PARTNERING FOR BETTER POLICY IN CENTRAL OHIO

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The City of Columbus, Ohio, received increasing complaints from North Columbus residents about several large apartment complexes, but city officials did not have information about those buildings to understand and respond to concerns. Similarly, Franklin County needed to understand whether youth are thriving and what supports can help those who are not. County officials also needed to involve other community stakeholders to tackle any identified issues. Thoughtwell, a local data intermediary and long-term partner of the city and county, could help answer these questions.

Founded in 2001, Thoughtwell (formerly Community Research Partners) is a nonprofit research, evaluation, and data center based in Columbus with a mission to strengthen communities through data, information, and knowledge. Since its inception, Thoughtwell has undertaken hundreds of projects in central Ohio and across the state and country. With every project, its goal is to partner with clients to turn data into information that can guide organizational and community decisionmaking.

This case study is part of a series, including an overview brief, that demonstrates how local governments benefit from engaging with data intermediaries such as Thoughtwell and other members of the National Neighborhood Indicators Partnership. In addition to their topical, analytic, and community engagement expertise, these organizations bring an understanding of local context, a reputation for impartial analysis, and a set of relationships that spans sectors. Their services build local capacity, including within governments, to use data for better decisionmaking. To read the full series, visit https://www.neighborhoodindicators.org/localgovt.

COLLABORATING TO TACKLE COMMUNITY CHALLENGES

Since its founding, Thoughtwell has helped answer the most pressing research questions for local governments in and around Columbus. Specific projects for the city and the county governments in central Ohio vary based on the needs and interests of the agencies and community at different times. The local governments draw on the cross-disciplinary expertise of Thoughtwell's research staff, covering many topical areas and methodologies. Examples of publicly sponsored analyses include studies of a downtown retail corridor development, the economic and health status of Columbus women, and an assessment of responsiveness of the emergency support team of Child and Family Service caseworkers during a period of high-volume requests. Across these partnerships, the staff at Thoughtwell emphasize capturing data to develop information that aids decisionmaking for their

government partners. Recently, the City of Columbus faced an issue with several neighborhoods where large apartment complexes had fallen into disarray, but officials did not possess sufficient data to understand the scope of the problem and address it through planning. In response, Thoughtwell collected new data on these properties through a survey and inventory, resulting in the 2016 Large Apartment Complex Survey and Inventory report covering more than two dozen developments along a major corridor on the city's north side (Cook et al. 2016a). Thoughtwell staff understood the local housing market and data sources from past research and knew administrative data was insufficient for the city's request. They designed and conducted a field survey on building conditions and vacancy and then linked these new data to additional data sources on each building, such as code violations and housing subsidies. To provide neighborhood context, the staff analyzed crime patterns and incorporated public perception as voiced in a community meeting. Thoughtwell's report positioned the city to make informed decisions on planning and code enforcement in those neighborhoods. For example, the city designated funds from Celebrate One, the mayor's initiative to address infant mortality, to housing issues for African American expectant mothers in that neighborhood. Having this information come from a neutral organization alleviated political concerns as the city determined actions related to different property owners.

A second example illustrates Thoughtwell's expertise on youth and children and the benefits derived from their cross-sector relationships. Beginning in 2016, the organization conducted two youth needs assessments for Franklin County for children from birth to age 12 and for young adults ages 12 to 24 (Cook et al. 2016b, 2016c). This project entailed partnering with two county agencies, The Columbus Foundation, the United Way of Central Ohio, the YMCA of Central Ohio, and other early child care providers. The needs assessment included a resource list of individual programs and zip code profiles of child care availability. Through this project, the county leveraged resources from project partners outside the government and strengthened collaboration with organizations also working toward the success of the county's children and youth. The report enabled a shared understanding of the current state of programs and service gaps in Franklin County and a baseline to track future progress. This baseline knowledge helped early child care providers and their funders identify gaps in the face of upcoming legislative changes in reimbursement rates based on high-quality child care targets and advocate for additional investment.

STRUCTURING A SUCCESSFUL LONG-TERM PARTNERSHIP

Thoughtwell's close connection to local government dates to its formation as an organization. In the early 2000s, local leaders from the City of Columbus, United Way, and John Glenn College of Public Affairs at The Ohio

State University came together and identified the need for a data intermediary to support local government and nonprofits. Franklin County later joined, and the four founding partners established a model by which Thoughtwell receives financial support from the four entities to build out projects that meet the partners' research priorities. Through this research partnership, the city also aspires to leverage relationships across departments and with other funders to supplement taxpayer dollars. The city contract includes a portion to support Thoughtwell's general data development. This infrastructure funding contributes to Thoughtwell's sustainability, as it allows Thoughtwell to maintain neighborhood-level data essential for analysis and broader community use, as well as provide assistance at no cost to smaller community groups.

The depth of the collaboration and trust between local government and Thoughtwell is evident in this long-standing relationship. Local government partners have a voice in Thoughtwell's strategic planning. Per the organization's bylaws, each founding partner nominates three representatives to the board of trustees. In practice, the city and county each establish an annual master service agreement with Thoughtwell. They meet annually with designated representatives to decide which projects the partners are interested in and how many hours (translated into contract dollars) those will take. At the city, the Department of Development leads this process to meet with other departments, such as the departments of

public utilities, health, public services, and neighborhood development; the city council; and the mayor's office, to identify priorities. Thoughtwell can also suggest ideas that build on other projects or fill unmet community needs. The flexibility of the master service agreement as a contracting vehicle enables local governments to hone in on priority projects and switch gears throughout the yearlong contract period of performance.

This iterative process to identify and refine the scopes of work for projects requires a strong working relationship between local government and Thoughtwell as the research partner. For example, Thoughtwell communicates with the point person in city or county government if there are unexpected challenges, if there are new research angles or opportunities, or if additional labor hours are necessary to ensure high-quality data and analysis. In these cases, the city and county can either shift hours from other projects or add additional funds on an ancillary contract. Similarly, there have been cases with issues that emerged halfway through the year that merit immediate research attention. In these cases, Thoughtwell has been flexible to meet its partners' pressing needs.

As an independent purveyor of information and analysis, Thoughtwell does not audit the city or county's work but provides analysis that positions them to make changes to policy or programs. Independence from political processes is an important concern for all involved. As such, agency staff rather than elected officials lead

project design and facilitate the research partnership with Thoughtwell.

THOUGHTWELL'S UNIQUE CONTRIBUTIONS

High quality of analysis and research products from Thoughtwell is key to maintaining this research partnership. Local governments rely on accurate and up-to-date information at relevant geographies to inform planning processes and decisionmaking. This may involve linking together disparate datasets or collecting new data, as described in the field study of apartment complexes. The consistent data quality is one reason the city keeps going back to Thoughtwell. The researchers recognize where data quality and availability are limited and are transparent in communicating that to their partners in local government. The research partnership with Thoughtwell allows the city to examine if programs are effective and to propose new initiatives or programs. This wealth of information allows the city to put evidence at the center of local public policy and action.

Because local government's capacity to collect data, share data, and conduct research analysis internally has improved, some might question the need to have a close, funded relationship between local government and a community research partner. In Columbus, the arrangement is mutually beneficial and important to improving programs affecting Columbus-area residents. The city has internal research capacity and handles all long-range and land-use planning in

house, but it looks to Thoughtwell for areas of specialization and depth that complement the capacities of city staff. Further, city staff emphasize that Thoughtwell's diverse experiences and researcher capacity often helps officials understand the intricacies of the challenges at hand. Beyond the technical capacity, the governments also recognize that Thoughtwell brings a depth of knowledge about local context to the table through other projects and partnerships.

One city staff member encouraged other places to explore external research partnerships in their own communities. City staff emphasize that partnerships should be centered on using the data to drive public decisionmaking, with the government open to learning about areas for improvement. The experience from Columbus shows that rigorous research from a fresh, independent perspective can help with issues that are not well understood. A collaborative process for setting the agenda and regular communications will help set clear expectations among partners. Similar partnerships in other places should be adapted to the local environment, but Thoughtwell and the governments of Columbus and Franklin County illustrate how investment in a long-term relationship can improve public programs and policies. This has allowed the city and county to be more efficient in using data for regular planning processes and allowed them to use existing datasets in new ways to gain neighborhood- or community-level insights. The region is prepared to answer questions about

local challenges and opportunities because of
the information and learning foundation
established over two decades of partnership.

Reference

Cook, Lynnette, Megan Johanson, Sarah Goodman, Mary Catherine Brown, Marc Rostan, Jessica Bracy, Chyna Carter, et al. 2016a. *City of Columbus Large Apartment Complex Survey and Inventory*. Columbus, OH: Community Research Partners.

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