



Collectively, Memphis Leaders Fast-Forward Social Progress

Objective: Suffering from years of disinvestment and persistently high rates of poverty, this case study shows how Memphis city officials joined forces with the private and nonprofit sectors to have a collective impact on some of the city's most pressing social issues.

City: Memphis, Tennessee

Major Participants: City of Memphis, Shelby County, State of Tennessee, Methodist Le Bonheur Healthcare, St. Jude's Children's Research Hospital, St. Louis Federal Reserve Bank, AutoZone, Pittco Management and Hyde Family Foundations, and numerous other local businesses

Background: In 2005, Memphis lacked any cohesive strategy for economic and business development. As a result, the city suffered. Crime rates were nearly four times the national average. High school graduation rates were a mere 66%, well below the state's goal of 90%. Downtown redevelopment lagged and there was a dearth of trained workers. With business winnowing, the City was unable to balance its budget and continued to spend more than it was collecting in tax revenues.

Noting this long-standing problem, Memphis Mayor Willie Herenton and Shelby County Mayor A.C. Wharton jointly approached [Memphis Tomorrow](#), the existing coalition of Memphis business leaders. Almost immediately, the business leaders pledged to help the Mayors design a blueprint for creating jobs, lowering crime, investing in the local workforce, and crafting a more efficient government. But rather than simply designing a five-year action plan, the group committed to tracking and measuring data, and engaging experts, practitioners and residents in both the planning and the implementation.

How it Works: Launched in 2008, [Memphis Fast Forward](#) was designed as the umbrella organization that would support four key initiatives: PeopleFirst (education and talent), Operation Safe Community (public safety), Growth Alliance (economic development), and Government Efficiency (efficient local government). In 2012, they added Healthy Shelby (health & wellness) for a total of five initiatives.

Memphis Fast Forward has its own steering committee and co-chairs, and is coordinated by the staff of Memphis Tomorrow and the Mayors' offices. But each initiative also has its own chairperson, a governing board and "backbone" agency to lead the planning and implementation of the initiative's activities. For instance, a 40-member public/private sector leadership council (governing board) oversees the work of the Growth Alliance; currently, the leadership council is focused on strategic planning work. From there, the Growth Alliance's two staff people, Dr. Bill Evans, the CEO of St. Jude's Children's Research Hospital (chairperson), and the Memphis Shelby Economic Growth Engine (the backbone agency) will be responsible for the implementation and monitoring of the strategic plan.

Memphis Fast Forward is distinguished by its use of a [collective impact](#) approach; its common agenda, shared measurement, mutually-reinforcing activities, continuous communication and backbone support that allow the initiatives to successfully address large-scale problems.

Results for Local Economy: Through the first five years of Memphis Fast Forward, major violent and property crime were reduced by 22.8% and 25.5%, respectively. Business and bank robberies were down by 67.7% and 60.6%, respectively. Memphis City Schools expanded the number of students in Pre-K by 50% - from 2,746 to 4,120.

Anti-gang and anti-blight programs are reclaiming neighborhoods and attracting business. On the economic development front, [the results](#) are impressive:

- More than 17,000 new jobs have been created with an average annual wage of \$40,577.
- New capital investment to the tune of \$4.5 billion has been generated.
- An additional \$642 million in minority business receipts have been generated.
- Innovation and entrepreneurship is accelerating through new startup/high growth ventures (INNOVA) and incubators (CEED, Memphis Bioworks) and through the new Office of Tech Transfer at the University of Memphis.
- Revenues at the Memphis Cook Convention Center have increased by 20% and bookings are up 41%.
- City and County economic development processes have been streamlined under a single economic development policy chief who speaks and acts on behalf of both the City and County.
- City and county-government executed efficiency strategies have saved taxpayers more than \$75 million.

Remaining Challenges: Despite the progress made as a result of the Memphis Fast Forward initiatives, poverty in Memphis remains stubbornly high. For many years, the city has experienced an exodus of higher-income, higher-skill adults and their families to other counties and regions. In the inner city there remains deep pockets of poverty, and many who are heavily reliant on social services.

Moreover, it's a challenge to maintain the momentum of Memphis Fast Forward. While it has been a boon for Memphis Fast Forward to have a wide range of stakeholders, keeping such a large group of people continuously engaged is challenging. In order to keep members engaged and keep excitement high, Memphis Fast Forward continuously shares data and celebrates accomplishments.

Lessons Learned: President of Memphis Tomorrow, Blair Taylor, credits political support as one of the primary reasons Memphis Fast Forward has been so successful. "We depend on [the mayors] to mobilize resources, to support advocacy work, to build political will, and to use their pulpits to say this work and these priorities are important," he explains in a recent [report](#) by FSG. After gaining this political support, it's important to maintain the support, particularly in the face of leadership turnover. Regular communication and interaction has helped ensure political support over time.

In practice, another important lesson is that multiple layers of leadership might be necessary to implement such large, strategic frameworks. For example, when Safe Community was first developed, leaders believed that the board of directors and a few key individuals were sufficient for implementing the plan of action. What they found, however, is that an additional layer of strategy leadership was necessary to help implement the action plan. These strategy leaders help to openly and effectively communicate what's happening on the ground with the board of directors. Strategy leaders also sit on the board of directors, ensuring that what's happening on the ground is reflective of the board's intentions.

For more information, visit Memphis Fast Forward at www.memphisfastforward.com