

## How Program Outcome Measurement Contributes to Community Impact

*"In the move to community impact, program outcome measurement is table stakes! You don't get in the game without it."*

*-Brian Gallagher*

Community impact United Ways improve lives by investing in two broad strategies: services that are delivered directly to individuals and families -- the types of services that United Ways traditionally have supported; and efforts to create lasting changes in community conditions (see [The Community Investment Triangle: A Tool for Transformation](#)). Program outcome measurement is a core tool for both strategies. This brief paper identifies specific ways that it contributes to the work of the community impact United Way in three strategic areas.

### Demonstrates the Results and Increases the Effectiveness of Direct-service Programs

There is no doubt of the impact of program outcome measurement on United Ways' work with direct services. Where implemented effectively (see [Indicators That a United Way is Prepared for Program Outcome Measurement](#)), it is a powerful tool that contributes to:

- **A focus on results.** Because of outcome measurement, both United Ways and agencies think about program value in terms of client benefits rather than program activities.
- **The measurement of results.** Program outcome measurement quantifies the extent to which program clients achieve intended benefits.
- **Learning.** Outcome data helps United Ways and agencies better understand both clients and programs and discover which practices are more effective than others with which client groups.
- **Improvement.** The learning that comes from thoughtful analysis of program outcome data helps programs improve their services to achieve even better results for clients.
- **Investment guidance.** Including outcome information with other funding criteria helps United Ways invest in programs that are pursuing learning and improvement to increase their effectiveness.
- **Accountability.** When United Ways feature programs' results in their marketing and campaign messages, they exhibit accountability to investors and the community and assert leadership in results-oriented philanthropy.

## Provides a Head Start on Implementing the Community Impact Model

Experience with program outcome measurement provides significant advantages and resources for a United Way that is pursuing the new business model. For example:

- **Program outcome measurement strengthens a United Way's position as a trusted community impact partner and leader.** It demonstrates the organization's commitment to achieving and reporting results and illustrates its use of facts in decision making.
- **It builds competence in measurement and analysis that a United Way can build on** to track impact on community systems and populations. United Ways that already have skills in identifying specific and appropriate outcomes, useful and measurable indicators, manageable measurement methods, and instructive approaches to analysis have a solid foundation for the challenges of measuring community impact.
- **It is essential for measuring the impact of community-change initiatives on clients of direct services.** Some initiatives to improve lives by creating lasting changes in community conditions will include steps to strengthen service delivery capacity as part of their plan for change. Program outcome measurement will show whether the changes achieved are in fact improving the lives of program clients.
- **It is itself a community-change strategy.** As a tool for learning and improvement, program outcome measurement helps increase programs' effectiveness in serving clients. In many communities, United Way's implementation of program outcome measurement among programs it funds has led other service providers and funders, as well as community leaders and investors, to shift from a focus on activities to a focus on results as measured by outcomes (see [National Learning Project on Using Program Outcome Data to Create Measurable Change, Vol. I](#)). The resulting changes in communities' public and nonprofit sectors are improving lives beyond those of clients of United Way-funded programs.
- **Its implementation lays the groundwork for subsequent changes in relationships with funded agencies.** With program outcome measurement, the United Way asks agencies to think differently about the purpose of their programs and expands the traditional funding relationship to include collaboration on program effectiveness. This shift can pave the way for further collaboration around a host of community issues. In addition, much of what has been learned about working with agencies to implement program outcome measurement constructively, such as the importance of early and open communication regarding the new direction, inclusion of agencies in decision making, and recognition of agencies' legitimate concerns, also are key in navigating agency relationships in the move to the community impact model (see [Redefining Agency Relationships for Community Impact](#)).

## Helps Target Community Issues

When United Ways and agencies partner to mine the learning from program outcome findings, they surface community issues that can become the focus of collaborative community change efforts. Issues identified may include:

- **Gaps in services.** Programs' attempts to connect clients with services reveal which services are unavailable or are not sufficiently comprehensive to meet the range of clients' needs.
- **Organizational and system problems.** The same attempts expose conflicting policies, lack of coordination, cultural issues, and other dynamics within and among community organizations and systems that present major obstacles for clients.
- **Community conditions that create barriers for program clients.** Client follow-up discovers conditions such as inadequate housing, lack of quality jobs, public attitudes, and other factors that stand in the way of clients' long-term success.
- **Community populations needing special attention.** As programs learn more about their clients and clients' networks, they recognize populations, such as middle-school children, women caring for both young children and aging parents, or an immigrant group for which literacy in their native language is rare, that are being overlooked by the broader community.
- **Issues requiring community-level intervention.** Searching for characteristics related to client success alerts programs to client issues, such as low literacy, lack of health care insurance, and lack of transportation, that are more productively understood as systemic issues requiring not just individual assistance but also community change.
- **Issues needing further study.** Programs' observations of the effect of various conditions and responses on community populations suggest research or additional experience that can provide new approaches to old problems.

For more information, see ***Connecting Program Outcome Measurement to Community Impact*** (United Way Online keyword = POM-CI). This UWA resource includes questions to stimulate useful discussions with agencies, guidance on what to look for to identify broader community issues, questions to consider in creating procedures for mining program outcome learning, a checklist to help a United Way know if it is making the fullest use of this resource for its community impact work, and examples from United Ways that have made the connection successfully.