

# 5 Tips for Useful Network Knowledge Maps

Bernadette Wright, PhD, and Steven E. Wallis, PhD

“Knowledge mapping” is a scientifically rigorous approach that your network can use to integrate multiple perspectives to discover new insights. A knowledge map (“map”) supports concrete decision-making and can be used to demonstrate your network’s value to funders and other stakeholders. This tip sheet provides five quick tips for improving your knowledge map.

## 1. Arrows Point to Success

On p. 2, we show a simple example of what a knowledge map for a network might look like. Clusters/members are working in different areas, including health, homelessness, and business. Each circle lists something that the partnering organizations believe is important to the network’s goal. The arrows show how changes in one thing cause changes in another (solid green arrows for “causes more,” dashed red arrows for “causes less”). The more arrows pointing toward a circle, the more options you and your coalition have.

The example map below contains a total of 20 circles. Seven of those circles have more than one arrow pointing to them (the circles with the yellow shadows). We recommend you continue mapping until most circles have more than one causal arrow pointing to it. That supports planning and managing your programs, because you can see more than one opportunity (or barrier) that could affect each outcome. So, while this map is a good start, the mappers still have a bit of work to do.

You may end up with a map that may seem large and confusing, but don’t panic. Using a few simple techniques, you can turn it into a map that is much more manageable.

→ Solid green arrows show where one thing causes an increase in another thing.



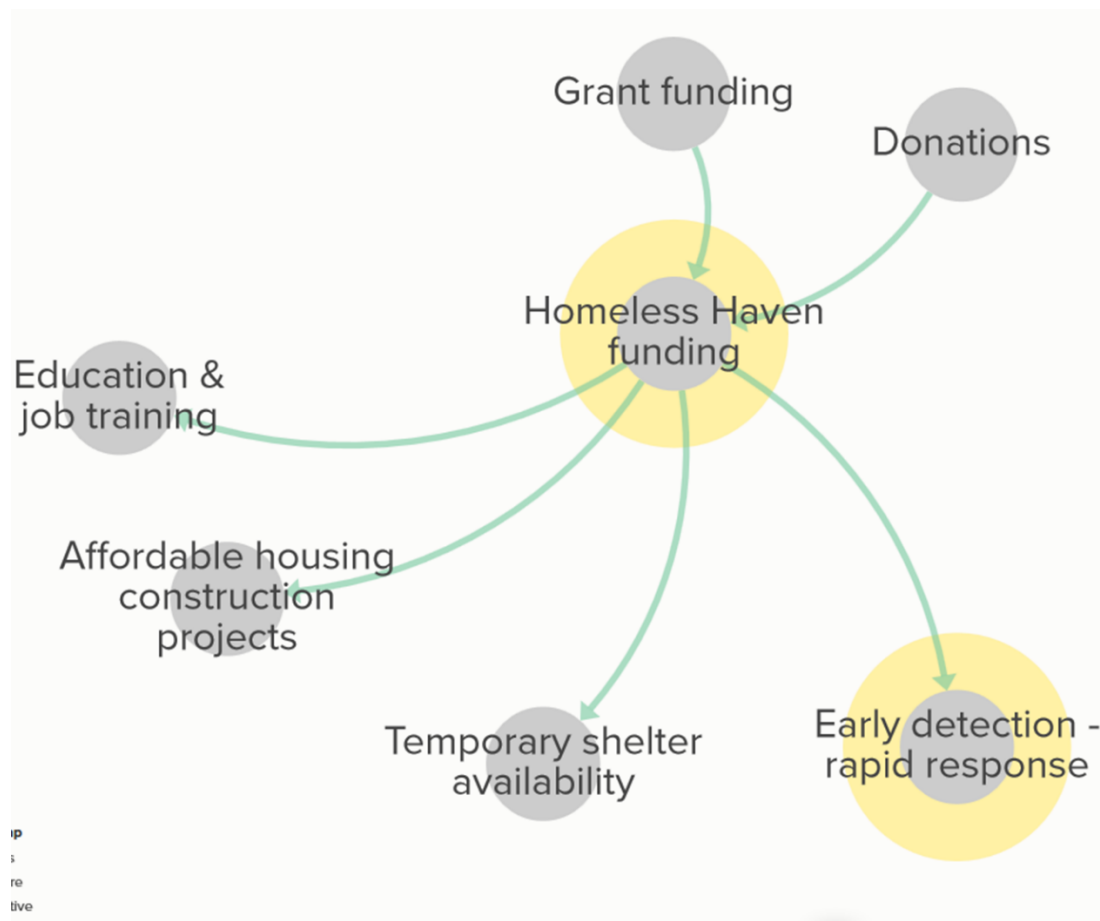
Yellow shadows show circles that have more than one arrow pointing to them on the larger map. For example, Grant funding and Donations both point to Homeless Haven funding.



## 2. Finding Focus

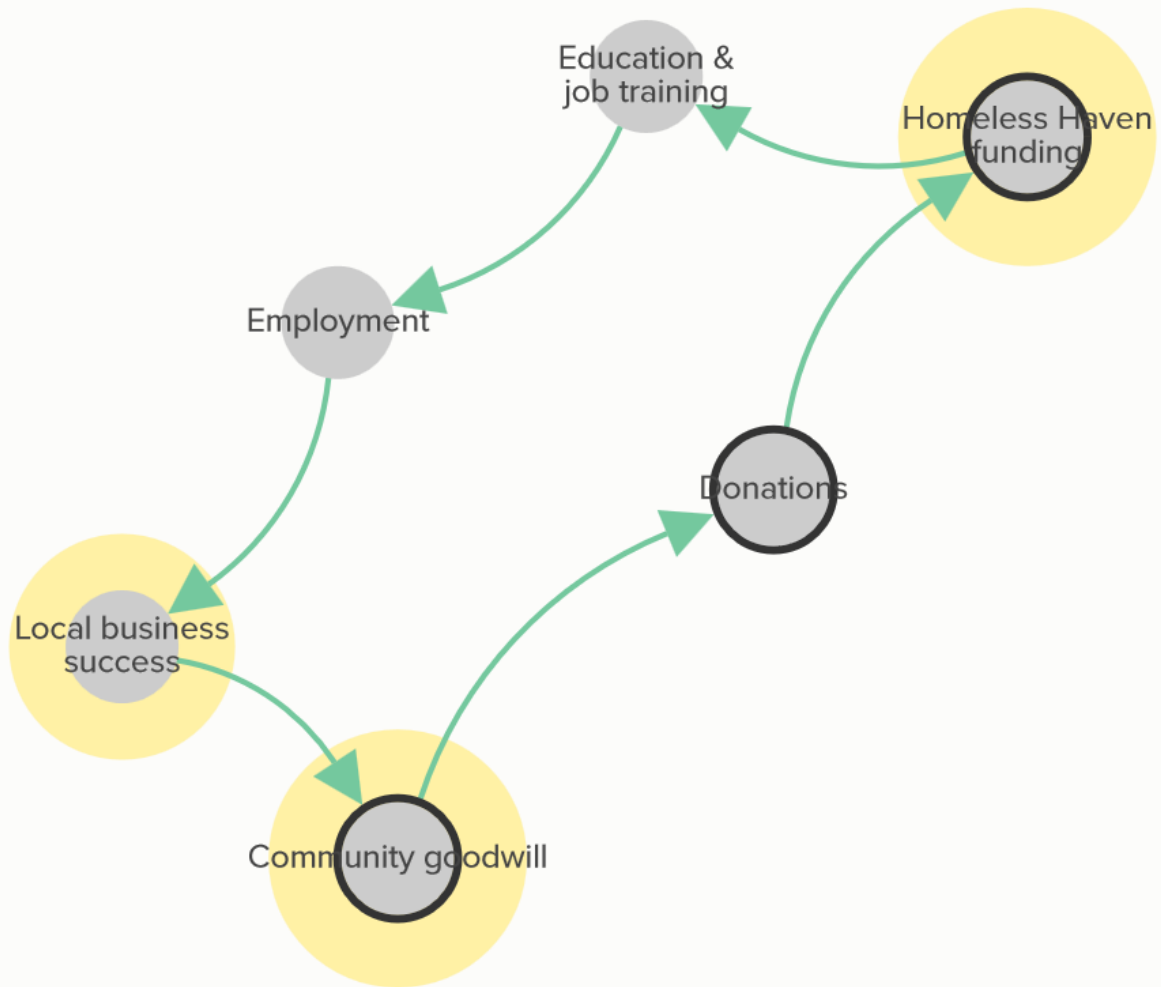
The sample map above is made by a network of housing, health, and business organizations. While it may seem complex, it can be broken down into smaller map such as the one below. This map is only focused on the activities of the housing organization “Homeless Haven.”

While creating a large map shows opportunities for synergistic collaboration, each organization, (and each person) can focus on the piece of the map that shows the activities they are implementing. This makes a large map manageable.



## 3. Find Self-Reinforcing Loops

Also known as “virtuous cycles,” these are connected circles where you can go from any one point in the circle to the next point, and eventually end up back where you started, as in the example loop below. Loops show where you can find self-sustaining systems and continued growth to address your issues more effectively and efficiently over time.

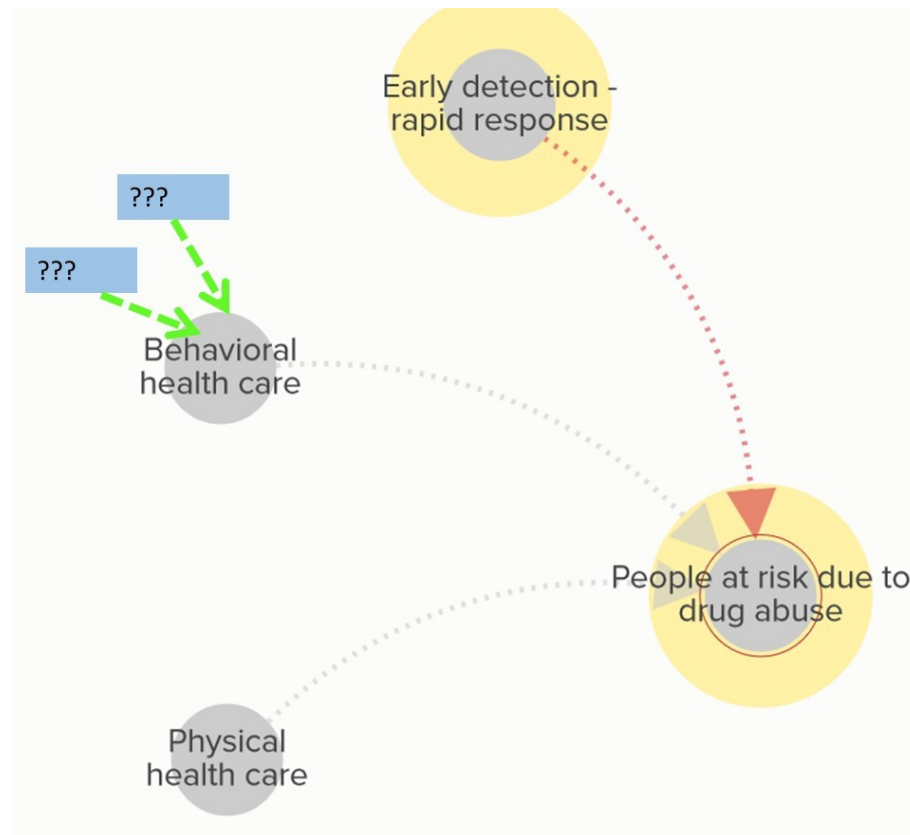




## 5. Find the “Unknowns”

The circles that do not have yellow shadows—that don’t have more than one arrow pointing to them—show where you need more information. For example, looking at “Behavioral health care” in the sample map below, you might add more circles pointing to Behavioral health care to show what helps (or hinders) people getting needed behavioral health care.

This shows us where we need new research to fill knowledge gaps.



You and your network can use these five basic tips for creating and interpreting your knowledge maps. With better maps, you will be more able to navigate to success and serve people’s needs.