



## **After the Fact | Strengthening Democracy: For the People**

Originally aired August 25, 2023

**Total runtime: 00:14:12**

### **TRANSCRIPT**

---

**Trooper Sanders, CEO, Benefits Data Trust:** It's really about: How can government work better for people in need? How do we make things more efficient? How do we help people get through the trying times?

**Dan LeDuc, host "After the Fact":** Welcome to the "After the Fact." For The Pew Charitable Trusts, I'm Dan LeDuc.

And that was Trooper Sanders who runs Benefits Data Trust, an organization that helps people connect with the government benefits they need. You'll hear more from him later in the episode. Benefits Data Trust is based in Philadelphia and that's where we're setting this episode. This season we're looking at how to strengthen democracy. And Philadelphia, of course, is the birthplace of democracy. It's also where The Pew Charitable Trusts was founded 75 years ago. There's a strong sense of history in Philadelphia, great art and architecture, and lots of open green space. But Philadelphians are also dealing with serious issues like gun violence, deep poverty, and a need for affordable housing. And, they're losing faith that their government can help. In a poll this year, 65% of residents said the city is on the wrong track; and that's our data point for this episode.

Donna Frisby-Greenwood, who leads Pew's work in Philadelphia, is here to tell us more about the state of the city and the efforts to help government there be more responsive—and strengthen democracy.

**Dan LeDuc:** Welcome, Donna. You're a longtime Philadelphian. Tell us, why is Philadelphia so important to our nation's history?

**Donna Frisby-Greenwood, senior vice president, The Pew Charitable Trusts:** Philadelphia is a great city and it's mostly known for being the birthplace of our nation. Everything from Independence Hall and the signing of the Constitution, the Liberty Bell, the flag being created here. And we take a lot of pride in that history.

We're also a very modern city with great restaurants, great arts, and culture. A city of beautiful murals, wonderful world-class art from the Barnes Museum to the Philadelphia Museum of Art,



and the African American Museum. And an amazing park system. No matter what neighborhood you're in, you have very easy access to our Fairmount Park system.

**Dan LeDuc:** I've spent some time in Philadelphia as well. I lived there for over 10 years while I was working for the *Inquirer*. And I'm delighted to hear you talk about the city. As a former resident, I know Philadelphia also faces some real challenges.

**Donna Frisby-Greenwood:** Philadelphia is an amazing city, but it is also a city with deep poverty. About 11% of our residents live in deep poverty.

**Dan LeDuc:** Tell us a bit about Pew's history in the city.

**Donna Frisby-Greenwood:** Pew has been in Philadelphia for 75 years. The family started as a foundation in 1948 and we've been doing grantmaking here ever since. Our very first grant that the foundation made in 1948 was to the American Red Cross of Southeastern Pennsylvania.

Some of the other early grantees who still remain grantees today are Children's Hospital of Philadelphia, the Philadelphia College of Physicians, and the Philadelphia Museum of Art. And then also, in 1976, the city's African American Museum opened for the first time and Pew was one of the major contributors supporting its initial exhibition. The founders were very interested in supporting local efforts, but also national efforts.

The foundation had national grantmaking, but it's never stopped doing the local grantmaking. And the grantmaking has evolved over the years. In the '90s is really when Pew worked with the city to create an organization that we call Visit Philly. And Visit Philly, and the Convention and Visitors Bureau, really helped to make Philadelphia a destination. And so, Pew was really instrumental in the early '90s in helping to make Philadelphia a place that people wanted to visit and want to come here as tourists. And Visit Philly is one of those institutions that we continue to support even now.

**Dan LeDuc:** Pew's Philadelphia research and policy initiative has become a resource for policymakers and other leaders. The initiative polls residents regularly and prepares reports on key issues facing Philadelphia, sometimes comparing it with other U.S. cities. And annually the initiative publishes a "State of the City" report. In your previous work in the city, you were among the people who received the report—so, how is that valuable to you?

**Donna Frisby-Greenwood:** Yeah, it's incredible. It's one of those reports as a nonprofit practitioner and a former government employee that I look forward to every year. I was so excited about, "Oh, the 'State of the City's coming out. We gotta see where we are. What's the data showing? What are the trends? What do we need to do differently?"



A lot of our city leaders use our report to take action. Data is very important to helping people make decisions and oftentimes the data is there, but there's not anyone to aggregate it and share the story.

**Dan LeDuc:** The "State of the City" report included findings that were worthy of celebration for sure. Unemployment in Philadelphia fell to 5.9% in 2022, down from 9% a year earlier. But the research found other areas of concern, too.

**Donna Frisby-Greenwood:** This year, 65% of Philadelphians noted that the city is on the wrong track.

**Dan LeDuc:** That 65% number comes from this year's Lenfest Institute for Journalism's "Every Voice, Every Vote" survey. In 2019, only 38% of residents said that the city was on the wrong track, so that's quite an increase.

**Donna Frisby-Greenwood:** It's very discouraging. When you think about it, during the pandemic, a lot of government services shuttered or came to a halt. And so, this was a survey that was done post-pandemic. And so, people I think began to lose some faith in government because city services were slower to happen because also city workers had to stay home.

And things like getting the title to your home and going to the Office of License and Inspection and those kinds of things, they were shut down for a time and people couldn't get things done. And so, I think great city services and access to city services, and understanding how to access city services, is really important in helping establish trust in government.

*(Voices from BDT call center)*

**Dan LeDuc:** That's a conversation between a community resident looking to connect with government help and an employee with Benefits Data Trust. The Philadelphia-based organization, which is partially supported by the Pew Fund for Health and Human Services, works across the nation on issues including food insecurity and access to health care. Its CEO, Trooper Sanders, spoke with "After the Fact" executive producer Sultana Ali.

**Trooper Sanders:** While Benefits Data Trust is national, we are founded in Philadelphia. The vast majority of my colleagues are Philadelphians. Philadelphia is such an extraordinary city. Rich, dynamic, complicated. But yes, it has this extraordinary challenge of having one of the highest poverty rates of a city across the country. And there's some extraordinary people who are really trying to make sure that is not the epitaph for Philadelphia, and we believe that benefits access



and making it easier for people to get food assistance, health care, and higher education assistance can help ease that.

**Sultana Ali, executive producer, “After the Fact”:** So, it's really interesting that you find yourself in that position with some of the challenges that are facing Philadelphia. You have a really unique perspective. Can you talk about that?

**Trooper Sanders:** I grew up in Detroit, Michigan, during the '70s and '80s. And while I was fortunate enough that I did not live in poverty, I was adjacent to it. And so, if you were in Detroit during those times, you knew the ups and downs of life and what it really meant when people had help and where they could rely on some assistance to get them through the tough times.

There's millions' worth of assistance left on the table in Philadelphia every year. And if you think about, if this were a for-profit organization, and millions of investment capital left in the quadrangle of City Hall or on Market Street, someone would be fired.

And if we all just said, “We can't put that to work,” so that people can be less hungry and get health care, and we really find it moving to be able to not only help Philadelphians every day, as we speak—I have some amazing colleagues talking to Philadelphians to help connect them to benefits—but we're also working with the network of organizations and public servants and leaders across the city to put these benefits in the hands of people who need them.

**Sultana Ali:** BDT's website says, “We help government serve people better,” which is such a powerful calling card. Can you talk a little bit about some of the examples, the ways that you're working with policy makers to do exactly that?

**Trooper Sanders:** I think it's important that in this kind of cynical age where it's easy to think that government is, by default, bad, to remember that government is us, both from a democratic point of view and also from a working point of view, that there are public servants all across this country who show up to work every day.

They aren't getting rich, and they don't show up to make life harder for people. And we work with public servants all across this country who know that these benefits programs are not serving people the way that they want to be served. They know that they're doing everything they can, but every day there are some people being left behind and some of them are literally in tears.

While we are steeped in government programs and regulations and all of the complexity that comes with programs such as Medicaid and SNAP, our primary motivation is the lived experience of people who need help. We don't even realize it, but yet, if you're low income, if you're



struggling, if you're facing challenges, you're told, "Nope, you will just take whatever you're given." That's not right. It's not equitable and it's actually not efficient.

And so, part of this is, one, how can we, through our work with my amazing colleagues, our benefits outreach specialists who talk to people every day and help screen them? How can we take the pressure off the public servants by adding some capacity to help people today? But then also, how can we take the unique relationship that we have with government leaders and provide the type of advice and technical assistance?

Then you build momentum, and then ultimately where we really want to be is where public servants and the government leaders, you know, who guide these systems to say, "Look, let's set a high bar for the level of standard of care and support that we want, so that if you are eligible for benefits, we want to make sure that it is an easy path for you to get them, that it's done effectively and it's done with dignity."

Now that's a big undertaking for complicated systems, but we need that kind of bold leadership. And I think part of BDT, we know that ultimately it is the government's responsibility to run these programs. We want to do everything as in our power to both help them and to take a barrier away of why a government leader would think, "You know what? This is just too hard to take on."

**Sultana Ali:** We're talking about democracy, which for some people listening may feel like, "Oh, democracy, that's something having to do with the Founding Fathers. What does that have to do with my life?" So, we're hoping that you can take that larger concept, those principles of democracy, and help us tie that to something that affects an individual person's life.

Something like, how does getting food assistance and leveraging those benefits that the government provides for the people who need them, how does that tie back to democracy?

**Trooper Sanders:** Being Philadelphia-based, one of, one of my great walking routes in Philadelphia is going through Independence Hall.

And I'm a bit of a nerd around the founders and how our Constitution was designed. And I think one of the important things to remember is during the debates that a lot of that focus was on very practical issues. That's what really democracy is about. It's about solving challenges for people.

But there were also other practical considerations of what does it mean for local government to serve people they're closest to, and how does it relate to the national government?



And a lot of the things that we deal with every day as citizens today, it's still part of that debate. One of the things I think that's important for people to remember is that, that the United States is a constantly unfolding puzzle, it is a constant quest we are constantly trying to reinvent and figure out.

And so, we have to be a part of that. And I see our work at Benefits Data Trust as, yes, it's about how can people get SNAP, or what used to be called food stamps, easier, or sign up for federal financial aid so that they can go to college, but making these systems more effective. Making it work at scale and with dignity for people who are in need. It goes right back to those founding debates about how we create a more perfect union.

**Dan LeDuc:** For a final word on this work toward a more perfect union, here's Donna Frisby-Greenwood.

**Donna Frisby-Greenwood:** It goes back to what our Founding Fathers wanted for us as a nation, for us as citizens. And why people immigrate here, right? For that American Dream.

And if I can't get the stop sign at the end of my block or the pothole fixed on my street, then I'm not gonna have confidence in government. Sometimes people don't make the connection to why it's important for them to vote. And why they do or do not get city services in their neighborhood.

We have to help people make those connections and understand that their own action can push for city services and make sure that they're standing up and that they know who they should be talking to, and they have the information to make things happen in their own communities.

**Dan LeDuc:** Thanks for listening. If you'd like to see and read about some of the people who are working to strengthen democracy in America today, go to [pewtrusts.org/afterthefact](https://pewtrusts.org/afterthefact). And if you haven't already, please subscribe to "After the Fact" wherever you listen to us—that will make sure you know about our next episodes. For The Pew Charitable Trusts, I'm Dan LeDuc, and this is "After the Fact."