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01/11/2017 by Sunne Wright McPeak

## California and CA Fwd should double-down on Smart Government

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California Forward was launched a decade ago with significant support from major foundations to be a dynamic and compelling force in transforming government. I was honored to be invited to serve on the original Leadership Council by bi-partisan Co-Chairs Leon Panetta and Tom McKernan.

Since then, thousands of California's have participated in a variety of events and initiatives sponsored by California Forward, warranting a review and assessment 10 years later to catalog conclusions and discern lessons learned as guidance for the future.



A traditional debate in government reform is "structure" vs. "substance": Should the focus be on the rules and procedures of organization (such as redistricting, top-two primary elections, or the length of time a bill must be in print before the Legislature can vote on it) or should it be on the purpose and results of operations (such as performance-based management and budgeting, realignment of human services, or integration of workforce training)? Of course, each has merit and California Forward has championed both kinds of reforms with great dedication. And, to be sure, it does take time to see appreciable impacts from the best of reforms.



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However, over the last decade, a number of vexing challenges have persisted and some have worsened: income disparity has increased, government effectiveness has not measurably improved, and political fissures in society have deepened. Part of the problem has been more emphasis on structural reforms rather than increased accountability for better results. It is like arguing over “the shape of the table” rather than “what’s being served for dinner” which only feeds into conventional left-right political debates while the direction that most people want to go is forward. Disillusionment with government stems from the reality that government does not work well enough for most people. There’s too small a “return on investment” for taxpayers and too little improvement for those dependent on government assistance to get ahead and become more self-sufficient. Government reform needs to start with the premise that “form” should follow “function” and, therefore, the first order of business should be clarity about what is to be achieved and how success will be measured.

We at the [California Emerging Technology Fund \(http://www.cetfund.org/\)](http://www.cetfund.org/) (CETF) observe a remarkable amount of consensus throughout the state about ways government should and could function that California Forward calls “Smart Government”—a concept to transform the “substance” of government that is rooted in quantified goals, performance metrics, and accountability for improved outcomes.

California Forward convened and consulted hundreds of local government officials, community leaders, and state policymakers in 2011 and developed a guide for “substance” reforms titled [Smart Government: Improving Performance and Accountability](https://cafwd.secure.org/cafwd/pce) (<https://cafwd.secure.org/cafwd/pce>), which is working with counties to execute system change efforts in criminal justice and social services, and with [school districts](http://www.cafwd.org/reporting/c-new/LCFF) (<http://www.cafwd.org/reporting/c-new/LCFF>) striving to reduce the achievement gap.

California Forward has deployed the framework in its [Partnership for Community Excellence](http://www.cafwd.org/reporting/c-new/LCFF) (<http://www.cafwd.org/reporting/c-new/LCFF>), which is working with counties to execute system change efforts in criminal justice and social services, and with [school districts](http://www.cafwd.org/reporting/c-new/LCFF) (<http://www.cafwd.org/reporting/c-new/LCFF>) striving to reduce the achievement gap.

The framework also has been foundational to the California Economic Summit’s efforts to [improve workforce development investments](http://caeconomy.org/reporting/C239) (<http://caeconomy.org/reporting/C239>) and other state policies that can restore upward mobility.

CETF has a mission to close the digital divide in California by accelerating deployment and adoption of [high-speed Internet access](http://www.cetfund.org/investments/overview/Get_Connected) ([http://www.cetfund.org/investments/overview/Get\\_Connected](http://www.cetfund.org/investments/overview/Get_Connected)) (generally referred to as “broadband”). Although the construction of broadband infrastructure is a fairly daunting task through California’s diverse geographical terrains to reach rural and remote communities, an even more sobering challenge is getting online all low-income households because of what we call the “wall of poverty”—inter-related factors and forces in poor neighborhoods: the lack of good schools coupled with few opportunities for jobs and decent housing, exacerbated by higher levels of crime and pollution, which combine to present a very high hurdle for residents to overcome.

These challenges require coordinated effort and collective impact by all levels and forms of government to help residents successfully escape poverty and be able to contribute to increasing California’s prosperity. CETF refers to this kind of requisite collaboration among government agencies and alignment of programs as [“Neighborhood Transformation](http://www.cetfund.org/investments/Neighborhood_Transformation) ([http://www.cetfund.org/investments/Neighborhood\\_Transformation](http://www.cetfund.org/investments/Neighborhood_Transformation)).” We frequently cite the California Forward *Smart Government* report as evidence that Neighborhood Transformation not only makes good common sense, but also is quite doable.

It also is encouraging to see promising initiatives tackling poverty that incorporate the principles of Smart Government and elements of Neighborhood Transformation: [Bridge Academy](http://readingandbeyond.org/bridge/) (<http://readingandbeyond.org/bridge/>) in Fresno, [Launch Initiative](http://www.sbsun.com/general-news/20141217/program-to-help-inland-empire-families-in-need-gets-funding-boost) (<http://www.sbsun.com/general-news/20141217/program-to-help-inland-empire-families-in-need-gets-funding-boost>) in the Inland Empire, and [Cities Counties Schools Partnership](http://www.ca-ilg.org/ccs-partnership) (<http://www.ca-ilg.org/ccs-partnership>) in Sacramento.

In this era of societal divisiveness and political volatility in search of an intersection of sanity and common sense, California Forward should seize the opportunity to advance substantive government reform by doubling down on Smart Government.

*Sunne Wright McPeak is President and CEO of the California Emerging Technology Fund*

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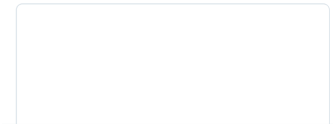
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