



After the Fact | States of Innovation—In Depth with Sue Urahn, Pew’s President and CEO

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TRANSCRIPT

Sue Urahn, president and CEO, The Pew Charitable Trusts: One of the things I think that is so fascinating about research is that, in the best of cases, it provides a language or a foundation that people who have opposing views can come together to have a conversation about what’s going to happen and why.

Dan LeDuc, host: Meet Sue Urahn, the new president and CEO of The Pew Charitable Trusts. She’s talking about the important role of research in developing policy. To launch a new season of “After the Fact,” we begin with a conversation with her about how state government can improve the lives of Americans.

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Matt Skroch, project director of U.S. Public Lands and Rivers Conservation, The Pew Charitable Trusts: There is an innovation here in terms of how states and federal governments, elected leaders, and decision-makers can work in a collaboration.

Laura Cantral, executive director, Coastal Conservation League: It’s important that our public understands the opportunity to engage and shape the future.

Carl Ruby, pastor, Central Christian Church: I don’t want to look back later in life and think, why didn’t I do anything about that problem?

Dan LeDuc: Welcome to “After the Fact.” For The Pew Charitable Trusts, I’m Dan LeDuc. At a time when many of us may feel government is gridlocked, it’s important to remember there are places where real change is being made. This season, we’re looking at States of Innovation—examples of state governments who have creatively addressed problems with solutions that are working.

As always, we start with a data point. For this episode, that number is 67%. Sixty-seven percent, or about two-thirds, of U.S. adults are confident in local elected officials, according to the Pew Research Center. And those local officials are central to the innovation we’ll be covering.



Sue Urahn got her start in state government, working for the Minnesota State Legislature, where she saw research translated into policies and laws that improved people's lives. That led her to joining Pew 25 years ago, where she eventually launched Pew's work with state governments around the nation. We talked to Sue about Pew's focus on evidence-based policymaking and how it continues to make a difference.

Dan LeDuc: Sue Urahn, welcome.

Sue Urahn: Nice to be here.

Dan LeDuc: It seems fitting to have you joining us because your background is in state policy. And you're also the new president and CEO of Pew. So welcome, congratulations.

Sue Urahn: Thank you.

Dan LeDuc: I wanted to talk about your early background because you started in state government before you came to Pew.

Sue Urahn: The reason I ended up in the legislature was fairly simple. I was finishing a Ph.D. in education. I loved doing research. But I had a fairly significant desire to also have an impact. And not that basic research does not have an impact, but I wanted something a little bit more immediate.

So during the time I was in graduate school, I had an opportunity to work with the Higher Education Coordinating Board in Minnesota, which set education policy. And I just loved it. It was the ability to do research and then to see it translated into decisions and policies that had an immediate impact. And I was hooked right from the beginning. I have a deep, deep fondness for my home state. And the ability to be able to work on policy that affected the state mattered a lot to me.

So at the end of the day, I stayed in Minnesota. And I went to the legislature. It was also an unparalleled opportunity to not only see the sausage getting made but to be part of the sausage-making process. So for me, it was—it was also an ability to continue to learn. I had in grad school, obviously, done a lot of research and a lot of presentations and a lot of conversations on that. But I had never been up front and involved in the policy process.

Dan LeDuc: So during your tenure is the time that Pew has really made its evolution into much more of a policy-oriented organization, as opposed to a grant-making organization. You eventually became the director of the Pew Center on the States, which gets us to our topic of this season. How did that come about? And what was the whole idea behind Pew getting involved in a center focused on the states?



Sue Urahn: Well, we had a couple of projects just before that. One of the very first ones I did when I moved over to the program side was a pretty significant multiyear investment to help states invest in preschool for kids. And based on the very compelling research that was not widely known at that time that there was a very good economic return on investment when states were able to do that.

It was at a time when states were very frustrated about their lack of progress on K-12 reform. So I think they viewed preschool as a really great place to invest. And we viewed it as a place that was ripe for progress at the state level. So we moved that program forward and worked in several states. And as we did that, it became very clear that the opportunity to engage in different kinds of policy areas at the state level was something that Pew should really take a very close look at.

So launching the Pew Center on the States allowed us to bring together different kinds of policy, whether it was education or how well states perform, or sentencing and corrections, and develop a capacity at Pew that allowed us to work across different issue areas but bring in some of the same approaches and thoughtful research to bear that would help state policymakers make better decisions.

Dan LeDuc: So how did Pew start figuring out which areas to start with, pre-K for example? Why that as opposed to something else?

Sue Urahn: We look for issues where there's a real opportunity to make a difference, a kind of a window of opportunity, if you will, where policymakers are aware that there are challenges. They would like to be able to move forward with some thoughtful solutions. And they are kind of primed, if you will, to look at the research and to welcome some help and technical assistance from organizations like Pew and others that are ready to help.

Dan LeDuc: All of that is frequently based on evidence and data and research that we engage in or work with others to engage in. And it's almost like applying the scientific method that we might see in a laboratory with test tubes to policy, right. You sort of have some theories, and you want to test them and develop the research. And I've heard you in meetings at Pew talk to the staff about, trust the process here; what do you mean by trust that process?

Sue Urahn: Well, in part, it's investing in research and very high-quality research and being willing to stand by the results. In other words, we don't have a solution in one hand and then look for a body of research that will support that solution. That is not how we work. We look at the research, find out what solutions that research suggests.



It's not always easy to be willing to take the research and live by it. Because sometimes it will come back and perhaps say—no, that's maybe not the best solution, or that's maybe not the solution that you thought it was. And you have to be willing to let it go. You can't get entrenched and sort of ideologically attached to particular solutions. You really do have to listen to the research.

One of the things I think that is so fascinating about research is that, in the best of cases, it provides a language or a foundation that people who have opposing views can come together to have a conversation about what's going to happen and why.

There are going to be cases where politics, or the fact that people have deep ideological or value-driven beliefs, will simply not ultimately be shaped—the decisions will not ultimately be shaped by data. So it's not like there's a formula. It's not like you have a really good research project that shows that if policy A is put in place, it will do X. And you take it to a state legislature. And they say, "Oh, thank you very much. Let's do that policy."

That does not happen, right. I think there is always the role of values and politics that happen. And the sorting, the research, becomes part of that sorting process as you move forward.

Dan LeDuc: What's the role of an organization like Pew, though, in that sorting process?

Sue Urahn: Well, a couple things. One is we make sure that the research is relevant for the state. All states are different. They have different populations. They have different challenges. They have different policy structures within which things play out. So research that is customized so that it's relevant and uses state data is always going to be more compelling and useful to state policymakers. Then we often come in and we sit with the legislators. And we work through the research.

So we talk about, if you do A, what happens? What happens in this particular subpopulation? What happens to this particular part of the state if you were to do that? Because states, even within the state, are not a monolith. They have different geographic regions that are affected differently by many different policies. And for Pew, one of the most important things is that we serve as a credible messenger. The source of the research and the person who delivers the message of the research has to be respected and has to be credible to the folks that are receiving it. And if they're not, it doesn't matter what the research says.

So from Pew's perspective, we are always very careful to make sure that people understand that we are completely nonpartisan, that we are driven by the research and our desire to make sure that policy decisions that are put in place are well-informed by that research. The last thing I would say is that we are very much aware that we play a very supporting role with state



legislatures. They make the decisions. They're accountable for them. And we are not front and center in many of those conversations. That's not our job.

Dan LeDuc: So Sue, how do states get to be innovative?

Sue Urahn: Well, the wonderful thing about states is that there are 50 of them. And they are all incredibly different. And I think it was Justice Brandeis who said that states are, or can be, the "laboratories of democracy." And I think it's so true.

If states have the freedom and the flexibility to try different approaches and to customize them for the particular challenges that they fit, they will come up with different solutions. And not only will they come up with different solutions, but often they will then be able to share those with other states. And those states will start with those and then adapt it even farther for the particular challenges that they meet. So it becomes a really virtuous cycle of innovation across the states. And I think that's a tremendous contribution that states can make.

Dan LeDuc: One of the other areas that Pew has been really active in at the state level is criminal justice reform and, in particular, sentencing issues. Can we talk a little bit about what we've done and where we're headed in that area?

Sue Urahn: Well, we've been working on sentencing and corrections issues for well over a decade now. And that was a kind of a fascinating process. When we started in that process, a lot of the debate out in the field was, "Are you tough on crime, or are you soft on crime?"

That was the political debate. And it was so challenging. Because people would lose elections if they got tagged as soft on crime, that nobody was really willing to think about a different approach to sentencing and corrections.

So one of the things that we were able to do was provide some research and some framing, actually, that changed that conversation to one that focused on, are you really providing the best response to some of the challenges that we have in sentencing and corrections in the most efficient and effective way? So what is the best way to achieve the goal of better public safety and holding people accountable in the long run?

And what we found was that there were some states, and we started in states that would not be your usual suspects for taking on significant sentencing and corrections reform, like Texas, and found some champions there, some legislative champions, who really, as they looked out over the next decade, and they looked at the cost to the state of continuing to build more and more prisons that were not necessarily providing the best return on public safety that they wanted, that they were willing to take a different path.



Dan LeDuc: Well, we can't let the elephant in the room go by, which is, unfortunately, the world is dealing with a pandemic right now that is going to have a dramatic impact on how policy is developed just about everywhere. What do you see as the major challenges, especially at the state level? And how do you foresee those impacts sort of just affecting how this kind of work gets done over the next few years?

Sue Urahn: Well, there are some clear leading challenges that states and the federal government, to be honest, are going to face over the next couple of years. And one of the challenges is going to be to find a way for the federal government and the states to work together in ways that are productive. So, and that doesn't always happen the way that it should.

Certainly, states are going to be dealing with some budget issues as we move forward. Their populations are going to be very hard-hit, different segments of the population, from the pandemic. You've got entertainment. You've got tourism. You've got the restaurant industry. All of those folks are going to really be suffering. And states are going to have to figure out, that's going to have a broad impact at the state level, whether it's a need for more services, whether it's a drop in state tax revenue, all of those things are going to be challenges for states.

Dan LeDuc: You've been doing this work for a long time and now are going to be leading this institution as it continues to do more. As you look forward about stuff you can look on and work on in the coming years, what excites you as examples of where we can see improvements?

Sue Urahn: I look at the role that Pew can play over the next three to five years in the context of what people like to call a hyperpartisan policy environment, where it's people are beginning to wonder whether it's possible to have bipartisan agreement, or whether that's a model that simply doesn't apply anymore. I think the research would suggest that most policy that gets made is bipartisan, to some degree or another. And certainly, if you want policies that are going to stick, you need to begin to build bipartisan support. Pew has a really important role to play here in finding ways to craft solutions using data that allow the left and the right to come together around what is often an incremental step forward. And I think people underestimate the value of taking very meaningful but incremental steps.

I think being able to show that progress can be made, being successful, and then building on that over time is the very best way to make progress. And it's like the old saying goes, success breeds success. As you are able to find a place to work together and bring the policy forward and then make it clear to the public that, yes, it can happen, yes, there is bipartisan agreement, and yes, government can work—is a role that Pew can play. And I think it's going to be really important in the coming years.



[MUSIC BREAK]

Dan LeDuc: If you're looking for some good news, stay with us over the rest of this season, as we highlight stories of innovation by states that are tackling long-standing problems—like improving access to fair and affordable credit, reducing the costly impact of flooding, and expanding treatment for substance use disorders. We'll show you places where change is happening and lives are improving. You can learn more about this season at pewtrusts.org/afterthefact. Thanks for listening.

For The Pew Charitable Trusts, I'm Dan LeDuc and this is "After the Fact."