

## Adopting A Fail-Forward & Action-Oriented Approach To Public Policy

**SPPA's 2023 Awards dinner, keynote speaker: Erin Valant, Area Manager in the Income, Employment & Homelessness Supports Division at the Region of Durham. MPPAL 2016**

You know, when I was thinking about what I wanted to share with all of you I kept getting stuck on wanting my words to be insightful and captivating and perfect. So much so that I couldn't get past writing this first sentence – which at that point was only 'hello and welcome to this evening's event'.

And the more I thought about it, the more I realized that those feelings that I was having were not unlike a lot of the feelings I think a lot of us have when it comes to developing and implementing public policy. Wanting the programs, policies and processes we develop and implement to be quote unquote perfect. Because in this field of work, you never really hear when things go right – but you certainly hear about it when things go wrong. And because of that, I think that it's easy to get stuck in a loop of not wanting to launch or move forward until something is 'perfect' because we're afraid of getting it wrong and the scrutiny that comes along with that. And that's important too – because more often than not the projects or policies that we're moving forward have very real impacts for people.

And this work is hard – now more than ever. The level of need in our communities, attention paid to public services and programs, online critics – have all seemed to increase over the last couple of years. But we also can't afford to wait for things to be 'perfect'. - - This is where adopting an action-oriented and fail forward approach comes in. We need to be able to continuously move forward despite the possibility of failure and to get more comfortable testing things, learning and improving instead of waiting around for the 'perfect' solution.

Now don't get me wrong - we certainly need to continue implementing quality assurance and use due diligence, but we equally need to embrace that failures are an opportunity to learn, to improve and to make continuous progress. Adopting an action oriented approach doesn't mean that we should be making impulsive decisions made on assumptions or path of least resistance. What it does mean is taking reasoned risks using information and data you have available to you at that time. Use it, fail forward and keep improving. There is no magic solution to the complex issues we're working on like ending chronic homelessness (which is the world I work in and am so passionate about). But there are continuous improvements we can make and learn from every day, every month and every year to continue getting better and reach the solutions we're seeking without that fear of needing to have the perfect policy at the outset.

To put this in context – I became the manager overseeing the homelessness portfolio just before the pandemic started. I was new to this field in general, let alone having any experience supporting a response to a global pandemic. I needed to implement a whole lot of things to support members of our community who were experiencing homelessness. Most things were things we'd never done before in our community – an isolation and recovery program, physical distancing requirements significantly reducing our shelter capacity, responding to most services being closed. We didn't have time to create a 'perfect' solution. Instead, we implemented what we could as quickly as we could – and then we continued to make things better. I think that's the biggest take away I have from those very stressful years – we just need to start somewhere.

I'll take a quick moment to talk specifically about our COVID-19 transitional housing program. At the time, being new in the position, I knew at least two things to be true. I knew that there were not enough shelter spaces available when we implemented physical distancing to support all of the people experiencing homelessness in our community. I also knew that emergency shelters in and of themselves do not solve homelessness. So - I knew I wanted to find an alternative that could provide people with safe places but

that would also work to actually end their homelessness – but - I didn't know what that could or should be.

So, instead of getting stuck trying to plan the perfect housing solution from start to finish – we made a conscious decision to use an action oriented and fail forward approach to this big problem. We started with a quick scan of available spaces and decided that a local camp space with living cabins and common space would be a good fit. Multiple cabins meant that we could use a cohort model for physical distancing and the common space would make it easy for meals and laundry, programming to provide meaningful daily activities. Was it perfect, not even close. We needed to get creative – we even had to figure out how to pave a road after a big storm washed out the pathways.

Six months later and what started small as an emergency shelter response led to more than a dozen partners coming together to provide dedicated onsite services and supports ranging from access to methadone to art therapy classes to landlord engagement. We were able to build out a full transitional housing model using this approach. It also resulted in a new Health, Homelessness & Housing Committee which intentionally brought together health and homelessness supports in our community for the first time on this scale.

The most important outcome from this process was that we were able to transition everyone into permanent housing when we wound the program down – which had been the goal to support an end to homelessness. I won't bore you with all the details, but this approach led to an actual scattered site head leasing housing model being implemented which is continuing successfully to this day. This is what having an action oriented, fail forward approach does – it allows you to get things done quicker, test interventions in real time and make continuous improvements that can result in big impact.

This approach also supports solution-focused decision making. We know that addressing the symptoms of homelessness doesn't actually end homelessness. What it does is create an environment where we're so busy addressing emergency symptoms that we divert all resources to the front end of the support system and away from proactive solutions. This can create a cycle where the problem will continue to grow, so more resources are needed to be diverted to supporting the symptoms and this then happens in perpetuity. By using an action-oriented approach – you are constantly testing things, understanding the impacts and making changes so that you stay nimble and are addressing the actual issues instead of just the symptoms.

This experience as a new manager in this field is how I really learned and embraced that progress can be better than perfection because it's an ongoing process – it's inherently action oriented. We started where we were, which was a global pandemic, used what we had, which was very limited resources and a significant lack of time to plan, and did what we could. We used the program as an opportunity to test new ideas in real time – and being able to try new things quickly helped to inspire even more ideas to try because we weren't focused on getting things perfect. We were focused on continuous quality improvement.

Fast forward a couple of years and we're still using the same process we adopted during that tumultuous time in the pandemic. And we're still very much in a crisis – an opioid crisis, an affordable housing crisis, a homelessness crisis, financial impacts from the pandemic, there is no shortage of pressing need across communities. It can be easy to get stuck when we try to focus on implementing a perfect solution to these really big, complex problems. But when we focus instead on progress and adopt an action oriented and fail forward approach to our careers in public policy and program development – we can avoid getting stuck.

Public policy isn't something that should be kept on a shelf to collect dust once it's been written – it should be reviewed and adapted, and it should keep getting better. I'll even be embracing this approach for this speech –

hopefully next time (if I ever have another opportunity like this) it will be more insightful and captivating and perfect like I had initially hoped!

Thank you so much for the opportunity to speak to all of you tonight.