

CROSS-SECTOR COLLABORATION BY DESIGN

A practical guide for governors
and private social sector leaders
to establish dedicated capacity for
public-private partnerships

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FREEDMAN
CONSULTING, LLC

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Cross-sector collaboration through public-private partnerships offers a powerful, “all hands on deck” approach that leverages the unique strengths, resources, and networks of the philanthropic, private, and public sectors. These partnerships create innovative, high-impact solutions that no sector could achieve alone, offering both immediate benefits and potential for long-term systems transformation.

For states – particularly governor’s offices – partnering with the private social sector (including philanthropies and corporations) helps leverage flexible capital and expertise toward priority programs and policies, maximizing the impact of public investments. Beyond funding, these partnerships allow governors to deepen their understanding of the challenges that local communities face, and to build trust with philanthropic and community-based organizations who serve and work directly with constituents. For the private social sector, direct partnership with state governments amplifies their strategic social impact goals, stretching their investments to enable greater impact while allowing innovative approaches to pressing challenges to be piloted and refined directly in partnership with state institutions that can help scale them.

Intentional and strategic cross-sector collaboration fosters relationships, coordination, and a nonpartisan, impact-driven approach to advance shared goals. Dedicated capacity for cross-sector partnerships in California, Maryland, Michigan, and North Carolina has enabled momentous impact. And while most governors are engaging in public-private partnerships in some form, states often lack the dedicated staff capacity and internal coordination to lead partnerships, missing out on an opportunity to have exponentially more impact by fully aligning the public and private social sectors.

Building a strong foundation for cross-sector collaboration takes careful planning, teamwork, and a commitment to lasting partnerships. The good news? There is no need to start from scratch.

This guide outlines four essential steps for governors to establish the capacity for public-private partnerships at the state level:



MAP

Landscape your state’s policy and social sector ecosystem



BUILD

Co-create a partnership model with public and private sector partners



RESOURCE

Secure funding to implement the partnership model



LAUNCH

Set the work in motion with an official launch of the partnership model

Before Diving In

To maintain clarity and transparency in this guide, we offer definitions to core terminology and concepts referred to throughout. This section also provides initial considerations for spearheading the development of dedicated partnership capacity.

DEFINITIONS:

Dedicated Partnership Capacity or Model (Partnership Capacity/Partnership Model):

A strategic and intentional structure with dedicated staff to advance collaboration between state government and the private social sector to achieve shared social impact goals through partnerships and co-investment. Ideally, this capacity includes a State Partnership Liaison and a system for ongoing engagement with key government and private social sector leaders.

Public-Private Partnerships (Partnerships):

Specific collaborative projects or initiatives involving shared investment from state government, philanthropy, and/or the private social sector to advance mutual priorities. Examples include:

- Philanthropic investment to help expand state programs.
 - Pooled funds that complement state resources.
 - Private dollars used to extend the reach of oversubscribed state programs.
-

Private Social Sector (Social Sector):

Refers to organizations, corporations, philanthropic foundations, or other non-governmental entities that have a strategic interest in leveraging their resources to drive positive impact for communities that need it most.

State Partnership Liaison (Liaison):

An individual or an office, either within or working closely with state government (ideally the governor's office), dedicated to fostering strategic collaboration with the private social sector. Their role is to create and align partnerships with the state's policy priorities for the benefit of constituents.

Who is Spearheading the Effort?

This guide is designed to help governors, state government, and private social sector leaders develop a dedicated partnership model and establish the capacity it requires. While any one of these sector leaders can spearhead the effort, there are a few considerations to keep in mind.

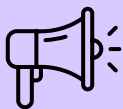
Considerations for Social Sector Leaders

Private social sector leaders, including those in institutional and corporate philanthropy, are well-positioned to demonstrate demand and advocate for a partnership model in their state.



Build a coalition of social sector partners.

Leverage member-based organizations, such as philanthropy-serving organizations (PSOs). Their reach and convening power enables them to easily organize private social sector leaders into a coalition that can advocate for a partnership liaison or broader partnership model.



Cultivate government champions early on.

Engage social sector leaders who have existing relationships with government. Where direct connections are unavailable, PSOs or similar entities/coalitions can serve as a collective voice for the social sector to engage state leaders effectively.



Make a compelling case for dedicated partnership capacity.

Emphasize the mutual benefits: the state gains capacity to advance key priorities, while public interest organizations help shape the implementation of critical programs. Sharing impact from other states, such as through the [2023 California Social Impact Report](#), the [North Carolina Office of Strategic Partnerships Accomplishments and Impact Report](#), or the [2023 Council of Michigan Foundations Annual Report](#), may be useful in articulating the benefits of increasing capacity for partnerships.

Considerations for Governors and State Leaders

State leaders are uniquely advantaged in advocating for a dedicated partnership model because they operate within government decision-making processes.



Advocate from within.

State leaders can leverage their role within state government to champion the designation of partnership liaison directly with senior decision-makers. Through that process, they can build state champions and buy-in across various levels of government.



Propose public investment to support dedicated partnership capacity.

In some cases, state leaders may have the ability to propose budget items to fund a partnership model, which can significantly speed up the process of establishing it and minimize the need for external advocacy.



Build intentional relationships with social sector leaders early.

An outside coalition of champions is critical to demonstrating the need and demand for dedicated partnership capacity that can back up any internal proposals. Aim to reach a broad set of social sector partners early on in the model development process.

STEP 1:

MAP

Landscape your state's policy and social sector ecosystem



While there are best practices from existing efforts to keep in mind, every state's unique dynamics require a tailored structure for partnership capacity. The mapping process below doesn't require starting from scratch – many insights can be gained simply by getting on the phone with organizations and stakeholders. However, mapping can require significant time and capacity as it involves connecting with many cross-sector stakeholders to gather insights, ideas, and opportunities that can help develop the best partnership model. Working with consultants, PSOs, government transition teams, or connecting the dots with existing resources are all good ways to leverage external capacity for this process.

Leverage knowledge of your state.

A broad understanding of your state's geography, demographics, key industries, and economic opportunities and challenges can help identify the areas with the greatest opportunities and gaps in community outcomes, informing the design of the dedicated partnership model for your state. It can also help gauge how effective certain solutions might be in implementation—for example, by differentiating the needs of rural and urban areas and creating distinct partnership approaches.

Map the Private Social Sector Ecosystem.

Identify active funders and networks, including institutional, corporate, and individual philanthropies. Assess key components such as:

- Priority issues and areas of philanthropic investment to identify alignment opportunities with state priorities.
- Total philanthropic resources available in your state for pooling and leveraging in partnership with government.
- The ecosystem of nonprofit and grassroots organizations that is supported by philanthropy, as these organizations will play a key role in implementing partnerships.

Uncover existing public-private collaborations.

Identify any public-private partnerships that might be underway. Chances are that most states are already collaborating with the social sector. These existing collaborations can provide a foundation for a broader strategy and serve as examples of success. The partners involved can also be champions for a more strategic dedicated partnership capacity because they already understand what the work looks like in practice.

Many states are already collaborating with their social sector counterparts in meaningful ways, even without dedicated partnership capacity.



Nevada

In partnership with two nonprofits, Opportunity 180 and the Equitable Facilities Fund, Governor Joe Lombardo established the [Nevada Facilities Fund](#) in 2023 for the construction and renovation of facilities in high-need public charter schools across the state. The initiative is funded through a combination of state and private investments, as well as federal support through a Department of Education grant to Opportunity 180.



Indiana

Governor Eric Holcomb launched the [Regional Economic Acceleration and Development Initiative](#) in 2021 with private industry leaders, educational partners, philanthropy and state officials. Through this partnership, coalitions of stakeholders worked across sectors to generate long-term proposals for economic growth within their regions with funding provided by a combination of public and private sources. So far, there are almost 400 projects across the state, including 157 focused on quality of life, 149 centered on quality of place, and an additional 91 dedicated to quality of opportunity. The approved projects include \$500 million in funding across 92 Indiana counties.

Understand state government priorities.

Research the state's policy agenda and governor's cabinet structure to ensure that the partnership model in development can support the implementation of state priorities.

Timing matters.

Consider state budget cycles, administration transitions, election years, legislative sessions, and other factors that could impact the state's ability to engage in cross-sector collaboration. Gubernatorial transitions can be an especially strategic time to establish a partnership model, as new administrations seek fresh ideas and develop their policy implementation plans. Engage transition teams early to understand year-one priorities and align partnerships accordingly.



California

After California Governor Gavin Newsom was elected in November 2018, Philanthropy California, a philanthropy-serving organization, built a coalition of philanthropies to advocate for a cabinet-level role dedicated to facilitating partnership with the social sector. These efforts led to the appointment of California's first Senior Advisor for Social Innovation as a publicly-funded role embedded within the governor's office.

Identify low-hanging fruit partnership opportunities.

This landscaping exercise is a great opportunity to identify issue areas where cross-sector alignment already exists to develop partnerships. Early wins can help make the case for dedicated partnership capacity and build the momentum and trust required for a long-term, sustainable partnership model.

STEP 2:

BUILD

Co-create a partnership model with public and private sector partners



While effective cross-sector collaboration efforts require a tailored approach for each state, there are several successful examples to draw from, including in California, Maryland, Michigan, and North Carolina.

Existing partnership liaisons in these states, who serve as the lynchpin between the government and social sectors, may work within the governor's office or be externally funded by philanthropy but are all closely connected to state government. Some liaisons focus solely on partnerships, while others take on this role alongside other responsibilities. Additionally, external coordinators—separate from the liaison—can provide added capacity and expertise, as seen in states like Maryland and California.

When building a partnership model, each structural choice carries implications for cost, the liaison's ability to collaborate within and outside of government, and the commitment required from private or public partners. Establishing capacity for partnerships runs parallel to building buy-in from stakeholders and generating opportunities to co-create the model with funders, governors, and other public and private sector leaders. This collaborative approach fosters alignment, trust, and shared ownership. The considerations below can help shape the model that best aligns with your state's needs, and we provide examples of possible structures to draw from.



Key Resource

The Center on Philanthropy & Public Policy published "[Philanthropy and Government Working Together](#)," a report intended to outline the role of 'Offices of Strategic Partnership' in promoting better outcomes for all. The report includes the rationale for this approach to cross-sector partnerships, how a dedicated model can be equipped for success, and potential opportunities and challenges. While released over a decade ago, its recommendations and conclusions remain relevant for state and social sector leaders who are considering establishing a partnership model in their state.

Key Structural Considerations



Legal and regulatory dynamics

Some states have legal, financial, and other regulatory guardrails on how the government and private social sector can collaborate. Understanding these policies is crucial to designing a compliant and effective partnership model. States may also have specific regulations on officials' ability to solicit charitable contributions toward certain programs (examples linked [here](#)).



Political dynamics

While public-private partnerships are inherently nonpartisan, political dynamics can impact how stakeholders engage in them. Focusing on universally prioritized issues like disaster response or economic development can help build trust across any potential political lines and establish a foundation for broader partnerships.



Examine what kind of financial structure is best suited for the partnership

Step 3 provides considerations on successfully resourcing additional partnership capacity.

Potential Partnership Models

A carefully designed partnership model can result in effective and sustained cross-sector collaboration. Whatever structure you land on, the model should foster alignment across sectors and reflect the unique legal, political, and resource landscape in your state.

Designate dedicated capacity for a liaison within state government.

A dedicated partnerships liaison who is embedded within an administration can be critical for effective public-private partnership. Situating a liaison in the governor's office or in an administrative statewide department can facilitate visibility across a breadth of policy areas and state agencies, which is key for effective coordination.

Advantages of this structure include:

- Greater integration with state leadership to ensure alignment with policy priorities, decision-making power, and seamless communication.
- A full-time focus on partnerships that maximizes the liaison's ability to engage deeply with both sectors and maximize the impact of their investments.
- A bird's eye view across all partnerships that enables an intersectional and coordinated approach to addressing systemic and policy challenges.
- An effective translator between sectors that brings a deep understanding of each sector's goals, strengths, and resources.

Embed partnership responsibilities within an existing executive role.

If dedicated capacity through a liaison is not feasible, financially or otherwise, consider whether there is an already established role within the state administration - such as in the governor's office - that could also take on the responsibility of developing public-private partnerships. While that individual's capacity could be a significant constraint, engaging other staff and/or an external coordinator to support the work could enable this option to be effective.

House a partnership liaison within a specific agency or department.

While this approach may require public investment, for some states it may make sense to identify a liaison within a specific department who can develop partnerships to implement key policy priorities in lieu of, or in addition to, leadership at the executive level. A liaison within a specific agency can either have dedicated capacity to work with the social sector, or can be part of an existing role within the agency. Strategically, this approach can serve as a starting point to build the muscle for public-private partnerships that can support a future statewide effort.



CA Public-Private Partnership Agency Liaisons

In addition to appointing a cabinet-level Senior Advisor for Social Innovation, California Governor Newsom directed 10 key agencies and departments to designate a current senior leader as a public-private partnership liaison to ensure that agencies consider the role of philanthropy and nonprofits in implementing their priorities.

Explore the role of external coordinators to augment capacity.

Even with a dedicated liaison embedded within state government, developing partnerships often requires significant research, operational, strategic, and communications capacity. An external coordinator can help foster ongoing engagement with the social sector and provide this support while working closely with state leaders. A small team serving as an external coordinator can:

















- Enhance the capacity for partners to engage with the state without requiring public funding for additional roles.
- Have an aggregate view into private sector priorities and provide continuity between state administrations or leadership shifts.
- Support strategic collaborations, identify gaps, and support partners in navigating complex systems and relationships.
- Provide expertise and operational and communications support to ensure partnerships are successfully implemented and sustained.

External coordination can foster trust and reinforce the shared commitment necessary for successful partnerships. States with limited capacity to support a dedicated partnership model could particularly benefit from an external coordinator, which could be funded by philanthropy to help operationalize and enable partnership implementation.

Create a partnership model independent of state government.

If a dedicated partnership role within the state government is not feasible, doing so outside of government could be an effective option. For this approach to work, however, the entity taking on the role must be a trusted partner in the state and hold strong relationships with state government and private social sector leadership. At the same time, it is essential to avoid conflicts of interest and/or a perception of a pay-to-play relationship between partners and the government.

Comparison of States' Partnership Structures

	 Michigan	 California	 North Carolina	 Maryland
LEADERSHIP TITLE	Foundation Liaison	Senior Advisor for Social Innovation	Director, NC Office of Strategic Partnerships	Senior Advisor for Innovation and Impact
POSITION IN GOVERNOR'S OFFICE				
FULL-TIME CAPACITY				
YEARS IN OPERATION	21	5	5	1
FUNDING STRUCTURE	Philanthropic	Public	Co-Funding	Public
DEDICATED EXTERNAL SUPPORT				

STEP 3:

RESOURCE

Secure funding to implement the dedicated partnership model



An essential aspect of building dedicated partnership capacity is determining how it will be resourced. Securing funding for an initial period, such as over a gubernatorial term, provides a realistic timeline to prove the model's value and build trust-based relationships across sectors.

The process of securing resources should run in parallel to the previous step of co-creating the model – as the model's structure begins to take shape in discussions, the funding sources that can best sustain it will become clearer. Before seeking resources, however, it's important to define what needs to be funded. Common costs to consider can include:

Salaries for dedicated partnership liaison positions or office staff.

If these roles are embedded within state government (e.g., governor's office or state agencies), salaries may be funded, at least partially, through public dollars included in the state budget. Cost-sharing arrangements with philanthropy can provide additional flexibility and sustainability (more below).

External coordination support.

If there will be an external coordination team, private funding will likely be required unless the external entity is contracted directly by the state. External coordinators can support securing funding for their own work, which may include managing communications, logistics, and strategic alignment across sectors.

Events.

Convening power is one of the most valuable tools in partnerships work. Strategic events can foster trust, align cross-sector priorities, define desired outcomes, and secure commitments to action. Events, of course, incur logistical costs such as venue rental, catering, and materials. Including these expenses in the budget from the outset paves the way for timely, effective events that drive partnership development forward.

Strategic Communications.

Ongoing communication is vital to maintaining momentum and showcasing the impact of partnerships. This may include newsletters, reports, designed materials, and other strategic communications. These costs may be factored in along with salaries for dedicated positions or external coordination support.

Potential Funding Models

By the time that the dedicated partnership model has been co-designed with cross-sector partners, it should be clear how it can be funded. The funding model chosen will depend on alignment between the state and private social sector partners. Below are key considerations for potential funding models along with examples from other states.

Public Funding

Adding a line item for a dedicated partnership liaison position or an office into the state budget can often support sustainability and demonstrates institutional commitment.

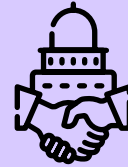
A key consideration is that securing public funding for a partnership liaison usually requires some level of advocacy during budget planning or gubernatorial transition periods.

Advantages:

- Ensures funding continuity and avoids need to continuously fundraise from private sources
- Signals institutional commitment by embedding partnerships within government operations

Challenges:

- Requires navigating state budget cycles
- May be difficult to maintain during budget deficits
- Changes in administration may require renewed advocacy



California's Senior Advisor for Social Innovation is a fully embedded philanthropy liaison role within the governor's cabinet team whose salary is fully covered by state dollars. The California Agency Partnership Liaisons are also embedded liaisons within specific agencies who have a full-time job with added responsibilities for partnership, and are fully employed by their respective agencies.

Co-Funding

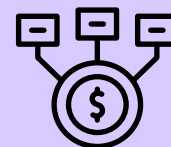
A co-funding model splits the cost of supporting a dedicated partnership liaison or office between public and private resources, fostering shared accountability and sustainability of the partnership model over time and across administrations.

Advantages:

- Fosters buy-in and commitment from both public and private sector from the beginning
- Reduces financial burden on any single sector

Challenges:

- Typically involves contractual and legal obligations that could require significant capacity to execute and manage
- Could require front-end alignment on timelines, outcomes, and reporting from funding sources that can slow down the launch of the model



The North Carolina Office of Strategic Partnerships and the Philanthropy Liaison role within it were co-designed and co-funded by government and philanthropic partners to cultivate relationships and networks between and among representatives of state government, research organizations, and philanthropies.

Philanthropic Funding

Philanthropy can fund partnership capacity either directly or through a pooled funding effort supported by multiple philanthropic entities.

Advantages:

- Provides flexible dollars and makes them available more quickly than public funding
- Provides initial proof of concept without burden on taxpayers

Challenges:

- Partnership model may be less integrated into state operations, requiring additional effort and capacity to align with governor's office priorities
- Reliance on philanthropic funding can introduce sustainability concerns if funders do not renew funding or if funding priorities shift



While Michigan's [Governor's Office of the Foundation Liaison \(OFL\)](#) is funded by a coalition of statewide philanthropic organizations, the liaison is embedded into the governor's office with a cabinet-level role, allowing for strong integration with senior state leadership. Additionally, a member of the governor's executive staff sits on OFL's advisory committee and the governor's office helps set objectives, assignments, and expectations for the work of the office.

Considerations to Effectively Secure Resources

It is important to note that the funding models above are not mutually exclusive. For example, philanthropic dollars can be used as seed funding to establish the model, while planning for a transition to public or co-funding over time. Whatever the financial structure to support your state's partnership model may be, cross-sector buy-in is critical. Below, we provide a few suggestions that can help in securing resources.

Craft a compelling narrative for investment.

Highlight the partnership structure's potential to drive measurable impact, scale, and operational efficiency. Quantify the financial benefits of partnering across sectors, such as by providing estimates of the aggregate philanthropic resources that state governments can leverage for their priorities and vice versa. Including concrete areas for partnership opportunities uncovered in the landscape analysis is always a good idea.

Share examples of success.

Use letters of support and evidence from other states to illustrate the value of having dedicated partnership capacity within state government. Wherever possible, provide examples and case studies of existing collaboration between government and the social sector in your state.

Define what engagement will look like for different types of stakeholders.

It is critical that public and private social sector leaders see themselves in the work. Share as much detail as possible, without overpromising, on what engagement in the partnership model might look like for each sector, referencing other models or existing collaboration in your state.

STEP 4:

LAUNCH

Set the work in motion with an official launch of the partnership model



A well-executed launch sets the stage for success by building momentum, establishing credibility, and ensuring the long-term viability of the partnership model. Whether introducing a dedicated liaison, a new office, or an external coordination model, the launch is a critical moment to showcase the impact potential of strategic cross-sector partnership and solidify buy-in.

The launch process involves engaging public and social sector partners, communicating a compelling vision, and presenting early opportunities to demonstrate the value of partnerships. Early wins and strong stakeholder engagement are key to setting a positive trajectory for the partnership model.

Launch with a public announcement or event.

A well-publicized launch signals a strong commitment to cross-sector collaboration and builds confidence among partners. For example, a public announcement from the governor's office can send a powerful message of commitment and reinforce the importance of the effort. A public event to unveil the dedicated partnership model, highlight its vision and goals, and introduce initial partners can encourage engagement from various sectors and attract additional champions. However, it is critical to ensure that there is sufficient staff capacity to handle the influx of inquiries that will likely follow a public announcement ahead of launching the model.

Highlight initial projects.

Early successes provide tangible evidence of the partnership model's potential for impact. Announce any early initiatives or existing areas of collaboration to illustrate this.

Leverage media and communications.

Use press releases, social media, and newsletters to amplify the launch announcement and attract interest from additional partners. Consider highlighting champions who were key in developing the model, and leverage their communications channels as well.

Commit to meaningful ongoing engagement.

Maintaining consistent communication and engagement post-launch ensures stakeholders remain informed and invested. Consider developing a communications plan for the first year to share key updates and keep a broad set of partners engaged. Potential strategies include quarterly emails to partners, partnership announcements through government or philanthropic outlets, and regular virtual and/or in-person convenings and gatherings.



Maryland

Governor Wes Moore [announced and launched](#) the partnerships model his administration created through the Maryland Council on Innovation and Impact, which ensures that the expertise and resources of innovative social sector organizations are leveraged, deployed, and aligned with the efforts of the state to meet common challenges.

CONCLUSION

Launching a dedicated partnership model to support effective cross-sector collaboration is hard work, but it represents a tremendous opportunity to bridge sectors, leverage resources, and implement innovative solutions that drive meaningful outcomes for communities. Whether initiated by a governor, philanthropic organizations, or a company, these collaborations depend on trust, alignment, and a commitment to shared goals.

Authors and Acknowledgements

State Partnerships Lab, a project of Freedman Consulting with support from philanthropic partners, aims to tackle the challenge of ineffective cross-sectoral collaboration in addressing the most critical issues in our society by harnessing the best of both government and philanthropic sectors. To actualize that vision, State Partnerships Lab provides essential tools, knowledge, and strategic support that empower states and philanthropic partners to foster impactful partnerships.



About Freeman Consulting

This report was drafted by Freedman Consulting, LLC, a mission-driven firm that provides strategic consulting services to foundations, nonprofit organizations and public interest coalitions, advising many of the nation's leading philanthropic institutions. This includes ongoing support for public-private partnerships infrastructure in California and Maryland. Authors include Kathleen Kelly Janus, Talya Karr, Martha Mendoza, Carly Cramer, and Aashna Kammila.

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