



**Evaluation of the Strong
Cities, Strong
Communities (SC2)
Teams Pilot**

**Building a More
Responsive Federal
Workforce: Lessons from
the SC2 Pilot**

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1. Introduction

In 2011, the U.S. federal government launched the *Strong Cities, Strong Communities Initiative*, a new model of federal-local collaboration designed to (i) improve how the federal government invests in cities, (ii) offer technical assistance to support local priorities, and (iii) help to coordinate funds at the local, state, and federal level.¹ A core component of this initiative is the *SC2 Team Pilot*, which deployed interagency groups of federal employees—SC2 Teams—to six economically distressed cities: Chester, PA; Cleveland, OH; Detroit, MI; Fresno, CA; Memphis, TN; and New Orleans, LA.² SC2 teams were comprised of a team lead and team members, the exact number of which varied by site. SC2 teams were given a mandate to partner with local leaders and provide them direct support, tailoring technical assistance and planning resources to focus on issues cities perceive as vital to their economic development. The first round of SC2 teams (referred to as the SC2 pilot) began implementation in September 2011 and finished in September 2013.³

Abt Associates, in partnership with Mt. Auburn Associates, conducted an evaluation of the first 18 months of the SC2 pilot, focusing on implementation, accomplishments, and lessons to enhance future efforts. To complement the main evaluation the study produced two select topic papers to explore some findings in more detail.

This select topic paper explores promising practices from the SC2 pilot experience for building a federal workforce that is more effective in supporting economic development in distressed cities. These practices include:

- Active Problem Solving with City Stakeholders
- Gathering Local Input to Inform Federal Policies
- Interagency Collaboration around Real, Time-Sensitive Local Problems

The study team identified these practices during interviews with SC2 members. We asked SC2 members to discuss what they learned from their pilot experience and how those insights changed the way they were approaching their post-pilot jobs. This paper highlights specific changes mentioned by SC2 members, describing core elements of the SC2 model that brought about the new practices. The paper ends with a section that discusses how a broader cohort of federal employees, beyond past and present SC2 members, might be encouraged to adopt the identified practices.

¹ White House Council on Strong Cities, Strong Communities, *Strong Cities, Strong Communities First Annual Report*, April 2013, pp. 6.

² In October 2012, after the contract for this evaluation was executed, Youngstown, OH also became a pilot site. A second round of SC2 teams will be deployed in 2014.

³ In addition to the SC2 teams, SC2 includes three additional components: *The Fellowship Program*, in which mid-career professionals are selected to work as fellows in targeted communities; the *Economic Visioning Challenge*, a national grant competition to enable cities to implement innovative economic development strategies; and the *National Resource Network*, a single portal for accessing technical experts available to cities across the country. This evaluation only focuses on the SC2 team component of SC2.

1.1 Methodology

Staff from the SC2 Council selected the topic for this paper during the summer of 2013. At that point, most of the study's data collection had been completed. As a result, the research team reviewed the data available and considered what might be useful for analysis. In the end, three data sources were relied upon:

- First, the research team drew upon **interviews** completed by the evaluation team in March and April 2013. These interviews were with SC2 team leads, team members, and city stakeholders, including mayors, city department heads, and a small number of stakeholders outside the city government. Most of these interviews were conducted during site visits to the six pilot cities.
- The second data source was the SC2 Council's **web survey** of team members, conducted in September 2012.⁴ This survey data brought in a broad array of perspectives from pilot participants and included the experiences of individuals we were not able to interview directly.
- The third data source was a second set of interviews conducted in the fall 2013. Due to the later timing of this round of interviews, we were able to ask specific questions targeted for this paper. During this round of interviews, we spoke with the SC2 team leads again, and we also talked with staff from the SC2 Council (which oversees the pilot), agency points of contact from participating federal Departments (also known as agency POCs), and a sample of team members located in Washington, DC.

In total, we interviewed just under half of the team members who participated in the first 18 months of the pilot.⁵

In analyzing these data sources, we first identified the most relevant parts of the interviews and survey, focusing on questions that related to how the SC2 pilot affected team members' work after the pilot. Exhibit 1 shows the key questions of interest for this paper and which data sources were available to answer them.

⁴ Eighty-one team members completed some portion of the survey. The study team does not know how many people were sent the survey, and thus cannot calculate the formal survey response. Between September 2011 and March 2013, 138 federal employees were assigned to a SC2 team at some level.

⁵ We interviewed a total of 62 team members. The total count of 138 federal employees is derived from combining three team member rosters provided to Abt Associates in September 2011, January 2012, and August 2013 (updated in September 2013).

Exhibit 1. Questions Identified as Relevant to Strengthening the Federal Workforce

Question	Source
Having been involved in the SC2 pilot, do you approach your post-pilot work with a different perspective than before? If so, how?	Interviews with SC2 team leads and team members
Have you observed or heard that team members approach their non-pilot work differently as a result of their pilot participation? Please describe the changes you have observed, providing specific examples.	Interviews with agency POCs
Have you observed that participating in a SC2 team had more impact on some members than others? If so, what were the factors that affected how much staff took away from the experience?	Interviews with agency POCs
How do you think that you, as an individual, have benefitted from your involvement with the SC2 pilot?	SC2 team lead follow-up
If you are a part-time or advisory SC2 member or have finished your time as a team member, what lessons from your work on SC2 have you taken back to your home agency/program?	Web survey
Describe any new skill sets or program expertise you have acquired as a result of your work on SC2.	Web survey
Has SC2 deployment impacted your career plans or career development goals? If so, how?	Web survey
Did your experience as a team member provide you with any insights that you have brought back to your agency about how to better support cities like the SC2 pilot cities?	Interviews with SC2 team leads and team members

1.2 Data Limitations

Study data are limited in several ways. First, the data collected were limited to the first 18 months of the pilot implementation per the requirements of the evaluation; as such, at least 6 months of the implementation period were not explored. Second, the study team was only able to talk to a subset of city stakeholders, SC2 leadership, and team members engaged in the pilot.⁶ Finally, the data we analyzed for each section came from a different subset of interviews and web responses. The findings presented from those sources may not have been reported by every team member who responded.

2. Background on the SC2 Pilot

This section provides an overview of the SC2 pilot including member background, the structure of the pilot, and member activities. This information is important as context for understanding what team members learned from their experiences, the way their work practices changed, and the extent to which these practices might be adopted by other federal employees.

Across the six cities, team members had a wide range of experience working for the federal government. According to the web survey, roughly equal numbers of team members were early career (0–4 years of experience), mid-career (5–14 years), and career (15 years or more) federal employees. These members represented 17 different federal agencies. There was wide variation in the number of

⁶ The scope of the evaluation did not call for discussions with all stakeholders in the pilot; rather, it allowed for a purposive sample to be selected for discussions to help answer the evaluation’s research questions.

staff members each department contributed, with several departments standing out as major contributors. These departments were the Departments of Housing and Urban Development, Health and Human Services, Transportation, and Commerce, and the Environmental Protection Agency.

Each SC2 team was comprised of a team lead and team members. These individuals contributed different amounts of time to SC2 team activities. In general, team members were classified as full-time, part-time, or advisory members. Full-time members were able to set aside their pre-pilot job responsibilities and focus nearly exclusively on being a team member in a particular city. All but one of the SC2 team leads were full-time members. Part-time members typically dedicated a portion of their time to SC2 team activities, while maintaining a portion of their existing workload. Advisory members did not have a dedicated time commitment to the pilot, but rather served as on-call support for the engagement, providing short-term, narrowly tailored assistance. Overall, 63 percent of team members were part-time, 12 percent were full-time, and 25 percent were advisory.⁷

During the pilot, team members worked from one of three locations:

- **On site, at or near city hall.** In five of the six pilot cities, a small number of team members, 14 members in total, relocated to the city. The on-site members typically worked full-time on SC2 team activities operated from the mayor's office or within a city department.
- **Remote, working in a regional or field office.**⁸ The percentage of team members located in federal regional or field offices varied by site. Most of these team members had worked in these offices before their pilot participation. They generally worked part-time on SC2 team activities.
- **Remote, working at Department headquarters in the Washington, DC area.** The percentage of team members located in department headquarters varied from site to site. Most Washington, DC-based team members worked on SC2 part-time or in an advisory role.

Team members began working with their respective cities in September 2011. In the early stages of the implementation, SC2 teams worked with city partners to identify priority areas for SC2 team attention and developed work plans to guide the implementation. Throughout the engagement, SC2 teams focused their work on five activity areas in keeping with the design and goals of the pilot:

- **Providing responsive, transactional assistance to address specific problems,** such as repurposing federal grant funds to be put to better use in a city.
- **Building relationships between local stakeholders and state and federal employees,** such as connecting local, state, and federal stakeholders to better coordinate planning for significant transportation projects.

⁷ Percentages were calculated using three team member rosters provided to Abt Associates in September 2011, January 2012, and August 2013 (updated in September 2013). Not included in the denominator of these percentages are 10 members whose data were missing or ambiguous, as well as the Presidential Management Fellows and German Marshall Foundation SC2 Fellows.

⁸ The category "regional or field office staff" is an aggregation of all federal employees not on site and not based in Department headquarters.

- **Brokering local or regional partnerships**, such as the creation of a working group to explore a cluster strategy for economic growth.
- **Temporary addition of technical capacity**, such as assisting understaffed city departments with time-sensitive tasks.
- **Program and plan development**, such as the development of a neighborhood revitalization strategy.

While most activities had a primary focus that fit one of these five categories, many activities spanned more than one category.

3. New Work Practices as a Result of Pilot Experience

SC2 teams are a unique way for the federal government to engage with local communities. As team members, federal employees are committed to specific places and encouraged to dig deep into specific local problems, looking for workable strategies and solutions. This focus provides federal staff with the opportunity to work with communities over a period of time. The long-term commitment gives federal employees time to listen; time to build relationships with community members, other agencies, and people within their own agencies; and time to test ideas and refine problem-solving strategies. This in-depth focus allows federal staff to see how local problems and opportunities are interrelated. It also allows them to step out of the confines of their regular jobs and explore how they might think more creatively about the programs and policies they create and administer.

These characteristics of the SC2 model led to three promising practices that can contribute to building a federal workforce more responsive to and effective at addressing community problems:

- Active Problem Solving with City Stakeholders
- Gathering Local Input to Inform Federal Policies
- Interagency Collaboration around Real, Time-Sensitive Local Problems

The following sections describe these practices. Each section begins with a brief discussion of the insights and skills federal employees gained during the pilot. It then discusses how team members used these skills in practice. In the last section, we discuss how the SC2 Council and agency leadership might facilitate other federal employees adopting the practices.

3.1 Active Problem Solving with City Stakeholders

The SC2 experience provided team members with a deeper understanding of the needs, priorities, and concerns of city government. SC2 teams also observed the effects of city governments' staffing challenges, with staff being responsible for very large amounts of work. This staffing burden coupled with cities' general lack of knowledge about federal programs hindered their ability to take advantage of federal resources.

Team members gained an appreciation for how local officials must juggle a wide range of responsibilities and compliance with different federal program requirements. They also became aware of how cities can feel disconnected from the federal government and this can make it difficult for cities to figure out what questions they should be asking about federal resources and how to go access

those resources. Team members came to understand that it is unrealistic to expect city government officials to be aware of all of the very specific requirements and opportunities of each federal program.

With this new appreciation of city challenges and perspectives, team members recalibrated their expectations of what cities might be able to achieve and the federal support they might need to achieve it. They also saw an opportunity to provide city officials with direct assistance on how to interpret federal program guidelines and identify federal grant opportunities.

As an example, one team member described how her interactions with cities changed after participating in the pilot. For example, when city officials come to her asking, “Can we do activities X or Y with this particular type of federal funding?” she no longer automatically answers “no” if the activities proposed are not permitted under that funding program. Instead, she begins a dialogue with the city officials to understand more broadly what they are trying to achieve with the proposed activities. She then works with them to figure out how they might achieve their objectives in other ways that are a better fit with federal funding sources. She now focuses on helping city staff identify strategies to reach the outcome they are trying to achieve, strategies which often look nothing like those envisioned originally by the city.

Promising Practice: Actively listen to cities’ goals and objectives to help them identify the most efficient and effective path forward.

Team members report that this type of specific, comprehensive assistance helps cities generate new strategies for achieving community development goals and builds capacity in city government, as well as facilitating more access to federal resources. “Knowledge is power,” one team member from New Orleans explained. This individual found that helping cities is sometimes as easy as getting the message out that there are specific ways the federal government can help them.

3.2 Gathering Local Input to Inform Federal Policies

Cities implement federal programs based on their understanding of program requirements and on local constraints. This often means that programs are implemented in ways that are considerably different from what was originally envisioned. Team members saw firsthand the ways that city officials navigate the complexity of federal programs and policies and realized that federal policy makers might benefit from understanding how community stakeholders experience federal program and policies. For example, if policy-makers could understand early on the challenges cities might face with implementation or the ways cities think they would need to adapt a program model to successfully implement it locally, they might be able to make more intentional decisions about these design elements from the start. This would ensure greater program consistency across cities and better support the local burden of program implementation. Team members emerged from the pilot with a vision for using local input to better align local implementation of federally-funded programs with what the programs were designed to achieve.

Promising Practice: Ask local community stakeholders to discuss (i) their experiences with existing federal policies and programs, and (ii) their thoughts on new program ideas. Refine policies, programs, and ideas based on their input.

Team members from one participating agency have taken this learning to heart and worked to create feedback loops with staff representatives from the SC2 pilot communities in which they worked.

They are using these relationships to gather city input on how particular policies are affecting people on the ground in the cities. Historically, the agency has engaged with stakeholders at the state level. By gathering feedback from the local level as well, the agency is able to negotiate compromises between Federal direction, what a State may want to do, and what cities need to be doing.

3.3 Interagency Collaboration around Real, Time-Sensitive Local Problems

During the SC2 pilot, team members enhanced their ability to collaborate within and across federal agencies and departments. They learned new ways to share knowledge, how to better align programs across agencies so that cities can pool resources and move projects forward, and how to manage collaborative projects such that everyone remains focused, increasing time and cost efficiency. Federal employees experienced first-hand the challenges of collaboration as well as how much could be accomplished when agencies pooled their energies and worked to find synergies in policies and programs.

These new insights about the value of collaboration and how to collaborate effectively were possible because the SC2 pilots were focused on real problems in specific communities. By tackling real world issues, team members gained a deeper understanding of other federal agencies' programs - what programs exist, how funds can and cannot be used, and how the programs intersect with their own agencies' work. Team members also were able to better conceptualize how agencies' approached their missions by observing implementation in the context of community work. As one team member put it, her experience working on the pilot showed her how much her agency's mission had in common with the missions of other federal agencies. This in turn gave her a path toward more effective collaboration, as she was able to see how she and her colleagues could coordinate better with colleagues in other agencies

In two of the pilot cities, key members of the SC2 teams decided to build upon their successes during the SC2 pilot by continuing their commitment to the inter-agency collaborative model. These members are actively pursuing new opportunities to work together in other communities. For

Promising Practice: Foster effective interagency collaboration by focusing on specific, real-time community problems.

example, members of the Fresno SC2 team are looking for other communities where their agencies are already working so they can use existing resources to do work differently as they have done in Fresno. These team members believe that they can

use existing resources more effectively by collaborating. Through their efforts, they hope to achieve deeper results, similar to what they achieved in Fresno.

4. Applying These Practices Beyond SC2 Team Members

While most team members interviewed for the evaluation described experiencing the principles mentioned above – deeper understanding of local challenges, greater appreciation for the skills and insights that city officials have to offer, and an overall belief that cross-agency collaboration is possible and powerful when implemented effectively – only a few team members could point to specific changes they had made to the way they do their non-pilot work as a result of their pilot participation. However, the study time frame, which focused primarily on the first 18 months of the engagement, may have limited the ability to track team members' reintegration back into their full-time federal work.

Nevertheless, there is a clear opportunity to disseminate these promising practices to other team members so that they can consider the practices' usefulness to their work. Additionally, there may be ways to foster the practices among non-team member federal staff. The following section presents possibilities for fostering these practices. The ideas are loosely grouped by promising practice, though there are some clear overlaps between practices.

4.1 Provide local exposure when possible, particularly for those answering cities' questions.

On-the-ground experience in city government was a unique opportunity that not all federal employees have. However, there may be ways to think creatively about providing federal staff with exposure to local issues. First and foremost, federal employees tasked with interfacing with local communities, either through answering questions or providing technical assistance, should be the focus of these efforts. Many agencies have such a group and starting with these individuals will likely achieve the greatest benefit for local communities and the federal programs. When employees are located in regional offices, there will be great potential to create these opportunities. For example, an agency might choose to partner with cities to create abbreviated SC2 experiences. Individual staff members could be assigned periodically to work intensively with a particular city for an extended period of time (e.g., week, month, or quarter) to problem solve. The placements would provide value to the city and build or reconnect the employee to the reality of local implementation. It would be important to design the program in such a way that the federal employees had to step outside of their normal role while working with the city. This might be done by placing staff in cities they haven't worked before (or for some time) or by focusing on a city's list of concerns rather than the agency's agenda. It might also be possible through the use of interagency personal agreements, which would allow federal employees to serve on details to state and local governments.

4.2 Support a culture where cities' experiences and insights are valued.

It is unclear if agencies can establish formal and meaningful mechanisms for cities to provide input on their programs and policies. This will likely depend on the agency's structure, how they have interacted with city governments in the past, and the extent to which the agency's policies have a direct effect on city operations. Either way, though, there is value in establishing a culture throughout the federal government that values cities' experience and insights. This was reflected during the pilot by cities indicating they appreciated and benefited from the SC2 Teams' customer service orientation.

Agencies should consider promoting a customer service mindset where appropriate. They could do this by expanding staff's opportunities to listen to cities in a variety of ways. One strategy might be to set up a series of webinars where city partners are asked to discuss topics of particular relevance to agency staff. Another idea might be to reward employees for soliciting and being responsive to community feedback in their daily work. Finally, agencies might examine their existing forums for community engagement and consider how they might be made more meaningful. A culture that values city experience would thoughtfully approach public comment periods with the intent to listen, figuring out how to elicit meaningful input and then incorporating it into policy or program revisions.

4.3 Look for ways to engage and solve problems locally across teams, agencies, and departments.

At a starting level, former team members can be encouraged to use their relationships with other team members to problem solve and find cross-agency solutions when needs arise. Beyond this, team members might be asked to share with their colleagues specific examples of how they successfully

collaborated with colleagues from other agencies during the SC2 pilot. They could particularly emphasize a vision for non-team member colleagues of what collaboration might look like and help non-SC2 colleagues believe that collaboration is feasible and valuable for the federal government, cities, and city residents. Agency leadership could also look for opportunities to encourage staff to partner in addressing specific community needs. Team members emphasized the opportunities in cities where multiple agencies are already making sizable investments. For example, agency leadership could consider work being done in and around designated Promise Zones, with Partnership for Sustainable Communities grantees, and in communities connected with major infrastructure investments such as high-speed rail. Agency leadership might also work to create professional development opportunities focused on grooming future leaders to be enterprise-wide, cross-agency, cross-sector problem-solvers.

5. Conclusion

Most team members interviewed or surveyed have changed the way they think about their work as a result of their experiences working with cities during the pilot. To varying degrees, they have acquired new skills, new awareness of the city context, and greater ability to collaborate and integrate programs across departments and stakeholders. These changes have resulted in some promising changes in the way team members are approaching their post-pilot work. These promising practices have the potential to affect the way staff across the federal government work with cities, helping federal staff become more attuned to the needs of the cities, listening to their goals, and valuing their perspective and experience. The practices also emphasize the importance of federal employees collaborating to address specific local problems in addition to engaging in broader interagency policy discussions.

To help expand these practices beyond a small number of team members, federal agencies might consider (i) providing on-the-ground experience to federal staff when possible, particularly to those staff whose role in the agency entails working directly with city government or stakeholders, (ii) fostering a culture where cities' experiences and insights are valued, and (iii) looking for ways to engage and solve problems locally across federal teams, agencies, and departments.