



EVALUATION BRIEF

Evaluating Systems and Organizational Change in Child Welfare Settings

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This brief highlights strategies for evaluating systems and organizational change in child welfare settings. The information draws on current evaluation literature and the experiences of federally funded child welfare grantees.

SYSTEMS AND ORGANIZATIONAL CHANGE

Few human service systems function perfectly. Parts of a system may operate in “silos”—in isolation from each other—or they may work toward different goals, leading to duplicative efforts and gaps in services (Coffman, 2007). Systems change transforms the way systems operate to strengthen services and supports.

A systems change initiative might focus on one or more of the following areas (Coffman, 2007):

- **Context**—improving the political environment that surrounds a

system so it produces the policy and funding changes needed to create and sustain it

- **Components**—establishing programs and services that produce results for system stakeholders and/or participants
- **Connections**—creating strong and effective linkages across system components that improve results for clients
- **Infrastructure**—developing supports that systems need to function effectively
- **Scale**—ensuring a comprehensive system is available to as many people as possible

This evaluation brief was developed by James Bell Associates on behalf of the Children’s Bureau, Administration for Children and Families. For more information, see www.jbassoc.com.

In the child welfare field, systems change refers to changes in thinking, practice, policies, and procedures that enhance performance and reduce service barriers to children and families at risk of entering—or currently involved in—the child welfare system. Change can occur within a single organization or across organizations. Most change initiatives include the primary child welfare agency and other entities. These often include private and community-based service providers; courts; law enforcement; schools; health care providers; and other child-serving local, state, or tribal agencies.

Common systems change activities include establishing multidisciplinary teams to collaborate on child welfare cases, instituting a new safety and risk assessment approach, launching a centralized intake unit, and implementing a system-wide practice model to guide child welfare practice.

Child welfare systems also experience change due to the complex and unpredictable environments in which they operate. As organizations adapt to changing conditions, their plans and activities change. This, in turn, alters the way systems deliver programs and services to children and families and ultimately, their outcomes (Hargreaves & Paulsell, 2009).

Despite this complexity, the evaluation of systems and organizational change within child welfare systems is similar to other evaluation efforts and should address the same key questions:

- Did the initiative do what was intended?
- Did the initiative produce the expected results within its intended focus area?
- To what extent can a specific impact be attributed to the intervention?
- Did the intervention make a difference?
- How has the intervention made a difference?



Systems changes may include—

Shifts in patterns of system relationships, boundaries, focus, timing, events, and behaviors

Transformations in the system structure or dynamics that impact large numbers of people



EVALUATING SYSTEMS AND ORGANIZATIONAL CHANGE

Theory of Change

Before designing and implementing a systems change evaluation, it is important to map out a theory of change that outlines the desired results and the pathways through which the results can occur (Coffman, 2007; Walker & Kubish, 2008).

To understand the relationship between a desired change and the strategies used to achieve results, it is important to ask the following questions (Fowler & Dunn, 2014):

- What actions will the intervention undertake?
- How is the system expected to change as a result?
- How will these changes contribute to the desired outcomes?

A theory of change should include the following elements (Taplin and Clark, 2012):

- Long-term, intermediate, and short-term outcomes and the assumptions behind each
- An explanation of the preconditions or requirements to achieve each outcome
- Assumptions about the underlying system (i.e., organizational context)
- Detailed descriptions of the activities/interventions that are expected to lead to desired outcomes
- Indicators to measure progress and performance

- A narrative to explain and summarize the theory of change framework

Theories of change should be revisited, critiqued, and modified throughout a change initiative to serve as a “living” roadmap. Questions to ask when revisiting a theory of change include—

- Are the pathways for change plausible?
- Are the causal links clear and logical?
- Is the pathway specific enough to identify each step and its associated outcome?
- Are the identified outcomes clearly the expected results of the listed activities?
- Are the components and progression of the theory of change reasonable based on existing evidence or theory?
- Do the outcomes represent changes that are important to the participating agencies/programs?

As an example, exhibit 1 summarizes key elements of a theory of change for child welfare agencies funded by the Children’s Bureau to address trafficking within child welfare populations.

EXHIBIT 1. THEORY OF CHANGE FOR GRANTS TO ADDRESS CHILD TRAFFICKING

Systems and organizational

change: Develop and enhance effective cross-system partnerships to address barriers identifying children involved in child welfare who are victims of or at risk for trafficking.

Theory of change: The grantees’ interventions—including cross-system partnerships, new policies, training of child welfare staff to identify and work with trafficking victims, and trauma-focused services to trafficking victims—will, in the short term, improve the infrastructure to provide a coordinated response to child trafficking, increase state-level and

local awareness of trafficked youth and their needs, improve the system’s ability to identify victims, and improve capacity to adequately serve trafficked youth.

The short-term changes will, in turn, help decrease entry into trafficking among at-risk youth, improve identification of trafficked youth, and improve cross-system response to child trafficking.

In the long term, the changes will contribute to decreased incidence of child trafficking, increased successful exits from trafficking for child welfare-involved youth, and improved well-being (physical, emotional, cognitive, and behavioral) among trafficked youth.

Evaluation Planning

Planning an evaluation of systems and organizational change involves finding relevant and feasible evaluation options consistent with the established theory of change. Evaluators need to consider the entire system (Parsons, 2007). They must also identify relevant research questions.

A theory of change can guide the research questions by highlighting feasible changes and the anticipated impact at the system, program, and/or client levels. Evaluators should acknowledge the perspectives of multiple stakeholders to generate buy-in and consider how findings will be used. Exhibit 2 provides a starting point for developing evaluation questions.

Tips for evaluating systems change include—

Develop evaluation questions

Collect baseline data

Map out theory of change

Collaborate with stakeholders

Choose appropriate methods and tools

EXHIBIT 2. SYSTEMS CHANGE EVALUATION PLANNING

What is the system?

- Describe the system the change effort is expected to impact (its boundaries, parts, and whole).
- Describe the system's relationships and dynamics.
- Describe the diverse goals or perspectives within the system.

What is the systems change intervention?

- Describe how the intervention will be governed or implemented.
- Describe the key points of the intervention's theories of change and action.
- Describe the intervention's intended outcomes.

What are the goals of the systems change evaluation?

- Describe the evaluation's users, purposes (developmental, formative, summative, other), and methods.

Note. System change evaluation planning worksheet. Adapted from *Evaluating system change: A planning guide*, by Margaret B. Hargreaves, 2010, Princeton, NJ: Mathematica. Copyright 2010 by Mathematica. Adapted with permission.

Indicators and Benchmarks of Progress

Short- and intermediate-term indicators should reflect the focus and scope of the change effort. Intermediate-term indicators are important because systems change is accomplished through smaller and larger steps at various stages. Measuring these steps allows evaluators to assess the change effort's progress and achievements, and it creates additional opportunities to review and refine evaluation methods. Short- and intermediate-term indicators can be framed in terms of benchmarks, which are performance standards against which future changes can be compared and assessed.

Implementation

The purpose of a systems change evaluation is to measure changes in key outcome variables and determine the extent to which changes can be attributed to the intervention.

Implementing a systems change evaluation involves selecting appropriate methods and procedures for collecting data (see exhibit 3). Choices depend on factors such as the evaluation questions, data needed to address each question, circumstances behind the change initiative, participant details, and available evaluation resources.

EXHIBIT 3. QUANTITATIVE AND QUALITATIVE METHODS

Quantitative methods include—

- Standardized assessment instruments and tests
- Surveys/questionnaires
- Analysis of existing administrative/MIS data
- Case record review (e.g., data on program attendance and service receipt)
- Structured observation (e.g., numeric rating scales)

Qualitative methods include—

- Open-ended and semi-structured interviews
- Focus groups
- Document review (e.g., workers' case notes)
- Observation (e.g., taking detailed field notes or making journal entries)

EXHIBIT 4. PHASES OF A SYSTEMS CHANGE EVALUATION

1. Orientation

- Learn about the systems change initiative's goals and strategies.
- Discover the basics of the collaborative implementing the systems change initiative.
- Collect basic information about a system's programs and services.

2. Evaluation planning

- Decide on priorities for the evaluation.
- Identify research questions.
- Develop a data collection plan.

3. Develop data collection instruments

- Develop instruments for baseline data collection.
- Develop instruments for collecting data at follow-up periods for subsequent data collection.

4. Collect baseline data

- Collect data on effectiveness of programs and services.
- Collect data on institutional structure.
- Collect data on collaborative effectiveness.

5. Collect follow-up data

- At a follow-up period:
 - Collect data on effectiveness of programs and services.
 - Collect data on institutional structure.
 - Collect data on collaborative effectiveness.
- Ask stakeholders about their perceptions of the systems changes and changes in collaborative effectiveness that have occurred between baseline and follow-up.

6. Describe change between baseline and follow-up

- Compare the follow-up and baseline data to assess the extent to which systems changes have taken place, including changes in program, services, and structures.
- Account for stakeholder arguments about extent and type of change in programs and services and in contextual structures (policies, procedures, resource allocations).

7. Analyze how the intervention contributed to change between baseline and follow-up

- Assess how the initiative was able to identify and reduce structural barriers.
- Assess how the initiative was able to build or enhance structural strengths.
- Assess the way and extent to which structural change contributed to increased program and service capacity and/or improved organizational and interorganizational connections (e.g., reduced barriers or enhanced structural strengths).
- Assess the extent to which the quality of collaboration contributed to successful implementation or challenges in the initiative's implementation.

8. Develop recommendations

- Identify ways that programs and services can continue to improve.
- Identify ways that the structure might be reconfigured to facilitate program and service improvements.
- Identify ways that collaborative members or other stakeholders might contribute to a better structure and to improved programs and services.
- Identify ways to improve collaborative structures and processes to facilitate implementation.

Effective evaluations use multiple methods to capture different viewpoints about the initiative's effectiveness (Children's Bureau, 2015). Measuring systems and organizational change often involves both quantitative and qualitative research methods. Quantitative methods such as surveys, tests, and checklists provide structured responses to questions that can be easily standardized and aggregated. Qualitative methods generate richer information and can introduce new ideas and insights.

Exhibit 4 on the previous page summarizes the phases of a systems change evaluation. Using the example of the child trafficking systems change initiative introduced earlier, exhibit 5 summarizes the key elements of the grantees' evaluation efforts, including their research designs, data collection methods, outcomes of interest, and challenges.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- ▶ Involve evaluators in discussions about systems and organizational change efforts.
- ▶ Encourage buy-in by engaging stakeholders in the evaluation planning phase, including the development of evaluation questions.
- ▶ Clearly define the evaluation's scope and boundaries.
- ▶ Clarify what outcomes can and cannot be expected.
- ▶ Develop benchmarks to document incremental progress toward systems change.
- ▶ Ensure that the evaluation serves the needs of child welfare practitioners and advances knowledge of effective change efforts for the broader child welfare field.

EXHIBIT 5. EVALUATIONS OF GRANTS TO ADDRESS CHILD TRAFFICKING

Evaluation design: The grantees are implementing mixed-methods evaluations that incorporate both quantitative and qualitative approaches. They include measurement of changes in system collaboration, coordination, and infrastructure and processes to identify and track child trafficking victims.

Data collection methods: Data on collaboration and infrastructure are collected via focus groups, interviews, document and case reviews, observations, fidelity assessments, and the Wilder Collaboration Factors Inventory tool. Data on tracking trafficked youth come from surveys of investigations, data integration and reporting, analysis of screening data, and analysis of administrative and case-level data.

Evaluation highlights: Grantees are (1) assessing the degree to which the change efforts lead to expanded and effective cross-agency collaboration, (2) documenting progress in building infrastructure to streamline the response to child trafficking among child welfare and partner agencies, and (3) tracking the multidisciplinary coordination of services for the target population. They are also tracking the identification of trafficked youth, trafficking incidence rates, and timeliness of identification of child welfare-involved victims.

Evaluation challenges: Because data systems used by child welfare agencies have not historically included data on child trafficking, there is a lack of data to facilitate long-term analyses.

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