An Interview with Lindsey Giblin, Portfolio Lead, Data Team, Community Solutions' Built For Zero Initiative

Anne LaFonde January 23rd, 2019

AL: We want to dive more deeply into the way you've been incorporating measurement in the BFZ process.

LG: That is all we do on my team.

AL: What is your role and background?

LG: I'm portfolio lead on the data management team. I manage 8 people, organized into three different teams.
The first team, of 2-3 people is the product implementation team – they visualize the reporting data they get from over 60 domestic communities that are reporting data to us. They put the data into dashboards.

The second team, of 3 people, is the research and impact team. They are responsible for working with the product implementation team on visual design, but they're also responsible for the overall data of the portfolio. They've developed an entire behavior and measurement strategy for determining if communities are ending homelessness based on their requirements. They are tracking data over time at different levels.

The third team is the data coaching team. They spend their time thinking about how people are using data in the performance space, and how to address gaps.

AL: How long have you been with Built For Zero?

LG: Four and a half years. I worked in a consulting firm in NY before that, when I was hired by Community Solutions. At that time they were measuring housing placements in 125 communities. They realized when they got to their goal of helping 100,000 people find sustainable housing that the metric didn't necessarily help any community end homelessness.

Instead of counting up they decided to count down, which is where "Built for Zero" came in. But we found the systems were way more volatile than what we first thought. We pushed communities to get a "by name list" which is a list of individual people in a community experiencing homelessness at any given time. It is constantly updated, and on any given day you can understand people's circumstances. We did a drive to have communities create a by name list, and developed a score card with data that communities needed to fill in. The scorecard has metrics to make sure people aren't double-counted, etc. We did a lot to try and influence the conversation about how to count the number of homeless. This process is now included in what goes out to communities at the federal level.

We realized there needed to be more metrics accounted for with in-flow and out-flow on the list. We ask communities about 3 different types of in-flow (how many people are showing up that you haven't seen before (new in-flow) or old in-flow (how many people were missing and then came back) or were housed before through community's efforts and have become homeless again. We have a form that communities report into monthly with metrics on in-flow and out-flow metrics on them.

AL: How do you then visualize this info to help communities act on it?

LG: We ask for another data point, of their actively homeless number. It's a data check that the in-flow and out-flow should add up to. We show them how close they are to the functional zero number, with a graph showing definition of veteran homelessness, and another graph for chronically homeless. There is an engine tab which is a data point of everything they've submitted. There's also a bar graph showing a deeper dive into the 3 categories of in-flow and 3 categories of out-flow. The last one shows their progress on a score card: One for veterans, one for single individuals, one for chronically homeless and one we are still working on, for families.

AL: Did the community partners take to this data well?

LG: I think a lot did. There were some growing pains. Once we introduced the concepts of the by- name list they really understood it. The previous way of measuring weren't helping end homelessness, it was just managing it and giving the federal government information. Some communities were shocked at the level of data we were asking them to track and weren't immediately equipped to take it on. Now communities are glad they implemented it.

AL: How big are the community level programs? What population are they trying to support?

LG: Every community has a continuum of care, a network of all the homeless programs in that community. It can really vary. Sometimes there are a half dozen in a sparsely populated community, but in larger places like NYC there can be 1,000 homeless programs.

AL: Do all organizations within that community have to by in to the program?

LG: Yes. And that is part of the toughest job our coaching team has, to get everyone on board with collecting the data and managing it. We try to have people make data driven decisions rather than preferential. We coach them to look at the real time data on the by-name list and prioritize based on that information.

Quality improvement – a lot of staff is trained on that and they push that training out to communities. When you have a community where not everyone is on the same page, we have them talk about barriers, and get them to talk about the level of things they can change by next Tuesday, to get people to move faster.

AL: What's an example of where a cycle has been integrated and produced results for one of these communities?

LG: I'm a little separate from the coaching team. One I heard recently was on the level of meeting structure. One community had staff remote and in-person and they didn't get good meeting attendance. The small thing that they did was just institute a conference call line and have the meeting over the phone. It worked right away and it worked well. It was amazing to watch because they were able to feel more connected as a team and

work towards the overall goal of ending homelessness which they had recently committed to.

AL: Where else have you seen a social design design approach come together in this work?

LG: It is a value of the organization. We ask for a lot of feedback loops within communities. I think it is really integrated into everything we do. Every coaching call we have with communities and the way they work with the communities is to get really involved with them. Every community's needs are different. The coaches really act like a facilitator/teammate and try to guide the communities towards what will work for them. Every community that has reached functional zero has had a different way of getting there. A lot of them had common themes, but they are very different communities. Like Lancaster PA and Riverside CA have very different needs. In CA they've ended veteran homelessness. In Lancaster, they've ended chronic homelessness.

AL: So you came from another organization that was working within homelessness. Did the other groups you worked with also use this design approach? Or is this a new way of tackling homelessness?

LG: I can't think of any organization that does it the way Built For Zero does. There are a lot of consulting firms out there but they take a more traditional approach. The old consulting work looked a lot different. It was more static and wasn't as sustained. We weren't on the ground or in the trenches with them like the coaching team is now in Built For Zero.

AL: What are backgrounds of coaches that work in Built For Zero?

LG: Some have masters in public administration, one came from the education field doing user centered design, a couple worked in leadership and admin positions in homeless organizations.

AL: The data people that are on your team of 8, did they come with social sector training?

LG: Most have picked up what they know from being on the job, they aren't trained in technical computer science. I have a masters in social work and a social work background. Data science and analysis I learned on the job, and the data team has similar backgrounds to mine.

AL: Do you have a strategy for building the capacity of communities to become implementers of data?

LG: Yes. We support all portfolios but we are heavily invested in the communities enrolled in Built For Zero. There was a community that just hit functional zero for veterans. They joined Built For Zero in Feb. 2018 and got data reliability in June and got to functional zero in November. This was extremely fast. A coach will often go to the community individually to get a lay of the land, and that is a way we can get a sense of how they are using data. We host two big on site learning session meetings a year. We

try to get every community to go to both of those. The end goal for every community is functional zero.

AL: Social design processes are inherently more qualitative than quantitative. It sounds like what you've created is a balance for communities to understand why things are or aren't changing.

LG: Data and coaching are often not different things at Built For Zero. They are starting to feel like the same thing. When you dig deep on how communities can improve their score it becomes a coaching question and becomes more qualitative.