there is a lack of competition in many service contracting practices both in the U.S. and around the world (Jing & Chen, 2012; Van Slyke, 2003). The lack of competition and requirements of

administrative infrastructures often marginalize community-based organizations that have expertise in serving particular communities in contrast to large service providers. In the modern welfare state, governments often use universalistic criteria in selecting clients and make funding decisions (Lipsky & Smith, 1989; Gazley & Brudney, 2007). As a result, community-based organizations serving BIPOC may not be eligible to apply for many government contract and grant funding opportunities. Recent research has shown that black legacy nonprofits (nonprofits founded before 1969 with a mission to serve the Black community) received nearly 50% less funding from government grants than other types of nonprofit organizations (Deng & Myers, 2019). The lack of government funding opportunities creates a vicious cycle of resource insufficiency that further compromises the administrative capacities of these organizations to go after other public funding opportunities.

Additionally, the managerialism and professionalism values embedded in the contracting out processes systematically marginalize BIPOC community-based organizations (Heckler, 2019; Ray, 2019). A nationwide survey of public health service providers supported by government contracts in New Zealand documented that community-based organizations serving indigenous communities were likely to have a shorter length of contracts, endure a higher intensity of monitoring, bear more compliance costs and get audited more often, compared to more generic service providers (Came et al., 2018). It also is widely documented that delays in government payment and insufficient funding to cover the full costs of nonprofit service delivery are prevalent in the current contracting regime (Peng & Lu, 2020; Marwell & Calabrese, 2015). Due to their lack of resources and limited networks, community-based organizations serving BIPOC are likely

to be disproportionately impacted by these malfunctions of the contracting processes compared to organizations serving white communities. The payment delays and insufficiencies cause stress and a lower level of trust in government perceived by these community-based organizations (Peng & Lu, 2020).

These systematic barriers marginalize community-based organizations serving BIPOC in the contracting regime. That, combined with other experiences, creates conditions in which distrust is likely to dominate the relationship with government. Even with the genuine intentions to renew their relationships with these community-based organizations and address institutional racism, public managers need to break both structural barriers inside the bureaucracy and facilitate trust building with their community partners (McGuire & Agranoff, 2011).

So how can the government rebuild trust with BIPOC community-based organizations? Theories about trust-building are clear that trust is built over time. Vangen and Huxham (2003:8) propose a trust-building loop where trust is built incrementally, over time, in a “virtuous circle.” In other words, trust-building activities feed off each other and accumulate over time, depending upon past experiences (Ansell & Gash, 2008; Mayer, et al 1995; Sandfort, 1999). Trust is both an input and an output of collaboration. In developing the practice theory of collaboration, Huxham (2003, p. 408) notes that “while the existence of trusting relationships between partners probably would be an ideal situation, the common practice appears to be that suspicion, rather than trust, between partners, is commonly the starting point.”

In the rational choice tradition, trust is seen as an encapsulated interest, meaning that it depends upon one’s assessment of the objectives of the other party and the degree of



alignment (Hardin, 1992; 2002). Distrust is a protective mechanism for the less powerful party to safeguard one's own interest (Cook, Hardin & Levi, 2005; Lee & Dodge, 2019). For trust to be developed, there must be incentive compatibility between the two parties. In daily management practices, the key question is how each party can show the other that the incentive compatibility is true and genuine. Scholars studying institutions and political economy call this key question to be resolved between the state and other parties as 'credible commitment' (North, 1993; Ostrom, 1990). To bring other parties to the reform, the state needs to show credible commitment to overcome their institutional power and authority as other nongovernmental parties are always afraid that the government will overturn their decision even if the government wants to share power.

Based on the theory of credible commitment, institutional arrangements and rules become crucial to set up the right incentives for collaboration. There might also be legalistic remedies government agencies could put in place to convince the partners that they are genuine about the reform. However, ultimately, community partners assess a key question - how trustworthy is the government? Given the uncertain political environment and the high turnover of elected leaders, community partners in administrative reforms may never be 100% sure that the new rules are effective, especially when their past interactions with the government were dominated by historical inequities and the lack of voice (Heckler, 2019). And research suggests that over-subscribing in legalistic remedies may hurt rather than help trust building (Das & Teng, 2001; Sitkin & Roth, 1993). This literature suggests that to initiate a collaborative initiative, public managers must also build interpersonal trust with BIPOC community-based organizations (Braithwaite, 2008, Lambright, Mischen & Laramée, 2010).

## **Research Setting and Policy Field**

The research context influences the activities undertaken by public managers and their intentions. While Minnesota is often regarded as a state with strong quality of life indicators - high education levels, homeownership rates, and labor market participation – it is also a state where there are persistent and sizable racial disparities in almost all indicators of individual and community well-being (Tran & Treuhaft, 2014). Termed “the Minnesota Paradox”, leaders in philanthropy, government, business and nonprofits actively pursued initiatives in the last decade that begin to address the legacy of white supremacy within institutions.

In the administration of social welfare programs, the state government sets policy and the counties administer them through service partnerships with the state’s robust nonprofit sector. In the mid-2010s, leaders recognized that white people were disproportionately represented in state agencies and undertook a purposive effort to hire differently. In the Children & Families administration of the Department of Human Services (DHS), this resulted in more racially diverse program managers, promotions of Black, Indigenous and People of Color (BIPOC) into positions of authority, and greater value placed upon knowledge gleaned from working in community-based nonprofit organizations. When there was an opportunity for the state to apply for a grant from the National Governor’s Association in 2016, these new leaders were excited by the potential of launching a “Minnesota 2-Generation Policy Network.” It focused upon the growing evidence that human service programs designed around the relationships between parents and children can improve long-term outcomes (Chase-Lansdale & Brooks-Gunn, 2014;

Sommer et al, 2016) and that existing structures, public policies and funding impede public investment in such programs (Agranoff, 2014; Hasset & Austin, 1997). When selected to participate in the national project with four other states, the Director of Economic Assistance Division decided to use flexible public funds to invest in local service organizations interested in piloting “2-Gen” programs (Kutcher & Sandfort, 2018). It was the only state in the national initiative to invest in local program innovation (Gaines et al., 2019).

This experience, as well as other initiatives attempting to understand the legacy of state action in communities disproportionately affected by inadequate child care and children’s removal from their parents, convinced state leaders that reform needed to focus on changing the nature of government-nonprofit relationships. In early 2018, three DHS Directors began planning for a larger collaborative initiative working with local sites that had expertise serving racial communities that experience systemic inequities (Emerson & Nabatchi, 2015). Their first action step was to commit to blending three distinct sources of public funding: federal funds from the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) and Child Care and Development Fund (CCDF) targeted for innovation and quality enhancement; and state funds earmarked for efforts to reduce racial disparities in child welfare programs. In the end, eight local organizations received five-year grants as part of the overall \$22.5 million initiative (See Appendix One).

There were several collaborative governance and racial equity principles articulated early in the operation of the initiative, such as the engagement of diverse stakeholders and the use of cross-sector problem-solving teams. Also, the state was explicit about its interests in decentering traditional administrative power, through creating a ‘learning

network' of diverse voices, stressing information and data from families was valued, and highlighting that cultural knowledge needed to inform the project. The theory of change document share with grantees was clear – through this five-year public investment, the state wanted honest review and dialogue about system-level barriers in policy and practices that intervened in effective engagement of American Indian, Black and other families of color. The first year focused upon the design to both deepen understanding of pressing issues in the community and create more holistic responses with stakeholders, with subsequent years supporting implement the projects and ongoing discussion about system barriers and administrative burdens. In turn, the state government planned to take these lessons to support new administrative rules and state legislation, invest in the development of new tools and technologies, and work with federal and county governments to reduce barriers. This vision was a significant alteration in public management practice and leaders asked the University of Minnesota's Future Services Institute to provide programmatic and evaluation support.

As is documented in the analysis that follows, these collaborative governance aspirations required the painstaking development of new public management infrastructure, one characterized by trust and transparency to support innovative program design to better meet the needs of BIPOC communities. Existing state bureaucratic practices for communication, contracting, program enhancement and monitoring more often fueled distrust than the resources needed for collaboration. This was felt both within state government, as the initiative required collaboration across programmatic departments, and in the relationship with the local nonprofit and governments designing

the program. The initial progress created durability in the network that allowed it to survive and thrive in the months when the COVID pandemic changed all of the work.

## **Data and Methodology**

This analysis draws upon a rich data set comprised of information from a number of sources. First, in depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with both the local grantees in the initiative and public managers. Grantee interviews occurred remotely, were audio-recorded and transcribed. Interviews with public managers in the state's human services agency included senior appointed officials, program directors, and key staff were conducted in person, audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. In total 18 interviews were conducted between October 2019 and March 2020.

Second, our data set included various agency documents, such as the formal statement of the theory of change, tools used to recruit potential grantees, and resources used to structure the grantee selection process. In this document collection, we focused specifically on approximately fifty artifacts that operationalize agency practices such as requests for proposals, contracting and monitoring tools. Third, participant observation notes were collected by Future Services Institute staff about key activities undertaken, including internal meetings with state program directors and staff, planning for the request for proposals, and site visits to select grantees. Notes from initial meetings of state working groups, whole learning network, and staffing meetings were also included to provide insight into administrative challenges and resolutions; the notes represent over 350 hours spent by numerous research staff from the University on these activities in 2019

and early 2020. Since the initiative is ongoing, additional field-data from these sources is being collected for subsequent analysis.

Finally, a survey was fielded to all of the local sites that submitted a proposal to the state in response to this call for proposals. Out of 64 applicant organizations, 37 organizations responded to the survey, representing a 58% response rate. The survey included all the applicants, those who did receive and those who didn't receive five-year funding through the initiative to enable us to assess whether or not the state disproportionately selected community partners who had positive past interactions with them. Including both survey and interview data from community organizations helps us triangulate and explore such patterns.

Our analytical approach began as merely descriptive, trying to first understand the various perspectives in this complex, field-based initiative focused upon advancing more racial equity in systems reform. As we looked across these various forms of data, however, we began more focused, inductive analysis to better understand how aspirations and actions were aligned. We introduced all data into Nvivo and embarked upon numerous waves of coding, with each investigator reading data and documenting emerging understanding of themes and construct relationships in analytical memos. These memos formed the basis of the findings and interpretation that follows, with certain vignettes highlighted to better communicate our ultimate conclusions.

## **Findings and Analysis**

Gathering around six tables clustered in the light-filled room, about forty-five people from Minnesota's Department of Human Services came together for the day-long planning session for the new 2-Generation Policy Network initiative. Some were apprehensive – although most worked for the state, they did not know each other and there was always the constant press of email to attend to. Others were cautiously optimistic – the invitation for the day had mentioned leaders' intentions to work more authentically with BIPOC community agencies over the next five-years. Buzzing with anticipatory energy as people got coffee and gathered background documents, the room quieted as three Directors stepped to the front of the room.

Janae, an African American woman, leading one of the largest Divisions in the Department with 120 employees, began by stressing the importance of the work bringing them together. While the Department focuses its attention on implementing programs that treat parents and children as mere eligibility groups, the real dynamics within families are ignored. The consequences were particularly bleak for people of color. From her experiences, she knew that community-based organizations could address the needs of whole families if it weren't for state and county policy mandates pulling them away. So the state needed to change. Janae asked: "How can we each connect to that local knowledge? How do we engage families more effectively in ways they want to be engaged? How do we put equity into action and tear down institutionalized racism?" Answering these questions, she acknowledged would require a different way of engaging, communicating, and leading than what was typically demonstrated by the state agency. But as she spoke, those gathered seemed to come alive with the possibilities.

The invitation to change personal practices was echoed by Jerry, a white man, who directed the child welfare programs. He shared his own professional experiences working at the frontline lines providing comprehensive preventative services and his frustration with how little that reality shaped state administrative practices. Along with the two women beside him, he felt proud to attempt real system systems with this initiative. Acknowledging that mistakes would be made, he concluded, “a learning culture is imperative” to fuel changes in administrative approaches. The framing of the initiative and day’s work continued with Choua, the Director of Child Care services, a Hmong-woman who shared her own story. Her parents had come to this country as refugees and her formal education had started in the anti-poverty, federal Head Start program. After finishing college, she worked in early education programs and applied for this state leadership role to bring her lived experiences to public administration. And now, in this initiative, she explained that all three Directors were inviting them to consider a powerful question: “How do I use this power that I now hold to effect change?” In her mind, sharing power with community-based organizations was critical. If they did so authentically and transparently, this collaboration would impact the state for years to come.

Attendees later reflected that they had never before heard three senior public managers speak with such a unified vision about a collaborative effort. The day unfolded with individuals naming potential tactics – engaging and reporting to the legislature, communicating with agencies that had hosted site visits, executing contracts, reducing racial disparities – and small groups developing plans to carry them out. Participating in the meeting helped create more optimism about the road head and enabled them to begin to see how the Directors’ vision could be brought into practice.



***How did existing legacy public management practices and administrative rules strain the building of trust?***

As many scholars note (Bryson et al., 2015; Emerson & Nabatchi, 2015; Huxham & Vangen, 2005), collaborative governance initiatives emerge from particular contexts, as groups of people seek to develop new ways of addressing pressing problems. In this empirical case, the idea for the collaboration emerged from these public managers who, as suggested by this story from the planning retreat, realized they needed to alter state administrative practices to invest in whole family programs implemented by community-based organizations serving people of color. The initiative sought to both blend public funding and design service programs that engaged whole families, rather than merely administering programs consistent with the policy categories of ‘kindergarten ready,’ ‘at risk for abuse,’ or ‘work ready’ that appeared in the policy.

Before attempting this daunting technical feat, the three Directors had to build their relationships. They had worked together for three years and had the clear support of their direct supervisor, Niaya the Assistant Commissioner of Children & Families. Reflecting upon the launch of the effort, she noted that initially her overall questions about the project were technical, consistent with the norms of the agency: Can we meet all of the statutory requirements? Can we adjust contracting processes without going to the legislature? Yet as Niaya thought more about it, she realized that it provided an important learning opportunity for the agency. In her mind, it was “like lighting a fire, and watching where it was going to catch elsewhere.” She used her positional authority to become an ambassador for the work, including briefing the Governor and Lieutenant Governor about the 2-Generation Policy Network.

With this support, the Directors initiated planning activities which included drafting a request for proposals from community-based organizations, developing grant review processes, and building internal cross-division workgroups to engage with each local site. They also agreed that quarterly meetings with the whole network once the grantees were selected would allow insights to be shared and reveal important learning about system barriers. These tactics pushed against the conventional practices within the state agency where potential legislative oversight cements a risk-averse administrative climate that reinforces program-based structures. In describing the beginning of the initiative, Jerry noted that it was the only time in his seven years in the agency that he had attempted such a cross-division collaboration because there was no real infrastructure: “We didn't even have the structures or the forums for us to talk to each other and get to know each other.” But the potential value of an initiative that focused upon unearthing the knowledge of BIPOC community-based organizations to alter state-level administration and policy seemed clear. Yet, each Director needed to take risks. As Jerry continued:

“We have not asked people for permission to put this funding together. We did it. And there are bodies that I still need to report to that are probably not going to be happy about it. But we did it because we felt we had sound justification....We did it because we need to try some different things. It wasn't anything about this agency that brought us together. It was us.”

This commitment to each other was created over time. When one had sponsored a series of listening sessions, the others had shown up. The conversations they had in the hallways about their commitments to racial equity and their frustrations with the existing system built their interpersonal trust. These interpersonal relationships forged around shared commitments to working differently were important to moving forward with the changes in administrative practices.

For example, the conventional state processes within the Department for issuing contracts are incredibly complex and time-intensive. Strict practices exist for developing and issuing requests for proposals, and making funding decisions involve multiple levels of internal reviews that often take months to achieve. This process was made more difficult in this case because the funds drew upon three different public sources, each with their own specific articulation of the target group and other rules. Staff held over twenty internal meetings with other administrators to get an agreement that the proposal should describe BIPOC communities' needs and capability to respond, rather than the conventional description of an intervention design and expected outputs. In the end, they were able to persevere and language in the formal announcement was consistent with their vision - a "five-year collaborative learning relationship with the state of Minnesota" to a "co-creative process that will uncover and address the systemic influences of racial, geographic and economic inequalities." Yet, when staff tried to reduce the amount of documentation required from applicants, they were met with resistance; even minor adjustments necessitated detailed internal negotiations with contracting staff. While webinars were conventionally used to announce grant opportunities, in this case, staff tried to express requirements in terms familiar to community-based organizations rather than policy constructs. In addition, they went above and beyond conventional practices by doing outreach to potential grantees through email and social media, trying to reach agencies that had never before received a state grant; in interviews, staff noted they hoped this professionalism communicated a transparent and trustworthy process, and signaled the intentions of the state to be better partners than they had in the past with organizations serving people of color.

In addition to the conventional committee review of written proposals, staff also planned site visits to applicants receiving the highest scores. The site visit tactic was seen by the Directors as both a means to provide important information to aid decision making and a way to begin to establish relationships with the community agencies. Yet site visits were not a practice that had much precedent in the Department. New assessment tools needed to be developed. The visits needed to be scheduled. The multi-division staff team needed to figure out how to integrate the information gathered at the visits with committee's ratings and Directors needed to negotiate their responsibility and authority for final decision making about the grant awards. Further internal negotiations needed to occur over both the contract terms and process so that the initiative adhered to state and federal law *and* communicated the spirit of co-learning. While staff planned a three-month process from request for proposals to awarding of grants, developing these new administrative processes took far longer. Sites were notified of their selection after six months, but contracts were not finalized until another three months. When Department staff and Directors reflected upon it later, it seemed like there were few options; these barriers to collaboration needed to be confronted and new practices established.

***What happened when these practices and rules were altered?***

These administrative reforms were painful to achieve. Although Directors were committed to this effort, there was always a pull to the programmatic responsibilities within their Divisions – implementation of a new child welfare federal law; developing new technology tools to improve reporting among child care providers; new policies to enable faster access to food and child care assistance during the COVID pandemic. That type of work, seen as 'central' to each division, created a scarcity of time for senior managers to dedicate to the

ongoing learning and strategy development at the heart of their vision. This reality sometimes strained the collaborative activities among the three Directors. As Juliette, the project manager for this phase reflected, “First there is their relationship, and from their trust a general feeling of good momentum. [But when there are hang ups], we have to revisit why that decision was made. And make sure that everyone can see where it is going before they agree to keep participating.”

While the Directors could lean into their relationships to propel them through times when shared understanding broke down, the staff did not have prior working relationships. And many were not familiar with this way of working. Juliette continued: “We talk about collaboration but I don’t think it is always understood. Some people [who work for DHS] want to know exactly what’s expected of them at any given time. And collaboration requires adaptability and big picture thinking. And that’s not necessarily the strong suite of state government.” While collaboration was the goal, the cross-division initiative required staff to adjust their typical roles and practices in light of this larger ‘big picture’ goal. Most of the tasks of this collaborative initiative – the process of application review, providing support for program design in the sites during the first year, even convening the network of grantees -- pushed staff to act outside of their traditional roles of writing rules and monitoring contracts. Individually, they needed to overcome their own hesitations to act without a clear direction to build authentic relationships with these new community partners; while some embraced this new freedom, it caused great anxiety in others.

Yet the Directors’ collaborative vision also caused them to implement other new tactics to try to build a different relationship for BIPOC organizations with the state. For

example, they assigned state staff, many who themselves are BIPOC, to work on site teams over the full five-year period. In this way, they wanted to personalize the public bureaucracy and assure local agencies that relationship building was not abstract but very specific. They also invested in facilitation and evaluation support from the University to assure that collaborative practices would form the cornerstone of the network. State program managers apprenticed with facilitators and designers, learning about new tools and building new skills. They heard stories about historical trauma they had never before – the shame American Indian mothers feel when they don't know about their traditional culture, the compliance pressure community organizations felt to adhere to state-mandated reporting requirements, the frustration community-based organizations feel when they don't know how to affect the levers of 'the system' but can only see how its under-resourced work focused upon whole families. University staff coached state managers on how to take these lessons and hone their change strategies within the state agency. They also pushed conventional monitoring standards – that often resulted in meaningless information being reported – to enable a first-year documentation of learning between the sites and state to replace mere bureaucratic accountability.

Reflecting on the first year of activities, Director Chaoa recognized that this type of collaborative, equity work was “intense.” She explained, “We're tackling really hard issues, and are having challenging conversations. How do we do that and make sure that staff don't get burned out? Anytime you do equity work, it's really draining. How do we identify the system change opportunities?” Directors repeatedly communicated to their internal teams the reality that providing equitable treatment to overcome the legacies of the past required the state to lay down its sole focus on the consistent process to recognize the

significance of customized relationships. They needed to not solely worry about short-term accountabilities but rather focus on longer-term outcomes.

While the existing administrative constraints could slow forward momentum, Niaya the Assistant Commissioner noted, it was important to stay focused on the long-term goal:

“Even if grantees are disappointed that we don't go live [at the original date], we are building a relationship, a trusting relationship where we are being transparent. We say ‘here's what we're trying to do, we don't know if it's going to be perfect this time around, but we're doing our best.’ We ask them, ‘tell us how we can do better. Tell us what you need. That really is the key to trusting relationships, that you're open. It's not that everything goes great. It's that you're honest about what's happening... That's the kind of **relationship infrastructure** that we need to be successful in certain communities that don't trust the Department of Human Services.”

Following the lead of the Governor, public managers regularly acknowledged that BIPOC communities had little reason to trust the existing system. Yet, in the minds of the three Directors and the Assistant Commissioner, this 2-Gen initiative was the government's opportunity to build an alternative ‘relationship infrastructure’ necessary for working with communities that have experienced systemic racism. Niaya concluded, “It's our job to keep showing up at the table and saying, we're here to listen and we'd like to hear from you. If they say, we don't want to talk to you. Okay. But we must continue...We don't get to just turn away.” Public managers used their own trusting relationships and administrative authority to launch this initiative and begin to create an alternative form of infrastructure to work with marginalized communities.

### ***How did community partners respond initially?***

From the perspective of the community-organizations applying for the funds, most of these internal state activities were invisible. What they could see were timelines and what they experienced were delays that came from the state processes. Some information about the

initiative had been shared informally in the six months leading up to the official release of the request for proposals, but the release of the request itself was delayed for no clear reason. In our survey of applicants, the vast majority noted that their motivation to apply was to address inequities in their communities and further integrate services with other local partners. These motivations helped them to act quickly because, when the request was finally released, there were only five weeks to develop proposals. The directions required applicants to allocate staff, document partnerships with other local community agencies, and develop a detailed budget. Detailed documentation, including letters of commitment and other government forms, also were required. According to the grant applicant survey, four out of five respondents noted that pulling together the grant took “a lot of work;” thirty percent reported they invested more than 40 hours to complete it. These administrative delays and subsequent tighter timelines compromised community partners’ perceived trustworthiness of the agency. More than half (54%) of the respondents agreed that the time delay in the selection process created a burden for their organization’s decision-making. The vast majority (73%) also disagreed with the statement that they received updates about the selection in a timely manner. Most respondents did not agree that DHS ‘knew what it’s doing’ or ‘has deep knowledge about the problems the community is facing’. Most respondents also did not feel that DHS kept the interest of the grantees in mind when making decisions. Taken together, the survey of grant applicants documents that - although they had put in the work to apply for initiative funding - their perception was a low level of trustworthiness in the Department of Human Services.



Juliette, the project manager for this phase recognized these dynamics and hoped that their efforts to be transparent and inspirational through the request for proposal process could address these dynamics: She noted:

Reverberations from previous relationships [grantees had with the state] also play out. We were working with sites and saying we want something different. And they don't really believe it. I don't blame them. They've had relationships with the state before that are very structured, very constrained and compliance-driven. While we are saying we want to try and do something different, breaking them out of the habits of interaction with the state is challenging. And sometimes we aren't always able to carry through on wanting to be flexible and adaptable. And collaboration suffers because of that."

The work of overcoming the legacy of the past was very much present in the first months of launching this initiative.

Our in-depth interviews with the grantees further elaborated on these initial conditions. Some grantees held a favorable assessment of the state and emphasized the genuine efforts shown and interpersonal relationships built during the selection process. When asked about early experiences, a project manager in a nonprofit organization serving refugees and immigrants since the 1980s said: "I saw people in the state are coming together and working to help make this place a better place.... They are good people. They want to see Minnesota and its citizens and constituents prosper and I think that was the biggest takeaway." Even one leader who expressed a high level of distrust towards the agency due to past experiences noted that she appreciated how the state Directors had come together: "I learned...there are three separate very large governmental agencies that are really actively putting their money where their mouth is and coming together as a group to offer opportunities. That was surprising to me."

Despite the general appreciation of the interpersonal interactions with the directors and DHS staff, more grantees offered a more conservative assessment of the trustworthiness of the state government. While there might be a personal connection with these particular directors, they were only individual people. One nonprofit manager in an emergency shelter serving families experiencing homelessness said it succinctly: “Individuals may desire change, but they are part of a larger structure and system and are trying to fight its inertia.” As Juliette had worried, most reflected upon past experiences of working with the state, where the existing bureaucratic structure inhibited effective relationships and service arrangements. They also noted what seemed like inherent disconnects between the DHS leadership and the community; when push came to shove, the state would prioritize their processes over the community needs. As one agency leader reflected, “It never occurred to me that (the state should keep our organization’s interest in mind). Is that something that they are supposed to do?”

***For community-based organizations, was trust built over time?***

Attempting to overcome this legacy and bring the idea of a ‘learning network’ into practice, the initiative included quarterly meetings with all eight grantee organizations, Directors and state staff on site and evaluation teams. At the first meeting, the Directors launched the session sharing their own stories and vision, much as they had in the internal staff retreat nearly four months earlier. To have real partners in the work, they pledged to “create a new infrastructure” and help the local partners to “design structures to meet family needs” that address negative outcomes for BIPOC families interacting with the system. Noting the support of others, including the Governor and his Children's Cabinet, they stressed their commitment to mutual learning. They recognized that communities

often have solutions and they hoped that “each would work to identify what each of us can do” to carry the lessons into systems change.

Each of the whole network meetings was carried out with very participatory processes focused on giving people experiences in co-learning. At the first meeting, for example, people were asked to do speed dating to described work, and what they each did to center the lived experience of families into policy and program design/delivery. At the second, they used a peer learning process where people named discussion topics of most burning interest to them: a tactic to develop a 'master leasing' strategy to help families access housing; techniques for engaging their own local core team of stakeholders or families to help in first year's work of program design; discussions to probe assumptions about families underlying program designs. The facilitation team was made up of people of diverse races and each important conversation of the whole group was graphically recorded. As the meetings unfolded, beautiful visual art documented shared learning. In one, a wall-size poster had images of some of the leaders and a ribbon running through it on which was written the purpose of the gathering: “laying the foundation, sharing our dreams, building trust, sharing cultural healing, systems change, healing intergenerational trauma.” The colorful poster was a concrete artifact of the diversity in the room. After each meeting, the facilitation team created a short, newsletter with photographs and key documents from the day-long session.

We interviewed community partners after the first two meetings. In general, all the community partners appreciated the interpersonal interactions with the Department Directors, staff, and other community-based organizations. The participatory activities built interpersonal trust and informants shared their growing confidence that the DHS was

genuine in carrying out this system-based reform. As a leader of an organization with expertise serving refugees noted: "The flexibility...shows me that the state is really invested in this, that they're really listening, and that they want to try something that hasn't been tried before." He goes on to say, "It is evident when you interact with them. And when you go to the next meeting, you will see that as well.... It's just so blatantly obvious because of the way that they act." The very structure of the participatory network helped convince these organizations that these Directors and program leaders knew the systemic challenges that hurt BIPOC. The leaders from the refugee service organization concluded: "If they didn't know...they wouldn't be doing this kind of work. The fact that they are doing this kind of approach shows me that they understand that there is something that needs to be better."

These day-long whole network meetings began to create an expectation of co-learning with the state that served as a practical, collaborative foundation when the COVID-19 pandemic hit during the first year. When the large group gathered virtually, they were able to benefit from small group conversations with people in other roles across the state. Nonprofit program managers, state staff, DHS Directors, frontline case managers shared information about their organizational response to the pandemic and social uprisings as Minnesota responded to the murder of George Floyd by the hands of police. They recognized common challenges - how could they create better processes for providing food, housing, and access to services to those in need? how could they make sense of the racial inequity in how the pandemic was affecting their local community? how could they use flexible funding to respond to some of these needs? The information shared was specific and tactical; people felt comfortable in authentically engaging with each other and sharing

their emerging understanding. As one staff member who had worked for DHS for more than thirty-years reflected, "I have never seen the state work so fast to meet the needs of people."

Thus, while the first year of activities in the Minnesota 2-Gen Policy Network was unprecedented, there were some glimmers that the tactics undertaken by public managers had begun to create a different type of infrastructure in working with these few community-based organizations. The events during summer 2020, however, brought into the spotlight the massive amount of work that lies ahead for public managers to redesign administrative practices and processes to assure community-based organizations of the state's trustworthiness.

## **Interpretation**

Our data from the early development of the Minnesota 2-Generation Policy Network documents how leaders in the state agency gradually built trust through altering existing public management routines and structures. They began within the public bureaucracy before starting to work with community-based organizations serving BIPOC families. Figure One illustrates the tactics described in the findings section, illustrating what happened and what resulted in this case. Given the historical power disparities and legacy of distrust, the narrative reveals how the process of transforming the existing contracting regime that cements institutional racism to the collaborative governance regime that tries to undo it is not easy and automatic. In fact, our analysis reveals that trust operates as a critical resource due. Figure Two summarizes the tactics carried out in this case, as the government tried to build trust with BIPOC community-based organizations and what

resulted. In both Figures, a trust building tactic cascaded with another, each needing to occur before the next right action could be undertaken. The process could not be predicted but needed to emerge as leaders and staff observed what happened from their initial actions in the complex, social system (Fligstein & McAdam, 2011; Sandfort & Moulton, 2010)

Trust both empowers existing organizational routines and creates new organizational routines. It helps both consolidate and share power. In fact, our analysis suggests that the interactions among organizational routines, trust, and power are key to understanding how genuine administrative reforms focused upon addressing systematical inequities take place on the ground.

[Insert Figures One and Two about here]

### ***Trust, organizational routines, and bureaucratic change***

Consistent with the metaphor of “networking in the shadow of bureaucracy” (McGuire & Agranoff, 2010), our analysis of this case reveals that administrative reform toward collaborative governance takes place in the web of existing hierarchies, structures, and routines. Throughout this administrative reform process, directors and project leaders repeatedly noted they were pushing against a rigid administrative apparatus. Although Directors were committed to this vision, staff working under them hesitated to deviate from conventional routines, to grapple with ambiguity and act anyway. Each step in the process to establish this collaborative governance initiative required persistent, and what often felt like courageous actions, from those with formal authority and those who worked for them.

Many routine decisions face public managers: How to structure a meeting? Who is invited? How to leverage the tools of the public bureaucracy - contracting, reporting - in ways consistent with the trust-building aim? While these decisions often seem mundane or insignificant, each provides an opportunity to build or deplete the overall stock of trust in the initiative. They become tangible ways that community-based organizations service BIPOC can observe and experience in daily interactions with the state. They constitute a relationship infrastructure.

As Agranoff (2014) argued, the authority of hierarchical roles remains important in service networks and collaborative initiatives. In this case, while Directors used their authority to refocus public funds from state and national sources, it was also important to convene the staff and share their imperative to be responsive. Until they stood in front of their staff and shared their vision, skepticism about the intent of the initiative prevailed. In other words, the Directors' interpersonal relationships and trust building - alignment of core commitment, living experiences and background - allowed them to coordinate their administrative authority. This enabled them to secure sponsorship from the Assistant Commissioner and Governor, which ultimately enables them to activate and champion the whole administrative reform process (Bryson, Crosby & Stone, 2015). Trust building with the Assistant Commissioner, among the Directors themselves, and in their divisions created power for them to make existing organizational routines a site of innovation and organizational change (Feldman, 2000). To enable funding for the collaborative initiative, Directors took a broader interpretation of the legislative intent of their particular programs. Their subsequent activities gave new meaning and purpose to what initially appeared to be rigid organizational routines of planning meetings, disseminating grant

requests, and signing contracts. Reflecting the framework Feldman and Rafaeli (2002) describe, the new activities enabled public managers and staff to build new connections and shared understandings, thus activating the administrative reform from within.

As new organizational routines were created, the trust-building cycle continued to evolve and facilitate more durable administrative reform. New techniques for the webinars, practices to communicate more openly with applicants and selected grantees, gatherings where state and community-based organizations could learn together - these new organizational practices created opportunities to build trust both between the government and community-based organizations, and among community-based organizations themselves. They also provide new resources and an institutional foundation for accountability. Trust does not replace structures and routines. Instead, these two forces strengthen and reinforce each other (Braithwaite, 1998; Sandfort & Moulton, 2020). These institutional innovations, combined with the interpersonal trust built in these processes, create a sufficient level of institutional trust towards the government for BIPOC community-based organizations that allowed them to participate in this administrative reform. In turn, BIPOC community-based organizations' participation in this reform further enabled the trust-building loop to operate between the government and these organizations.

### ***Trust and power in the administrative reform process***

In most public human service bureaucracies, each division has an independent relationship with community-based organizations based on the form and content of the contracts they issue. This fragmented power makes it difficult to initiate and implement system-oriented changes to address institutional racism. As the theory of change documents developed at



the start of this project noted, “The current system is transactional rather than adaptive, transformative, and innovative.” In this initiative, led predominantly by BIPOC public managers, their collaborative vision was particularly audacious, an attempt to develop authentic collaboration with organizations serving people historically under-served and ineffectively served. To deliver this vision, they needed to intentionally build trust among themselves and with BIPOC community-based organizations, consolidating power that was initially fragmented within public bureaucracies and across BIPOC communities. Figure Three illustrates how trust building among the DHS Directors and between the government and BIPOC community-based organizations gradually consolidated power and enabled them to begin to collectively address racial inequities in human services. In our inductive data analysis, we particularly noticed three stages of trust building, documenting how each build power and resources for the subsequent actions to take place: trust building among Director, trust building between the government and potential grant applicants, and trust building between the government and BIPOC community-based organizations.

[Insert Figure Three about here]

Trust-building, power-sharing, and power-consolidation occur at and across different levels of collaboration in this administrative reform. In this case, the three Directors developed the collaboration within the bureaucracy to consolidate more power, which was necessary to destabilize some of the existing agency routines around requesting proposals and site visits. As leaders in BIPOC community-based organizations and public managers build more trust, they collectively built and shared more power and resources for the collaborative to address the systematic racial disparities in the community (Feldman, 2004; Feldman & Quick, 2009). This power was crucial to give them a chance at the work ahead -

making concrete changes in public policy and public investments to support programming focused upon whole families. Yet it is important to note -- power was created and consolidated first before it could be shared. As more trust was built, more power was built with the BIPOC community.

## **Conclusion**

With the social inequities made more salient in the stressors of the COVID-19 era, addressing institutional racism embedded in the existing public management practices should become a top priority for public managers. Our study improves understanding of how trust can be built between government and BIPOC community-based organizations when distrust from years of normative routines dominates these relationships. Our analysis highlights that, at the beginning of the administrative reform, there are complex interdependences among personal identities, organizational routines, interpersonal trust, institutional trust, and power. In the previous literature, it is assumed that trust is easier to build when power is shared (Farrell, 2004; Ran & Qi, 2019). It is also assumed that trust building takes place between two organizations or individuals (Vangen & Huxham, 2003). Our findings suggest a more complex trust-building cycle where trust does not only operate between two organizations or two individuals. Instead, trust must be built at and across different levels of collaboration. Power, too, was consolidated throughout trust-building processes allowing them to challenge routines that operate as mechanisms of institutional racism and create new routines that facilitate more power sharing with BIPOC community-based organizations.

To begin to address institutionalized racism, public managers need to be intentional about the legacy preceding them. They also must recognize the significance of their own identities in assessing and challenging traditional forms of authority in the bureaucracy. That awareness must be followed with careful consideration of strategies and tactics that build collaborative activities that challenge existing routines within and between organizations to continuously build and reinforce trust. It is the old adage of ‘walking the talk.’ These purposive actions are important ways to communicate with historically marginalized communities and help convince them that trust is appropriate. Trust is not automatically generated; it needs to be earned.

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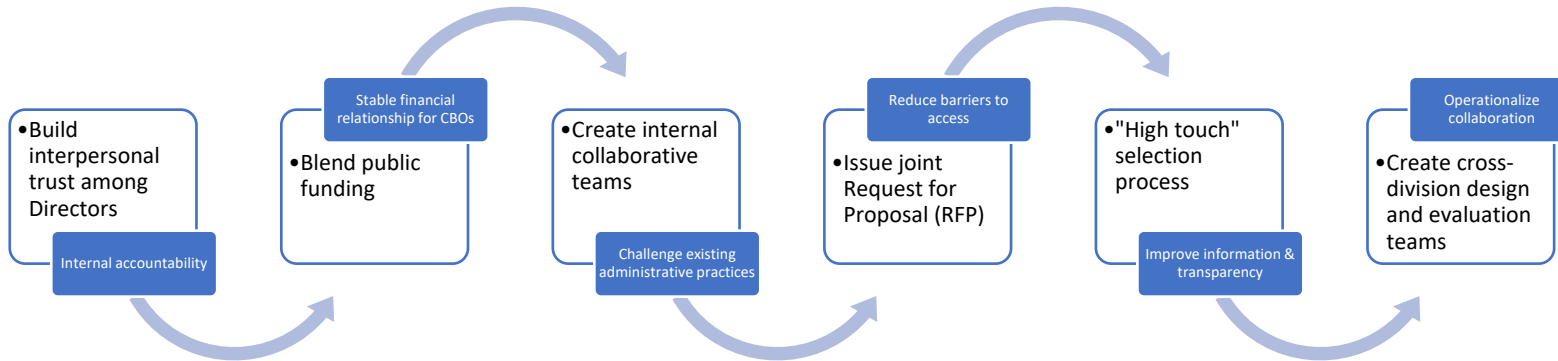
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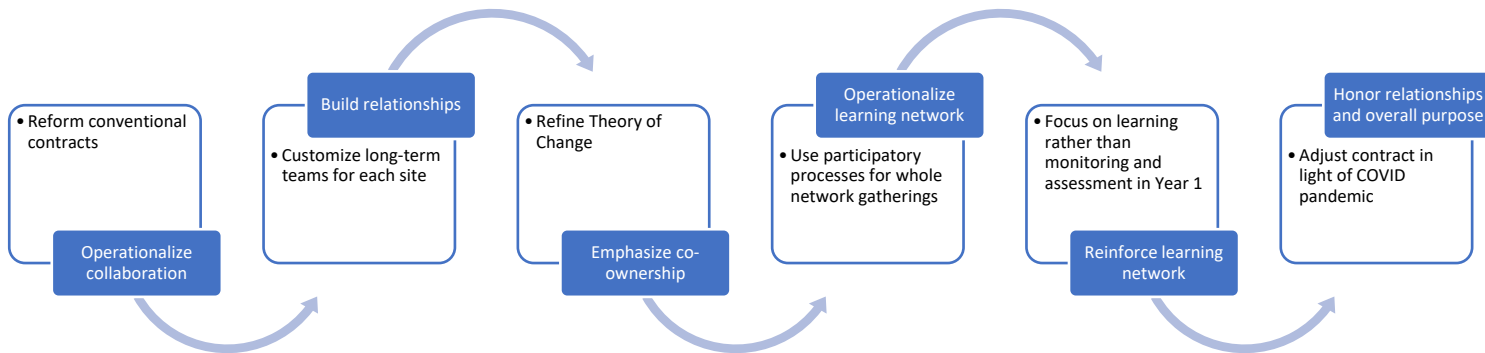
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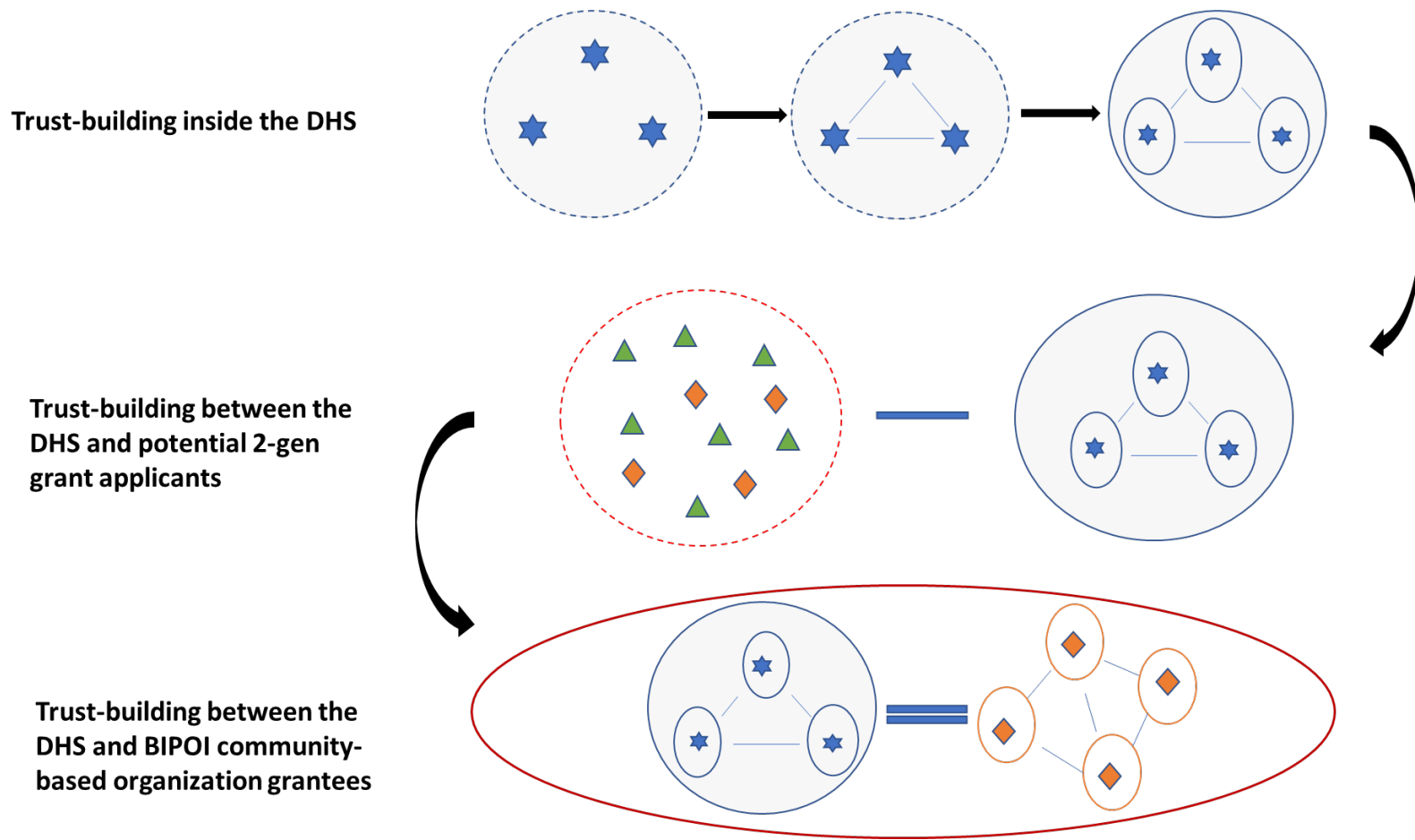
**Figure 1. Government’s Cascading Trust-Building Tactics and Internal Results to Create a Different Public Management Infrastructure.**



**Figure 2. Government’s Cascading Trust-Building Tactics and External Results.**



**Figure 3. How Trust Helps Consolidate Power in Each Stage of the Administrative Reform.**



**Note:** Dashed lines indicate that power is fragmented among actors. Solid lines indicate that power is consolidated among actors.

★ refers to the three DHS Directors. ▲ refers to potential 2-gen grant applicants. ◆ refers to the BIPOC community-based organization grantees. The circles around those actors refer to their divisions (in the case of the Directors) and their local networks (in the case of BIPOC community-based organizations).



**Appendix 1. Local Sites Participating in Minnesota’s 2-Generation Policy Network 2nd Cohort:/Whole Families System Initiative.**

	<b>City of Saint Paul</b>	<b>CLUES: Comunidades Latina Unidas en Servicio</b>	<b>Fond du Lac Tribal and Community College</b>	<b>Intercultural Mutual Assistance Association</b>	<b>Minneapolis American Indian Center</b>	<b>Northpoint Health and Wellness Center, Inc.</b>	<b>Northwest Indian Community Development Center</b>	<b>People Serving People</b>
<b>Focus Population</b>	All families with newborns in single-parent households in Saint Paul, with a deeper equity focus on black and Indigenous single-parent households.	Latino families with low incomes and with children ages 0-3.	Children from prenatal to 3 years whose parents speak Ojibwe.	Immigrant and Refugee families with children Kindergarten-aged or younger children.	American Indian new mothers living in the Twin Cities who have a history of substance, and child protection services.	African American children from conception to age 3 and their parents/caregivers living in North Minneapolis, Brooklyn Center, and Brooklyn Park.	Anishinaabe and other American Indian families disrupted by corrections who are homeless or at risk of having their children removed from their homes	Families experiencing homelessness especially those who are pregnant or have young children. Family homelessness overwhelmingly impacts African American and American Indian communities.
<b>Key program elements</b>	Through partnerships with financial institutions, community-based agencies and early childhood providers, the City of Saint Paul is expanding and building its college savings account initiative.	CLUES will address the disparities, particularly during ages birth to 5, faced by children in Latino families regarding school readiness as a result of systemic failures, and engage the whole family in services to enhance their well-being.	The college’s language immersion program is partnering with Tribal Social Services to plan and implement “Grandma’s House,” a language nest where infants and toddlers, with the help of their parents and elders grow up immersed in the Ojibwe language and culture.	Partnering with families and other community agencies to explore the social-cultural barriers of success in pre-kindergarten- to kindergarten- age children, whose families are first-generation immigrants and refugees.	Work with mothers to develop a stable, nurturing environment for their children, incorporating cultural teachings and resources.	To support healthy child development during the critical period from conception to age 3, Northpoint, along with partners and families, will research the systemic failures that result in an abundance of risk factors and a lack of protective factors for many African American children and their parents/caregivers.	Working with partners, tribes and families, the center is seeking to identify systemic solutions to family separation caused by intergenerational incarceration and substance use disorder for Anishinaabe and American Indian relatives in Beltrami County.	Explore issues related to access to childcare and quality early childhood education and prevention of the recurrence of family homelessness.

Source: Adapted from Sandfort, Sarode & Hendriks (2020).