



David Saltzman running the ING New York City Marathon

Fighting Poverty

An Interview with David Saltzman,
Executive Director, Robin Hood

We haven't wavered from that belief and it is still the driving force behind everything we do at Robin Hood. We've become smarter over the years and have been fortunate that others have joined forces with us to help us do even better.

What programs are you focused on supporting?

The vast majority of our work is focused on trying to prevent poverty. The early childhood programs, schools, and the job training and placement works all make sure that people have the education and attitude they need to find good jobs to lift themselves and their families out of poverty.

Another part of what we do is what we call "survival" – we have to make sure people have the basics: roofs over their heads, food in their bellies, and adequate health care. It's our responsibility to focus on prevention and to make sure our neighbors have the basics in this tough economy.

When there is so much need out there, how challenging is it to address all the things you hope to address?

The bad news is that every indicator of well-being for poor people is moving in the wrong direction. The good news is that over nearly a quarter of a century, we have learned a tremendous amount about what works. People have been very generous to us in this time of need because we now know what works and they want to invest their charitable dollars wisely. They want to make sure their neighbors in these tough times have what they need to survive and to get themselves on their feet.

Why do you think Robin Hood has been so successful?

We have an extraordinary group of people here who spend their days trying to figure out the most effective ways to help poor New Yorkers build better lives for themselves and their families.

Imagine if you had the world's greatest experts sitting together exploring the different ways in which they could fight poverty – that is what we have tried to build here.

In New York City alone, there are about 27,000 poverty-fighting organizations in New York City; our job is to figure out which of those are the most effective at fighting poverty. We then not only provide those programs with money but also with management help, legal assistance, and accounting support – whatever they need to be successful.

From the beginning, our board has been extremely generous – they pay for all of our administrative and fund-raising costs so that every penny a donor gives to Robin Hood goes directly to the most effective interventions. More importantly, they have been generous with their time and with their thinking. They are some of the most gifted people on the planet.

Is it challenging to track impact in some of these areas?

It is challenging to apply metrics to the business of saving lives – it's not been done particularly well before. We are just in the beginning stages here. But it's an important tool we are developing to help determine the best way to invest our donors' money and to fight poverty. It's as important to us as many other things, including making sure our staff visits each of the organizations we fund many times before we make a grant, and after a grant is made, we spend a lot of time following up.

We have a brilliant team here who is trying to develop the proper metrics and we have developed hundreds of algorithms. We know they aren't perfect, but they're a step in the right direction in terms of figuring out how to compare two similar interventions, and those that are dissimilar, i.e. an early childhood program versus a shelter for homeless families.

How critical has the engagement of Robin Hood's board been to the success of the organization?

We are blessed with the best board on the planet. They are wonderfully generous with their time, their thinking, and their financial resources. From day one, everybody on our board has displayed an extraordinary level of commitment to helping their neighbors, especially in these tough times. I can call any person on our board at anytime for anything that would help somebody that needed help. They are humanity at its best.

How do you measure success when you're fighting against such a deep systemic problem without a quick fix?

While we know there are no quick fixes, we have made tremendous progress over the past two and a half decades to help lift tens of thousands of people out of poverty in New York City. We've built models that have been replicated in New York, as well as across the country, and around the world.

It is frustrating that we can't move faster, but I get to go to bed every night knowing we have made a huge difference in poor people's lives and that children have a better shot at leading full, successful lives as a result of our work. ●

EDITORS' NOTE David Saltzman earned a Master's in Public Policy and Administration at Columbia University before starting his career in public service working with homeless families for the Human Resources Administration of the City of New York. He was one of Robin Hood's five founding board members in 1988 and became its first full-time employee in 1989. Robin Hood soon attracted attention for developing the innovative "venture philanthropy" approach to giving.

ORGANIZATION BRIEF Robin Hood (www.robinhood.org) is a charitable organization that combines investment principles and philanthropy to assist programs that target poverty in New York City. Founded in 1988, the board of directors includes such names as Jeffrey Immelt, Brian Williams, Harvey Weinstein, and actress Gwyneth Paltrow. The organization is an early practitioner of using metrics to measure the effectiveness of grants and gives 100 percent of every donation directly to programs helping poor New Yorkers. Working with more than 200 nonprofit organizations in New York, their core fund recipients consist of four portfolios: Early Childhood, Jobs & Economic Security, Education, and Survival. In response to the terrorist attacks of September 11, Robin Hood established the 9/11 Relief Fund that distributed more than \$70 million to victims' families and provided services to low income families affected by the attacks.

As one of the founding members of Robin Hood, what was the original vision and how has it evolved?

We started Robin Hood in 1988 after the stock market crash in October 1987. We feared then that the crash was going to be the beginning of a very tough time for poor New Yorkers, and we believed those of us who had been blessed by good fortune had a moral obligation to come together and help our neighbors in a time of need.