

# Mining Program Outcome Measurement Learning for Community Impact

The insights that agencies gain from program outcome measurement can provide much substantive input to community-change efforts. However, the connection between program outcomes and community impact does not happen automatically. It occurs when the United Way asks questions and establishes systems that actively create that linkage.

## Drawing Community Implications from Program Outcome Learning

An agency's review of its program outcome data can surface not only measurement challenges and ideas for increasing service effectiveness, but also challenges faced by particular client groups, community barriers to client success, and other valuable insights to help target community-change efforts. Questions to stimulate agencies' thinking about this topic include:

- Do some client groups consistently have higher or lower levels of outcome achievement than others? Which groups (certain age range, family composition, literacy level, etc.)? What explains the differences?
- What characteristics of clients, their personal networks, their situations, the services they receive, or their environments make the most difference in outcome achievement?
- Do your clients often need services or other assistance beyond the scope of your agency? What are these? Are they available and accessible?
- When you seek to refer clients to other services or coordinate your services with other agencies, what works well? What doesn't work well and why?
- What community changes—changes in policies, practices, resource use, messages, attitudes, or other characteristics of organizations, systems, personal networks, neighborhoods—would make the biggest difference for your clients?
- What community changes would make the biggest difference in your agency's ability to serve clients effectively?
- As you think about ways to make our community work better for your clients, what ideas do you have? What do you wish we all knew more about?

The **United Way in Bristol, Connecticut** invited funded agencies to help shape its community impact work related to youth. Groups of agencies collaborated to prepare concept papers identifying important community issues and possible approaches to addressing them. A number of agencies drew on their learning from program outcome measurement, along with other knowledge and experiences, in developing concept papers that provided a basis for further discussions and broader community partnerships.

Insights of individual agencies combine for rich discussions when a United Way invites groups of programs to share perspectives, identify common experiences, and focus collectively on community issues and possible solutions. Depending on the purpose of a specific session, groups might consist of programs that offer similar services; or serve the same clients; or target the same outcomes; or are located in the same geographic area; or represent a comprehensive range of issues, delivery strategies, and other factors.

Participants look for trends and patterns that bring community issues into focus. For example:

- Similar programs have very different outcome results that are not related to client differences.
- Outcome achievement is consistently low among programs in certain geographic areas.
- Outcome achievement had been improving across programs in certain geographic areas but recently has worsened.
- Programs consistently name certain client, service, and community characteristics as important influences on outcome achievement.
- Certain services are identified frequently as unavailable, inaccessible, or difficult to work with.
- Multiple programs observe the same community conditions posing barriers to their clients' success.
- Programs repeatedly nominate the same set of community changes to create lasting benefits for populations of concern.
- Certain questions about causal factors, possible responses, and long-term results surface over and over.

### Assuring Useful, Timely Input

A United Way gains the most from agencies' program outcome learning when its policies and practices:

- Reflect an expectation that funded agencies review and learn from their program outcome measurement efforts—not only about their measurement systems and programs, but also about community issues that affect their clients and programs.
- Provide ways for funded agencies to report their learning.
  - Encourage open communication of findings, both positive and negative.
  - Ensure thoughtful review of reported learning by a designated individual or group.
  - Provide for conversations with agencies and other partners to explore issues raised and identify additional insights, including cross-program and cross-field discovery.
  - Reward agencies for learning from program outcome measurement, sharing learning with others, and responding to identified challenges.

The **United Way in Milwaukee, Wisconsin** has held annual Lessons Learned Forums for agencies to share learning from their outcome measurement experiences.

Defined processes help United Ways assure that they mine agencies' learning from program outcome measurement for its broader community impact implications. There are many ways to accomplish this aim. Questions United Ways consider in creating procedures and a few ideas for addressing them include:

- Do agencies report learning about their measurement systems and services and their learning related to community issues at the same time and in the same way?  
*For example, both may be reported as part of the funding application process. Alternatively, learning related to community issues may be explored separately as part of the United Way's process of making decisions about its intended impact.*
- How is learning that surfaces informally during staff and volunteer conversations, training and technical assistance sessions, and in other settings captured?  
*For example, a simple reporting form and centralized electronic or paper file can help assure that insights are not lost. "Ah-ha" sharing can be included on staff and volunteer meeting agendas.*
- Who initially reviews the learning that comes from funded agencies?  
*For example, United Way staff? Specific volunteers? A volunteer committee?*
- What happens to the findings of this review?  
*For example, they can be sorted by topic and forwarded to appropriate staff and volunteers, and/or they can become agenda topics for meetings with agencies and others.*
- At what points are findings about community issues discussed with individual agencies? With groups of agencies? With agencies and other community partners who are collaborating to target community change efforts?  
*Regular (e.g., quarterly or annual) lessons-learned forums are one option. Special sessions targeted on specific topics are valuable as the United Way selects focus areas, establishes priorities, defines goals and objectives, and targets community-change initiatives. Conferring with agencies experienced in a particular health or human service topic is a useful early step for a United Way body with responsibilities for that topic (e.g., an impact council responsible for a specific focus area).*
- If there are regularly scheduled meetings with agencies that are not directly connected with current decision making, what mechanisms assure that conclusions are captured and used as input later when decisions about targeting community change are being made?  
*For example, reporting forms in centralized locations were mentioned earlier. Tickler files and designated responsibility for reviewing forms in preparation for meetings and decisions remind the United Way to use the information in a timely way.*

The **Success By 6<sup>®</sup>** initiative in **Portland, Oregon** regularly convenes representatives of funded agencies and other human service providers, the school district, Head Start, child care providers, consultants and community groups involved with young children to identify barriers and respond to challenges.