

## **Communications Three-Year Strategic Plan, 2011-2013**

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### **Overview and Summary of Goals**

The over-arching goal of OSI-Baltimore is to build a social movement consistent with the values of an open society. This movement would assure that opportunities exist and are available for those in the city's traditionally underserved communities—composed largely of people of color who have, throughout their lives, faced systemic discrimination—to build successful lives for themselves, their families and their communities. This aspirational goal cannot be met without many partners who believe that there are viable solutions and are committed to the idea. In order for OSI to find those partners, it must communicate its mission and goals clearly and compellingly.

OSI-Baltimore has operated in this city since 1998 and for much of its history was funded by a sole individual, George Soros. In 2005, Soros challenged the city to raise \$20 million to support the work of the office. It was because of this challenge that the office created both a communications and a development program. We recognized that both our fund-raising goals and our over-riding program goals could not be met without significant partners who not only share our vision, but are also willing to take action to make the vision a reality. Key to engaging partners on all levels is to create a strong, integrated communications program that builds awareness among multiple constituencies and inspires those audiences by explaining why OSI's work is imperative for the future of the city.

The goals of the OSI-Baltimore communications program are as follows:

- To motivate people to create and support systems that allow all individuals, but especially those affected by historical discrimination and are most needy in Baltimore, to have both the opportunity and the ability to lead successful and productive lives.
- To inform leaders and community members about the scope of the problems OSI addresses and simultaneously to illustrate effective solutions.
  - The problems that we specifically address are those of drug addiction, unjust policies in the criminal justice system and the overuse of incarceration, and the inability of children and youth to stay engaged in and successful at school--and on the road to better lives.
  - The solutions we advocate recognize that addiction treatment must be readily accessible for those who need it, alternative programs can and should be adopted and utilized instead of incarceration,

and that innovative—and sometimes very simple commonsense programs—can help children and youth attend and be motivated to stay in school.

- Solutions also include relying on best practices around the country and groundbreaking research. They include successfully connecting private and public partners and community members. And they sometimes come from untested, but innovative social entrepreneurs and innovators—such as our Baltimore Community Fellows.
- To inspire leaders, public officials and community members to participate in making these solutions possible, by partnering with OSI-Baltimore in multiple ways.
- To persuade public officials to adopt proven policies and practices and re-direct public resources to build programs to scale.
- To engage individuals, foundations, and corporations in the work of OSI-Baltimore as active investors.

### **Guiding Principles: Relationship to Open Society Values and Mission**

Everything we do is directly related to the values and mission of Open Society. Aryeh Neier, president of the Open Society Foundations, was recently quoted as saying:

“One of the essential characteristics of an open society is that all count equally and all should enjoy equal opportunities.”

That rallying cry is embedded in our communications program, first by our goal of building an awareness that too many people in Baltimore *have not* counted equally *nor do they enjoy* equal opportunities. And second, we attempt build awareness of what can and has been done to rectify that situation. We aim to amplify the voices that are not always heard. Through many different channels, we transmit information broadly so the community can debate key issues in an informed manner and with the benefit of knowing different perspectives. We bring people together to illuminate common interests, thereby encouraging groups to work together toward common goals. And finally, through our efforts we hope to give people a sense of movement and success and encourage them to continue their efforts to create justice and opportunity.

### **Critical Issues, Opportunities and Challenges Affecting the Field**

*“Any consumer-products company rolling out a brand of toilet paper will agonize over marketing. The messaging will be carefully devised, tested with focus groups, revised based on polling, tested in a particular market, tweaked, and tested again. And that's for a product whose launch makes no difference for humanity. In contrast, if an aid group is trying to raise support for a new program that could save many lives, it will often rely on a hodgepodge of guilt and statistics that limit its effectiveness.”—Nicholas Kristoff, New York Times, reporter/author*

We live in one of the most paradoxical times in history regarding human communication—although we have more access to information than ever before, we are barraged by a constant assault by it. Frequently, we do not know to which source we should pay attention. And because there is such an overwhelming abundance of information, we are less likely to retain multiple pieces of it.

Not so very long ago in cities like Baltimore, opinion makers and community leaders would get their information from key newspapers. Now, newspapers are dwindling and those that are surviving are printing fewer pages and fewer stories. (According to a recent study produced by the Pew Research Center Project for Excellence in Journalism, the *Baltimore Sun* produced 73% fewer stories in 2009 than in 1991.) Journalists with subject expertise are not necessarily the ones who are reporting on issues and events, especially in smaller and mid-sized cities, because staffs have been cut so significantly.

Electronic media is growing exponentially, providing ubiquitous information. Anyone with a cell phone or a computer can participate in the public discourse and produce media, as well. But because there is so much information, readers are now self-selecting from so many options and not necessarily relying on the older, more established sources. In this fast-changing media landscape, it is becoming more difficult to ascertain *what* sources opinion makers and community leaders consult to be informed.

The challenge for a non-profit organization is great: How to inform and engage a broad-based constituency when its various constituents are utilizing so many different sources of information? What are our best choices to inform people about the work we do?

Despite these uncertainties, there are some real opportunities before us. OSI-Baltimore is in an enviable position, as it is well respected in the community and considered by many as a foundation office with deep subject expertise and a significant track record. We can deliver our subject expertise to a large number of people because it is now so much easier to send that information out into the world. In fact, there are many opportunities to become much more expedient and direct, if we utilize the many resources that are available.

Much research has been done in the last number of years about what motivates people to take action. A number of very sophisticated studies (among them, the work of Paul Slovic, a professor of psychology at the University of Oregon and the president of Decision Research) indicate that people are not motivated by hearing about huge problems that are beyond the scope of understanding or by problems that are so large that no solution seems viable. They quickly succumb to “psychic numbing” and the “collapse of compassion.” Slovic further suggests that people are not motivated by guilt. Nicholas Kristoff, reporter from the *New York Times* and a noted author who has been much affected by Slovic’s work, has stated, “If one lesson is the need to emphasize hopefulness, the second is that storytelling needs to focus on an individual, not a group.”

Research conducted by John Kotter and Dan Cohen, as reported in *The Heart of Change*, conclude that in almost all successful change efforts, the sequence that works best is not

what many think. A typical approach is “analyze-think-change.” But Kotter and Cohen say that what really works to create change is “see-feel-change.” They explain:

“This is true even in organizations that are very focused on analysis and quantitative measurement, even among people who think of themselves as smart in an MBA sense. In highly successful change efforts, people find ways to help others see the problems or solutions in ways that influence emotions, not just thought.”

On the other hand, people *can be* motivated by an ambitious goal—what Chip and Dan Heath, the authors of *Switch: How to Change Things When Change is Hard*, call a “gut-smacking goal” that appeals to both the emotions and intellect. But, **they emphasize, people will only be motivated by that goal if they believe it can be accomplished. And they will believe the ambitious goal can be accomplished only if they understand the concrete steps that will get them to the goal. They need crisp examples to illustrate the solutions.**

Based on the research discussed above, OSI-Baltimore staff plan to alter our communications emphasis going forward.

In forthcoming communications work, we will emphasize positive solutions that imbue us all with hope and belief in the future. We intend to continue our “audacious thinking” but will make our goals more direct and clear and we will illustrate the way those goals can be achieved. We will then focus on individuals and their stories to illustrate the issues and those solutions that work. We are eager to showcase individuals, especially those from underserved communities, who have made significant and positive changes in their lives and the lives of others. Our aim is to make their lives understandable to those who can exert influence to support the change that is necessary.

This change in emphasis does not make it less necessary to show the depth and breadth of the problems that exist in our community, but we now believe that by showing more examples of hope—and the solutions that have been proven to be effective—we will be able to enlist more partners in our work. We also recognize that statistics and more comprehensive explanations of our work are important and do not plan on eliminating them completely. But we will concentrate on leaning in this new direction, showcasing individuals whose lives have been changed and whose potential is now being realized.

Related to all of the above is yet another reality—**direct human contact is the most persuasive communication of all.** Because that has always been the best way to make change, bringing people together will always be a critical component for successful communications.

### **Role of OSI-Baltimore in Catalyzing Change**

The work undertaken by OSI-Baltimore is big: We aim to change major systems (i.e., the criminal justice system, health care delivery as it relates to addiction, and the public

school system). To many outside the foundation office, these goals seem impossible. But working in public and private partnership with many entities and individuals, OSI-Baltimore already has a track record of success. Key to our continued success in making major changes will be the shared understanding and agreement of many—those in the communities themselves and their leaders—that these new ways of approaching and implementing solutions can and will work.

OSI-Baltimore has a number of assets:

1. A proven track record of making significant changes in the city.
2. A staff with rich subject-expertise and a Board with influence, resources, and subject-expertise.
3. Strong relationships in the city and region.
4. Investors that include over 200 individuals, corporations, and foundations.
5. Access to the significant resources and information about practices that work and those that don't because of our close connection to colleagues at our parent foundation..

Critical to the success of all our programs is making certain that multiple constituencies understand our goals and our approaches and believe that success can and will occur. The communications program aims to inform these different audiences by sharing information in many different forms. We hope to inspire even larger numbers to share the vision with an even larger community and participate in our work.

### **Current Strategies to Build Upon**

Over the last three years, we have built a robust communications program that repositioned the office publicly within the community. To date we have:

- established a new identity
- created clear messages in accessible language (less oriented towards those in the grant-making field and more towards the educated lay public)
- produced distinctive publications
- created a weekly blog, [www.audaciousideas.org](http://www.audaciousideas.org)
- upgraded our website, incorporating multi-media features
- utilized e-mail blasts effectively
- expanded coverage of OSI-Baltimore, our community fellows and grantees in regional media
- served as a resource for the media seeking experts on the subjects we cover
- served as a resource for community fellows and grantees seeking assistance in communications
- funded public radio programming to make the people we ultimately serve and our issues more understandable
- funded issues of the *Urbanite* dedicated to education and to an in-depth look at race in Baltimore and
- established the Leadership Council, a group comprised of approximately 40 influential individuals to serve as ambassadors for our work.

In the last year, the communications office led and coordinated a year-long series, “Talking About Race,” in the city. This series, originally intended to highlight the role of racism in impeding an open society and to connect our three-intertwined issues directly to race, has expanded to discuss many tangential issues, also affected by discrimination and racial tension. The series, which has included film screenings, conversations among experts and audiences, as well as storytelling, has taken place in different venues in the city. It has been exceptionally well-received and given OSI-Baltimore much greater visibility. Because of its success, we intend to build on it and offer another year-long series of programs.

### **Discontinued/Consolidate Strands of Work**

Because of the nature of communications work, we are constantly assessing the success of what we do. We are in the process of reviewing our publications. As noted above, because so many people are inundated with too much information, our charge is to determine what information is most helpful to our various constituencies. We have begun to survey a number of investors, members of our Leadership Council and other engaged individuals in the community to determine how they get news and information. We also are asking this group which communications vehicles—including the traditional publications, electronic communications and social networking tools—are most important and effective. By culling this information, we will be in a stronger position to modify the tools and methods we are currently employing—and revise our plans going forward.

We are also about to produce a publication that explains our work by giving short, concise examples of our success and that connects all of our different programs. We believe our work is more understandable when all the issues and programs are linked together as one large prescription for lasting change in Baltimore.

### **Summary of Opportunities for Cross-Program Collaboration**

Within OSI-Baltimore, we plan to assist our colleagues working directly in the program areas by more actively strengthening their grantees’ strategies for communications. These efforts will probably include developing issue-oriented communications plans and communications training. While we have always worked with the current classes of Community Fellows to assist them with their communications needs and selectively with alumni Fellows and grantees, we hope to expand our efforts going forward. We are identifying several professional firms who will be able to work with grantees on specific aspects of communications. We hope to serve as *ad hoc* members of the teams. Our goal will be to help their agenda by linking them directly to our communications program. Their work directly affects ours—and is really the heart of what we do.

The communications program also works directly, as intimate partners, with our colleagues in the development office. One of our key priorities is to provide tools that will assist them in their work to raise funds for OSI-Baltimore.

We are linked closely to OSF's national/international communications program. We are increasingly invited to participate in professional development opportunities, brainstorm on specific issues, and share contacts and best practices. Although we are intending to redesign our website for OSI-Baltimore as a more autonomous site, we hope to be a part of the OSF team in NY as it begins to redesign and overhaul the national site, so that our site can be redesigned to complement it.

We are closely connected to the national Closing the Addiction Treatment Gap and the Campaign for Black Male Achievement—providing both support and resources and collaborating on useful communications approaches. We also serve on the OSI committee that is considering an national arts program to achieve social justice.

### **Expansion of Work**

As we consider the next three years, our goal is to keep individuals informed about our work and compelled to stay connected to us. The communications program aims to deliver information in different formats, all intended to underscore why social change is necessary and how specific, smart solutions can make life better and ensure justice for Baltimore's most underserved residents.

A number of key new initiatives and ideas are listed below:

1. **Create a new web hub for OSI-Baltimore** that features our goals, our current work, and the need for partners and support. This website would be connected to the larger OSF site, but it would allow us to feature more relevant content for our specific constituencies. Key among the changes would be an emphasis on giving to and volunteering for OSI-Baltimore. This new site would be designed so that potential supporters immediately understand our value, see our solutions, and can easily and directly give online.

In the last few years, we have built a very large archive of excellent audio pieces from sponsored public radio programs that deserve to be heard—and that tell individual stories brilliantly. The current web design and grid do not allow us to feature these pieces in an accessible, attractive or compelling way—they are mostly hidden from the viewer. These pieces deliver exactly the compelling stories about individuals that have been missing in our communications.

Without going into too much detail here, the primary reason we believe we should create a webhub specifically for OSI-Baltimore is that the current configuration is difficult for the user. Users can easily get “lost” in the larger OSF website and, once that occurs, returning to our site is complicated. Because we need to make certain that our constituency has easy access to and easily understands our work, this is a major obstacle for getting our message to key audiences.

2. **Continue our blog, Audacious Ideas ([www.audaciousideas.org](http://www.audaciousideas.org)), but focus it more strategically** on particular themes that connect to our issue areas and recruit more actively for “influential” individuals to write. In addition, expand the blog so that we can highlight or link to related work that has been done locally or in other areas of the country within the blog itself—or connect directly to our website.
3. In addition to our printed newsletter *Audacious Thinking*, **produce an online publication called *Priority NOW*<sup>1</sup>**. This publication would describe an initiative that we deem a top priority and offer the solution that we envision. An example might be “Converting summer jobs for teens into year-long sources of income.” We would explain why this idea is important: Youth, particularly those coming from low income families, often are called upon to help their families with much needed income. Once they get summer jobs, they are able to abet their families’ needs. Research indicates that these jobs build confidence and thus keep students more attached to schools. OSI-Baltimore’s solution is to make a large grant to the Family League to support and build upon this idea. Relevant research could be cited, along with embedded links to it. (In addition we could have a direct call to action: Give now to support this and other audacious programs.)
4. **Create a comprehensive social media plan.** As the communications landscape continues to grow and evolve, OSI-Baltimore needs to have an active presence—especially as we learn more about which tools are important to our key constituencies. As part of the informal survey of investors and Leadership Council members (noted above), we will ask how and if they use Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, LinkedIn, etc. so we can know which tools our constituents use and, thus, which tools we should dedicate time to developing. We will also assist our colleagues to make these tools available to them—the Baltimore Community Fellows, for example, might find that the social media platform can greatly enhance cross-collaboration, help them to meet new connectors, and facilitate the sharing of good ideas. The Leadership Council might be interested to have access to a dialogue between meetings, etc.
5. **Provide training for staff and Board on presentation and speaking skills and messaging.** Over the last several years a number of staff and Board members have requested that we offer professional workshops on advanced presentation and public speaking skills (including media training). As we increase our public presence in the community, these skills will be extremely useful. In addition, from time to time it may be very useful to have workshops focused on messaging so that everyone will speak in the same voice about OSI-Baltimore.
6. **Continue to establish our staff as experts in our subject areas.** Continue to write topical op-eds related to our issue areas. We will be more deliberate in getting our staff members and grantees to speak on local radio programs and respond to media queries.

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<sup>1</sup> this could be augmented by a simple print publication as well.



7. **Continue to support radio programming.** This is one of the most inexpensive ways to insure that the stories of those that are most affected by our work is told. Most recently, we made a grant to WYPR to produce a series entitled “Ear to the Ground,” which features interviews of people who have been touched by drug addiction and the criminal justice system. We have partnered directly on another series, also aired on WYPR, addressing issues of race in Baltimore. Both of these paint vivid pictures of why our work is important—depicting difficulties, hope, and resiliency.

What is difficult to assess is how many of our constituencies have actually heard these stories, although we are able to get reports of listener demographics. We recognize that supporting this kind of media is very useful, but that we must consider ways of “repurposing” this work by having it available in multiple places and directing people to those outlets. In addition to featuring these pieces on our website, we suggest **creating an iPhone application that connects users to all of our audio stories and converting the audio to podcasts as well.** We also suggest **producing a CD** that includes our audio stories and distributing it widely.

In addition, we propose continuing to work with WYPR and possibly WEAA, the public radio station housed at Morgan State University, to produce additional series over the course of the next three years. The Annie E. Casey Foundation recently funded a series, “Growing Up Baltimore” on WYPR that looked at a lot of issues surrounding children’s services, education and juvenile justice. This series was extremely well reported and aired during drive time. We could consider producing an analogous series to continue to make certain that these issues are front and center in the minds of a very well-educated and civically engaged demographic. (The series could be even more focused on our issues or not.)

8. **Continue to produce high quality public events.** This year, we have been hosting a year-long conversation entitled “Talking About Race.” Co-sponsored and held primarily at the Enoch Pratt Library, these events provide significant exposure to our work, our mission and our level of expertise. Each event has been filled to capacity, with standing-room only crowds. The Stoop Storytelling event, held at Center Stage, was sold out, and a film screening and spoken word event at MICA enabled us to explore utilizing more social media to engage a younger and diverse crowd. The shape and form of events in the future are yet to be determined, but clearly there is a great hunger in the community for these kinds of discussions. The series is extremely helpful in creating more awareness of who we are and what we do—and to cementing some key relationships as well. It is also a helpful piece in underscoring our “audacious” role in the community by addressing difficult subjects.

We might consider partnering with some other entities to continue this work—perhaps making grants to create partnerships with schools so that conversations about race can begin early in children’s lives; with art organizations, so that youth and adults can embrace this subject by observing what happens and envisioning what could happen in an ideal world; and with other groups, such as the Maryland Humanities Council, which is interested in facilitating conversations throughout the state. In the next phase of programming, we may re-orient the theme to focus more on solutions, reconciliation, and healing.

9. **Build the Leadership Council to be an effective conduit for OSI-Baltimore.** The Leadership Council is in its third year and continues to grow. It is beginning to fulfill its promise: members are solid ambassadors for our work and the more we introduce them to our work and share our goals and accomplishments, the more they become eager for more. We will continue to offer a combination of site visits and in-office presentations by grantees and local leaders—a formula that seems to be effective.

Going forward, we may want to evaluate the membership more critically and include new members who will help to connect us to key people in the community—those that can assist us in making our vision a reality. We are hoping to utilize Myra Norton from Community Analytics, who may be able to offer an analysis of the social networks and uncover individuals who have not yet been considered for membership. The Leadership Council can be a perfect place for “bridgers” and “key influencers” to build a relationship with OSI.

10. **Build a Young Professional Group** to get the next generation engaged in our work—to serve as yet another constituent group that can serve as ambassadors for us and who will also grow to be more engaged, as possible contributors, to OSI-Baltimore.

To accommodate these ideas, we will need to carefully review the existing budget to see what can be eliminated and replaced by new projects. Additional staff may be necessary to make this a reality—which could be addressed by adding an intern.

### **Role as Urban Laboratory**

Although our work is specific to the city of Baltimore, it clearly has implications for other urban centers that have similar challenges and demographics. As we get more adept at telling our story well to those in our region, we will also tell our story to a much wider audience so that others can learn from our successes (and mistakes, as well). We have already been successful in getting media coverage from the *Washington Post* and *USA Today* and some of our grantees and fellows have been featured in national broadcast media. Our blog is read by individuals beyond Baltimore and Maryland. Although our primary constituencies at this time are those in the greater Baltimore region, we do take our role as an urban laboratory seriously and hope to share our work more broadly.

### **Implementation: Timeline and Risks**

The work of the communications program needs to be fluid for a number of reasons. One is that the field is changing dramatically and quickly, as noted above. The other is that we do need to be flexible in responding to events that are constantly changing. The expansion of our work as described will begin incrementally as of the spring of 2010. During a three-month period, we will go through a process of information gathering and assessments and put a final plan into place. Budget and staffing will determine how much can be accomplished in what time frame.