



Innovator Interview: Lisa Morrison Butler **Chicago Department of Family and Support Services, Commissioner**

Lisa Morrison Butler was the Commissioner at the Chicago Department of Family and Support Services (DFSS), Chicago’s combined human and social services agency, from August 2015 – February 2021. She spoke with the GPL about her experience using Requests for Proposals (RFPs), results-driven contracting, and data-driven collaboration with nonprofit providers as core department strategies to drive better outcomes.

This interview has been edited for clarity and brevity.

What problem were you facing that prompted you to reach out to the GPL?

Lisa Morrison Butler: When I joined Chicago’s Department of Family and Support Services as commissioner in 2015, I knew I was coming into an organization that was well run, had a strong reputation, and was fairly healthy – nothing was on fire. It was a wonderful opportunity because I had time to ask people what was on their minds and what they hoped for. During my first sixty days, I did interviews and meetings with probably 70-90 members of the team. Across the board, I was hearing that folks were concerned about whether we were really maximizing all of our funding and all of our opportunities to help vulnerable Chicagoans; the nagging question was if every dollar was working as hard as it should.

At the time, we were very outputs focused. Like many human and social services agencies, much of our money comes from the federal and state governments, so over time, we had become really good box checkers. I am not critical of box checkers – as a government entity, we absolutely must steward dollars carefully – but that cannot be the only thing we are good at. Staff were saying to me that they felt we spent 80% of our time responding to inquiries and emergencies, and only 20% of our time actually being the experts in our program areas.

One of the things we came to realize was that at DFSS, the ultimate manifestation of our work is the contracts we have with the nonprofits that we fund. This year, with CARES Act funding, we are stewarding \$750 million. That’s a lot of money going out the door, and the contracts for those funds are the most powerful display of our vision. For us, it was clear that we needed to back away from the process and figure out what it was that we really wanted to accomplish when we put those dollars out there.

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Before, we literally were going and getting old RFPs and putting new dates on them. That was the practice because no one thought it was important. There were actually versions of RFPs that had been copied so many times that the text was crooked on the page. And when you dug into that faded, crooked, RFP, you would notice that one section wouldn’t align with something later on because no one had taken the time to rethink it. We also realized there was sometimes a huge

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disconnect between the RFP and the final contract. No wonder nonprofits were left unsure about what to do.

What have you accomplished with your GPL TA to address those challenges?

Here in the U.S., we value strategic thinkers and we value visionaries, and everyone wants to be one of those folks. Chicago is not at a loss for big ideas. The challenge is always getting big ideas to turn into flawless execution. What we've been able to do with the support of the GPL is break down existing processes, systems, and procedures, and change the behavior of employees and of the nonprofits that we fund. So what has changed?

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Virtually everything.

We have gone from seeing RFPs as an administrative task – a burden, if you will – delegated to the lowest people on the team to seeing procurement as a core component of our strategy, involving staff from top to bottom of the agency. There is no such thing anymore as taking the RFP from 1965, slapping a new date on it, and sending it out the door. The first thing that happens now is a discussion around what we are trying to accomplish when we put dollars out the door: What challenges would we like to address? What opportunities would we like to respond to? Have we learned something new? Our team is doing the best practice research and engaging with the nonprofit community and the community of residents that are going to be impacted before the RFP is even designed. The process is one of reflection, thoughtful planning, and engagement with the people who are going to be affected.

How did those changes in your RFPs and contracts translate to your engagement with nonprofits?

We've always engaged our nonprofits, but our engagement now is very different: we pull groups together periodically to review and share data, to talk about what's going well and what they're struggling with. Now we don't have to wait until the end of a contract and look backward and say, "Did it work?" We are having that conversation throughout the life of the contract. We're coming together with our funded nonprofits on at least a quarterly basis.

To give you an example, we brought together a group of homeless shelters to discuss something we knew we had seen but didn't know how to unpack: why were people staying so long in shelter? Through those conversations, we realized that some shelters were not able to get people properly assessed for housing resources because assessments were being conducted during only one time of day. Folks coming in before or after weren't being assessed, and without assessments, they couldn't move forward in the process of getting connected. Within a quarter, we were able to see the problem, do some practice sharing, and address the hurdle.

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You've thought a lot about how to make the innovations at DFSS sustainable and lasting. This is something a lot of governments grapple with – tell us about the work you're doing on that front.

The work that we have done at DFSS has made us a significantly stronger and better agency. But we are not done with our transformation – we think of this as a 1000-mile journey. We feel like we have 700 miles behind us, and that's significant, but we still have some work ahead of us.

What that means is this change could never only be about a commissioner. If I made the change only about me, it would be vulnerable from the beginning. I had to win over not just the people who report to me; I had to be willing to go deeper into the organization and win over the people who had been with the City of Chicago for 30 years and are going to be here after I'm gone. That winning over of people takes time. There is no shortcut to taking the time to educate, inform, and, hopefully, influence your own staff.

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The momentum in government is so big and the momentum is to pull you back to the status quo. For us, going broad and going deep was our attempt to fight the momentum. Not one person, not one division – we were going to expose everyone. We don't have a single expert on RFPs; we have many people who are involved in this process in order to get something high-quality out the door.

These changes are monumental for us and, with the GPL's help, we were able to make that change in a way that is deeper and more lasting than any individual commissioner.

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