

# HOUSTON ENDOWMENT



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## **Addressing Complex Social Issues through Collaboration: Reasons for Hope in Greater Houston**

We are facing a challenging time in our nation's history: deepening economic divides, growing distrust in institutions, a contentious political environment. Many in our country are concerned about America's future. We are unsure how we will make good on the promise of America for the generations that follow ours.

As a private foundation, Houston Endowment has had the privilege of serving greater Houston for almost eighty years. Our founders, Jesse H. and Mary Gibbs Jones, saw, lived and confronted the toughest social issues of their time. Like the Joneses, we are committed to working closely with others to address the important issues for our region today, including those closely associated with the growing divides in our country: families without stable housing or reliable access to basic services; disparities in academic achievement and rates of incarceration; and individuals unable to access quality health care. While these issues may seem remote to some, they affect us all by eroding the stability of our community and threatening the prosperity of our region.

These challenges are deep-rooted and complex. They cannot be solved by any one organization alone. To address these multi-faceted social issues, we must create opportunities to collaborate across sectors. Working together, we can build a more just, equitable and inclusive community – one where all our children can grow up to be confident, healthy and tolerant adults.

If any place in America can succeed in achieving this vision, it's greater Houston. Our public and private leaders recognize that problems get solved at the community level, by organizations and individuals doing the gritty work necessary to build effective and efficient systems that serve our residents and strengthen our region.

In 2011, we had one of the highest homeless populations in the country: on any given night, more than 8,500 people were without a permanent place to call home. Through the work of The Way Home, a public-private partnership which helps coordinate the work of over 100 different organizations involved in the homeless continuum of care, Houston has decreased chronic homelessness by more than 75% and effectively ended veterans' homelessness in only five years. Using a relatively small amount of private dollars to leverage public funding, The Way Home has effected lasting change by creating a durable, sustainable homeless response system.

Two years ago, greater Houston set its sights on disparities in educational achievement, with particular focus on a child's critical early years. According to 2015 Texas Education Agency data, only 29% of Houston-area third graders from economically disadvantaged backgrounds are reading at levels that put them on track for post-secondary success, compared to 56% of their peers from more affluent backgrounds. To address the challenges of a severely fragmented system, the Early Matters initiative brings together over 150 community leaders – a coalition of experts from education, healthcare and social services with business and philanthropic leaders – to ensure that all children enter school ready and able to learn and have access to high quality educational experiences. While Early Matters is not as far along in its development as The Way Home, six working groups are designing a range of strategies to ensure strong systems of support for all our children, both inside and outside the classroom. The coalition's shared goal: all Houston-area third graders will read on grade level by 2025.

More recently, public and private leaders in Harris County began working together more closely to support some of our most vulnerable residents: young people who are involved in both the child welfare and juvenile justice systems. Meaningful change will require deep collaboration between multiple county agencies and nonprofit organizations. Though the work is in its beginning stages, the leaders involved are demonstrating an extraordinary commitment to work together from different perspectives toward a shared vision of success. Based on the progress made by other collective efforts in our community, there is reason to be optimistic that this effort will yield positive changes for these youth.

Our community should feel proud of the leaders from all sectors who are persevering through the often tough work of alignment and collaboration to address complex social issues. Houston Endowment is committed to supporting and working alongside those leaders toward smart solutions that move us forward. We support these collaborative efforts and others like them, including work to improve access to quality health care and efforts to provide legal services to immigrants, because we recognize that building the kind of community where we all want to live takes deep levels of commitment and cooperation. We must all continue to seek opportunities to come together, listen to and learn from those whose perspectives may differ from our own, and work alongside each other toward a future where all can share in the region's prosperity.

Collaboration must be our rallying cry to ensure that greater Houston continues to be a growing, vibrant region where equity of opportunity is truly available to all.