



# San Antonio: Strengthening Community Collaboratives



ABOUT

# ProSocial World

We're a non-profit dedicated to enabling individual and collective action for positive cultural change and widespread cooperation through our unique framework built on science and compassion.

## What makes us unique?

**We've been working on the theory and practice of a ProSocial framework since 2011. We decided it was time to expand our efforts and founded our non-profit in 2020.**

While many organizations have a prosocial mission and vision, what makes us unique is our focus on bringing together modern evolutionary and behavioral science with Elinor Ostrom's Nobel prize-winning design principles to inform our process. Our work focuses on empowering individuals, groups, and communities at all contexts and sizes to make positive cultural change possible.

## Our Belief

We believe that to catalyze rapid, positive cultural change we need to recognize our interconnectedness and continuously improve the relationships we have with ourselves, each other, and the planet.

## Our Purpose

We exist to consciously evolve a world that works for all.

## Our work focuses on **three key areas**

### Research

Our research explores the integration of modern evolutionary science, spirituality, and community - providing an inclusive framework that can help groups to become cooperative and adaptive.

### Courses

We provide a number of learning opportunities that enable and support individuals and groups to collaborate, co-create, and tackle issues together.

### Community

We've created a global community so we can work together to accelerate a major, multi-level evolutionary transition and better adapt to our rapidly changing world.

# A commitment to compassion in San Antonio

Several years ago, leaders and residents in San Antonio made a simple but ambitious commitment: they wanted their city to be guided by compassion. In 2017, the mayor signed a resolution declaring San Antonio a “Compassionate City,” inviting people across the city to work together to improve life for their neighbors.

What followed wasn’t a single program or initiative. Instead, a network of community collaboratives began to take shape. Many were volunteer-led and focused on different issues – mental health, housing, environmental sustainability, immigration, and community resources. Each group worked independently while also staying connected to others working toward a shared goal.

Like many collaborative efforts, the work was meaningful but not always easy to sustain. Even with strong commitment, groups encountered familiar challenges:

- meetings that felt repetitive or unfocused
- unclear roles and expectations
- difficulty addressing differences in perspective directly

Coordination across organizations required ongoing attention.

ProSocial World partnered with local leaders to better understand what was helping these collaborations work in practice. Community members themselves helped conduct interviews and reflect on what they were noticing.

The insights in this brief draw on 42 interviews and 35 survey responses collected by trained community co-researchers working within the collaboratives. As one participant described the broader aim this way:

***“We’re working on trying to make a regenerative system, a social system, civic system locally, that addresses needs and includes equity and inclusion.”***

Over time, a clearer picture began to emerge.

# How the collaboratives developed

What stood out was that progress did not come from a single intervention or structural change. Instead, it developed through gradual shifts in how people worked together.

In many groups, shared purpose became more concrete and something that was revisited regularly rather than assumed. This created a stronger sense of direction and helped guide decision-making over time. As one participant put it:

***“We are unified by a shared vision and a sense of urgency to help those in need. People are open to each other’s ideas.”***

As purpose became clearer, decision-making processes also became more transparent and inclusive. Participants had a better understanding of how decisions were made and how they could contribute, which increased engagement and follow-through.

At the same time, roles and expectations became clearer. This reduced confusion and made coordination across organizations easier to manage.

Several shifts tended to reinforce one another:

- Clearer purpose supported better decisions
- Clearer decisions supported stronger follow-through
- Clearer expectations reduced friction across roles

Just as importantly, interactions within the groups began to shift. Differences and tensions, which are inevitable in collaborative work, were more often surfaced and addressed directly.

***“Compassion is like water; it gets through the cracks down to the level of need.”***

*– participant quote*



# Shifts in how groups worked together

Over time, these shifts became visible in how the collaboratives functioned day to day.

Meetings became more purposeful, with clearer connections to shared goals. Conversations were more focused, and participants were more likely to stay engaged. Listening also appeared repeatedly as part of how collaboration was sustained. One participant described this simply:

*“Listen. Learn. Ask questions with respect.”*

- **Decision-making processes, while still evolving, became easier to follow and more consistent across the group.** Participants had greater clarity about how input was gathered and how decisions were reached.
- **Differences in perspective, which had previously been difficult to navigate, were more often addressed openly.** This did not mean that agreement was always reached, but it allowed groups to work through challenges more constructively.
- **Follow-through also improved.** As expectations became clearer and agreements more visible, participants were better able to coordinate their efforts and sustain momentum over time.

These changes were not just procedural. They also shaped how people related to one another over time. As one participant reflected:

*“Each person in the Collaborative matters. This weaves a level of trust that endures for a long time.”*

Another participant described the quality of collaboration this way:

*“Building relationships to support and inspire others to develop ideas and sustain effort. Like in a dance, the collectives move together.”*



# What changed in practice

The San Antonio experience reflects a pattern that appears in many collaborative efforts. Success is not determined only by who is involved or what a group is trying to achieve, but by how people work together over time.

Even highly committed groups can struggle when there are no shared ways of:

- making decisions
- clarifying expectations
- responding to challenges

At the same time, relatively small shifts in how interactions are structured can have meaningful effects on trust, coordination, and effectiveness.



One of the most important developments in San Antonio was the emergence of a shared way of describing how the group functioned. This made it easier to notice patterns, address issues earlier, and make adjustments without placing blame on individuals.

Another takeaway is that collaboration does not improve all at once. In most cases, progress comes through ongoing reflection and gradual adjustment rather than large-scale redesign.

**At a time when many groups are experiencing strain and division, the San Antonio experience offers a practical example of how cooperation can be built and sustained through attention to everyday interactions.**

You can read our in depth research report [here](#).

A special thanks to our partner:

