

Georgia Appleseed Center for Law and Justice Best Practices for Social Innovation Labs

Georgia Appleseed is the facilitator and founding member of the Clayton County Homelessness Intervention Program (HIP). This collaborative social innovation lab develops and implements effective interventions to end homelessness and unhealthy housing conditions for low-income children and their families in Clayton County, Georgia. Over the last two years, HIP-led reform efforts in the court and code enforcement systems helped thousands of families avoid eviction during the COVID-19 pandemic.

HIP's unique design¹ brings together a county-focused group of leaders and stakeholders to identify barriers to healthy, affordable housing and innovate community-specific solutions. HIP creates a model for localized reform by engaging the courts, schools, nonprofits, service providers, policing and housing code enforcement, and other community leaders.

Communities can apply the social innovation lab model to a wide range of social problems across Georgia. We developed the following best practices based on our experience with HIP.

- **Recruit members** who can commit resources (tangible and intangible) to support the development, implementation, and evaluation of policy experiments (or interventions) related to the lab's focus. Emphasize diversity (across sectors and demographics). In addition, either include as members individuals directly impacted by the lab's focus or develop formal mechanisms for engaging them to inform the lab's work and evaluate its impact.
- **Adopt a focus early** in the life of the lab (e.g., reduce homelessness among children) and in coordination with founding lab members.
- **Commit to at least a year of participation.** Participants should agree to attend lab meetings or send representatives for at least a year. Regular attendance fosters personal relationships, knowledge sharing among members, and gathers resources that members rely upon for policy experiments. In addition, a participation commitment helps the lab weather the unexpected, e.g., the COVID-19 pandemic.
- **Engage members in shared learning experiences** related to the lab's focus, proposed policy experiments, evaluation techniques, and other relevant topics. For example, lab members can read the same books or studies and discuss them, take educational trips together, educate each other about their experience, offer expertise relevant to the lab's focus, and bring in outside speakers.
- **Build and implement policy experiments and do not be afraid of failure.** Lab members should look at projects large and small that can impact the lab's focus. That focus is

¹ HIP adapts social lab techniques from Zaid Hassan's [The Social Labs Revolution: A New Approach to Solving our Most Complex Challenges](#).

likely a multi-faceted, complex social problem caused by a variety of social challenges. Lab members should look at multi-faceted solutions. The lab should seek reach out to diverse community stakeholders (particularly those directly impacted by the lab's focus and experiments) for feedback at various stages in experiment planning and evaluation. Incorporating this feedback loop will help experiments achieve the lab's goals, reduce unintended harm, and help interpret results.

- **Emphasize sophisticated evaluation and learn from experience** to create better policy experiments. Recruit members who can bring evaluation expertise, like local university faculty, or engage outside assistance to implement timely and useful evaluation, analysis, and feedback. Emphasize diverse viewpoints in the evaluation process, and include viewpoints of stakeholders directly impacted by the lab's focus and experiments. Lab members should use what they learn from the success and failures of experiments to improve future outcomes.
- **A “backbone organization” should support the lab with staff** who create and maintain meeting schedules, facilitate meetings if appropriate, produce agendas and notes, and coordinate information sharing among lab members.
- **Listen and then listen some more.** Listening allows for asset sharing, idea creation, planning, relationship building and much more.
- **Employ patience as a tactic and a resource.** Quality experiments take time to develop, especially if you intend to evaluate your impact.