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Executive Summary

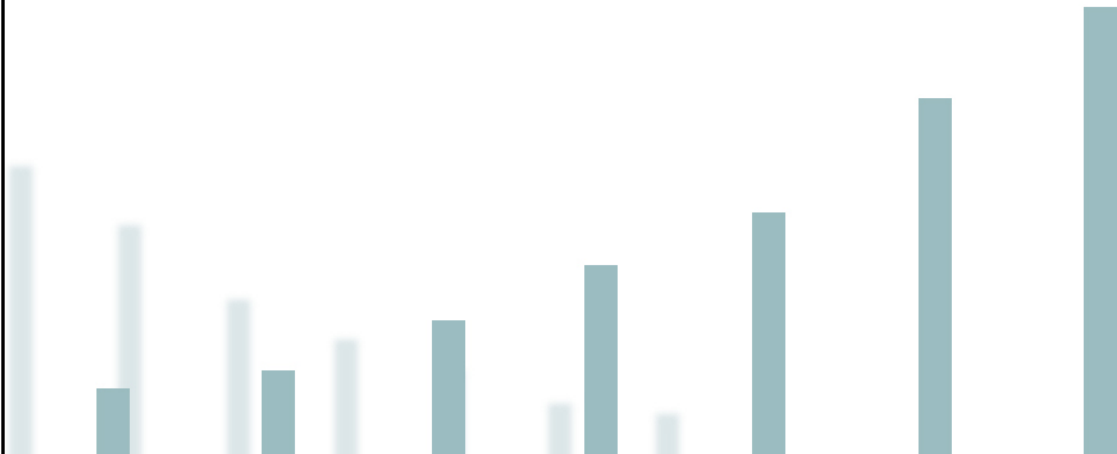
Houston's Kids

**Collaborating Across Sectors
in Times of Crisis and Beyond**

Hurricane Katrina was the catalyst for the formation of a group of first-time, cross-sector partnerships in Houston, Texas, focused on meeting the needs of displaced and disadvantaged children. The collaboration's ongoing success suggests long-term potential—for this group in Houston and also for other partnerships.

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This report was prepared by Kristin Brennan and Alan Tuck of The Bridgespan Group, a nonprofit, 501(c)(3) organization applying leading-edge management strategies, tools and talent to help other nonprofits and foundations achieve greater social impact.

The contributors to this report include: the partners of the Houston's Kids collaboration and the children and youth who participated in the Houston's Kids programs, surveys and focus groups; the partners of the America's Promise Alliance, which have contributed time, leadership and funding to Houston's Kids; The Atlantic Philanthropies, which has contributed guidance and funding for the individual agencies delivering services to displaced children and youth, as well as guidance and funding for the Alliance's work with Houston's Kids, including this report; and the Bridgespan Group, which provided strategic assistance to the Alliance in its work with Houston's Kids and authored the report.

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For more information about Houston's Kids, and for additional copies of this report, please visit www.bridgespan.org, www.americaspromise.org, www.atlanticphilanthropies.org, or contact the America's Promise Alliance at: 1-800-365-0153.

In August and September 2005, some 30,000 disadvantaged children, along with their families, arrived in Houston, Texas, driven from their homes by Hurricanes Katrina and Rita. Responding to the immediate needs of these children and their families, local agencies formed unprecedented partnerships to provide aid and support.

A year and a half later, those partnerships, supported by the America's Promise Alliance, have lasted long past the crisis that spawned them. And today, the collaboration that was created out of dire necessity has become a powerful model in Houston's youth services landscape and beyond.

Houston's Kids, as it is called, links and integrates the efforts of the Joint City/County Commission on Children, the United Way of the Texas Gulf Coast, the YMCA of Greater Houston, Communities In Schools Houston, Inc., the Alief Independent School District, and the Children's Museum of Houston. Together these core partners, along with other organizations that have joined their efforts, provide comprehensive support to disadvantaged children and youth displaced by the hurricanes, as well as to those living in Houston before the hurricanes.

Houston's Kids' offerings include after-school educational and recreational activities linked to in-school work; transportation to and from the programs; field trips; service learning opportunities; internships and part-time jobs; and connections to an array of services for children and their families, including mentoring, and vision and dental health services.

Initially, the work of Houston's Kids was reactive and responsive. Today it is proactive: The collaborative is expanding the depth and scope of its services, as well as refining the offerings it already provides. It is also carefully managed, with ongoing facilitation, a regular meeting structure, and formal evaluation measures to track children served, outcomes, and overall performance against goals. And, importantly, it is successful. Ninety-eight percent of children and youth who participated in the first summer of Houston's Kids programming report feeling "safer now than I used to," and 89% report feeling better prepared for school. Houston's Kids represents a new, inspiring and effective approach to helping children and youth in the Houston area.

Equally important, the collaborative suggests a framework for organizations in other cities seeking ways to expand the depth and scope of their offerings to children and youth within the constraints of limited budgets, space and time. The lessons from Houston's Kids are already being shared and applied by communities in Louisiana and Mississippi striving to meet the needs of children and youth affected by Katrina and Rita. But in other areas of the country not affected by a monumental crisis, there are still children and youth whose needs are great. Where there are such needs, there is potential for organizations to join together to create a social safety net and provide services that are more than the sum of their parts.

This report was written to share insights and lessons about how organizations and agencies within a community can work together to meet the needs of our children and youth. A chronicle tracking the development and evolution of Houston's Kids is, by itself, an amazing story. Nonprofit organizations, government agencies and offices, and other groups went beyond their formal boundaries, overcame their bureaucracies, and established common ground and uncommon levels of communication and cooperation to fill gaps in services for children and youth. By themselves, they could not keep up with the sudden surge in need. Together, they did, and do.

But the implications are even greater for similar efforts in other cities, and for unprecedented collaboration among service providers at local and national levels. Absent crisis-level pressure, the local partners in Houston continue to find opportunities to collaborate outside of the context that brought them together. One small example: When there is unused space at a YMCA facility, staff members now look for opportunities to invite other service-providers to make use of that space. Organizations are participating in one another's trainings and finding ways to create joint services in locations across the greater Houston area. There has been a fundamental shift in mindset within all of these organizations regarding how they fulfill their aspirations and work with one another to support children and youth.

The partners in Houston's Kids recognize the huge potential of their collaboration. As one commented, "The organizations involved are now more willing to consider opportunities, outside of the project, for children and youth. Now that we have

developed the relationships, natural linkages are coming together, and it will be easier to make a phone call and link up our organizations in new ways.”

Another said, “I feel really privileged to be able to help with this program. Houston’s Kids is the kind of project that happens once in a career where organizations come together for a common purpose in a productive and long-term way. The difference with this project is that the organizations seem eager to continue the partnership regardless of the hurricane evacuee aspect. There is real interest in finding ways to benefit children in the Alief area of Houston without regard for job titles, money, or recognition. It’s truly amazing and is a fresh way of working in community outreach.”

The following case study demonstrates what is possible when individuals and organizations come together in unprecedented ways. The sidebar entitled “Launching a Successful Collaboration” offers take-away lessons that may help other organizations develop similar initiatives. The Houston’s Kids story also poses this question to all of us: What if we could all act every day with the same urgency, efficiency and teamwork displayed by the partners of Houston’s Kids when they were faced with this unprecedented need?

Challenge

- Houston faces an extraordinary need when, virtually overnight, more than 30,000 young people relocate there as a result of Hurricane Katrina.
- Organizations and local government offices and agencies respond to the immediate crisis, but it quickly becomes clear that longer-term solutions are needed, as thousands of displaced families settle in Houston, overwhelming the existing community services.

Response

- Leaders forge an unprecedented public/private community partnership to confront the crisis. The initial core group includes the Joint City/County Commission on Children, the United Way of the Texas Gulf Coast, the YMCA of Greater Houston, Communities In Schools Houston, Inc., the Alief Independent School District, and the Children's Museum of Houston. Supported by the America's Promise Alliance, these partners provide comprehensive academic and health supports to students in the Alief area of Houston.

Results

- Ninety-eight percent of children and youth feeling "safer than I used to."
- Eighty-nine percent of children and youth feeling better prepared for school.
- One hundred percent of core partners report greater collaboration in assisting children and youth.
- "It's truly amazing and is a fresh way of working in community outreach." —Partner, Houston's Kids.

Implications

- Applicability to cities across the U.S., which, faced with steep challenges, seek to leverage public/private partnerships to provide greater supports for local children and youth.
- Houston's response also acts as a roadmap showing how national organizations can spark change and work together effectively in support of local initiatives. (Specific operating insights can be found on pages 33 and 34.)