

The Wellness Theorem: A Test of the Hypothesis

| Stephan A. Schwartz |

In 1932 Associate Justice Louis Brandeis, in the case of *New Ice State co. v. Liebmann* observed, "It is one of the happy incidents of the federal system that a single courageous state may, if its citizens choose, serve as a laboratory; and try novel social and economic experiments without risk to the rest of the country."¹ The statement had a profound effect on the thinking of the Court and the judiciary in general, and has been cited by Justices both liberal and conservative in some three dozen other cases. I want to invoke that idea to test a social theorem, The Wellness Theorem.

I have written many times in these pages comparing from the individual state to international levels wellness oriented social programs compared to the outcome data of profit as first priority policies. From this, I have developed what I will call the Wellness Theorem. It postulates that programs that have increased wellness as their first priority inevitably are cheaper, more efficient, more effective, more easily implemented, more productive, and pleasanter to live under.

To test the Theorem I want to move down from the international and national to the more granular level of cities and individual states, and look at the results we now have from three Brandeis type experiments. Two positive proofs of the Wellness Theorem, and one negative proof. I want to be clear I could have

picked many other examples, so as you read this, let these three studies stand for a far larger truth. I will start in Tennessee.

Six years ago, in 2010, the city council of Chattanooga, Tennessee, made a fateful decision: they decided it was in the city's interest that everyone have access to a high-speed publicly owned internet. It was a matter of the city's wellness as they saw it. At the time the national average download speed was 3 Mbps, and the upload speed was 595 kbps.² Chattanooga at the time tested better than the national average at 4.490 Mbps download and 885 kbps upload, but that was not good enough for the council.² Their initial goal was a then almost unimaginable 1 Gbps (1 Gbps = 1000 Mbps).

And once they made the decision they reached their goal more quickly than many predicted at a remarkably modest price and just kept on upgrading. As I write this in June 2016 in Chattanooga it is possible to get reliable internet at speeds up to 10 Gbps. To give a sense of comparison Time Warner's cable operation for technical reasons maxes out at 300 Mbps.

The unhappy truth is that although the United States created the internet we are no longer even in the top 10 nations in terms of internet speed. That honor goes to Korea at 26.7 Mbps, followed by Sweden at 19.1, Norway at 18.8 Mbps, and Japan at 17.4 Mbps. I live in an area served by a small private telephone company whose owner is a techie, and tries to keep us ahead of the curve. I pay \$54.70 for 15.85 Mbps download and 0.93 Mbps upload, and consider myself lucky compared to surrounding areas. In Chattanooga I could get 100 Mbps for \$57.99, and 1 Gig for \$69.00, with steep discounts for low-income residents.

That is so fast that in the FAQs signing up for access they advise talking with tech support because older computers and tablets cannot handle the speed and the cheaper option is better. How does that stack up with what you pay, and what you get for it? My guess is if you could do as well with your private internet service provider (ISP) as a student or grandmother in Chattanooga, you would be a very happy camper indeed. On iTunes, the average HD movie size is 3–5 GB. At 1 Gbps, if there are no other technical limitations, that means you could download a movie in 3–5 seconds.

But this story is about more than the individual customer's benefits, as wonderful as they are. I think it should also be seen as a social experiment testing the hypothesis that making individual and thus social wellness, and not profit the first priority will result in a cheaper, more efficient, more effective, pleasanter to live under, and more productive outcomes than alternatives based on profit as the first priority.

I think it is also important to consider how the city chose to make this important municipal upgrade possible. This was not done by a major ISP like Time Warner, or Comcast, a private corporation being granted a monopoly for profit. Instead the city chose its publicly owned municipal power company EPB which already had a history of a strong social and environmental commitment. In the course of its ongoing modernization of the city's power grid, something it was doing anyway, EPB decided to lay a fiber-optic network at the same time.

But to understand what the internet project meant to Chattanooga one has to go way beyond the internet. Businesses began to move into downtown

The Schwartzreport tracks emerging trends that will affect the world, particularly the United States. For EXPLORE it focuses on matters of health in the broadest sense of that term, including medical issues, changes in the biosphere, technology, and policy considerations, all of which will shape our culture and our lives.

Chattanooga, restaurants started. Everything from clothing businesses to galleries were attracted. The way businesses advertised changed. The way elderly people could conduct their affairs altered, as did the entertainment available to them. One gig is a different world, and it produced a different and better economy for the city.

The only impediment to EPB's development of its network was that Comcast formerly the dominant provider in the city, sued. As Peter Moskowitz who has studied this new public internet model in-depth described it, "Comcast sued, saying the service amounted to unfair competition for the company. It lost the suit, but Comcast and other companies have spent millions of dollars on ad campaigns and donations to local politicians in the hope that municipal providers don't expand more than they already have."³

He added, "Six years ago, Chattanooga was the only city offering publicly owned 1-gigabit Internet service. Today, over 50 communities do, according to ILSR, and there are over 450 communities in the United States offering some form of publicly owned Internet service. Many municipal networks are in small towns and rural areas where private high-speed access is hard to come by."³

The Chattanooga internet story is just one proof of the hypothesis: wellness oriented social policies are cheaper, more efficient, more effective, more pleasant to live under, and more productive. Let us look at another.

By 2004 the homeless problem in San Francisco had become so acute, such a weeping sore, and so expensive that Board of Supervisors, Mark Farrell, requested of the Budget and Legislative Analyst's Office another approach, one that came to be known as Housing First. Supervisor Farrell asked for an analysis of "the impact of supportive housing on total costs for homeless adults."⁴ That request became the *Plan to Abolish Homelessness* driven by citizen outcry and grounded in research. Its major conclusion, "permanent supportive housing has been proven to be the most effective and efficient way to take chronically homeless off the streets."⁴

By 2007 the City had implemented the program with 1818 homeless adults and initially costs went up as the city figured out exactly how to implement its policies, and as it began to grapple with the untreated illnesses of the homeless. But by 2010–2011, "Combined service and supportive housing costs decreased ... as these adults stabilized in supportive housing The decrease in costs was due primarily to a 58 percent decrease in emergency/urgent care costs, especially inpatient hospitalization."⁴ And even within that they realized that just a few people had been responsible for the initial increase, and had these people been treated more expeditiously costs would have gone down from the beginning. Costs for the Housing First policy saw expenses between 2011 and 2015 decline 56% resulting in a \$31.5 million savings.

This change in the homeless policies and the wellness increase that resulted had other major financial impacts on the public budget. In the same period jail costs declined even more, 64% from \$1.6 million to \$580,000, as did costs for prosecutors, inpatient hospitalization, mental health services, ambulance costs; the full panoply of expenses a city incurs by leaving destitute people no option but to live on the street. And as the costs went down the city's social wellness improved; the city was a nicer place for everyone, resident and visitor.

Once again just the hypothesis predicts: wellness was more efficient, cheaper, easier to implement, more pleasant to live under, and more productive.

Now let me offer another study which provides a negative proof of the theorem: Abstinence-only Education (AOE) programs. The idea of such an "educational" approach in its modern incarnation begins when the conservative religious world began to become political and aligned with the very conservative political Right. In 1981 that marriage resulted in The Adolescent Family Life Act (AFLA), Title XX of the Public Health Services Act, colloquially known "The Chastity Law." Over \$125 million went into this effort to convince teenagers that sex was bad unless done monogamously in marriage.

Then the whole thing got further refined in 1996 by Title V of the

Welfare Reform Act, or the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF). This conservative scheme set up yet more grants for states providing abstinence-only-until-marriage education as long as such programs met a specific eight-point criteria, known as the "A–H definition."⁵

- A) has as its exclusive purpose teaching the social, psychological, and health gains to be realized by abstaining from sexual activity;
- B) teaches abstinence from sexual activity outside marriage as the expected standard for all school-age children;
- C) teaches that abstinence from sexual activity is the only certain way to avoid out-of-wedlock pregnancy, sexually transmitted diseases, and other associated health problems;
- D) teaches that a mutually faithful monogamous relationship in the context of marriage is the expected standard of sexual activity;
- E) teaches that sexual activity outside of the context of marriage is likely to have harmful psychological and physical effects;
- F) teaches that bearing children out-of-wedlock is likely to have harmful consequences for the child, the child's parents, and society;
- G) teaches young people how to reject sexual advances and how alcohol and drug use increase vulnerability to sexual advances, and
- H) teaches the importance of attaining self-sufficiency before engaging in sexual activity.⁶

Four years later, a third AOE program was created, Title XI, Section 1110 of the Social Security Act.

Hundreds of millions of dollars were spent on these programs, but by 2004 it was obvious they did not work and in fact they caused problems. A report prepared by the office of California Representative Henry A. Waxman found "that two-thirds of the abstinence-only education curricula studied contained incorrect scientific information regarding condom failure, sexually transmitted diseases, the health consequences of abortions, and mental health. Much of this information directly contradicted the scientific findings of government agencies

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