

# Traversing the Human Services Value Curve: Achieving New Outcomes at the Metropolitan Action Commission

A Case Study Developed for the Kresge Foundation's Next  
Generation Human Services Initiative







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The barbed wire was the first thing that Dr. Cynthia Croom noticed. Surrounding the perimeter of the property of the Metropolitan Action Commission (MAC), the fence made the human services agency in Nashville, Tennessee look more like a prison than a place created to move people out of poverty. The thought of young children playing behind it every day – and the messages that image may send about MAC families – was abhorrent to her. The fence had to go. It was her first decision made in the Summer of 2000 as MAC's newly appointed Executive Director.

Croom knew the agency was in disarray, but as she entered MAC, she discovered the cleanup would require much more than a cosmetic fix. First were the lines of people, desperately needing rent or utility assistance or access to other emergency services, who never seemed to attain economic stability. Equally concerning was the severe financial mismanagement that had landed the agency on the precipice of closure for noncompliance with federal funding regulations. Both issues reflected a siloed, fragmented organization that could not deliver on its mission to break the cycle of poverty.

Rebuilding the organization was not going to be easy. MAC had both the reputation as a low-performing city agency and as a site handy for political favors vis-a-vis appointments. Those opinions hurt Croom, not only because she prided herself on being an excellent, transparent, ethical leader, but also because as a young, African American woman, she hated the idea that an agency run largely by people of color would be considered a site of low expectations. She knew the organization had dedicated, capable, hardworking team members who genuinely cared about the people they were serving. Yet, staff continued to receive low pay, which seemed driven by negative perceptions of MAC's reputation

"Good ole boy" politics was not Croom's operating style, and she was ready to push both internally at MAC and at unions and mayors who were not ready for transformation. She reflected on her experience in Chicago, where she





had worked at a faith-based social services agency for seven years before moving to Nashville. Her organization often worked to “take back the block” from notorious drug dealers. She was not easily intimidated nor appeased.

She also knew that social and economic mobility could be more than a dream – and she wanted MAC to drive those outcomes. As a Head Start kid, Croom watched her mother navigate the human services system, weaving together supports to gain an education, open a business, and buy the family a home. “We learned economic supports were best when temporary and could not be a permanent source,” Croom said.

Watching the barbed wire come down the next day, Croom was aware it was just the first step in agency transformation. While she knew she had early adopters within the agency, she also knew she would have to change MAC culture and operations, and then convince everybody – including the public – that an agency known only for emergency assistance could deliver holistic pathways to economic mobility.

As she steeled herself for the task ahead, she pondered a set of key leadership questions and challenges she was facing:

What new outcome and impact goals could create a “North Star” for transforming MAC?

How could MAC redesign its structures and services to not only build sustainable pathways out of poverty but also enhance social and economic mobility for customers?

What steps would she need to take to shift the organizational culture and foster leaders who could sustain long-term innovation and change?

And, importantly, as an African American woman, how would she engage and mobilize stakeholders in a city with a legacy of structural and systemic racism?



## *The Context: MAC and Nashville, Tennessee*

MAC was founded April 12, 1964, as part of the Community Action Program, a nationwide initiative stemming from the Economic Opportunity Act of 1964 and President Lyndon Johnson's War on Poverty.

Community Action Agencies (CAAs) launched with the expectation they would develop innovative pathways out of poverty formed in collaboration with the community and customers experiencing poverty. Although CAAs receive substantial federal funding (the Community Services Block Grant is usually the largest source), they also receive state, local, and private funding. Because the city of Nashville and Davidson County are a consolidated metropolitan government, MAC is both a department and commission for the area. It is 88 percent federally funded, with Nashville-Davidson supplying the bulk of the remaining funding, most of which goes towards MAC salaries.

MAC is governed by a 16-member board of commissioners comprised of public officials, people experiencing low incomes, and private-sector representatives who are appointed by the mayor. Today, MAC's staff of 310 employees at eight locations and an operating budget of \$32 million<sup>1</sup> provide Head Start and Early Head Start services, robust workforce, youth and adult education programs, and an array of emergency supports including food and rental assistance. They annually serve about 25,000 families via these services alone, with a vision of "Breaking the cycle of poverty in our community – one child, one person, one family at a time."<sup>2</sup>

The Nashville-Davidson context provides unique challenges and opportunities for improving social and economic mobility. For example, rapid gentrification of Nashville, without a concurrent push for a robust affordable housing program, led to MAC clients spending more on housing or being forced out of the area. Some say the exodus is what has driven a dip<sup>3</sup> in the Nashville-Davidson poverty rate from a high of 20 percent in 2014, to 12 percent in 2019,<sup>4</sup> and that such data obscure the significant economic struggles of low-wage workers. Those struggles disproportionately affect Nashville-Davidson's children of color, who experience the highest poverty rates. In Davidson County in 2021, 34 percent of Black children and 34 percent of Hispanic children experienced poverty compared to 12 percent of white children.<sup>5</sup>

Yet, at the same time, gentrification reflected movement into Nashville<sup>6</sup> for jobs in the IT and healthcare fields. Both experienced significant expansion in the last decade and offered not only higher pay for low-skilled work but also sustainable career pathways that "fall into the 'middle skills' category...requiring some education beyond high school but not a four-year degree."<sup>7</sup>

When Croom took over, developing those pathways was not yet possible given the state of the organization. She leaned into lessons learned from her experiences in Chicago to guide her: One, do not lead with fear; two, a "no" is an invitation to negotiation; and three, if an organization can become excellent, it will gain respect and opportunities to enact substantive change.

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1 The 2019 operating budget was as a component of the MAC application to participate in the Kresge Foundation and Leadership for a Networked World's NextGen Initiative. The application was submitted in 2019 (accessed October 2021). To learn more about the program, visit: <https://kresge.org/initiative/next-generation-nextgen/>.

2 "Metro Action / Vision," Metro Action Commission, available at <https://www.nashville.gov/departments/metro-action> (accessed November 5, 2021).

3 Mike Reicher, "As New Residents Flood Nashville, is Income Inequality Actually Getting Better?" *The Tennessean*, October 7, 2018, available at <https://www.tennessean.com/story/news/2018/10/08/nashville-income-inequality-new-residents-actually-getting-better-economy-development/1527210002/> (accessed November 4, 2021).

4 "Estimated Percent of People of All Ages in Poverty for Davidson County, TN [PPAATN47037A156NCEN]," FRED, Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis, available at <https://fred.stlouisfed.org/series/PPAATN47037A156NCEN> (accessed November 4, 2021).

5 "County Health Rankings and Roadmaps / Tennessee," University of Wisconsin Population Health Institute, available at <https://www.countyhealthrankings.org/app/tennessee/2021/rankings/davidson/county/outcomes/overall/snapshot> (accessed November 4, 2021).

6 "Quick Facts, Davidson County, Tennessee," United States Census Bureau, available at <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/nashvilledavidsonmetropolitangovernmentbalancetennessee/PST045219> (accessed November 5, 2021).

7 Mike Reicher, "As New Residents Flood Nashville, is Income Inequality Actually Getting Better?" *The Tennessean*, October 7, 2018, available at <https://www.tennessean.com/story/news/2018/10/08/nashville-income-inequality-new-residents-actually-getting-better-economy-development/1527210002/> (accessed November 4, 2021).



"Right now, we just gotta get to excellent," she told herself, as she stepped over the last remnants of the barbed wire and entered the building.

### *Laying the Foundation: Fiscal Compliance and Becoming "One Agency" (2000- 2014)*

Getting MAC's operating image to "excellent" was going to be tough.

As an example of the challenges she faced when she began this effort in 2000, the sides of MAC buses taking kids to MAC Head Start sites simply read, "Head Start." There was no reference to MAC, and that omission reflected the agency-wide problem of siloed departments and fragmented service delivery. Each program had their own schedules, internal cultures, and even wildly inconsistent salaries largely determined by grant funding. "Everybody was doing their own thing," said Don Parham, a longtime MAC employee and current director of one of MAC's Head Start centers.

Croom knew her first steps had to be bringing the agency into fiscal compliance and de-siloing departments. To achieve compliance, she threw herself into "reading everything," learning the funding regulations forward and backward, and passing the texts on to staff. She hired finance experts who helped her train employees in how the agency was funded, non-negotiables in funding regulations, and how different funding sources could be leveraged. Simultaneously, she instituted the "One Agency" approach, reminding staff they worked for MAC – not a department – and that high-functioning organizations worked collaboratively.

Croom clarified job descriptions while shifting people into new roles (and enforced clear discipline procedures) informing staff they could no longer feel they "owned" their positions. The message was clear: the drive towards fiscal compliance, competent service delivery, and a collaborative culture was "a direction that is not optional." Some perceived her push as strict, others as efficient. All found her transparent in her directives, even if they did not always understand her vision.

Croom had to convince team members this "One Agency" approach was important, according to Lisa McCrady, MAC Communications Director and then Special Assistant to Croom. "She was educating directors of programs to rearrange the way that a person thought about their role within the agency and their ability to make decisions autonomously," she said. Croom required cross-departmental directors' meetings and structured those sessions to focus on sharing information, as well as brainstorming solutions to departmental – and organizational – issues.



Most staff appreciated the clarity and accountability, but it was a challenging time for Croom. About ten employees left the agency, including the CFO. Three filed lawsuits stoked by the union, which seemed unaware that Croom was working to save the agency.<sup>8</sup> A survey capturing the job dissatisfaction of a minority of MAC employees made the papers.<sup>9</sup> At the same time, Croom was pushing for a salary study to highlight the low wages MAC staff endured compared to other city employees in similar roles. She would face years of battling some mayors, while receiving support from others, just to convince them MAC was a city agency comprising employees who should be eligible for annual city pay raises.

The pushback was hurtful to Croom, who by 2007 had wrangled the agency into financial compliance but realized fighting the legacy of racism and low expectations would be a lengthier battle. She prayed and contemplated whether she had accomplished all she was called to do at MAC.

She decided compliance was not enough. While the agency was solvent, they were bereft of creative plans to move people out of poverty, the original mission of MAC. “At the end of the day, you can be meeting every regulation of the funder and not change people’s lives,” she said. She decided to stay and double down on these efforts.

By 2010, the team was heavily focused on learning from research and working with MAC’s two new data analysts to go beyond counting customers served to discerning program-specific challenges and using data-driven decision-making. Vulnerability and trust had deepened among the directors and with Croom, and the team began thinking about how to work collaboratively to use funds and other resources to sustainably promote customers’ economic mobility. However, it was not until 2014, when they cross-mapped opportunities to leverage the federal Community Services Block Grant (CSBG) across the agency, that they felt they had a financial mechanism to pursue innovation. They decided to use those dollars as a foundation to launch a two-generation, whole family<sup>10</sup> pilot program.

As Croom watched the ink dry on her 2015-2020 strategic plan dedicated to using evidence-based practice to break cycles of poverty, she was excited and anxious. On the one hand, her team was poised to think agency-wide about moving people out of poverty. But could these practices evolve into shared efforts across departments that kept customers at the center of MAC’s work? What program shifts needed to occur for the two-generation pilot to succeed? Croom also knew that for the two-generation pilot to produce new and sustainable outcomes, the agency as a whole would have to develop and collaborate within a human services ecosystem. For a team that had only recently moved beyond compliance, how to operationalize that vision was opaque.

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8 Interview with Lisa McCrady, MAC Director of Communications, November 2, 2021. In this interview McCrady explained that Croom’s personnel and fiscal decisions were largely driven by wanting to keep the agency solvent: “There’s been too many organizations that we’ve watched either dissolve altogether, or be parceled out... I just don’t think we could have stood the test of times had we not made those hard choices,” she said. She added Croom’s conflicts with the union were largely driven by their lack of understanding of her efforts.

9 Michael Cass, “Workers Say Metro Action Not Treating Them Fairly,” *The Tennessean*, June 11, 2006, (accessed via ProQuest).

10 A brief definition of Two-generation programming is provided by Ascend at the Aspen Institute: “Two-Generation approaches provide opportunities for and meet the needs of children and their parents together. They build education, economic assets, social capital, and health and wellbeing to create a legacy of economic security that passes from one generation to the next.” To read more: Ascend at the Aspen Institute, “Two-Generation Playbook,” available at [https://ascend.aspeninstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/Playbook\\_Sept\\_2016.pdf](https://ascend.aspeninstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/Playbook_Sept_2016.pdf) (accessed October 2021).

## Agency Transformation (2015-2020)

### *Framework for Change: Adopting The Human Services Value Curve (HSVC)*

"We try to catch our breath when Dr. Croom goes away to conferences and meetings because we know when she comes back, it's going to be a shift – something's going to happen – and, oh, was it a major shift," said McCrady, speaking of a meeting Croom attended with the Kresge Foundation in 2016. Croom returned with a tool dedicated to helping human services agencies move from meeting regulations to generating holistic outcomes for customers while maximizing organizational capacity and innovation. *The Human Services Value Curve (HSVC)*<sup>11</sup> "was the language I'd been looking for to describe these shifts to staff," Croom said. She made it MAC's business model.

"We'd been adapting various models to try to access our work and impact," said McCrady. "However, this was the first time we had something specific to us as a human services agency, and it measured us all the way through [from regulative] to national impact... I could look at everything I did and ask, how does this also push the needle somewhere else? How do we get to the next level of the curve?"

At MAC, Croom first trained the board, and then the leadership team (some for days), on how to understand the at-times cerebral curve, which sets goals and outcomes measures at each level of an agency's movement from regulative up to generative, a space comprising an ecosystem of innovative supports for equitable outcomes for communities. She wanted to make sure those leading the agency both understood the levels and outcomes promoted – enough so that directors could incorporate the curve into their SMART goals<sup>12</sup> – and could explain and adapt the curve to address the specific work done in each department.

While understanding and adoption of the curve at MAC took some time, it had profound effects on MAC's collaboration, inclusion of customer voice, and participation in shaping a national ecosystem of supports for economic mobility.

Croom first used the curve to highlight the importance of working towards agency-wide goals and maximizing opportunities for MAC customers – a step from "regulative" into the "collaborative" level. She implemented a results-oriented management tool (ROMA) that connected directors and programs to cross-departmental goals that were not program specific. This encouraged leaders and teams to braid, track, and discuss resources. Customers benefited immediately. "This was big in terms of our ability to disrupt any activity that was halting customers' progress," Parham, the Head Start center director, said. "Now, if a Head Start kid is attending, but their parent isn't going to their job training program, they get a call from a caseworker right away." The tool also inspired cross-department recruiting to ensure customers could partake of all MAC offers. "There is no wrong door in the Human Services Value Curve, right?" Said Belva Weathersby, MAC's Director of Early Education and Youth. "And so, no matter what door they (families) come into, we look at how they may benefit from another component of our program."

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11 *The Human Services Value Curve* is a transformation framework and system-wide theory of change that inspires and equips leaders and policymakers of health and human services organizations, systems, and communities to envision and create a path for achieving better and more equitable outcomes for individuals, families, and communities, as well as improve and accelerate human services social and economic value for society. It was developed by Antonio M. Oftelie, Executive Director of Leadership for a Networked World. For more information, visit Leadership for a Networked World, "The Human Services Value Curve: A Leadership Framework and Theory of Change for Health and Human Services Outcomes and Value," available at [https://lnwprogram.org/sites/default/files/HSVC\\_Guide.pdf](https://lnwprogram.org/sites/default/files/HSVC_Guide.pdf) (accessed October 25, 2021).

12 SMART goals are goals that are specific, measurable, achievable, relevant, and time-bound.



# The Human Services Value Curve

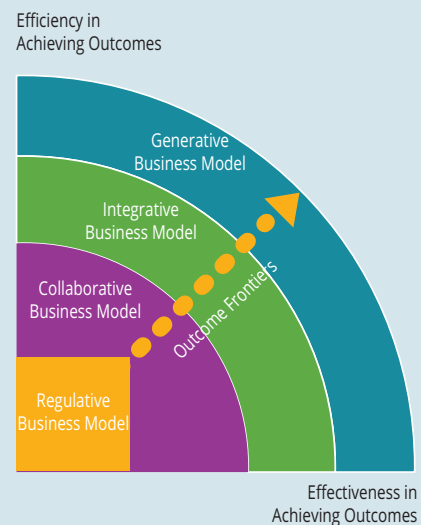
The Human Services Value Curve is a transformation framework and system-wide theory of change that inspires and equips leaders and policymakers of health and human services organizations, systems, and communities to envision and create a path for achieving better and more equitable outcomes for individuals, families, and communities, as well as improve and accelerate human services social and economic value for society.

At the core of the Human Services Value Curve is an intentional focus on growth – measured in two primary ways and displayed on the axis points. First, outcomes growth is measured by ever-increasing forms and value of outcomes. For example, as a human services organization or system advances, it improves its ability to develop, deliver, and communicate growth in equitable outcomes and impact. Second, capacity growth is measured by how efficiently and effectively policies, services, and solutions create this value. In practice, as an organization moves up the Human Services Value Curve, innovation builds and improves effectiveness and efficiency and overall organizational capacity. When combined, the growth in outcomes and growth in capacity determines net growth in social value.

The Human Services Value Curve charts this growth in four horizons, each of which represent a progressive level of outcomes, impact, and social value. The horizons are described in brief as:

- **REGULATIVE HORIZON:** The focus of is on supporting and helping people and families in critical need via an organization that can delivering customer-friendly and cost-effective programs that adhere to evidence-based policy and program rules, processes, and regulations.
- **COLLABORATIVE HORIZON:** The focus is on helping people and families gain stability via multiple organizations that collaborate across programmatic and organizational boundaries to deliver an optimally tailored mix of services to the customer.
- **INTEGRATIVE HORIZON:** The focus is on achieving sustainable social and economic mobility for people and families via an integrated system of services that co-create novel services and solutions that address the root causes of challenges and opportunities.
- **GENERATIVE HORIZON:** The focus is on generating equitably flourishing communities via an ecosystem of organizations, machines, and services that seamlessly design and deliver solutions for multi-dimensional socioeconomic and population-level challenges and opportunities.

## Human Services Value Curve





Another key, curve-inspired shift was making customers – as well as other agencies and the business community – partners. Parents were able to help the agency address the root causes of their struggles and tailor economic mobility supports, even if it meant going to agencies outside of MAC - a step up the curve toward the “integrative” level. Parents sit on MAC’s board and comprise 75 percent of the Head Start policy council. Customers are surveyed annually. And the MAC Family Wellbeing Assessment ensures all customers are treated with dignity and, equally important, invited to share their challenges and goals, and in so doing take ownership of their own mobility plans. Karen Walker, MAC Director of Transformation and Innovation, credited the HSVC in inspiring how to interpret and maximize the Assessment. “It teaches us not to operate within our own bubble and not just conform to federal requirements and regulations. You also have to have that accountability and awareness of, beyond the funders, what can we do for our families? What can we learn from our families about existing barriers? And then being aware of who’s in our ecosystem – what other organizations do we need to be partnering with to help bring this work along, because we can’t do it by ourselves? But also, taking the time to not just deal with what we see surface-wise from a service provision standpoint but really taking the time to say, what is the root cause of this?”

Finally, Croom used the curve to insist that while MAC staff remain vigilant around regulations, they also commit to developing and sharing holistic and innovative pathways for economic mobility. After MAC cross-mapped CSBG funding in 2014, they convinced not only the state but also the federal government that non-emergency services fell within funding guidelines, largely by demonstrating via the two-generation pilot program that CSBG funding could be an engine for economic mobility. In 2016, MAC was among a handful of agencies invited to write the national performance standards for the CSBG, “ensuring that continued flexibility is written into national directives,” Croom said. Croom also informally embedded “dreaming generatively” into job descriptions. Parham, for example, who could spend every day on compliance regarding myriad Head Start regulations, instead, spends “Monday and Tuesday on regulatory guidelines. Wednesday and Thursday, I’m being creative within the organization, making sure the staff are doing well and you got to make sure to dream,” he said. “Friday, I breathe and I scream and I holler.”

### *Bringing Services More Deeply into Alignment: The Two-Generation Pilot*

By 2015, MAC leadership and staff trusted that Croom wanted them to lead (“Cynthia never makes decisions in a bubble,” said Tanya Everson, MAC workforce director) and they supported her renewed focus on MAC’s mission of fostering economic mobility. It was time to accelerate these efforts and put hope into action by launching a two-



generation, whole family pilot – a project that would align with the HSVC and, Croom hoped, provide a roadmap for the agency in collaborating with families and the community to develop holistic plans.

The team decided the pilot would highly resource families with kids enrolled in MAC Head Start and Early Head Start programming and parents enrolled in MAC's Community Services Adult Education programs. This group of parents could be with MAC as long as five years, given Head Start regulations, and a survey of parents revealed many were underemployed and interested in work that could provide economic mobility.

According to Zulfat Suara, MAC board member and elected City Councilwoman, MAC's two-generation program shifted the agency focus to looking at the families "as a whole...whether it was education, whether it was healthcare, whether it was childcare, it's about the person and making the person whole, and making the family whole, which in turn makes the city whole."

Croom turned her attention first to aligning MAC's internal departments. In particular, she focused on Head Start/ Early Head Start, the Community Services Division (which controlled the foundational funds for the pilot, the CSBG funds), and the data team, who would be integral to helping those departments interpret and use real-time data on everything from student test scores to parent and child program attendance. To move towards a two-generation model, MAC created new roles, programs, processes, and resources. The Community Services Department embedded a family development specialist at each Head Start site to assist with issues that arose for either the parent or child, and the agency launched a Father-to-Father program to integrate dads in everything from parenting programs to adult education. The advocates met with each family at least twice a month and informally met with staff of both departments daily. CSBG funding provided laptops and software for teachers to gather and interpret real-time program data (tests and tasks) and to send home curriculum-related activities and videos, and track whether parents used them. The MAC data team followed up, designing additional training for teachers, team members, and parents focused on understanding and using data, offering professional development, and launching "data conversations/tours" with agency team members.

As a result of these efforts, the leadership teams began innovating together. Every Friday, Head Start directors and Community Services leadership met to discuss individual, family, and program data, and twice a month they traveled on "data tours" to different Head Start sites and the adult education program. Croom attended, listening carefully to make sure staff were using data to solve program challenges. Ultimately, the team began designing new programs. For example, in 2016, when older siblings of families in the two-generation program needed summer learning, MAC launched a youth technology camp for 13 to 16 year-olds that included computer training and internship exposure in the technology sector, a move that not only better supported whole families, but also garnered MAC citywide attention for offering a significant intervention to help curb youth violence. Croom knew an important transition had taken hold when eight parents who went through MAC's new Child Development Associate (CDA) credentialing program became MAC Head Start teachers, and the first group of parents achieved the COMPTIA A+ credential<sup>13</sup>, leading to higher paying entry-level positions in the IT field. To her, this symbolized how the days where leaders were only concerned about compliance were over and that the team had embarked on a new path focused on building creative and relevant economic mobility pathways for clients that could really work.

*"[I spend] Monday and Tuesday on regulatory guidelines. Wednesday and Thursday, I'm being creative within the organization, making sure the staff are doing well and you got to make sure to dream," he said. "Friday, I breathe and I scream and I holler."*

– Don Parham

Head Start Center Director,  
Metropolitan Action Commission

*"Hope is really who Cynthia is. She helps people get to another place."*

– Flo Kidd

Board Member,  
Metropolitan Action Commission

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13 According to the Computing Technology Industry Association (CompTIA), The CompTIA A+ Certification enables credentialed IT employees to "support today's core technologies from security to cloud to data management and more" and requires passing two sets of exams. To learn more, visit "CompTIA A+," available at <https://www.comptia.org/certifications/a> (accessed November 2021).



### *New Pathways to Prosperity: In-Demand Job Training*

A critical element of this new economic mobility pathway was a bold, new vision of employment opportunities and job prep. When parents said they wanted job training – in addition to GED preparation, English as a Second Language (ESL) courses, and college readiness supports – Croom insisted a MAC credentialing program must result in jobs with living wages. She worked with the Chamber of Commerce to identify sectors with relatively high pay that needed entry-level workers. Information Technology (IT), booming in Nashville, met the criteria. As a result, the MAC CompTIA A+ certification program was born. Croom added the CDA training and paid parents who interned in MAC Head Start sites. In 2021, MAC began pursuing electrocardiogram (EKG) technician training, another lucrative and growing field in Nashville.

“Cynthia really blended the adult education programs and training to fix the problem of jobs not being available to folks without one of those key pieces,” said Arlene Collins, a longtime MAC Adult Education teacher. “It really inspired me to continue to ask how I am partnering to provide services, not only with parents but also other departments.”

The shifts fostered deeper partnerships with businesses to promote their job openings and hire MAC customers. Now, for example, several technology companies are key partners, and MAC has a robust collaboration with Nashville-Davidson government to provide the CompTIA students paid internships in Nashville government IT departments. The internships were crucial in providing the work experience interns needed. In addition, internship coordinators – like MAC staff – came to care deeply for their interns, motivating them to persist, and importantly, noticing and dismantling obstacles that could derail an intern’s progress during their 3–6-month internship or beyond.

Nathalie Stiers, department head for Nashville’s Justice Integration Services, an IT department serving elected officials and the courts, has coordinated MAC interns there for three years. Stiers recalled several conversations she had with interns:

How many college credits do you have? You are that close? Here are some options, because you know what happens when you have a CompTIA certification and you’ve got some experience and you got a bachelor’s, why are we not finishing that? It gives the opportunity to talk about those things. You’ve got this small little thing on your record for how long? You know that person whose PC you fixed? You can ask them what the process is [to get rid of it] because you don’t want to not have the job of your dreams because somebody



does a background check and sees something that happened when you were 19 years old.' When you get close enough to individuals that they start telling you this stuff, it's like, 'No, there's a way to fix that. That never has to bring you down again – ever – in life.

"We have a real dedication to the people we serve," said Collins, the Adult Education teacher, adding that the professionalism brought to MAC with the addition of the HSVC and deeper alignment of services also made the agency more caring and effective. "Now, I wonder, what happens to the kids if we don't help the parents and work together? Before, we were a business. Now, we constantly ask what we can do to get the families out of poverty."

## **Evidence of Change: Outcomes and Impact (2020 – 2021)**

Within five years of progressing along the HSVC, launching the department alignment, and adding an explicit focus on two-generation programming, MAC was able to demonstrate not only positive outcomes for customers but also agency resilience and agility, as well as legitimacy in the community. For Croom, the ability to create and share viable pathways out of poverty made MAC virtually unrecognizable from the agency she first encountered in 2000, as siloed and insular as the barbed wire she tore down suggested.

### ***Two-Generation and Head Start Outcomes***

In late 2019, MAC released a 3-year evaluation<sup>14</sup> of the Two-Generation pilot, delineating specific outcomes for the 166 people who had children in the MAC Head Start program and simultaneously matriculated through the Adult Education or Jobs program.

The evaluation revealed strong parent satisfaction with MAC and a desire for their network (family and friends) to experience MAC services.<sup>15</sup> The data also highlighted meaningful outcomes for parents, parents and children together, and children.

Parents saw improved employment and wages. While 64 percent of parents reported being unemployed prior to joining the pilot, 76 percent of CDA and CompTIA students were employed in 2019, 56 percent full time. Of those who graduated from those programs, 81 percent were employed (63 percent full time), and 93 percent said they were prepared for their new roles. Forty-seven percent of them reported that their wages increased "a lot" after their credentialing. In addition to the job gains, 50 percent of parents reported they attained at least one additional financial step, such as improving their credit, buying a home or car, or reducing their debt.

Sixty-four percent of parents reported feeling less stressed since beginning the pilot, and that wasn't the only "home-life" benefit. Eighty-one percent of parents said their child talked to them more, and 61 percent said their child was less likely to act out at home. Parents also saw kids persisting in school because kids saw them persisting. One participant said of her high school aged son, "As he saw me going to school, I guess I motivated him to keep going. If they see you're not doing anything, they'll say, 'Ah, well, my mom and dad aren't doing anything, so I don't have to do anything.'"<sup>16</sup>

Gains were significant for Head Start kids as well. While the study was smaller for kids, evaluators could easily compare "pilot" kids with their peers. For example, kids whose parents participated in the CDA credentialing, in particular, scored 8 points higher on the Brigance test of development and early academic skills than their peers. This was particularly

14 The evaluation was conducted by Thomas P. Miller & Associates and used MAC program data, interviews of MAC staff and program participants, and a survey of pilot customers. Ninety-seven people completed the survey. Unless otherwise indicated, all data cited above comes from this report. To learn more: "Metropolitan Action Commission 2Gen / Whole Family Initiative Evaluation Report – 2019. Serving the Children & Families of Davidson County, TN," available at <https://filetransfer.nashville.gov/portals/0/sitecontent/MAC/docs/Reports/2GenWholeFamilyInitiativeEvaluationReport2019.pdf> (accessed November 2021).

15 Eighty-three percent of MAC customers who responded to the survey were "satisfied" or "very satisfied" with their experience at MAC. "Metropolitan Action Commission 2Gen / Whole Family Initiative Evaluation Report – 2019. Serving the Children & Families of Davidson County, TN," available at <https://filetransfer.nashville.gov/portals/0/sitecontent/MAC/docs/Reports/2GenWholeFamilyInitiativeEvaluationReport2019.pdf> pg.16, (accessed November 2021).

16 This quote comes from a participant cited in the MAC evaluation: "Metropolitan Action Commission 2Gen / Whole Family Initiative Evaluation Report – 2019. Serving the Children & Families of Davidson County, TN," available at <https://filetransfer.nashville.gov/portals/0/sitecontent/MAC/docs/Reports/2GenWholeFamilyInitiativeEvaluationReport2019.pdf> pg. 40. (accessed November 2021).



notable, given that these kids had started the year scoring 3.5 points below their peers. Compared to their peers, language assessment gains also occurred for kids whose parents had gone through the CompTIA certification program and whose fathers were in the fatherhood program. Moreover, all pilot kids had higher average daily attendance scores (85.9 percent) than their peers (83.9 percent).

While the program wasn't perfect – participants shared struggles with compensation for time, scheduling issues, and difficult course material – it was clear that if the goal was real economic mobility, MAC had enacted a holistic plan.

### *Building Resilience and Agility By Evolving the Business Model*

Events at the beginning of 2020 also demonstrated the resilience and agility MAC had built as it progressed up the HSVC. In March of 2020, MAC faced both the COVID-19 pandemic and a tornado that ripped through Nashville – the sixth deadliest in US history – costing approximately 300 lives and \$1 billion in damage.

MAC not only saw customers come back, “we were also seeing new customers, with higher bills,” who lost jobs and potentially homes, Croom said. She worried: could MAC, so focused on developing antipoverty measures, once again pivot to focus on meeting emergency needs – and yet not become stuck in that “regulative” space?

The period was affirming for Croom, who saw her staff respond with agility. “When the tornado hit, when the pandemic hit, my folks were out there. We didn't close up shop and go behind closed doors. We shifted fast, and key shifts happened because people were used to working cross-departmentally,” Croom said. “No one is married to what they do every day.”

Croom described just some of MAC's pivots, enabled by the “One Agency” focus: the agency mobilized to refurbish buses into mobile catering units and food trucks, delivering meals to neighborhoods, and days and weeks' worth of food to customers. Everyone from the MAC CFO to the bus drivers participated in the work. MAC set up kiosks for those unable or hesitant to meet face-to-face. And throughout, the team kept their heads in collaborative and integrative curve levels, consistently pushing economic mobility as the end goal. For example, the Head Start and Early Head Start centers never closed during COVID-19 but set up virtual learning labs for some, hustling to get families laptops and connections. For working families, they continued offering in-person school. The Adult Education team received cellphones to improve connectivity and to provide the hope that was so critical to customers' persistence, especially

*“We're a community here – we work together and give you what you need... Partly because we don't want you to come back.”*

– Zulfat Suara  
Board Member, Metropolitan Action Commission.



when many were emotionally distraught and consumed with meeting basic needs. “We have to motivate them when they’re at that moment of thinking, ‘It’s never going to change. This is my life. This is it.’ No, that’s not it. And you never know when that telephone is ringing if that’s one of those situations, so we answer it,” said Collins. “But it’s a reward. It really is. And it’s not just Adult Education, it’s everywhere [at MAC]. You see people happy about the job they get to do.”

Croom didn’t want to rely solely on employee good will to sustain her staff, so she paid them a \$4-7 premium per hour for their dedication. “Not even the rest of the government was able to do that, but that really came with a decision that we are going to prioritize, if our people have to be out there while other folks are sitting in their offices, they are going to be compensated at as high a level as we could see affordable,” she said. She wanted folks doing excellent work to remain at MAC.

Croom was convinced that MAC was successfully straddling both providing emergency services and maintaining a focus on achieving generative outcomes when the city requested MAC take over a program housing indigent elderly. She returned a swift and authoritative “No.” It did not fit MAC’s mission, areas of expertise, or plans. “It takes great leadership to be able to say, ‘We do this, and we do it very well,’ rather than ‘Let’s do everything you throw at us,’” Suara said, of Croom’s decision.

And when the requests to do more to support Nashville-Davidson increasingly came in 2020 and 2021, Croom knew the agency had also achieved a level of legitimacy she had been working towards for two decades.

### *Achieving Legitimacy: The 2021 HOPE Grant and Workforce Additions*

In 2020, the mayor asked MAC to absorb a shuttered city workforce and youth agency. In 2021, he asked Croom if MAC would oversee the \$20 million HOPE Grant, federal dollars from the American Rescue Plan to be dispensed to customers at risk of eviction or losing their homes due to COVID-19- related challenges. Those dollars eventually grew to almost \$70 million.

Croom recognized the shift in reputation the agency now enjoyed. “It was huge for us because it was a huge vote of confidence from the city, that, ‘You all are the ones that we believe can carry this out,’” she said.

Challenges with HOPE were significant. Beginning in March of 2021, MAC had to construct a tool and process to evaluate a crushing demand of applications and then oversee a fair and timely distribution of funds, all within a 9-month window. To boot, regulations were both stringent and changing as understanding of the toll of the pandemic grew. Croom mobilized her team, and many worked 16-hour days, first designing an online portal, and then reading applications and dispensing funds. Despite these efforts, “We were slammed by the nonprofits and I can see the headlines now ‘The action commission sits on \$20 million while people risk losing their housing,’” Croom said, rubbing her forehead at the memory. Only two news outlets were critical of MAC’s pacing (\$2.25 million was dispensed in the first six months), the others understanding the process; but it still stung Croom and MAC staff. They showed up in Croom’s office one day, irate at the unforgiving headlines and their reputation sullied. While she told her staff she’d address the misconceptions in her own way, she was buoyed by their allegiance and noted how profoundly their unity represented a transformation from MAC’s siloed departments in 2000.

Croom also refused to let her staff feel defeated or afraid of pressure – one of her “Chicago” leadership lessons. They were focused on meeting funding compliance – and “doing it right” was a path they’d walked since she took the helm. “One of the things that we have learned is that sometimes when you’re building a program from the ground up, you have to try and take the time, even though you needed more time, to put things in place so that when it’s time, you can move efficiently, rather than allowing the external pressures – and there were a lot of them – to overwhelm you,” she said, speaking of both the portal design and implementation.

Croom’s measured, transparent, and cooperative public response to the criticism eventually won over critics and resulted in even wider recognition of the agency’s excellence. She held outreach events to explain the application process, clarify the timelines for distributing funds, and encourage customers to participate. She met with the mayor and attended City Council Affordable Housing Commission meetings to explain evolving guidelines and capacity issues.



Partners and supporters rallied behind MAC, and the City Council authorized funds for Croom to hire additional staff dedicated to the project.

“They had been working with the courts. And one of the judges that she worked with came to the City Council meeting to talk about their partnership with MAC, in that they were doing a whole lot, working very hard. At the end of the day, everybody realized that the problem wasn’t MAC, it was just the way the grant was structured, and [funds distribution issues] are a nationwide issue,” Suara said.

Suara was right, and last year MAC received national recognition for their HOPE work. Croom was quick to share the acclaim. “We are one of the top performers in the nation when it comes to what we’ve been able to do with the HOPE program and we continue to be invited to The White House summits to serve as an example of, ‘How are you getting this done in the speed and the way that you’re able to get it done?’” She said. “Getting it done is definitely due to the dedication of the people who work here.”

## Sustaining the Transformation

By 2020, Croom, at 58, was contemplating retirement – and as she marinated on how deeply embedded two-generation, holistic economic mobility pathways had become in MAC, she wanted agency structure to reflect that purpose even more deeply. She also wanted the data and outcomes focus – for customers and for MAC employees – to be elevated to promote not only a push towards generative work, but also agency sustainability.

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Dr. Cynthia Croom

Executive Director, Metropolitan Action Commission

## Agency Restructure

In 2020, Croom decided to reorganize departments by functions and outcomes rather than program focus. She replaced the “Head Start” Department with the Department of Early Education and Youth. With the absorption of the city’s small workforce and youth agency, she created the new Workforce Department, comprising the adult education programs, programming for older teens and out-of-school youth, and “MAC4Jobs,” the credentialing and internship programs. Croom hired seven more coaches for two-generation work. She also added a Transformation and Innovation department and expanded the Communications department with the goal of honing, perfecting, and sharing MAC’s work with the community and human services field.

The creation of the Innovation team, in particular, was a strategic decision to increase MAC’s capacity to deliver



targeted and beneficial services, as well as help Croom by shouldering some key leadership responsibilities. Croom hired a Director of Transformation and Innovation as well as three more data analysts. The team closely supports Croom by helping to shape and set the agency's strategic direction and ensure that agency goals match the business model (the HSVC). Day-to-day, the innovation team develops and conducts agency-wide data meetings and professional development, and helps directors see not only the "big picture" but also feel comfortable using their departmental data to drive decision making.

With these departmental shifts came additional leadership transitions and responsibilities. "It was important to me to be able to say that the organization is positioned well, and it has people within it that have the ability to move it forward, even if I'm not sitting in this seat," Croom said.

Staff trusted her decisions. Tanya Everson, MAC Workforce Director, recalled when Croom tasked her with managing the new youth workforce program. "One day we had a meeting and she said, 'I'm going to change your life today!' Nobody asked me if I wanted it or not, but I'm taking it as obviously she thinks that I have enough knowledge and experience to turn it around and make it successful. There's always reasoning behind it... People never complained about the changes. I'm sure, if somebody was not happy about it, they would have probably left," she concluded.

As Everson's comment indicates, MAC staff trusted Croom and appreciated working at MAC. But Croom wanted to ensure that staff would always feel empowered in their roles – no matter the agency head – and feel free to seek assistance if they had concerns. She implemented Human Resources Business partners "so that in addition to their direct supervisors," McCrady, the Communications head said, team members "have another touch point for them to remain connected to the mission and vision of the organization, an advocate, which is why that title is important and very intentionally used that way."

While an additional "internal advocate" was new, fighting for racial and socioeconomic equity for MAC staff had been a push for Croom since 2000, and it was a final area she wanted to shore up before even considering retirement.

### *Advancing Inner-Agency Economic and Racial Equity*

From her first day at MAC, Croom was proud to lead an organization run and staffed largely by people of color. It was important to her that it remain that way to reflect Nashville demographics and so that anyone entering the door could see someone who looked like them and spoke their language (at one Head Start site, instructors speak seven languages, reflecting the recent influx of Spanish and Arabic speakers, among other populations, into Nashville).

She was vigilant in protecting racial equity within MAC and made it a priority with city partners too. "Racial equity is who we are," Croom said. "It is what you say, it is what you do, it is how you do it, and how you look."<sup>17</sup> Attaining her racial equity goals meant tracking metrics and salaries internally, and between 2016-2020, making pointed and at times difficult pushes with mayors for MAC salary increases.

Croom was vigilant to track not only rates of hiring, promotion, and discipline by race and gender at MAC but also kept an eye on expanding the field of job candidates. She trained hiring managers in implicit bias and cultural norms, and the team ameliorated obstacles for job candidates from less-affluent backgrounds. Croom defied city protocol, for example, when she chose not to use the civil service test and requirements that candidates apply for positions online – the test did not reflect the real capabilities of many, and, like the online application, might prevent historically marginalized candidates from being invited to interview.

Because of Croom's efforts, today 85 percent of MAC senior leadership is people of color; so is 89 percent of management, and 63 percent of the board of commissioners, making MAC one of the city's most diverse agencies.<sup>18</sup> A 2019 survey revealed MAC staff ranked the agency's approach to racial equity higher than staff at any other city

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17 Croom is quoted here in a Leadership for a Networked World Interview with Cynthia Croom, MAC Executive Director, Phara Fondren, MAC Assistant Director of Early Education, and Marvin Cox, Family Services Director, September 19, 2019.

18 MAC application to participate in the Kresge Foundation and Leadership for a Networked World's NextGen Initiative. The application was submitted in 2019 (accessed October 2021). To learn more about the program, visit: <https://kresge.org/initiative/next-generation-nextgen/>



agency.<sup>19</sup> Recognizing her efforts, the mayor asked Croom to help lead a Diversity Advisory Committee tasked with developing city plans for recruiting, hiring, and training city employees.

Externally, Croom had a tougher battle – attaining city-determined pay equity for MAC staff, who were the lowest paid city staff when Croom began her tenure. “It was a lack of knowledge on [each] mayor’s part,” said Trista Boseman, MAC’s Service Employees International Union (SEIU) representative, adding, “Because MAC receives federal dollars, they’re thinking, ‘Well, they’ve got this extra money, so they don’t need these other dollars.’” Boseman said with every new administration, she and Croom took trips to City Hall to educate the Mayor and City Council that MAC is a city agency.

Croom pointedly highlighted the racial equity impacts of MAC salary struggles in 2016, when MAC was working on a large, federally funded program, and employees were once again left out of annual city pay raises. Croom and Boseman met with the Mayor and City Council. Some of MAC’s board joined them. At first, the raise was denied. It was eventually granted but only after Croom pushed back and named the inequity at play.

The pushing back really was about, and in some cases, some very heated conversations, the importance of being able to say and say openly, “This is not right,” and at points, being able to say, “This is an equity issue, and it’s a race and gender equity issue because the majority of people who work here are people of color and they are women.” So, at times, just really being willing to have some really hard, awful conversations and even some pretty tough things in emails where one city official said that I was calling them a racist and I told them, “I’m not calling you a racist, but I am saying what this looks like, let me tell you how this looks when you continue to make these kinds of decisions.”

Internally, Boseman said Croom “led the way” in working within the MAC budget to annually review departments and advocate for raises for adequate standard of living and retirement needs. Croom was also a key union ally in the SEIU campaign for a \$15 per hour salary for all Nashville city workers, Boseman said.

Ironically, when Croom moved MAC to a base of \$15 per hour in 2020, it was without the financial support of Nashville-Davidson, even though the government had committed to the goal the year before. MAC was left out again. She led a campaign to frame efforts to increase pay for MAC staff as an equity issue and implemented the increase via dollars from previous fundraising efforts. “The initial \$15 an hour was not the city,” she explained. When she reached the mayor, she said, “I can fund this, but not long-term for my people. I need a commitment that if I fund it in the beginning, that you’re going to pick up this funding.” the mayor agreed.

Croom explained her thinking. “I couldn’t wait for somebody to figure it out, and it was important for me to, at the

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid.



same time, not have my people at the mercy of whoever's in the administration at the time, because my folks were working hard every day, and increasingly, we were the organization being called on to get it done," Croom said.

Suara, the MAC board member and City Council member, said Croom "is able to make people believe they need to do the right thing," which resulted in the city supporting her \$15 per hour wage.

In the summer of 2021, Croom was pondering the interplay between everything she had established at MAC and her pending retirement. She was aiming for a 2024 departure, and realized that same year, seventy percent of MAC leaders would also be eligible to retire.<sup>20</sup> She wondered: Was MAC poised to move on without her and other dedicated leaders who drove agency transformation? Could the agency sustain an exodus?

### *Leadership Questions About the Future*

"I sense some urgency in her," said McCrady, the Communications head, speaking of Croom. "She wants to make sure she's done all she could to prepare whoever the next leader is, and to leave a solid foundation. Right now, she's making sure people are where they need to be, and the organization is where it needs to be," she added, concluding, "There may still be more shifts to come."

Croom's twentieth and twenty-first years at MAC were tough, the global pandemic and housing crises reminding her that MAC may never be able to sit solely in a "generative" space. Yet she remains steadfast that sticking only with emergency services provision would stagnate MAC's progress, staff empowerment, and most importantly, customers' economic mobility.

As she considers the steps and shifts she will make before her departure, Croom is balancing a couple of questions and a non-negotiable. First, will MAC continue to remain innovative, not only in new ways of operating but also new sensibilities, and staff and leaders fearless in enacting agency change when needed? And second, can MAC solidify their presence in a local and national ecosystem of supports, to not only create policy and practice but also share their knowledge and resources?

Her non-negotiable remains the first human services lesson she learned as a child: Customer supports should be temporary and promote economic mobility.

She beamed as she recalled a recent interaction with a successful CompTIA A+ graduate, who said: "'I've come to you all for a season in my life at a time where I do need you, but that's not an invitation for [MAC] to stay in my life. I'm not interested in you shepherding me through the rest of my life.'"

"And I appreciated that," Croom said. She continued: "I said to her, 'I know you're going to make us proud.' And she said, 'I am.'"

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid.



## Acknowledgments and Credits

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## Traversing the Human Services Value Curve: Achieving New Outcomes at the Metropolitan Action Commission

### Case Discussion Questions

#### Discussion Questions:

1. Croom adopted the Human Services Value Curve (HSVC) to articulate and engage staff in her vision to achieve agency compliance while moving to generative outcomes for families. What new goals, messaging, programming changes, and staffing shifts stood out to you as foundational to her success? What would it take for your agency to adopt the HSVC and adapt agency practices, understandings, and outcomes?

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2. For all leaders, the personal and the professional intersect. How did Croom also navigate the unique leadership challenges she faced as an African American female agency head in Nashville, both in naming inequity and working to end it? In what ways did Croom's upbringing and experience enhance her understanding of customer experiences and the possibility of using economic supports for true economic mobility?

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3. What leadership sensibilities, tactics, and messaging were critical in bringing along MAC staff and families around visioning true economic mobility for customers? As an agency leader, upon whom can you rely to share with you key insights regarding life experience that customers or historically marginalized staff may have? How do you solicit such understanding and have the courage to act upon the feedback you receive?

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4. What concrete steps did MAC take to keep customers at the heart of their efforts and endeavors? How does your agency center the respect, dignity, and autonomy of people, families, and communities? What adjustments could you make to your assessments, business models, service delivery approaches, and practices to make customers true partners in their economic mobility journey?

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5. Croom believed that economic mobility supports should be temporary, and that MAC could maximize customer outcomes by adopting the HSVC and deepening collaboration across departments, with families, and within the ecosystem. These touchstones led MAC to develop a bold, two-generation plan for families. What work do you need to do in your agency to enhance anti-poverty strategies, such as two-generation initiatives? How are you providing staff with the freedom and support to dream of generative outcomes and build the programming that is required to get there?

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6. Analytics served as a strong “ligament” at MAC – it helped to connect departments across shared work and outcomes goals, and it was key to understanding challenges and to discerning whether generative programming was effective. Data and analytics experts also help Croom shoulder leadership tasks such as working with directors on agency-wide outcomes goals and providing staff training. Reflecting on the ways MAC is using data, what new ideas or strategies could you adopt to enhance data use at your agency? What additional data strategies and approaches might you recommend for MAC?

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7. Croom was effective at braiding and blending – funding, department personnel and goals – as well as services. What are the opportunities in your agency to focus more intentionally around breaking through silos and braiding and blending to better support people, families, and communities in achieving social and economic mobility? What resources and skillsets will you need (or do you need to develop) to drive this work?

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8. After 20 years leading a major organizational transformation, Croom turned her focus to sustaining those capacity-building efforts and ensuring the organization would remain innovative. Regardless of where you are in your own leadership journey, how can you increase your agency’s capacity for sustained innovation and change? What structures, practices, and cultural attributes need to shift (or remain) to ensure leadership after your tenure is both innovative and effective?

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