

# How Rockford Changed Course to Tackle Veterans' Homelessness

*Using Data to Diagnose and Remedy Complex Problems*

## *Educator Guide*

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### Overview

This Educator Guide is designed to assist instructors in teaching this case to students and practitioners. It is based on [case pedagogy](#), which invites participants to put themselves in the shoes of the protagonist(s) of the case and imagine how they would respond to the circumstances. Participants should read the teaching case in advance and identify key issues as a preliminary step toward meeting the learning objectives. Instructors may then use the time in the classroom to guide participants in exploring the issues and examining the challenges in the case; to introduce key concepts, tools, and frameworks; and to assist participants in applying their learning to their own environments and challenges.

This guide includes learning objectives, a synopsis, key questions, a roadmap for discussion, and appendices with some additional pedagogical information and theoretical applications. The roadmap and appendices are offered to initiate meaningful conversation but are by no means the only way to teach the case. Educators and facilitators should feel free to design their own teaching plans; both the structure and the time allotted for each component are suggestions.

### Learning Objectives

The overarching learning objective of this case is to help senior leaders in government understand how to build data-analytic capabilities designed to tackle tough urban problems that require a cross-boundary approach, sometimes with non-government actors. (Other problem-oriented challenges, besides data, for which this case can be used include policy, governance, and executive leadership.) In this case, the content focuses on efforts to eliminate veterans' homelessness in the city of Rockford, Illinois. More specifically, participants will examine:

- What does it mean for a government or city agency to be “data-informed”?
  - Constantly and systematically asking the right questions at all levels of the organization and using data to arrive at answers and make organizational changes (rather than simply introducing tools and data)
- What value or new capabilities derive from being “data-informed”?
  - Expanding one’s understanding of the system at multiple levels
  - Finding out what does and does not work by rapidly testing hypotheses
  - Defining and measuring progress
- How can you think about transforming your organization into being “data-informed”?
  - Deciding where to start when faced with a complex social problem such as homelessness
  - Noting which factors or conditions are helpful and which are necessary
  - Naming challenges and barriers a government might face when trying to become more data-informed, and how to deal with them

## Case Synopsis

In late 2014, Rockford, Illinois Mayor Larry Morrissey signed on to Michelle Obama’s challenge to end veterans’ homelessness. Rockford Human Services director Jennifer Jaeger and homeless program coordinator Angie Walker were tasked with the primary responsibility of “functionally” eliminating veterans’ homelessness in Rockford. This meant ensuring that no veteran, from that time onward, would spend more than thirty days unhoused.

Rockford, the third largest city in Illinois, was hit hard by deindustrialization starting in the 1980s, struggling ever since with job loss, blight, and attendant social ills. When elected as Rockford’s mayor in 2005, Morrissey made tackling homelessness a priority, but, along with the city’s local and regional partners in homelessness services, seemed to be getting bogged down, often in small-scale issues like juggling their cloud-based case-management system. When Jaeger and Walker approached Morrissey in 2014 to sign onto First Lady Michelle Obama’s Mayor’s Challenge, he did so only after considerable hesitation.

Once the mayor had made a political commitment, he was under pressure to deliver. On the one hand, Rockford had already been making changes: devising a coordinated-entry system to centralize information within the local ecosystem of service providers for people experiencing homelessness; and endorsing a “Housing First” approach which, as the name suggested, meant the first obligation was to offer people housing, and from there determine what other services (e.g., counseling, substance abuse treatment) were needed.

On the other hand, however, was a hard truth: No one knew how many unhoused veterans lived in Rockford at a given time, much less how to house them all. Navigating bureaucracy and housing, each veteran would take resources and persistence in a fatigued system with little to no accountability. This was the task before Jaeger and Walker.

## Key Questions

1. Why did Rockford's previous efforts to combat homelessness fail? What was different about their approach starting in late 2014?
2. In designing a solution to tackle homelessness, what would you want to know? Where might you find that data?
3. Once you have data, what questions help you conceive the right interventions?
4. What is the actionable point-of-entry?

## Roadmap for Discussion

**Introduction** (3-10 minutes): Briefly state the goal of the session in reference to the case, cite specific major conflicts facing the protagonist, and foreshadow broader learning objectives.

**Exploration** (15-20 minutes): Use class discussion, "buzz groups," and board work to examine Jaeger and Walker's options, and how they should begin to tackle this complex problem.

**Diagnosis** (30-45 minutes): Introduce key concepts, frameworks, and tools to help participants pinpoint possible solutions to major conflicts in the case.

**Application** (15 minutes, optional): Ask participants to relate the concepts and frameworks to their own organizations' challenges.

**Wrap-Up and Takeaways** (15 minutes): Review the learning objectives and discuss insights most relevant to your organizations' challenges.

### Introduction (3-10 minutes)

Take a few minutes to describe the case and the basic thrust of the story while introducing four key challenges underlining Mayor Morrissey's approach to solving homelessness: policy, data, governance, and leadership. (See Appendix 1 for handout explaining the four challenges.) Some questions to start the discussion can include:

- *Why start with veterans? Why not go broader?*
- *Why did previous attempts to tackle homelessness fail? What data figured in those approaches?*

### Exploration (15-20 minutes)

Focus the discussion by leading the class through board work on the question: *How would you characterize Rockford's attempts to solve veterans' homelessness?*

Divide Board 1 into four parts without—yet—putting titles to them. (The four categories will be policy, data, governance, and leadership.) Write down student answers as they arrive in the relevant unmarked "box." A fifth box can be used as a "parking lot" for ideas that don't seem to fit in the other four. At some point in the discussion, add the titles to each of the four boxes, illustrating that solving a problem like homelessness is cross-boundary work.

**Diagnosis** (30-45 minutes)

Depending on the lesson plan, pursue one of the four tracks—policy, data, governance, or leadership—at this point. Diagnostic questions for the non-data tracks are offered below, but the remainder of this educator guide will focus on the data track.

Questions for the **Policy** Track

- *What is the difference between housing people (who have registered for available resources) and trying to end homelessness? Is this an accurate description of Mayor Morrissey's project?*
- Subjects to cover: If Housing First was adopted, what assumptions must have been true? What mechanisms would have ended homelessness in Rockford?

Question for the **Governance** Track

- *Could the mayor (i.e., the city Rockford) have solved this problem alone?*
- Subjects to cover: Most necessary services come from non-city providers. Jaeger and Walker are just two employees. Many resources—including databases—are in the hands of the regional Continuum of Care. The VA is always a major player in veterans' affairs.

Questions for the **Leadership** Track

- *What political capital did Mayor Morrissey expend to make progress on his homelessness goals? When did he do so, and what risks did he face?*
- Subjects to cover: The White House Mayors' Challenge to End Homelessness; empowering staff to present at monthly Rockstat meetings; devoting part of his State of the City address to the issue.

Having assessed how the data needs of Rockford's approach to solving homelessness intersect with various policy, governance, and leadership requirements, guide the class through the data considerations that would have helped Rockford human services staff transform their understanding of the problem and improve their efforts to ameliorate it.

Using [Board 2](#) for answers, ask students: *What data would you have wanted?*

Share Rockford's disidentified spreadsheet (see Appendix 2) and form breakout groups for students to review and analyze the rows and columns Rockford developed to track the problem and their response. Ask the groups: *What surprised you about the spreadsheet? How would you have improved it? What is missing, and why would you include it?*

(Another possibility for the breakout groups is to create pairings, so that the students are analyzing the spreadsheet from different points of view, e.g., an "analyst" versus a "manager.")

After students return to the main session, write down their answers on [Board 3](#). You may follow up with a discussion around: *How often would you need to have data updated? What are pros and cons of more (or less) detail?*

More advanced data students can be given actual tables or data to work with in a quantitative or statistical exercise. See Appendix 3, Veterans Charts from Rockford "Master CES for Partners" from September 2020.

**Application** (15 minutes, optional)

Ask students to identify a data problem in their own work and consider how an initial, simple spreadsheet could be used to start analyzing the issue. *What columns and rows would you create? How will you decide what data to collect?* (One consideration: if there is no way to act on the data entry, it might not be worthwhile to collect it.)

*For the data problem you have identified, what policy, governance, or leadership challenges come into play?* (See Appendix 1 handout for reminders on what these three categories encompass.)

**Wrap-Up and Takeaways** (15 minutes)

Two short videos can be shown. Both are from Rockford's consultant-partner mentioned in the case study, Built for Zero (part of Community Solutions), and feature Jaeger and Walker; each one is nearly three minutes:

"How this Community Ended Homelessness"

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Aqvhm3waj18&ab\\_channel=BuiltforZero](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Aqvhm3waj18&ab_channel=BuiltforZero)

"What it Takes to End Homelessness"

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8fgylZU1hnM&ab\\_channel=BuiltforZero](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8fgylZU1hnM&ab_channel=BuiltforZero)

Other data takeaways:

- Understanding the problem you are trying to solve will help identify the data you need.
- You do not need a database for information you cannot act on. A lot of time can be lost pursuing technical or IT standards (e.g., "We need the cloud, integrated databases."), especially if these are your first steps.
- The best data is centered on the individual(s), not the government program.
- Data work is not just about analytics, but also outreach. (The analyst and outreach worker in the case relied on each other's input to move the work forward.)

## Appendices

### Appendix 1 Handout

#### FOUR CHALLENGES FACING ROCKFORD MAYOR MORRISSEY

- **Policy** (the programs, incentives, regulations, supports, and services to help reduce homelessness and increase well-being rooted in a more or less explicit theory of change)
- **Data** (the technology, data, analytic capabilities, and processes that help governments learn, improve, decide, predict, allocate, evaluate, etc.)
- **Governance** (the jurisdictional challenges of coordination and collaboration between various sectors and levels of government)
- **Leadership** (the ability to convene, coordinate, motivate and hold people and organizations accountable for contributing to a common purpose)

## Appendix 2 Veterans (Disidentified) on Rockford BNL, September 2020

<b>Name</b>	XXXX	XXXX	XXXX	XXXX	XXXX
<b>Date identified</b>	1/11/2019	1/11/19	7/5/2019	7/31/2019	9/16/20
<b>Verified Homeless status?</b>	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
<b>Homeless Situation at Identification</b>	Friends/Family	Friends/Family	Streets	Shelter	Place not meant for human habitation
<b>Days on List</b>	616	616	441	415	2
<b>List Status at time of check-in (TH=Transitional Housing)</b>	Active-TH	Active-TH	Active-TH	Active-TH	Active-Unsheltered
<b>Date Active list updated</b>	8/26/2019	5/3/2019	7/10/2019	9/19/2019	
<b>Specific location if unsheltered</b>					Davis park-2003 Red Chevy Blazer
<b>This week's obstacle to housing (system, not client)</b>	TH	TH	Obtaining VASH	TH	
<b>Next Step</b>	Using VASH to move-looking for unit		Looking for housing--WCHA has VASH vouchers avail		apt with CAM 9/22
<b>By when?</b>	11/1/2020		9/1/2020		
<b>By Whom (Staff initials)</b>	GPD		GPD		
<b>Target Permanent Housing (PH) move in date</b>	11/1/2020	12/31/2020	9/1/2020		
<b>Date of PH</b>					
<b>PH Destination at exit</b>					
<b>Monthly Income</b>	\$3,100	\$0	\$771	\$0	\$1,500
<b>Race</b>	White	African American	White	White	White
<b>Ethnicity</b>	Non-Hispanic	Non-Hispanic	Non-Hispanic	Non-Hispanic	Non-Hispanic
<b>Disability?</b>	Yes-MH	Yes-MH	Yes-MH	No	Yes-MH+
<b>Household Size</b>	1	1	1	1	1
<b>Household Composition</b>	Single	Single	Single	Single	Single
<b>Number of Bedrooms Needed</b>	1	1	1	1	1
<b>Returns to Homelessness</b>	0	0	0	0	1

Source: Jennifer Jaeger, Rockford Department of Human Services

**Appendix 3** Veterans Charts from Rockford "Master CES for Partners" spreadsheet September 18, 2020

<b>(PH=Permanent Housing)</b>									
QUARTER	# START OF QUARTER	INFLOW	RETURNS TO HOMELESSNESS	EXITS PH	NULL EXITS NON PH	NEGATIVE EXITS NON PH	# END OF MONTH/ QTR	DAYS TO EXIT	DAYS TO PH
Sept 2020	4						4		
Aug 2020	5	1	0	2	0	0	4	18	18
July 2020	4	3	0	2	0	0	5	13.5	13.5
Q2 2020	7	0	0	3	0	0	4	95	95
Q1 2020	5	6	0	3	1	0	7	16.75	16
Q4 2019	5	7	0	7	0	0	5	30.57	30.57
Q3 2019	6	9	0	6	4	0	5	76.8	43.83
Q2 2019	7	6	0	6	1	0	6	48.14	36.33
Q1 2019	7	10	0	7	2	1	7	109	121.14
Q4 2018	3	5	0	1	0	0	7	17	17
Q3 2018	1	2	0	0	0	0	3	0	0
Q2 2018	0	1	0	0	0	0	1	0	0
				37	8	1			
Q2 2018	1							Q2 2018	0
Q3 2018	2							Q3 2018	0
Q4 2018	5							Q4 2018	17
Q1 2019	10							Q1 2019	121.14
Q2 2019	6							Q2 2019	36.33
Q3 2019	9							Q3 2019	43.83
Q4 2019	7							Q4 2019	30.57
Q1 2020	6							Q1 2020	16
Q2 2020	0							Q2 2020	95
POSITIVE EXITS	37								
NULL EXITS	8								
NEGATIVE EXITS	1								
<b>INFLOW 2020 Population Comparisons</b>									
	<b>Q1</b>	<b>Q2</b>	<b>Q3</b>						
<b>Veterans</b>	6	0	4						
Chronic	0	2	2						
Youth	15	15	27						
Families	21	27	33						
Singles	127	133	100						
	<b>Veterans</b>	Chronic	Youth	Families	Singles				
<b>Q1</b>	6	0	15	21	127				
<b>Q2</b>	0	2	15	27	133				
<b>Q3</b>	4	2	27	33	100				





