



Innovator Interview: Christian Denes

Chicago Department of Family and Support Services, Director of Strategic Planning and Impact

Christian Denes is Director of Strategic Planning and Impact at the Chicago Department of Family and Support Services (DFSS), the City's combined human and social services agency. He spoke with the GPL about his experience leading a department-wide change management initiative, including implementing results-driven contracting.

This interview has been edited for clarity and brevity.

How did you end up in government? In your current role at DFSS?

Chris Denes: My wife and I were both born and raised in Chicago, so we moved back to be close to family. At the time, my practical work experience was in youth development in the Bronx, while my education background was in public policy. There was a policy analyst opportunity with the City of Chicago's Department of Children and Youth Services, which was a perfect marriage of my front-line experience and policy background, and I was lucky enough to get it. That department merged with several others in 2009 to form DFSS, and I eventually worked my way to become the senior policy adviser across all of its service areas. When a new commissioner came on board and developed a strong vision for organizational change toward an outcomes-based approach, I was the point person and I was ultimately selected for the role of Director of Strategic Planning and Impact, a newly-created position dedicated to change management. One of the key recommendations early on was that the department should have a position dedicated to this work—someone to be able to see things at 30,000 feet and be a change management agent. The sand in the shoe and the fly in the ointment, that's how the Commissioner likes to describe my role.

Part of DFSS's work with the GPL focused on overhauling the department's approach to contracting and procurement. What was the status quo, and what was the vision for change?

When the Commissioner arrived, she did this listening tour early on, throughout the department. It's not like she came in with a strategy that she was dying to impose—the work that we ended up doing came out of what she heard from folks during that listening tour.

One of the top issues that came from that feedback was decision-making around funding—how to connect decisions around funding more directly to the outcomes we were trying to achieve. Like many organizations in the field, we would often scramble to respond to contracting opportunities rather than use them as a way to accomplish the department's core mission of serving vulnerable Chicago residents. While DFSS provides some services directly, most of our budget goes to contracts with delegates that provide services, so getting our service and impact right meant we had to get contracting right.

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We would come up to the point a contract was expiring and have 8 to 12 weeks to push out the same procurements as before, with little space to think strategically or creatively, let alone how the suite of programs worked together.

We wanted to get a better handle on the universe of things that we do and how they were interrelated. It wasn't that there was no innovation—there was research and the development of new program models, but they often resulted in a new initiative added on top of existing programming. 10 years later, you had all these contracts that had accrued. The department spends hundreds of millions of dollars a year, so we needed to bring our innovation and outcomes focus to our core contracts.

Can you talk about what you did and how you saw practices change?

When the GPL team came on board in late 2017, we were months away from the citywide rebid of federally-funded contracts for multiple divisions. DFSS had 26 RFPs worth \$50 million that needed to go out, and we wanted everyone working on one of those RFPs to do things differently. We wanted the space, workshops, and tools to approach the contracts strategically and focus them on outcomes.

We worked with the GPL to implement Results-Driven Contracting across the entire set of contracts. We were engaging with division staff in a completely different way, asking them to reorient the procurements towards the outcomes that the services were supposed to be achieving, and articulating how they fit into the division goals. But the division staff weren't used to writing RFPs this way—so it was a huge learning curve. This year we've been able to reflect and solidify the lessons learned, expand our Results-Driven Contracting tools and processes to subsequent RFPs, and prepare for when all those contracts come up again for rebid next year.

How were these changes received by the delegates contracted to provide services?

The reception was surprisingly positive. We conducted surveys and found that around 90% felt like the RFPs were clearer about what they were trying to accomplish, and about three-quarters found our resources and support helpful. We got positive feedback in many areas that we were hoping for. There were 26 RFPs, so of course there wasn't total consistency in execution, and there have definitely been growing pains along the way. But we also had about a 7% percent increase in proposals, which was really encouraging.

What else has been encouraging?

Government is typically associated with cumbersome processes—the whole contracting process with RFPs, bids, and reviews is often viewed as a liability compared to the private sector, which is viewed as being more nimble. I'm not saying these processes are necessarily done well, but I do believe that they are the right way to do things. They are what help to make government accountable to the public, which is what sets government apart from other sectors, and they deserve attention and effort to make them better.

We just hired a new employee to continue the type of work the GPL staff began for us and support our results-driven contracting work going forward. To have the office of budget management and the mayor's office sign off was a huge confirmation of our recent work—this is the right place to focus and a new role makes the changes more permanent, something that can last across changes in leadership.

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