The Solutions Journalism Network is an independent, non-profit organization working to legitimize and spread the practice of solutions journalism: rigorous and compelling reporting about responses to social problems.

@soljourno
www.solutionsjournalism.org

Written by
Sarika Bansal and Courtney Martin

Produced by
Samantha McCann

Published January 2015
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

- Introduction ........................................................................................................... 4
- How do I know it’s solutions journalism? ................................................................. 6
- How do I know it’s NOT solutions journalism? ...................................................... 8
- Why solutions journalism? ....................................................................................... 10
- 7 steps to creating a solutions story ........................................................................ 12
- How do I find a solutions-oriented story? .............................................................. 15
- How do I vet a solutions-oriented story? ................................................................. 18
- How do I conduct interviews for a solutions-oriented story? ............................... 20
- How do I pitch a solutions-oriented story? ............................................................. 22
- How do I craft a solutions-oriented pitch? .............................................................. 23
- How do I promote my story and engage readers? .................................................. 26
- How do I structure a solutions journalism story? .................................................. 28
  - A “positive deviant” story .................................................................................. 29
  - A “big new idea” story ....................................................................................... 32
  - An “experiment in progress” story ..................................................................... 34
  - A “location transformation” story ..................................................................... 39
- Advice from journalists .......................................................................................... 42
- How can I engage with SJN? ................................................................................... 45
- SJN origin story ....................................................................................................... 46
- Appendix/Further resources ................................................................................... 47

List of Sidebars

1. What kind of impact can solutions journalism have? ........................................... 11
2. How do I write instructively about failure? ............................................................ 14
3. Heroes vs. Characters ............................................................................................ 17
4. Positive deviants .................................................................................................... 19
5. Good solutions stories ........................................................................................... 21
6. Bringing a solutions lens to short pieces .............................................................. 24
7. How can I bring a solutions focus to my beat? .................................................... 25
8. Solutions Journalism and investigations ............................................................... 27
Welcome!

If you’re reading this toolkit, it means you are — at the very least — intrigued by solutions journalism and how it might enhance your reporting skills.

**We believe journalists gain a lot when they look at responses to problems.**

A wide variety of compelling stories simply don’t get covered. Why? The field of journalism has traditionally been resistant to seeing responses as legitimate fodder for investigation. Some reporters and editors fear it will be perceived as advocacy, fluff, or PR. Here at the Solutions Journalism Network (SJN), our mission is to change that perception. We define solutions journalism as rigorous, compelling coverage of responses to social problems — reporting done with the highest of journalistic standards. We’re already working with a network of over 30 newsrooms and hundreds of individual journalists to demonstrate that solid solutions journalism need not be feared. To the contrary, it’s an important, underused tool in a reporter’s pocket.

SJN was co-founded by David Bornstein and Tina Rosenberg, veteran reporters who write the Fixes column at *The New York Times*, and Courtney E. Martin, a journalist and author who got her start just as online media was exploding. The three of them had unique journeys — through the farmlands of India, the hospitals of Brazil, and the Ninth Ward of New Orleans — that led them all to the same conclusion: there wasn’t enough healthy competition among journalists for great stories about responses to social problems in the world.

The old thinking: we might compromise our professionalism by covering solutions. The new thinking: we compromise our professionalism by not covering solutions. As journalists, our job is to hold up an accurate mirror to society. If we fail to cover the many ways people and institutions are trying to solve problems — successful or not — we fail to do our jobs. If we only cover the systemic problems in schools and ignore the models that are working to improve education, we are not telling the whole story.

From that perspective, using this toolkit can both open you up to a treasure trove of great, underreported stories. Our official definition of solutions journalism is worth mentioning here: **rigorous, compelling reporting about responses to social problems.**
Many of us became journalists because we want to have an impact, to make the world better. But uncovering wrongdoing isn’t the only way to have an impact. Revealing problems is crucial, of course — but that impact is magnified if alongside the problems, we report on how people are trying to solve them. Education reporters, for example, produce hard-hitting stories about how public schools are failing poor children. We believe that they’d have more impact if they also reported on how some schools are doing better educating all their students, and how they are achieving this. These kinds of stories energize readers, listeners, and viewers. They change the public debate. And they change policies.

People don’t change merely because someone points out their problems. We need to know that change is possible and see models of how to do it. Societies work the same way.

This Solutions Journalism Toolkit is designed for anyone who would like to practice solutions journalism. We hope you will find value in these pages, whether you’re a veteran print journalist looking to reinvigorate your approach, a mid-career videographer looking to reconnect to your original reasons for becoming a journalist, a journalism student looking to define your career, or anything in between.

The toolkit walks users through the practice of solutions journalism, from the first step — identifying a response worth investigating — to the last — engaging readers in your piece once it is published. We distill the structures of a few solutions journalism stories to aid you in times of writer’s block. You will also see “sidebars” throughout the toolkit, which answer some of the most common doubts journalists have about this practice – like how to write about failure in a solutions-oriented way. But you need not read this document from start to finish like a traditional book. You can pick the sections that are most useful to you.

We see this as a working document and hope that you will talk back. Please give us feedback, whether by emailing, tweeting, or skywriting. We’re particularly hungry for wisdom on making solutions journalism applicable to television. But we welcome all advice that helps us improve on this toolkit and make it more useful to the growing network of people practicing solutions journalism.

Enjoy and we look forward to hearing from you soon!
Here are 10 questions to ask yourself when writing/producing a solutions-oriented story. Not every story will address all of these questions, and that’s okay — but we hope this will inspire your thinking:

**Does the story explain the causes of a social problem?**
A solution should be explained in the context of the problem it’s trying to address. Documenting the causes of that problem will clarify the opportunity for a solution to create leverage and impact.

**Does the story present an associated response to that problem?**
The acid test: if the story doesn’t describe a response, it’s not solutions journalism.

**Does the story get into the problem solving and how-to details of implementation?**
A great solutions story delves into the how-to’s of problem solving, investigating questions like: What models are having success improving an educational outcome and how do they actually work?

**Is the problem-solving process central to the narrative?**
Solutions journalism, like all journalism, is about great story telling. It should include characters grappling with challenges, experimenting, succeeding, failing, learning. But the narrative is driven by the problem solving and the tension is located in the inherent difficulty in solving a problem.

**Does the story present evidence of results linked to the response?**
Solutions journalism is about ideas – but like all good journalism, the determination of what works (or doesn’t) is supported, where possible, by solid evidence. For early-stage ideas, where the only “evidence” may be the assertions of credible observers, the key is to not overclaim.
How do I know it’s solutions journalism?

1. Does the story explain the limitations of the response?
   There is no such thing as a perfect solution to a social problem. Every response has caveats, limitations, and risks. Good solutions journalism does not shy away from imperfection.

2. Does the story convey an insight or teachable lesson?
   What makes solutions journalism compelling is the discovery — the journey that brings the reader or viewer to an insight about how the world works and, perhaps, how it could be made to work better.

3. Does the story avoid reading like a puff piece?
   Solutions journalism is expressly not about advocating for particular models, organizations, and ideas. Journalists pursuing solutions stories are bringing their discernment to explore ideas and methods, not to advance an agenda or make people feel good.

4. Does the story draw on sources who have a ground-level understanding, not just 30,000-foot expertise?
   Solutions journalism comes alive when it draws on practical how-to insights from people working in the trenches, who are knowledgeable about on-the-ground realities and the details of implementation.

5. Does the story give greater attention to the response than to a leader/innovator/do-gooder?
   We see a clear distinction between solutions journalism and what is often called “good news.” “Good news” stories tend to celebrate individuals and inspirational acts. Solutions journalism is about ideas, how people are trying to make them work, and their observable effects.
We’ve found that to explain what solutions journalism is, it’s often effective to offer examples of what it isn’t. Here are seven types of solutions journalism impostors we’ve all seen in the media before.

**Hero Worship:**

These are stories that celebrate or glorify an individual, often at the expense of explaining the idea the individual exemplifies. Instead of talking about the merits of an approach an individual is advancing, the piece will gush about the person’s decision to leave a high-paying job to save the world.

**Silver Bullet:**

These stories are often seen in the tech and innovation sections. They describe new gadgets in glowing terms, often referring to them as “lifesavers.” Also, a note: Money is sometimes considered a silver bullet.

**Favor for a Friend:**

You can sometimes distinguish this impostor because the sole or predominant voice is that of the organization being profiled. Like the silver bullet story, it doesn’t have much in the way of a ‘to be sure’ paragraph—i.e. the caveats to success—and appears as thinly veiled PR.

Art credit: John Challis and Annie Taylor
Opinion journalism can explore solutions if it contains real reporting about existing responses to problems (and the results). But “think tank journalism” refers to journalism that proposes things that don’t yet exist.

The Afterthought:

This is a paragraph or sound bite at the end of a problem story that gives lip service to efforts at solving it. The solutions aren’t considered with real seriousness, but rather thrown in as an afterthought.

Instant Activist:

A lot of people think, when seeing the phrase ‘solutions journalism,’ that we’re promoting pieces that ask the reader to click a button at the end and give $5 to a cause. They offer an emotional plea and then ask for support for a specific cause, as a means to “solve” the issue.

Chris P. Bacon:

This kind of journalism is heartwarming, quirky, and one-off. It often appears at the end of the evening news or on Thanksgiving, in the form of a kid with a lemonade stand or a guy who made a wheelchair for his beloved pig (the pig is, somewhat ironically, named “Chris P. Bacon”). It tells the viewer that the world has good people doing cute things, but doesn’t get to the structural issues that we want solutions journalism to address.
WHY SOLUTIONS JOURNALISM?

Journalism’s predominant theory of change is that pointing out social problems will spur reform. Journalists act as whistleblowers and expose wrongdoing, but have little role to play beyond that.

We believe this theory of change is insufficient.

It is increasingly inadequate for journalists to simply note what’s wrong and hope for society to create better laws or provide proper oversight. The world’s problems are just too complex and fast-changing. People must learn about credible examples of responses to problems in order to become empowered, discerning actors capable of shaping a better society. In this context, journalism must augment its traditional role, spotlighting adaptive responses to entrenched social ills. Why else should you practice solutions journalism?

It's just good journalism.

You may have noticed that our tagline reads, “The whole story.” We believe solutions journalism makes existing journalism more accurate and complete. Journalism that fails to cover responses to social problems provides an inaccurate and biased view of reality — one that can actually harm society. By regularly highlighting problems and ignoring responses to them, journalists convey a false sense that people haven’t tried to fix things, or don’t know how to do any better.

It increases reader engagement.

Solutions stories are often structured as “Howdunnits,” similar to television shows like CSI and House: someone achieved results that are newsworthy; what did they do that others did not? If done well, this approach to storytelling can grab and keep readers’ interest. Solutions stories are more likely to be shared on social media. This is partly because they can make listeners feel powerful, less likely to tune out, and less apathetic or cynical about the problem. This is supported by social science research, as well as by research we supported with the Engaging News Project.

It can have an impact.

By showing how different institutions approach problems, solutions journalism can advance the public discourse. Instead of a “he said, she said” screaming match, we’ve found in several instances that solutions-oriented journalism can lead to more constructive and less divisive conversations. People don’t change simply because you point out their problems. They need models for change — so do societies.
WHAT KIND OF IMPACT CAN SOLUTIONS JOURNALISM HAVE?

By focusing on what’s working, solutions-oriented stories can reframe problems in a way that sparks new thinking among policymakers, practitioners, and community members alike. Here are a few examples:

**BRING MORE EFFECTIVE STRATEGIES TO A COMMUNITY’S ATTENTION:**

Rhiannon Meyers wrote a year-long series called “Cost of Diabetes” in the Corpus Christi Caller-Times. Although Corpus Christi’s county has the highest rate of amputations in America, the disease was long ignored and hidden. The series included three solutions-oriented stories of communities in other parts of the United States that had more successfully dealt with diabetes care. Meyers said: “The solutions stories... probably got the most feedback and they were the most controversial — I think, in part, because they ruffled the feathers of providers in this community... [They] were probably the meatiest of all of the stories in the series. Those were the ones that sparked the most conversation here about what we can do differently and what we are not doing now.”

**EXPOSE AN ORGANIZATION TO A POWERFUL IDEA THAT CAN TRANSFORM ITS IMPACT:**

The 100,000 Homes campaign was trying to dramatically increase the placement rates of chronically homeless people across the country. In the second year, it became clear that the campaign was not on pace to achieve its goal. Then its leaders read a New York Times Fixes column about Rapid Results, a strategy for challenging a community to mobilize and organize itself to achieve bold goals in 100 days. The campaign got in touch with Rapid Results and adopted it as a core strategy, implementing it in communities across the country. In July 2014, the campaign announced that it had met its goal of housing 100,000 chronically homeless people. Organizers say that success was directly attributed to its work with Rapid Results.

**DELEGITIMIZE EXCUSES FOR INACTION:**

By showing that something is working in one place, it takes away the excuses for failure elsewhere. At the dawn of the millennium, HIV/AIDS drugs were so expensive that the virus was essentially considered a death sentence in the developing world. Tina Rosenberg wrote a story for The New York Times Magazine in 2001 that investigated this problem, but through a different lens. She discussed how Brazil had reduced HIV/AIDS drug prices significantly and how it was managing the complex treatment regimen. It also brought an investigative lens to expose the behavior of U.S. government officials and pharmaceutical companies. Rosenberg’s piece made many decision-makers question the assumptions then used to justify high drug prices, and has been cited as a factor that contributed to the creation of the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis, and Malaria.

**CHANGE A COMMUNITY’S CONVERSATION AND OFFICIAL POLICY:**

Milwaukee Journal-Sentinel reporter Meg Kissinger has covered mental health for much of her career. But the biggest impact of her work came from her 2013 series, “Chronic Crisis,” which documented how patients continued to die of abuse and neglect, and also reported on methods for reforming the system. Immediately after the series, Milwaukee abolished political control of mental health policy and established a non-political Milwaukee Mental Health Board, with mental health experts as members. In addition, the city’s new budget provides a large increase for mental health care. “Chronic Crisis” included three solutions-focused stories, which Kissinger said were key to the series’ impact. “It’s one thing to talk about problems, and there are many in the Milwaukee County Mental Health System, but where the real value comes for readers is to know how does another community tackle something and turn something around,” she said.

**REIMAGINE A STATUS QUO:**

What if Michael Lewis had decided to tackle the issue of the distorting effect of money in baseball by focusing on a team that had very little — and was a constant loser as a result? Would anyone have read it, or learned from the story? Instead, he took a solutions approach — and changed the sport forever with Moneyball.
1. Identify an issue or question of concern (e.g., climate change, public safety, low graduation rate).

2. Ask yourself: What’s missing in the public conversation? Is there a lack of awareness about the problem? Is there some awareness, but insufficient outrage? If so, traditional journalism that exposes the problem may be the best course.

But if the missing parts of the public conversation include “What could be done about this? Who is doing a better job handling this problem?”, then it’s a good candidate for a solutions journalism inquiry.

3. Start hunting for candidates for solutions journalism stories. Are there places that have consistently done better than average? Are there any noteworthy responses to the problem? You can use the tips in the section, “How do I find a solutions-oriented story?” (page 15) to guide you.

NOTE: The above steps may come in a different order, depending on how you receive information. You may hear about a promising solution first, and then back up to find the extent of the underlying problem. You may hear about a city/county that has bucked a particular trend, and then learn about how they did it. Or, as diagrammed, you may hear first about a problem and then work to uncover an existing response. You may also choose to talk to an editor much earlier in the process than we indicated.
4. Select a story to highlight using old-fashioned journalism judgment. You can use the 10 Questions (page 6) and the section “How do I vet a solutions-oriented story?” (page 18) to help think through this.

   Keep in mind: Is there evidence of success? Is the evidence credible? Is it a one-off or are there lessons others could benefit from? If the story is happening outside your community, can you give it local relevance by framing it as something your community needs to know about?

5. Report the story. You can use our resources, “How do I conduct a solutions-oriented interview?” (page 20) and “How do I structure a solutions journalism story?” (page 28) for this. If there are multiple responses that are working in different ways, this may be a candidate for a larger series on the issue.

6. At some point in this process, you’ll want to be in touch with an editor. If you work in a newsroom, you’ll probably develop these stories with your editor. If you’re a freelancer, you can use our resource, “How do I pitch a solutions-oriented story?” (page 22) to guide you.

7. Once your story is published, you’ll want to think about promoting it and engaging with your readers/listeners/viewers. You can use our resource, “How do I promote my story and engage readers?” (page 26) for some tips.
HOW DO I WRITE INSTRUCTIVELY ABOUT FAILURE?

In a way, the phrase “solutions journalism” is a bit of a misnomer. To many people who hear it for the first time, the word “solutions” implies that the journalist is claiming something to be the solution. (We hope that by this point, we have disabused you of that notion.)

In truth, we’re interested in getting journalists to cover responses to problems, regardless of how well they are working. Journalists should be clear-eyed about what is working in these responses, and what is not working. The main goal of solutions stories is to yield practical insights for society about how a problem, or similar problems, could be more successfully addressed.

In this definition, it would be possible to bring a solutions lens to a seemingly failed response — as long as it makes society smarter in some way. Here are a few ways to consider doing just that:

Contrast the failure with a similar, more successful, alternative.

Ebola unfortunately spread quickly through much of West Africa in the summer of 2014. There were many important stories written about the plight of countries like Sierra Leone. But in August, the BBC’s Catherine Byaruhanga reported on the East African nation of Uganda, which controlled Ebola through a health monitoring system. Her story played a unique role in informing the international community of potential for improvement.

Make sure the failure is instructive.

When interviewing people about a failed response, considering asking, “What can others learn from this? What could have been done differently?” These questions can take your reporting beyond a typical story about a failed response.

Allow yourself to be open to shades of gray.

We would argue that only rarely could something be classified as a complete failure – or, conversely, a complete success. If you look at an issue with enough granularity, there will be shades of gray. As an example, Jeffery J. Silingo’s piece in The New York Times examining what he called the “hype cycle” around MOOCs (massive open online courses), concluded that while they have failed to live up to inflated expectations of democratizing education, they “have become an important supplement to classroom learning and a tool for professional development.”

Discuss why people are drawn to a failed idea.

This is particularly relevant if you plan to take down a straw man of an idea that has attracted many eyeballs and/or investor money. Take, for instance, TOMS shoes, one of the first and most popular “buy-one-give-one” businesses. Many consumers thought this model was a brilliant way to shop while making the world a better place. However, careful reporting shows that building up local shoe manufacturing would have more impact than donating foreign-made shoes. A full story about TOMS’ flaws should include a discussion of why it was greeted with such enthusiasm. (In this case, well-intentioned consumers got smarter and TOMS actually changed their business model.)
Many people who want to do solutions journalism aren’t always sure where to begin. This is partly because, as illustrated above, it can be much easier to spot problems than solutions. It isn’t that challenging to find examples of widespread problems. But it can take work to find places that are effectively responding to those problems.

Of course, this doesn’t mean that solutions don’t exist. We just need to reorient how we see the world, to be more mindful of compelling solutions. There are two tricks to doing this. The first is knowing where to look, and the second is knowing what to ask.

WHERE SHOULD I LOOK?

Peer-reviewed academic papers
Randomized controlled trials (RCTs), case studies, and literature reviews can help surface what’s working in different spheres. Google Scholar is a good place to start. Type in a few keywords (e.g., dental health Missouri immigrants) and consider narrowing the time period in which you look. Even reading over a few abstracts can give you a sense of the new thinking in a field.

Academic experts
If you have a chance, try contacting the authors of relevant academic papers — it’s usually not too difficult to find contact information on institutional websites. Interview them, even if only for background purposes. Find out what groundbreaking events are helping define their fields, whether there are any cutting-edge research papers worth exploring, and if there are any rising academic stars worth following.

Large datasets
Datasets (for example, the Global Burden of Disease report) can help surface places and institutions that are having the most success at dealing with common problems. Is something happening in these locations that could be replicated elsewhere? This is known as the “positive deviance” approach to journalism (see page 19).
People involved in implementation

One distinction between solutions journalism and traditional journalism is the emphasis on the “how.” Good solutions-oriented stories report not only on what is happening, but also the nitty-gritty details of how it’s done. For that reason, it’s often beneficial to speak to people involved in direct implementation of an idea. For example, someone writing about innovations in daycare would find it vital to speak to daycare providers who have seen the implementation firsthand. Since subjects have an interest in claiming success, more than the usual skepticism is warranted.

Networks of innovators

Groups like Ashoka, The Aspen Institute, Echoing Green, The Skoll Foundation, The Schwab Foundation, and TED have vetted thousands of entrepreneurs and innovators. People in their networks could be great sources for solutions-oriented stories. Many of these networks hold social change conferences, which can be a great place to meet many of the people on this list (see page 47).

Program officers in foundations

Foundations are in the business of vetting ideas. Many program officers have developed a deep understanding of their fields over time — and the ideas within them that have taken off. Since foundation officers will often over-sell their grantees, however, it can be more useful to ask them about programs they don’t fund.

Your own expertise

If you have a beat, or you are drawn to a specific topic, build a network of contacts. They can tell you about innovative responses underway and introduce you to the people behind them.

Hold a mirror up to your own life

If you are having trouble vetting after-school options in your town, it’s likely that others are struggling with it as well. Are there cities that have responded to this issue? Solutions journalism isn’t just about responses to problems that “those” people face in faraway places, but all of us — including journalists. Some of the most successful solutions-oriented stories are grounded in personal experiences.

What should I ask? Who is doing this better?

That is the one question that can often help surface solutions better than any other. Imagine that you’re chatting with an expert about mental health, and the conversation veers to your state’s poor treatment of the mentally ill. This question may take the conversation in a new direction.
Heroes Versus Characters

Systemic responses to entrenched social problems require more than a few extraordinary people; they require armies of ordinary people employing strategic and effective techniques. That’s why solutions journalism is more engaging when stories focus more rich, three-dimensional characters and compelling narrative tension, rather than relying on “heroes.”

How can you keep yourself from slipping into hero worship, even when you find yourself legitimately impressed by someone’s leadership or ingenuity? Here are some tips:

• Like all good writing, **show, don’t tell**. Observe the architects of the solution and the “clients” in action and make it visually vivid for your reader. The more you can be on site, the better.

• If you report what you observe without the use of editorializing adjectives like “amazing” or “terrific,” you can **let the reader draw their own conclusions** about the characters’ qualities.

• Don’t forget the value of **revealing characters’ challenges**. This isn’t to shame or condemn them, but to make them real. Perhaps the leader of an organization is a fantastic visionary, but a dysfunctional manager. Or perhaps he struggles to achieve scale because he is unwilling to let go of control. We would argue that it’s actually a more helpful act to report on someone honestly than to flatten them into a flawless hero.

• Behind every story about a powerful changemaker, there is a hidden privilege (an aunt’s big start-up investment, for example), a heartbreaking fallout with a collaborator, or an abysmal failure. Don’t dramatize for the sake of it, but also **don’t shy away from dark moments** that can be instructive.

• **Look for the unlikely characters.** In fact, many times, the so-called recipient can be the catalyst for a far more interesting narrative than the social entrepreneur. Or consider people within the organization, but those without positional leadership. Many times great characters are overlooked because they don’t have CEO or Executive Director next to their names. Geoff Dembicki, a sustainability reporter, gives an example: “I’ve found that for certain beats — like climate change, for instance — reporting tends to focus on the same archetypes over and over: the underdog environmentalist, the wily lobbyist, the ignorant conservative etc. Sometimes the most engaging aspect of a solutions story is the **new archetype** it reveals. I got lots of positive feedback on my profile of a libertarian solar panel installer in Hawaii because it challenged people’s conceptions of who can, or should be, interested in the environment. The very fact that an unexpected archetype now exists in people’s imaginations opens up new possibilities for narrative/debate.”
At this stage, you’ve potentially found the bud of a compelling story. How do you know if it’s any good? As with any story, you’ll have to vet the idea.

First, follow the rules of good journalism. Try to find many distinct perspectives when reporting a story. Interview people who do not have a vested interest in the outcome of the intervention. Think about where your sources get their funding.

The judgment needed to identify a good solutions story is similar to the judgment needed to identify a good problem story: what happened and how do we know it happened? The difference is in the perceived consequences of getting it wrong. In journalism, saying something is a problem and getting it wrong is a misdemeanor. Saying something is working and getting it wrong is a felony. “Overly credulous” is one of the worst things you can call a journalist. How do you avoid it?

1. **Don’t overclaim.**

Don’t imply the problem is solved — it probably isn’t. Don’t announce that this is the best solution — you can’t know that. Don’t predict it will last — it might well not. Limit yourself to reporting the news: there’s something going on, and here’s what the evidence says. As with a traditional story, “evidence” isn’t just data. It can also be found in interviews, shoe-leather reporting — all the ways journalists gather information. No solution is perfect. Make sure you report on its limitations and struggles.

Such caution is protective. You don’t have to worry about looking like an advocate if you don’t make claims. If the solution falls apart a few months later, you don’t look gullible, because you simply covered what was happening at the time.

These guidelines are also liberating. You don’t have to try to rank and compare solutions to find the most successful one. You are free to write about solutions that are only partly successful — or even unsuccessful, as long as it’s an interesting or important failure, and you can explain to the reader why you’re covering it (see page 14). You’re just looking for a good story.

2. **Get the opposing view.**

It’s very important in a solutions story to include informed skeptics. Listening to and incorporating differing points of view — especially when on a topic that’s relatively unproven — will give your journalism more weight.

3. **Use data to work backwards from the outcome when possible.**

As indicated in our “Positive deviants” sidebar (page 19), this gives you a level of comfort. That said: remember that even with numbers, there may be some vested interests that went into collecting and sharing them.

4. **Be extra careful.**

Your subjects will likely rush to talk to you about a solutions story. But you shouldn’t rush to believe what they say. Get the evidence to support any claim of success.
POSITIVE DEVIANTS

Despite the emphasis on data journalism in the last few years, some journalists still shy away from large datasets. And when journalists do turn to data, it's often to investigate a negative outlier. Data usually informs journalistic inquiries like: What city has the worst crime rate? Where is governance the weakest? Where are racial and economic inequalities the greatest?

We suggest a different way for journalists to use data — exploring positive deviants, or the best performers in a dataset. For example: Which hospital in Texas has the lowest infection rate? In which state is recidivism the lowest? What country has the highest participation of women in government?

A positive deviant is a signal that something newsworthy could be happening. It’s the journalist’s job to get the story behind the positive deviant — and in so doing, uncover information that could be valuable for people everywhere. Perhaps the Texas hospital found a way to encourage nurses to speak up when a doctor fails to wash hands. Maybe state prison authorities began providing mental-health services and drug treatment to recently released prisoners. Those are important stories. (That being said, a positive deviant could also signify nothing. It could be a quirk in the data, a function of demographics, or an inaccurate measurement. As we said, it’s the journalist’s job to find out!)

Positive deviant journalism works backwards from data outcomes. Some journalists hesitate to attempt solutions journalism because they fear being labeled advocates or PR representatives. But with positive deviant journalism, the data will guide you to a story — and therefore will refute any confusion with advocacy.

Next time you look at a dataset, here are a few ways to consider slicing it to find a noteworthy positive deviant. This table is not meant to be exhaustive, but rather to spur your imagination a bit.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Data Slice</th>
<th>Example</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Comparison to peers</td>
<td>Which city has the lowest rates of homicide?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Change over time</td>
<td>Who has improved voting records the most in the last decade?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>By method/best practice</td>
<td>Which VA hospital has the shortest wait time?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>By subgroup</td>
<td>Who’s done best to reduce obesity among Hispanics?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>By cost</td>
<td>Who has reduced dental costs the most?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>By coverage</td>
<td>Who’s doing well at getting low-income patients into preventive care?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>By disparity</td>
<td>Who has most reduced the gap between African-American and Caucasian high school graduation rates?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>By policy</td>
<td>Which state/city policies are most successful in preventing teen smoking?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The traditional news journalist is taught to report on the five Ws: who, what, when, where, why. Obviously these are critical building blocks for any investigation, whether you’re covering a PTA meeting or an airstrike.

But when exploring the impact and potential of responses to social problems, it’s critical that journalists move beyond basic reporting and look at some of the nuances of making change.

Assuming you’ve already done some vetting on the story in order to pitch it (see sections on vetting (page 18) and pitching (page 22)), it’s time to interview a wide range of stakeholders, including the people enacting the solution, those directly affected, detractors, funders, academics, and more. As you prep for those interviews, consider some new questions to ask your diverse experts:

**Replace, “Whodunnit?” with “Howdunnit?”**

In solutions journalism, what matters most is not the quirks and qualities of the main character, but the transferable wisdom found in his or her actions. How did a small organization revolutionize the way a city recycles? What are the slow, systematic steps they took? What are the teachable lessons?

It’s imperative that you drill down into the fine-grain details of the processes people use when turning great ideas into real, measurable successes. Sometimes, this will throw your subjects off — they may not be used to it. Keep drilling! You have to be very deliberate about drawing out the most important information about process or your subject might gloss over truly illuminating details. It’s only by understanding the real nitty gritty of a response that you can explain what makes it work (or doesn’t), and pass on that learning to your readers.

**In addition to “What are the results?”, ask “Which measurements matter most and what are they?”**

Organizations can throw metrics your way all day, but if they don’t represent the most critical measurement of change, you can get distracted.

**In addition to “What do the experts think?”, ask “What do the people directly affected by this model think?”**

Whenever possible, have real conversations with folks on the ground in addition to some of the usual suspects (think-tank wonks, professors, thought leaders).

**Replace, “Is it working?” with “In what ways is it succeeding and in what ways is it failing?”**

Social change is complex. Our reporting should reflect that complexity.
GOOD SOLUTIONS STORIES...

....Focus more on what’s going on than who’s doing it.

Good solutions journalism stories have characters, just like any story. But the work is usually the main character.

....Answer lots of “how” questions.

In addition to the five W’s (who, what, when, where, why), ask how. They get into the nitty gritty of how change happens. David Bornstein, SJN’s co-founder, explains: “When I was interviewing people for my book The Price of A Dream: The Story of the Grameen Bank, I had a list of 60 ‘how’ questions. How did you finance this idea? How did you realize people would pay back their loans? How did you decide to make groups have five members? How did you respond when mullahs intimidated the borrowers?”

....Don’t shy away from detail.

When Peg Tyre wrote “The Writing Revolution,” which explored how a writing-based curriculum led to dramatic test score improvements in a Staten Island high school, her editors at The Atlantic were initially worried that the specificity she wanted to include was too wonky and would turn readers away. “Not at all,” Peg responded. “It’s just like ‘House,’ the television show. The details are what bring the story alive.” We’ve seen in solutions-oriented stories that details can often add interest and credibility.

....Put characters in scenes.

Solutions-oriented stories tend to focus less on a character’s intrinsic qualities (e.g., altruism or courage), and more on the character’s work. Show a character trying to solve a problem, and failing or succeeding. Show the results they’re getting, and how this differs from what others do. Show what can be learned from it. This has the added benefit of giving you dynamic scenes and a strong narrative.

....Keep the reader hooked through tension.

Every good story needs tension, but it doesn’t have to come from the clash of two sides, as is so often the default in today’s media. In a solutions-oriented story, the tension is also rarely in, “Will they succeed?” That’s often implied in the headline or in the lede. Rather, the tension is in answering the questions, “How will they solve this problem that has stumped so many others? How do they overcome the obstacles in their way?”
Our friends at The Op-Ed Project have summarized it best. Every good pitch needs to answer three basic questions:

1. **So what?**
   How does this particular story relate to larger discussions that people are having? How does it impact the reader’s life? What are the larger frames?

2. **Why now?**
   What’s the news peg? Why should this story be written and published now as opposed to last week or a year from now? Think anniversaries, holidays, trends, current events, etc.

3. **Why me?**
   What is it about your background that makes you particularly fit to write this story? Establish your credibility and do it fast.

But let’s face it, these three questions are only the foundation; pitching a solutions-oriented story is made far more complex because solutions are still suspect to some editors. If you’re pitching a solutions-oriented story, here are some things you want to flag very clearly in your concise, clear correspondence:

- Indicators you have already found that this is a response worth investigating further. Think hard data, multiple credible sources, stuff that helps the editor quickly see that you’re invested in a rigorous investigation.

- Any potential limitations of the response that you’re already picking up on. This will help the editor understand that you’re not planning on writing a fluff piece.

- A short list of the kinds of hard-nosed experts you might tap for interviews. Think scholars, people who have worked on the frontlines for years, customers who use a product, and more. This helps the editor conclude that you mean business when it comes to your reporting—you’re not planning on just interviewing the do-gooders and calling it a day.

And, of course, don’t forget the super basic stuff: Include your phone number and email with your signature. Be sure to include hyperlinks to pieces you’ve done previously so the editor can quickly vet your work. And check back within a week if you haven’t heard anything. All editors are overextended. Most appreciate a polite check-in.
Dear Susan,

I appreciated the recent coverage of CureViolence in the magazine. An epidemiological approach to ending conflict is a fascinating emerging response to urban violence and I’m keen to keep my eye on it as it continues to scale up.

I’d like to write a piece that examines another model, this one originating in East L.A. under the leadership of Jesuit priest Father Greg Boyle. Rather than seeing violence as a disease, as Dr. Gary Slutkin and his team do with CureViolence, Father Greg Boyle sees it as a cultural imperative. Without “exit ramps,” as he calls them, in the form of jobs, emotional skills etc., young people growing up surrounded by violence have little choice but to get involved in it. Homeboy Industries operates on the assumption that it is not enough to “interrupt” violence, but to, in essence, replace its power with more life-affirming projects.

It is the country’s largest gang member rehab program, serving over 12,000 people each year. The organization claims that it costs them between $20-44,000 to provide a full range of services and training for a young person; juvenile detention in LA County, averages $100-150,000.

Despite what appears to be 25 years of successful intervention, Homeboy Industries has struggled with funding in recent years. I’d like to look into why that is, and also investigate the local limitations of this model, which appears not to have been scaled much at all.

I look forward to hearing your thoughts.

Jane
BRINGING A SOLUTIONS LENS TO SHORT PIECES

You have one reporting day and 500 words. Or you have three hours to put together a 1-minute broadcast. How can you integrate a solutions mindset?

Gold standard solutions journalism is long and time-intensive. Many of the tips we offer in this toolkit are best suited for longer-form feature or narrative pieces. We have found several ways, though, to bring a solutions focus into pieces where you do not have the luxury of space.

Short solutions pieces work particularly well in cases where the problem is widely known. Consider bedbugs, which a few years ago were pervasive in New York City. A reporter for AM New York — a free newspaper distributed on the subway — spent one sentence on the problem, and was able to jump directly to the better news: that bedbugs were massively on the decline, thanks largely to the city’s multi-pronged effort to eradicate them. In 576 words, the author tackled many of our “10 questions.”

Choose a subject that has data to prove it works. Then you needn’t spend a lot of time or words making that case — you can get right to the how it works.

Some responses are less complex than others, making them a good fit for a short piece. For example, an Atlantic CityLab piece explored how Brazilians are increasingly hitting record on their cell phones when they witness police brutality. It’s creating more accountability in the notoriously militaristic police force there.

Beat reporters may also do solutions stories quickly by covering local programs with good track records. Beat expertise allows you to save a lot of reporting time. We delve more into this on the following page.
HOW CAN I BRING A SOLUTIONS FOCUS TO MY BEAT?

If you’re a beat reporter, here are a few ways you can bring a solutions focus to your everyday work:

1. **Cover a local program.**
   As mentioned on the previous page, a solutions story is a good way to catch readers who might skip over a more traditional report on a “too depressing” issue, like gun violence. Just make sure to interview a wide variety of people. Greg Barnes at the *Fayetteville Observer* used this approach when investigating how Georgia’s “Second Chance” program helped violent teenagers start over and saved the state $4 million in 3 years. A key to these stories is to focus on the *model* that the local program uses, rather than the program itself. That will help it sound less like a PR piece.

2. **Localize a solution from elsewhere.**
   This involves changing the definition of “local news” from something happening in your city, to something that is relevant to your city. As discussed on Page 11, Meg Kissinger, a reporter with the *Milwaukee Journal-Sentinel*, compared her city’s failing mental health system to Houston’s innovative law enforcement programs.

3. **Contrast two cases.**
   If something failed in one place, and flourished in another, what made for the difference? Keegan Kyle at the *Orange County Register* researched Santa Ana’s failed efforts to deal with prostitution. He then contrasted Santa Ana’s track record with a successful strategy in nearby Anaheim. What accounts for the difference? How, if at all, could Santa Ana learn from Anaheim?

4. **Treat solutions stories like obituaries.**
   *The New York Times* has hundreds of pre-written obituaries. When a famous person dies, they top it up with a few paragraphs and can quickly publish it. Similarly, there are many interesting solutions stories that can be pre-researched. And then, when the unemployment reports come out, for example, you can quickly publish something about five American companies that are successfully dealing with the changing global workforce.
HOW DO I PROMOTE MY STORY AND ENGAGE READERS?

Now that you’ve written a great story, make sure that it’s actually read and discussed!

The good news is that research indicates that solutions stories are more shareable. They can actually prime people to have more productive conversations in comment sections. For example, a study that we developed with the University of Texas at Austin’s Engaging News Project strongly suggested that readers were more likely to share an article on social media if the stories included even a relatively modest mention of a potential solution.

Here are a few tips for getting your work shared on social media:

It’s worth investing some time in crafting high-quality tweets, Facebook posts, etc.

Some things to remember:

• Shorten the link to the article using bit.ly or a similar tool.
  - Research and include relevant topical hashtags, like #soljourno #design #homelessness #violence. (Note: you can now use hashtags in Facebook.)
  - Don’t forget to include the handle of the publication.
  - Research the handles of individuals and organizations quoted in the article and consider tweeting at them.
  - Attach a photo to one of the tweets. Photos travel particularly well.
  - Pull key quotations and particularly interesting statistics from the piece and use those in tweets.

• Email your network and ask them to spread the word, including a few sample tweets for easy copy and paste.

• Tweet out from your own account and update your Facebook page. Don’t be shy about sending out a diversity of tweets and status updates over the course of a few days.

• Thank people when they tweet out your article, favorite, and retweet.

• Tweet at us (@soljourno)! We’d love to retweet rigorous pieces about responses to social problems.

An important point regarding the long game: social media outreach is most effective when done in the context of mutual relationships. It’s critical that you tweet out the work of other journalists that you respect so that when you’re eager to have the favor returned, an ask feels appropriate and authentic.
SOLUTIONS JOURNALISM AND INVESTIGATIONS

In many ways, investigative reporting is an ideal vehicle for solutions journalism. The reporting mechanics are essentially the same in both cases: reporters must understand not just what happened, but how and why it happened.

If done well, solutions journalism can strengthen the most hard-hitting investigations. It’s a way to hold public officials responsible not just for bad stuff they may be doing, but also for the good stuff they aren’t trying. Profiling examples of success takes away any excuses for bad behavior. It’s also often a fresher, more reader-friendly way to report on a depressing subject.

Here are two ways you could add a solutions focus to your next investigative series:

**Contrast your investigative expose with a solutions story:**

Strengthen your exposé by also reporting on a comparable or nearby place that’s doing it better. Many investigative series give a cursory mention to better responses. Don’t waste that story! Use it to explore deeply why that response works, and what others can learn from it.

The Center for Investigative Reporting’s Katharine Mieszkowski investigated the difficulty California parents face when looking for vital information about the safety of potential childcare providers. This was a critical first step in holding policy makers accountable. But like so many investigations, it was only the first step; pointing out the inadequacy of California’s outdated system spurred outrage, but didn’t provide answers as to what concerned parents might advocate for instead.

Courtney Martin later reported on Indiana, a state where inspectors are using the latest in technology — including tablets in the field — and administrators are structuring services online, in person, and over the phone so that busy, overwhelmed parents can get the information they need to keep their kids safe. Now California parents don’t just have the knowledge of what’s broken, but a viable example to point to when they demand better services.

Another example of this is how Rhiannon Meyers included three solutions-oriented stories in her year-long investigation of diabetes (discussed on page 42-44).

**Frame your investigation with a solutions story:**

Let’s say you are exposing bad behavior. For example, nursing home industry lobbyists persuade state legislatures to go soft on nursing home abuse. Or, the for-profit prison industry runs a public relations campaign that keeps states from instituting drug courts and other alternatives to prison.

Has any place successfully bucked that pressure to do the right thing? If so, you can tell the story of one place’s successful efforts to defy it. In the process, you can report on everything you would have put into a more traditionally-framed expose. On page 11, we talk about how Tina Rosenberg did just this in her investigation of how Brazil handled the HIV/AIDS epidemic at the turn of the century.
At its heart, solutions journalism is just good journalism. That said, solutions stories are often structured a little differently. That difference is enough to be daunting to reporters accustomed to traditional journalism. So in this section, we annotate four types of solutions story structures: one that explores a positive deviant, one that explains a big new idea, one that discusses an experiment in progress, and one that explores how a location has transformed.

**Positive Deviant:**

“How Rochester Responded to its Lead Poisoning Problem,” which appeared in the Cleveland Plain Dealer’s “Toxic Neglect” series in October 2015, explores a “positive deviant”: Rochester, New York. Positive deviant stories, including this one, often feature a secret ingredient. In this case, authors Rachel Dissell and Brie Zeltner say: “What separates Rochester’s approach from other cities fighting childhood lead poisoning is simple: The city decided to start looking for lead in rental homes rather than waiting to act until a child had already been poisoned.” The story also relies on data to show Rochester’s success, another touchstone of this kind of journalism.

**Big New Idea:**

“For some, prenatal care is a community affair” challenges traditional notions of prenatal care. This multimedia piece, which was published in Public Radio International’s “Ninth Month” series, tracks a group pre-natal program called Centering Pregnancy. It is written by Shuka Kalantari. As with many solutions-oriented pieces that explore big innovative ideas, Kalantari opens with a taste of what the program offers. She then backs into what the problem is (in this case, depression among pregnant Latina immigrant women in California), and how this program helps address those issues.

**Experiment in Progress:**

Sometimes, reporters have an opportunity to cover an ongoing program that has clear pros and cons. This is the case in “Less lecturing, more doing: New approach for A.P. classes,” which appeared in The Seattle Times’ “Education Lab” series, the Solutions Journalism Network’s flagship series, in March 2014. The author, Linda Shaw, chronicles a new style of teaching advanced placement classes in high schools — specifically, one that favors group work and debates over straight lectures. The experiment is still underway, and results thus far are mixed. She is very forthcoming about the idea’s limitations, but also does not shy away from the promise it holds. Compared to the “big new idea” structure, this type of story usually has a bit more data and evidence behind it.

**Location Transformation:**

In August 2014, Kaiser Health News and NPR published, “Wrestling With A Texas County’s Mental Health System,” which explains how Bexar County, Texas, dramatically revamped its approach to mental illness. The KHN piece is written by Jenny Gold. The top of the piece focuses heavily on the problem, with a few lines signaling that the situation is now vastly improved. The major change the county made, Gold explains, was having diverse departments in the city pool their funds together to build a “Restoration Center.” She goes on to explain how the center works, the teachable lessons it can offer, and its limitations. Locations highlighted in this story type may or may not be an overall “positive deviant,” but do offer important lessons.
The story opens with a startling statement and figure designed to leave the reader asking: "How?"

A quick reference to Cleveland puts Rochester in context and shows why this matters to Plain Dealer readers.

The graf every positive deviant story needs, introducing how Rochester achieved better results than other cities.

These next few grafs detail the mounting evidence for Rochester's focus on prevention.

CLEVELAND, Ohio -- It’s been a decade since the city of Rochester, New York, committed to tackling its lead poisoning problem head on. No longer would children in the city act as lead detectors, poisoned at a rate 10 times the national average, local leaders vowed.

What resulted was a set of lead poisoning prevention laws heralded by experts in the field as the "smartest" in the nation and a more than 80 percent drop in the number of children with high lead levels. It’s a change leaders believe is sustainable.

Last year in New York’s Monroe County, where Rochester is the county seat, 4 percent of children who were screened for lead had 5 micrograms of the toxin per deciliter of blood, the threshold currently set by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

In Cuyahoga County last year that percentage was more than double, at 11.5 percent of children screened.

What separates Rochester’s approach from other cities fighting childhood lead poisoning is simple: The city decided to start looking for lead in rental homes rather than waiting to act until a child had already been poisoned.

Rochester’s laws weren’t revolutionary, though. For the most part, the city amended its existing housing laws to target lead hazards and strengthened housing code enforcement in areas where kids were likely to be poisoned.

Real prevention key to change
For decades, public health officials have understood that if houses are safe and free from lead hazards, children won’t be poisoned.

The U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) has long encouraged cities to enforce housing codes as a way to prevent lead poisoning.

The agency, which supplies much of the grant money for lead-based paint clean up across the country, says its mission is truly prevention. In an interview this summer, an agency official said HUD’s statutory mission regarding lead poisoning is to target the housing that’s likely to poison children.

“The only way to really address this problem is to address the housing itself," the agency told The Plain Dealer.

City code enforcers play a key role in identifying the housing that is most likely to pose a hazard to kids, both now and in the future. HUD officials have advised cities receiving grant money for lead clean up that code enforcement could better help to pinpoint individual properties containing lead hazards as well high-risk hot spots for lead poisoning.

“By failing to focus directly on lead hazards, code enforcers lose numerous additional opportunities to prevent children from being poisoned,” read a 2002 HUD primer on the strategy.

(...continued)
Officials also determined, based on volumes of research compiled from across the country, that preventing lead poisoning actually saved money.

Change of course in Rochester
The mounting evidence supporting prevention was a part of what former Rochester Councilman Wade Norwood called a “tidal wave of facts” that eventually prompted the unanimous passage of the city’s lead ordinance in 2005.

“There was a moral, scientific and community imperative that the ordinance passed,” Norwood said. You had to be willfully ignorant or stubbornly resistant to truth to oppose the ordinance, he said.

There were concerns about the new laws, particularly among the city’s landlords.

Gary Kirkmire, who leads Rochester’s inspection and compliance efforts, said one of the biggest hurdles was the sense that forcing inspections would upset the rental market and overburden landlords.

“The unknown is scary to people. It was scary to us,” said Kirkmire, director of inspection and compliance for the city. After the lead inspections began, he said, most landlords adapted.

“Some people got out of the business but, frankly, some should have,” he said.

Others objected that it would be too expensive, potentially costing the city more than $1 million a year to perform the additional inspections.

Kirkmire said it took significant dedication, but Rochester hired a few more inspectors and cross-trained building and housing inspectors to be able to assess lead hazards.

The city also decided rather than complete total lead-risk assessments, which can take four or more hours, that it would prioritize inspection efforts toward the types of properties they knew were at highest risk: rental properties with deteriorating paint and surrounding bare soil.

Inspectors started with aging homes in poor areas where lead poisoning was prevalent.

It took several years to work through the city’s roughly 60,000 pre-1970s rental units, Kirkmire said. But it now costs about $696,000 each year to fund its program. The city pays for a little more than half of that, and the rest is picked up by a state prevention grant.

That pays for the visual inspections and 2,800 to 3,000 lab tests for lead taken from floors, window sills and other areas inside homes that contain dust which could be easily touched or inhaled by children.

Kirkmire said the city has also honed the program by studying the data it collects. One change that saved time: after finding that more than 90 percent of lead hazards were showing up in single and double rental units, the city amended its ordinance so that inspectors no longer had to inspect properties with more units.

The city was also able to cut in half the amount of time it took to reinspect rental units where lead had been addressed but not removed entirely, from six to three years.

(...continued)
Lessons for Cleveland?

Kirkmire said that other cities can also bite off small pieces of the problem at first.

“You don’t have to dive in citywide,” he said. “In our city initially we deployed in the highest of the high-risk areas.”

Now, those high-risk areas are smaller, he said.

In the past, Cleveland and Cuyahoga County have tried small projects that inspected homes and offered education and low-cost lead control methods, like rugs and cleaning supplies, in homes where expectant mothers and new babies live. But the grant-funded effort, which showed initial promise, ended when the money ran out.

Currently, the Cleveland Department of Public Health, the MetroHealth System, and the non-profit Environmental Health Watch are partnering on a new effort, called BUILD, which calls for a more cooperative, holistic approach to ensure homes are healthy.

It’s being piloted in a West Side neighborhood with a high percentage of lead and other housing-related health problems.

The program’s goal, proponents say, is to create a sustainable strategy to prevent families and children from being sickened or poisoned by their homes.

Whether that will last beyond its $250,000 grant remains to be seen.

The authors directly ask what Cleveland can learn.

Back and forth between Cleveland and Rochester. They end by offering a contrast to Rochester’s systematic approach: Cleveland’s small and short-lived stabs at solving the problem.
This is not your typical doctor’s appointment.

Once a month, Irma Vásquez goes for prenatal checkups at a clinic in San Francisco’s Mission District. But instead of getting the usual one-on-one care, she meets with 12 other Latina immigrant patients.

The women begin their appointment by taking their own blood pressure, weighing themselves and writing down the results. They take turns seeing a midwife in a makeshift exam area in the corner of the room. The midwife checks each baby’s heart rate and talks privately with mothers-to-be.

Next, the patients sit in a circle and talk, in Spanish, about everything from how to eat well to problems at home.

Finally, there’s group meditation — Vásquez’s favorite part. “It clears your mind of all the things that are going on around you, going on outside,” she says. “It makes you more relaxed.”

Vásquez, from Mexico, says she’s under a lot stress at home. She lives in a cramped apartment with her husband and his entire family. She says the group appointments help.

Vásquez and the other women are a part of a group prenatal care program called Centering Pregnancy. Women with similar gestational ages meet, learn and have group discussions.

Studies show group prenatal care leads to better birth outcomes. Women who participate in Centering Pregnancy are more likely to breastfeed and attend prenatal care appointments, and they’re less likely to have postpartum depression and preterm births.

There’s another benefit: Centering Pregnancy is linked to fewer Cesarean sections, which saves money. For California births without complications, C-sections cost nearly twice as much as vaginal births.

Margy Hutchison, a midwife, started Centering Pregnancy at San Francisco General Hospital 15 years ago for patients like Vásquez. Hutchison noticed many of her Latina immigrant patients, sitting alone and silent in the hospital’s waiting rooms, had chronic stress or depression. “It was really clear to me that many of them were really struggling,” Hutchison says. “And patients I continue to see are struggling with the impact of social isolation.”

Hutchison wanted to connect them, especially considering that stress, social isolation and depression are linked to preterm births and low birth weight.

Initially, it was hard to convince some patients to participate in group prenatal care.

“If a woman’s depressed, that may be the last thing she wants to do,” Hutchison adds. “She wants to curl up in a ball and stay home.”
Persistence is usually crucial in the success of new ideas.

Here, Kalantari shows the mindset shift that occurred among Latina patients at San Francisco General.

New ideas often require partners – in this case, community clinics and churches – to take off. This is a teachable lesson for others who may consider adopting the Centering Pregnancy model.

If Kalantari had more room in this piece, it would have been helpful to understand the limitations of Centering Pregnancy groups. Are there women for whom this program does not work well? Are there topics that are difficult to discuss in groups?

That was the case for Karent Novela, a Mexican immigrant who moved to San Francisco a year before she became pregnant. Novela didn’t speak English, and the only family she had in the United States was her husband, who works 12-hour days. She was depressed, and was in no mood to hang out with other women.

Also, the Centering Pregnancy program at San Francisco General Hospital is run by midwives, and that scared Novela. A year earlier, in Mexico, she had seen a midwife without medical credentials and had a miscarriage. Now in the US, she wanted to see a doctor.

But the nurses at San Francisco General were persistent. They assured her that their midwives were trained professionals.

“The nurse that was with me, she told me, ‘You might try it. If you like it, you can stay. If you don’t like it you can just keep coming to your appointments with your doctor. But you decide. It’s your decision.’”

Novela enjoyed the first session and signed up.

“Having people who speak my language ... who are from my same background, that changed me. It changed my life,” Novela says.

Novela isn’t alone. Most Latina midwifery patients at San Francisco General are now choosing Centering Pregnancy over one-on-one care. And most of these women say they would do it again with future pregnancies, according to hospital officials.

Laurie Jurkiewicz, a midwife who runs Spanish-language Centering Pregnancy groups at San Francisco General Hospital, says some US hospitals hesitated at first to launch Centering Pregnancy programs — mostly because, like San Francisco General, they weren’t setup for group prenatal care.

“It’s out-of-the box thinking, right?” Jurkiewicz says. “And so our struggle was we’d get a room, and we’d get kicked out of a room at the last minute. And the rooms weren’t very nice.”

San Francisco General, the city’s largest public hospital, eventually got its program off the ground by partnering with community clinics to use their space for the group appointments. Other hospitals are now doing the same, or even partnering with churches for meeting space.

Jurkiewicz says the partnerships have allowed Centering Pregnancy to flourish at her hospital. When they first established the program in 1999, there were no other prenatal programs like it on the West Coast. Today, there are 21 Centering Pregnancy programs in California, mostly at public hospitals, where over half the patients are Latino. It’s also growing nationwide, especially among high-risk, low-income populations.

Novela, the Mexican immigrant, says she has built a community with the other Latina immigrants from her Centering Pregnancy group. They now call each other for support.

“They didn’t have family, they didn’t have friends, and most of them had their first baby like me,” says Novela. “So I just feel like, ‘OK, I’m not the only one who is having these difficulties. I’m not the only one who is suffering for this.’ My way of seeing my situation changed. So I start to change.”

Novela says Centering Pregnancy shook things up in her life and pulled her out of her out of her depression. And that, she says, empowered her to be a better mom.
By LINDA SHAW

In a new type of advanced government class at Seattle’s Garfield High, the students rarely sit quietly taking notes while their teacher stands and lectures. Instead, they debate each other. They write legislation. They run for president in mock elections and pretend they’re lawyers arguing cases before the U.S. Supreme Court.

They sometimes even stand up and holler, as Sanai Anang did recently, playing a member of a Virginia-based group that lobbies for strict immigration controls.

In a simulated public hearing, Anang, who loves to ham it up, jumped to his feet without being recognized and declared, in a mangled Southern accent, “Ee-lee-gals come over and take our jobs. They don’t bee-long here.”

His classmates and teacher Jerry Neufeld-Kaiser cracked up.

They are all part of a teaching experiment that began six years ago in the Bellevue School District when a handful of frustrated government teachers teamed up with University of Washington researchers and turned the usual Advanced Placement curriculum inside out.

Instead of lectures sprinkled with discussions and occasional projects, they put role plays and simulations at the center of the curriculum — the entree, rather than a side dish or dessert.

Their goal was to solve two problems with the A.P. program, the largest set of college-level courses offered in high schools across the nation.

First, they wanted to address the criticism that A.P. classes cover so many topics so quickly that students spend too much time memorizing facts and too little time analyzing their meaning and significance.

The team also wanted to test whether a steady diet of hands-on exercises would help address the rising failure rate on A.P. tests among some minority groups.

The team members started with A.P. U.S. government and politics — one of the most popular A.P. offerings — dumping most of the lectures that usually are the core of the course, and replacing them with five in-depth projects.

They then tackled A.P. environmental science and are now working on A.P. physics.

The transition hasn’t been easy for students used to being told, at the start of each assignment, exactly what they’re supposed to learn.

Students and teachers alike complain the projects can be time-consuming to complete — and to plan. And, done poorly, they can be a waste of time.

But the results so far are promising, showing that the project-based classes can provide depth and enough breadth for students to pass the spring A.P. exams.
Students in the experiment, now under way in about five dozen classrooms in Washington, Northern California and Iowa, have done as well and often better on the A.P. exams compared with classmates in the experiment’s control schools that use a lecture-heavy approach.

They’ve often scored higher on a separate test that researchers designed to probe how well students truly understand what they’ve learned — although those results have been mixed.

The researchers are not examining results by race because they believe achievement gaps are grounded in differences in class rather than ethnicity. They have found their approach can yield results for students from low-income homes as well as those from middle- and upper-class neighborhoods.

Last year, for example, 88 percent of students in two of the experiment’s high-poverty schools passed the A.P. U.S. government test in the spring — much higher than the 24 percent for comparable schools nationally.

Program booming

The A.P. program began in the 1950s as a way for elite high-school students to earn college credit.

In the past two decades, participation in the program has exploded, with more than 2 million students taking one or more A.P. exams last year.

But as A.P.’s popularity has grown, so have questions about its quality.

The spring A.P. exams are supposed to cover what students would learn in typical introductory college courses, but many teachers complain there’s so much material that their classes turn into extended cram sessions.

Critics also question whether the A.P. boom, driven by a push to open the program to all interested students, sets up those without strong preparation to fail.

The program is run by the nonprofit College Board, which is addressing those same concerns itself, steadily streamlining the exams to allow students more time for in-depth study.

The board is watching the teaching experiment carefully, interested in its promising results. In 2012 the board invited project leaders to its A.P. conference to present their ideas to A.P. teachers from across the nation.

It’s important that students gain an in-depth understanding of a subject, said Auditi Chakravarty, an A.P. program vice president. “And that requires more than the passive sit-and-get kind of learning.”

Enlisting an old idea

The A.P. experiment that started in Bellevue grew out of conversations between the U.W. researchers and a former Bellevue superintendent, Mike Riley, who’d led a big expansion in A.P. participation in his district.

They thought they could improve the classes by using an idea that dates back to the 1890s, when education reformer John Dewey promoted “learning by doing.”

At its best, project-based learning can help students grasp the importance of their lessons and retain more of what they learn. At its worst, it can be entertaining but little else.

The research into its effectiveness is mixed, in part because the project approach can mean so many different things.

(...continued)
The U.W.-Bellevue team members dubbed their approach rigorous project-based learning, to distinguish it from unfocused efforts that have given the term a bad reputation.

They didn’t throw out traditional instruction altogether. Students still take tests and do homework. They still take the regular A.P. test at the end of the class.

The team spent a year planning the first project-based class in U.S. government, extending it to a yearlong course and searching for projects they could adapt so they didn’t have to create them from scratch.

Then it recruited the experiment’s first set of students, promising a still-tough but more engaging — even fun — A.P. experience.

**Bumpy ride at first**

The first year turned out to be **tougher than many anticipated.**

Some students complained they didn’t know what they were supposed to be learning, and they struggled to work productively in teams.

Many worried they wouldn’t be ready when it came time to take the A.P. test in the spring — and so did some of their teachers.

“To be quite frank, I didn’t think I was giving them what it took,” said Newport High teacher Tim Shultz. Some teachers still lament that the course now takes more time, which means students can no longer take a common companion course — A.P. comparative government — in the same school year.

**The experiment has been costly, too.**

To date, the team has raised about $6 million to support its work, with half from the George Lucas Educational Foundation and the rest from other sources, including the National Science Foundation and the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. (The Gates Foundation is the main funder of *The Seattle Times* Education Lab project.) Still, Shultz and other teachers **embrace the new approach.**

They love seeing students stop counting how many points an assignment is worth and instead lose themselves in planning a political campaign or lobbying for a bill.

“What I was doing in the past was teaching to the test,” said Shultz. “I’d say, ‘Know these 50 cases and you’ll be fine on the test.’ ”

Now, he said, he teaches students how to use legal precedents to help them make strong arguments before a mock Supreme Court, only sometimes adding, “Oh by the way, it’s also on the test.”

Teachers also say the approach helps many students who don’t come from privileged backgrounds and may not regularly talk politics over the dinner table. Until they play a legislator or a judge or a candidate, said Garfield’s Neufeld-Kaiser, they may have no concept of what those people do.

But after they write a bill and lobby their classmates to vote for it, he said, they get it.

“It’s so much more accessible because they’ve lived it.”

(...continued)
For the second year, teachers dropped some projects and revised others, and they figured out ways to grade students on their individual contributions — one way to avoid one student taking over and doing the bulk of the work.

Some teachers warned students they might feel uncomfortable with the new approach but that they should trust the process, and that students before them had passed the test and they could, too.

“Engagement first”

Each project follows a common set of principles based on research into how people learn best.

One is to immerse students in a challenge, then follow with lectures and reading to help students figure out how to meet it — an approach the researchers call “engagement first.”

They also design each course around a master question, which students circle back to after each project, ideally gaining a new level of understanding each time.

John Bransford, a well-regarded learning expert and a member of the U.W.-Bellevue team, said the hope is to help students gain expertise much like musicians improve with repeated guided practice.

At Bellevue’s Sammamish High earlier this year, a project on the federal budget illustrated what this concept looks like in practice.

Teacher Katie Piper first showed a documentary that presented a troubling picture of the country’s growing debt and taught students a little about entitlements and economic theory.

Then she sent them off to come up with a proposal that would significantly reduce the debt, with elements that would appeal to both Democrats and Republicans.

Within two days, students were deep in discussions about Social Security benefits, tax loopholes, Medicare and the Bush tax cuts — concepts some barely understood when they started.

The point was not to make the students financial experts but to give them more insight into how government works — in this case, all that goes into passing budgets.

On the last day, three groups presented their proposals to the class and an invited expert, the city manager of nearby Newcastle.

Seve Sandomirsky, 17, worked hard to sell his team’s plan, which was heavy on liberal solutions such as closing tax loopholes for corporations, and light on anything that might appeal to more conservative lawmakers.

Dressed for the presentation in a blue dress shirt and tie, he hoped to win over everyone with a sense of fairness, saying companies have long avoided taxes that they should have been paying for years.

“I had to dig deep,” he said later, “trying to sell this as a bipartisan deal.”

(...continued)
Students buying in

Sandomirsky expressed enthusiasm for the project approach, even while acknowledging it can be a lot of work.

“The greater understanding,” he said, “is so much more enriching than having a lecture and regurgitating information.”

Some of Neufeld-Kaiser’s students said the same.

“Instead of reading about what people are doing, you get to step into their shoes,” said Israel Brown. Rather than test prep, “this is more like real-life prep,” added a classmate, Rahel Solomon.

Neufeld-Kaiser and a few other teachers like the approach so much they use it in non-A.P. classes as well.

At Sammamish High, the faculty, inspired by what they saw in the project-based A.P. classes, are redesigning most of their core courses in a similar way.

Some teachers emphasize the approach is not best for all students — that some learn just fine through lectures.

Newport teacher Virginia Evans, while a fan, also wonders if it helps or hurts students when they go to college. “The reality is, colleges are like my non-project classes,” she said. “They lecture at you, and you write papers.”

The researchers aren’t declaring complete victory yet.

That’s partly because the early results, while promising, could reflect the so-called “early adopters” effect — that any program with enthusiastic teachers will at first show strong results that peter out when used more widely.

The research team will continue its study for a few more years, hoping to amass enough evidence to convince many more schools that rigorous project-based learning can enhance advanced classes.

Team members don’t back the notion that all high-school students should take college-level classes, but for those who do, they want the courses to be the right kind of tough.

They are still debating exactly what that is, but they know what it isn’t.

“Have you really learned something if you’ve memorized a bunch of definitions?” asked UW professor Walter Parker, one of the experiment’s lead researchers.

“It’s probably some kind of learning. But it doesn’t make the grade as deep learning — meaningful learning.”
Wrestling With A Texas County’s Mental Health System

By JENNY GOLD  August 20, 2014

SAN ANTONIO -- Some people here just call Leon Evans “The Bear.” He is a massive man with a shock of white hair on both his head and face and wrists the size of a child’s thighs. The former All-Star wrestler earned his nickname after wrestling two living, breathing bears.

“This is Bexar County” (pronounced “bear”), Evans says, “so my wife teases me about this being my third bear.”

Evans is the director of the Center for Health Care Services, the community mental health system in San Antonio and Bexar County.

Texas ranks 49th out of 50 states in how much funding it commits to mental health. But under Evans’ leadership, Bexar County has built a mental health system considered a model for other cities across the country — one that has saved $50 million over the past five years.

Evans came to Texas in 1972 as a social worker, to help set up some of the very first community mental health systems, and he’s been in the state ever since. When he took over the Bexar county system 14 years ago, the county jail was so overcrowded — packed with people in various states of psychoses — that the state was getting ready to levy fines.

That’s not unusual. Across the country, about 20 percent of inmates and prisoners have a serious mental illness that includes psychosis, according to a study from the Justice Department’s Bureau of Justice Statistics. Evans’ idea for reform was simple: for people with mental illness, treatment works. And jail does not.

“Even here in Texas, which is very conservative, we learned some time ago that nonviolent mentally ill offenders shouldn’t be in prison. They don’t make good prisoners,” he says, In a state of psychosis, a prisoner is hearing voices and can’t follow rules, and that means he gets no time off for good behavior, Evans explains. “They take up space for violent offenders.”

It’s also an expensive revolving door. When people with a serious mental illness are released from jail, many end up living on the street, sick and often addicted. And then almost invariably, they end up back in jail for a minor nuisance crime, like panhandling (which is illegal in San Antonio), urinating in public, digging in dumpsters or sleeping on someone’s porch.

That all sounds very familiar to Samuel Lott. For decades, he was a white collar worker, most recently for the BNSF railway in Fort Worth. But in 2006, he lost his job.

“Whatever diagnosis I had — depression, alcoholism, that sort of thing kicked into high gear back then, and I spiraled down pretty quick and became homeless,” says Lott.

For four years, Lott lived on the streets and camped in the woods. He was estranged from his family, got infected with hepatitis C, and his untreated depression started to take on signs of psychosis. He had frequent run-ins with the police.

(...continued)
On his laptop, Lott, 51, pulls a picture of himself from 2010, the last time he was in jail. “This person is angry, unhealthy, there’s malnutrition, there’s no direction. You can see from the sunken cheekbones,” he says, pointing to the screen.

Getting treatment for any of his health problems felt hopeless, especially without transportation. “It meant having to walk from one side of town— I mean, miles and miles to the other side of town -- maybe to get a referral, and then you take your referral and walk clear back over to some other side of town, and then maybe you can go and get the help,” Lott explains.

In addition to scattered services, Leon Evans says there was another problem for this population: none of the county or city agencies and nonprofits that deal with people with serious mental illness was talking to one another. The jails, hospitals, courts, police and mental health department all worked in separate silos.

“People who fund these services only look at their little small piece of the pie and whether there is a return on investment,” says Evans.

So with the help of the county judge, Evans worked to get the funders together to talk about the money they were all spending on mental health. It turned out to be the most challenging – and the most important – piece of the puzzle.

“If you think law enforcement and mental health workers have anything in common, we don’t, except people with substance abuse and mental health problems. We speak a different language, we have different goals, there’s not a lot of trust there,” he says.

So he hired Gilbert Gonzalez to take a look at the money that they were all spending on mental health. “You know Brad Pitt in the movie Moneyball?” asks Gonzalez. “Well, the success in that movie was based on the data and analytics. We needed to do the same thing.”

Once they stopped looking at mental health as an isolated expense in the city budget, the players realized they were spending enormous sums of money to take care of people. And they were doing a bad job of it. Pooling their resources instead, Gonzalez found, would offer significant savings.

The courts, the jails, the hospitals, the county government and the police department agreed to work together on the issue. Everyone provided funding— the police even contributed their drug seizure money – to build a system where people with mental illnesses could get better.

The result is one centralized complex which offers many services. The Restoration Center is conveniently located across the street from San Antonio’s state-of-the-art homeless shelter.

“One thing that’s really important about the San Antonio approach is that they’ve integrated services together for mental health and substance abuse and homeless services, because most people have overlapping needs,” says Laura Usher, a program manager at the National Alliance on Mental Illness who helps set up collaborations between law enforcement agencies and mental health departments.

The center has a 48-hour inpatient psychiatric unit, sobering and detox centers, outpatient primary care and psychiatric services, a 90-day recovery program, housing for people with mental illnesses, and even job training and a program to help people transition to supported housing.

“San Antonio realized that it’s more cost effective to provide mental health services and supports to people on the front end, rather than pay for jail beds and prison time,” says Usher.
More than 18,000 people pass through the Restoration Center each year and officials say the coordinated approach is saving the city more than $10 million each year. “There’s no wrong door,” says Evans. Some patients walk in off the streets or with their families. Others are brought in by police or diverted here from programs inside the jails.

“San Antonio is ahead of what’s a growing trend across the country to try to build a non-hospital alternative for people who are experiencing a psychiatric emergency, often with co-occurring alcohol or other drug abuse,” says Dr. Mark Munetz, a psychiatrist and professor at Northeast Ohio Medical University who toured the Restoration Center last year.

But he says the San Antonio model might not work for everyone. The Restoration Center and homeless shelter, he says, felt like “a psychiatric oasis, removing the people from the most central part of the city, it felt a little like segregating people in that part of the city, especially with the homeless shelter next door. I’m not sure how that would fly in other parts of the country.”

Nonetheless, the rest of the country has started to notice. Every state in the country has sent delegates to San Antonio to see if they can model their own mental health systems after this one.

Samuel Lott found his way there in 2010. He walked over to the Restoration Center from his jail cell a block away. He went through the detox program, then a 90-day in-patient recovery program, followed by treatment for hepatitis C, and finally medication to help control his mental illness. The center helped place him in an apartment of his own and provided him with additional job training.

He pulls up another photo on his laptop, this one taken Thanksgiving of 2012, two years after he arrived at the center. It’s a picture of Lott with his arms around his family – mother, father, brother, niece and nephew.

“I’ll start crying if I talk about it,” says Lott, who is now healthy and employed at the center. “It felt so good to be home, with my mother and my dad. And I had expected them to be angry and hurt, but it was the exact opposite. They were so happy for a member of the family to come home. Now I email with them every single day, text, Facebook, make plans for gatherings.”

He says he’s helping other people find the kind of hope and healing that he has.
On the elements necessary for a solutions story

**JANET:** There has to be an established problem or common agreement that there’s a problem. Look at the responses. There needs to be some way to measure the effectiveness of that. If it’s just anecdotal, if we just have people saying, “Oh, this is great,” that’s really not enough. We need some way to measure it. If the response or solution came about because somebody just threw a ton of money at it, we’re probably not interested in that because that precludes a lot of other places from being able to replicate it or try it out themselves. Which speaks to another thing we look for. Is the response or solution scalable? Could it be replicated somewhere else?

**FRED:** We want to make sure that the story we’re doing has a track record or shows very good promise delivering something that is impactful. Scalability is very, very key. The same criteria that you might have from a philanthropic funder or an impact investor looking at a prospective enterprise that they might want to engage with. Does the thing show promise? Has it got a track record? Has it grown substantially? Can it be replicated widely elsewhere? Increasingly, I’m looking for stories that have more texture, not a full consensus that this is the right approach.

**DANIEL:** I want to find a really great project that seems really innovative, that seems like it could be replicated, that is trying to solve some social injustice or inequality, and where there’s a really interesting story about how it came together.

**CLAUDIA:** I love to see longitudinal studies or randomized control studies. That puts you a long way down the line. But a lot of times you can’t find something so established and a lot of it is using your gut. If you’re not going to have the gold standard of a randomized control test, you’ve got to look for other things. You’ve got to look for the results of a particular approach that other people are picking up on.
On finding solutions journalism stories

**DANIEL:** I think about who in my town would know about creative efforts at solving problems. One thing you could do is go to community foundations and ask them. Another would be to think of specific topics that interest you. Then call people in that field and ask them who’s trying to solve this problem.

**FRED:** One of my major sources of news stories are various organizations that deal with social enterprises, because these are the people who are talking to each other, who know what the cutting edge is. So I’m looking at [groups like] Skoll World Forum, Opportunity Collaboration. I’ve made many contacts in those spaces.

**MEG:** Think about it in your own life, if there’s a problem that you’ve got. Maybe your kid stutters, or your toddler is wetting the bed. What can be done? You look for programs that are successful. How can we improve it and who has improved it?

**CLAUDIA:** Follow your questions. Every story I’ve ever done really comes from one place. What am I curious about? What am I interested in? What seems strange to me? What do I want to know about? That’s it. That’s where you start. What’s intriguing to you? What seems like a screaming problem or an area nobody has looked at? That’s the first place to look. Solutions journalism is just telling a wider story. Fill out the other side. What is the problem that this approach is addressing? Fill that out with whatever research or data you can. Or vice versa, you see a trend happening that is troubling. Look at it. Document it as well as you can. Map it out. How broadly it affects people and the implications, but then start looking at who’s doing something about it. Now, that’s where it could end. Maybe nobody’s doing anything about it or maybe what’s being done about it is so new or so ill-formed that that’s not going to work for you for a solutions story. But maybe you just need to look somewhere else. Maybe their not really focusing on that problem in a constructive way where you are, but maybe across the country, or in another country you can find that research and you can write that story.

On writing

**MEG:** You have to have tension to keep readers interested. So maybe you don’t tell them everything all at the top of the story. You reward them along the way with, “Then they did this, then they did that.” I’m a big one for putting a human face on the issue. I always try to tell a story through people but using the numbers to support it all.

**CLAUDIA:** I don’t think that there’s one way to do a solutions story in terms of the writing. I do think that the “howdunnit” approach is a really helpful place to start. Not who done it, but how done it. Exactly how did this person or team or community or whatever grapple with a problem and break it down and surmount it? Exactly how? I think that [structure] may be more interesting than a lot of reporters might immediately assume.

**DANIEL:** Say to yourself, “Alright, I want to write about a really interesting and creative attempt at solving a problem.” Once you talk about it as being a creative attempt, then you don’t feel trapped into having to find only good news. Because then you say to yourself the virtue of what I’m going to do is show people here is somebody who’s tried to solve a problem in a really intriguing way and I’m going to tell you what is working and what’s not working. Then you feel more open to learning about the project for real, warts and all, successes and failures. As long as you do that and make sure to really dig and learn what some of the stumbling blocks are and report on them, people will find it credible. It’s the puff pieces that just say this is the greatest thing since sliced bread and there’s no problem — that’s what makes people mistrust them.

**RHIANNON:** Really assert your authority in a story. We [journalists] have done all the research. We have all of the data. We are probably more well-versed on topics sometimes than some of the experts that we’re quoting. So it’s important for reporters to really assert yourself and speak with authority and be clear in your writing and have a focus and stick to and explain that to your readers in plain language.
On challenges

**RHIANNON:** Taking all that data, cramming it down into a small space, making it so that it’s readable and so that people will finish the story is always a challenge, especially when you’re talking about policy pieces. But I think it’s important for people to find a voice. That’s a huge piece of making it readable, is that you speak with authority and that you have a voice that’s clear and understandable.

**CLAUDIA:** I would say a traditional quick-turn enterprise story at a newspaper might be a thousand words or so – and [solutions stories] are at least twice as long. So always there’s going to be the challenge of keeping readers interested through that. That’s a writing challenge that is all about structure and pace and character, keeping readers in the story for 2,000 words or 2,500 words. That’s just always going to be a challenge in a world where people are flipping and clicking constantly and there’s any number of distractions and ways that a reader’s mind might wander away from data, studies and research. It’s your job as the writer to find the nuggets that are powerful and that are surprising, and to keep readers in a story.

Advice for editors

**MEG:** Identify some of the more vexing problems in your community. And just really address those, really put a reporter on whatever the problem might be. Assign reporters to just cover the heck out of them.

**JANET:** When we started [the Education Lab project at The Seattle Times], a big part of it is to really get readers engaged in this. Maybe we have an online chat connected. We just did our first Google Hangout. It gives people who are interested in maybe following up with some response of their own a place to go. It’s a place that draws people together for some sort of actually effective discussion.

**RHIANNON:** A solutions story is very time-intensive because you have to do all that research ahead of time. You have to feel comfortable making the assertions you’re making. But it’s so worth it. Especially at a time when newspapers are shrinking and pulling back coverage and focusing more on the day-to-day grind as opposed to the big picture stories. I think these big picture stories, these stories that solve a problem or work toward solving a problem, are the stories that are going to save journalism in the end.

**JANET:** Come to some agreement on what it is you want these stories to accomplish. Really educate your staff about what it is you’re setting out to do. Get consensus among the staff, buy-in, for lack of a better word. Otherwise it’s going to be a mysterious thing that people don’t really get and they can maybe not take seriously. Whatever your goal is, really give thought to what is the staff going to need to know to do whatever it is you want them to do. It doesn’t just happen.

**CLAUDIA:** I think that there is a real hunger for not good news, but a reason to hope. It’s not like these solutions stories are happy stories. It’s that they present a reason to keep going, to hope, to try for something new, something better, something different, and everybody needs that. These kinds of story can help with, when done right, a real problem that newspapers are struggling with, which is declining readership. I do think that these stories attract readers when they are done well.
We hope that this toolkit is just the first of many ways that we can be of service to you in your work as a media maker. Here are other ways to engage us:

**LEARNING PLATFORM:** Our website is the go-to source for tools on the practice of solutions journalism. We offer guidebooks, checklists, and case studies—all for free. We’re developing online curricula to reach professional journalists; we’re also collaborating with graduate schools of journalism to develop a course for students.

**JOURNALISM PARTNERSHIPS:** We’re working with dozens of the nation’s leading news organizations to build the practice of solutions journalism in newsrooms. We offer workshops, coach journalists on individual stories, connect newsrooms with data providers, and provide modest project funding. With a few select partners, we pursue longer-term demonstration projects such as “Education Lab,” our flagship initiative with *The Seattle Times*.

**COLLABORATIVE NETWORK:** Solutions Journalism Network’s emerging network will offer journalists and news organizations a platform for shared learning and collaboration, connections to relevant professional opportunities, and fellowships to pursue deeper dives into solutions-oriented projects.
The Solutions Journalism Network was founded in 2012 by David Bornstein, Courtney Martin, and Tina Rosenberg, veteran journalists who had grown increasingly concerned that mainstream journalism was failing to keep pace with major global changes and society’s evolving information needs. During the early parts of their careers, like most journalists, their instincts had led them to focus on important social problems. Then, as now, success in journalism came from magnifying wrongdoing. But over time, they became convinced that they needed to tell stories about credible responses to problems. In focusing primarily on the watchdog role, they felt that they, and many other journalists, were overlooking important developments and stories. And they saw meaningful reporting opportunities to explore how people were trying to advance solutions, examining the results they were producing and what could be learned from their work.

David did this by spending five years chronicling the growth of the Grameen Bank in Bangladesh during the early days of microfinance. Courtney wrote a book, *Do It Anyway: The New Generation of Activists*, which challenged the portrayal of young people as apathetic and disengaged, and explained how they were working to address a wide array of problems. Tina explored how people used positive peer pressure to solve social problems, ranging from keeping teens away from cigarettes to mobilizing Serbians to overthrow Slobodan Milošević.

While their stories covered timeworn topics – poverty, health, human rights – the solutions angles provided contrast and brought fresh energy to the stories. In doing so, they made people question the more limited narratives that dominated the mainstream news.

The experience of writing these stories, and seeing how powerful their impact could be, were the seeds of the Solutions Journalism Network. After meeting each other through professional networks, David, Courtney and Tina discovered a shared belief in the necessity of making rigorous reporting about solutions a core part of daily journalism.

They recognized that it wouldn’t be easy. Journalism had a long and noble tradition of bearing witness to the world’s problems and pain, shining a spotlight to illuminate the dark corners of society. The challenge was to help journalists who saw the importance of chronicling problems to also see the importance of documenting responses to inform agency. Expanding the traditional definition of news would require both a culture and a practice shift, starting in the newsroom itself.

It was a necessary evolution. Many people felt that journalism had become too negative and short-sighted. Journalists had defined their role too narrowly and they were inadvertently providing a view of reality that often subverted their own goals: rather than informing or engaging citizens around the most important issues of the day, all too often reporting — even the best reporting — contributed to feelings of helplessness, cynicism, and apathy.

The Solutions Journalism Network was founded to set a cultural shift in motion, by bringing together a community of like-minded journalists who embrace the notion that their responsibility goes far beyond cataloging failures – to circulating the information that society needs to self-correct every day. That means telling the whole story.
Here is a sampling of places—online and off—where you can find responses that could be worth investigating further. Keep in mind that many worthy responses are still off the radar of event organizers.

As a caveat, this list is by no means exhaustive, and SJN is not endorsing anyone on it. It is up to you to separate the credible voices from the noise. Also be aware of any potential bias: a few of these places may, consciously or not, be advancing a particular view of the world (e.g. the role of technology in solving problems).

**A sampling of solutions-oriented conferences:**

- **Poptech!**: Every October in Camden, Maine; known for its fellowship program of social innovators and scientists that make the programming unexpected
- **Skoll World Forum on Social Entrepreneurship**: Every April in Oxford, England; known for it’s truly global conversation on entrepreneurship and innovation, which often delves into strategies in the developing world
- **Bioneers**: Every October in San Rafael, California; focused on solutions in key areas of environment, women’s and youth leadership, indigenous wisdom, and community resilience
- **SOCAP (stands for Social Capital Markets)**: Every September in San Francisco, California; known for its focus on the more technical aspects of social entrepreneurship, including impact investing
- **Opportunity Collaboration**: Every October in Ixtapa, Mexico; created with the mission of breaking down barriers between social entrepreneurs and funders; pay special attention to the Cordes Fellows, poverty fighters flown in from throughout the world
- **Facing Race**: Every November in a different U.S. city; put on by Race Forward, which also publishes the daily news site Colorlines with a particular focus on solutions to systemic and structure racism in America
- **SXSW Interactive**: Every March in Austin, Texas; particularly interesting for journalists following technology-driven solutions or cultural trends

**Here are a few networks worth looking into:**

- **Ashoka**: Global network of social entrepreneurs that has been building for decades; great resource if you are traveling to a country on a reporting trip and looking for practitioners to interview
- **TED Fellows**: Known for attracting people working at surprising intersections like science and art, or social change and business
- **Echoing Green**: Highly competitive early stage fellowship program; heavy focus on social entrepreneurship
- **Ascend Network**: Focused on “two-generation” solutions to U.S. poverty; particular focus on early childhood and community college-level strategies

And, of course, don’t forget to check out groups dedicated to social entrepreneurship, community development, and activism on LinkedIn and Facebook.

**And don’t forget to follow solutions-oriented hashtags, like these:**

- #SocEnt
- #Sustainability
- #Eco
- #femfuture
- #genderjustice
- #SocialGood
- #3bl
- #lastmile
- #racialjustice
- #economicjustice
- #Poverty
- #SocialChange
- #globalhealth
The Solutions Journalism Network works to legitimize and spread the practice of solutions journalism: rigorous and compelling reporting about responses to social problems.

www.solutionsjournalism.org
@soljourno