



Supporting Data Systems Improvement in Tribal Home Visiting

Capacity Built and Lessons Learned

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Introduction

Social services and data-driven decision making depend on data systems. For tribal nations, effective data systems are critical to report progress to funders and support governance and sovereignty. Indigenous data sovereignty is the right of a nation to govern the collection, ownership, and application of its own data (Rainie et al., 2017). Indigenous communities exercise sovereignty by owning and managing their data; overseeing their data systems; and applying their culture, values, principles, and ways of knowing to system management to produce data that reflect cultural understandings (Carroll et al., 2019). Well-managed data systems can help American Indian and Alaska Native (AI/AN) organizations and agencies collect, analyze, and use data that reflect their communities. However, there is often a misalignment between funder data requirements and tribal data system infrastructure and capacity. Moreover, adequate technical assistance (TA) may not always be provided to tribal programs to strengthen and support that capacity.

As demonstrated through the [Tribal Maternal, Infant, and Early Childhood Home Visiting Program](#) (the Tribal Home Visiting Program), federal agencies can provide AI/AN programs with innovative TA and resources to strengthen data systems in furtherance of indigenous data sovereignty. This brief describes the capacity-building approach of the Administration for Children and Families (ACF), which helps Tribal Home Visiting grantees identify and address data system challenges through TA from the [Tribal Home Visiting Evaluation Institute](#) (TEI). Case studies illustrate how TEI has provided intensive, individualized TA to strengthen data system capacity for three unique tribal programs.

Intended primarily for federal agencies that fund AI/AN social service programs, this brief presents the following:

- ◆ An overview of data system challenges and needs for tribal programs

- ◆ A summary of data system TA and resources provided to Tribal Home Visiting grantees
- ◆ Case studies of the ways TA support improved data system capacity
- ◆ Recommendations for providing data system TA unique to tribal programs

Tribal Home Visiting Program

The Tribal Home Visiting Program is a federally funded initiative that supports maternal, infant, and early childhood services for AI/AN families. Since 2010 when the program launched, 30 tribes, tribal organizations, and urban Indian organizations have received grant awards to deliver evidence-based home visiting services. ACF oversees this program, authorized under Section 511 of Title V of the Social Security Act, in collaboration with the Health Resources and Services Administration.

The Tribal Home Visiting Program seeks to support the development of AI/AN children and families; implement culturally relevant, evidence-based home visiting programs in AI/AN communities; expand the evidence base related to home visiting interventions with this population; and support and strengthen early childhood systems. To measure how well home visiting services are achieving those goals, Tribal Home Visiting grantees collect, analyze, and report data annually on participating AI/AN families in the following areas:



The Tribal Home Visiting Program is a federally funded initiative that supports maternal, infant, and early childhood services for AI/AN families.

- ◆ Improved maternal, newborn, and child health
- ◆ Prevention of child injuries, child abuse, neglect, or maltreatment, and reduction of emergency room visits
- ◆ Improvements in school readiness and child academic achievement
- ◆ Reductions in crime or domestic violence
- ◆ Improvements in family economic self-sufficiency
- ◆ Improvements in the coordination and referrals for other community resources and supports

Grantees submit performance measurement data annually to ACF and must demonstrate improvement among participating AI/AN families in at least four of these areas. Grantees must also submit data on program demographics and service utilization. To meet these requirements, grantees must have functioning data systems to store and analyze participant data for annual reporting. Grantees often have other reporting requirements set by model developers. Program surveys and dialogue with Tribal Home Visiting grantees revealed data system support as a critical need to meet data and reporting requirements.



Data System Challenges and Needs for Tribal Programs

Tribes and tribal organizations often receive funding from multiple federal agencies and therefore must manage and report on many unique data elements. However, many tribes have limited funds to allocate to data system development and maintenance and inadequate technological infrastructure (U.S. Government Accountability Office, 2015). Challenges with data capability (e.g., organizational infrastructure and technology), capacity (e.g., knowledge, skill), and limited resources can complicate decisions about data system management for AI/AN organizations (Carroll et al., 2019). A study of tribal nations found that 74 percent of tribes surveyed had a data hub or central data office to manage tribal data. Even with this infrastructure in place, however, they reported needing training, TA, and other resources to strengthen their data capacity (NCAI Policy Research Center, 2018).

Tribal Home Visiting grantees have experienced many of these same data system challenges. In 2016, ACF and TEI surveyed grantees about their experience and satisfaction with their data systems and interest in a federally supported data system (Geary, 2016). Grantees were moderately satisfied with what they had, but without internal information technology (IT) support, they used multiple systems and time-consuming data entry processes to meet complex reporting requirements and comply with agency policies. Grantees preferred to work with and/or improve their own system rather than use a government system that would last only for the duration of the grant period. This survey and TEI's experience working with Tribal Home Visiting grantees revealed the following challenges and areas for TA.

Challenges

- ◆ **Misalignment of data entered in a system and data generated by reports.** Grantees did not have a clear understanding of how the data elements related to the information in the aggregate system-generated reports. Often grantees thought they entered the data correctly in their in-house and/or model developer data system(s), but the data were not represented in the reports. This meant program staff had to manually review and confirm the data in the reports, requiring time and resources.
- ◆ **Inconsistent data entry processes.** Many grantees found inconsistent data practices caused some of their challenges, regardless of data system type. Some programs experienced the most trouble with data entry. One potential reason for inconsistency was reliance on the home visitors to collect (and often enter) data instead of having one dedicated data collector. For example, a team may have had home visitors entering data in different data fields in the system or even using different forms. This inconsistency led to data quality issues that sometimes did not emerge until annual reporting.
- ◆ **Communication challenges with vendors.** Many grantees found data system vendors frequently had training in the technical aspects of data system development but not in the language or practice of home visiting. Most grantees reported positive relationships with

their vendors but struggled to phrase requests and determine what was within or outside the scope of a contract.

TA Needs

- ◆ **Documenting and improving data processes.** Grantees noted needing TA to ensure their data processes were well documented and consistently implemented across staff.
- ◆ **Understanding data ownership.** Grantees needed TA to understand and incorporate policies and procedures that facilitated, promoted, and strengthened data ownership.
- ◆ **Improving existing case management functionality.** TEI found some systems offered case management features that grantees were not fully using; grantees might benefit from TA to improve use of those features.
- ◆ **Simplifying data reporting.** TA was needed to assist grantees in data mapping; improving the ability for data to be pulled into a flat file for analysis; and exploring options for improving reporting capabilities.
- ◆ **Reducing data entry burden.** Grantees might benefit from TA to examine current processes and identify opportunities for efficiency.



Data System TA and Resources Provided by TEI

ACF aimed to support grantees in developing and/or strengthening their data systems and encouraged the use of TA support from TEI to address data system challenges. The types of TA provided have been customized to grantees' unique competencies and needs, ranging from brief activities to more intensive projects with site visits.

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TEI provided universal TA to all Tribal Home Visiting grantees, including resources such as the [Data System Improvement Toolkit](#).

TEI was well positioned to provide additional data system supports because of our experience providing individualized and universal TA in evaluation, continuous quality improvement, and

performance measurement to all Tribal Home Visiting grantees. TEI builds grantee capacity in gathering, using, and sharing information to improve the health and well-being of children and families. TEI's approach to TA supports indigenous data sovereignty through four guiding principles: (1) respect for tribal processes and decision making, (2) support for substantive community input, (3) bidirectional learning, and (4) dedication to relationship building.

In this brief, “TEI” refers to [TEI staff](#) and subcontractors¹ supporting grantees in technical areas of data system improvement.

Overview of Data System TA

In addition to the universal TA provided to all Tribal Home Visiting grantees, TEI has provided intensive data system TA to some grantees since 2017.² The TA strategy combined onsite visits with remote support through conference calls and virtual meetings. TA delivery had four phases.

Engagement

TEI worked with grantees to summarize their data system challenges as an initial point of discussion and planning. TEI also confirmed the scope and duration of the TA and ensured staff were available and able to participate during that time. TEI determined a staffing arrangement based on ACF and grantee feedback. This typically entailed pairing a technical expert with the grantee’s TEI liaison.

Goal Setting and Planning

TEI organized an initial site visit to identify data system issues, prioritize improvements, and co-develop measurable, short-term goals. During this time, TEI developed a data system improvement charter with each grantee describing—

- ◆ Grantee team member roles
- ◆ Identified needs
- ◆ Measurable, short-term goals (requiring 6 months or less)
- ◆ Resources (e.g., budget, time, vendor, internal IT expertise)
- ◆ Potential obstacles and strategies to addressing goals
- ◆ Next steps

During the site visit, the grantee drafted the charter, then refined and submitted the final version to TEI. The charter served as a “living document” that was updated throughout the TA process as new information became available.

¹ TEI subcontracted with Face-to-Face Integrated Technologies to provide data system-related TA to Tribal Home Visiting grantees.

² As of July 2020, TEI continues to provide data system TA to Tribal Home Visiting grantees. However, this brief reflects the TA provided to grantees from 2017 to 2019.

Data System Improvement Project Delivery

TEI and the technical expert continued to work on identified goals with the grantee through conference calls, screen sharing, and additional site visits as needed.

Individualized TA included improving system functionality for the team through onsite system reviews; developing agency data ownership, data sharing, and management policies; and identifying improvements for system interoperability.

Follow-Up, Continued Learning, and Feedback

TEI supported grantees in finalizing improvement projects and gathered grantee feedback during peer-sharing webinars and at the close of improvement projects.

Data System Improvement Toolkit

In 2018, TEI developed a [Data System Improvement Toolkit](#) for tribal programs planning to develop or improve their data systems. The toolkit is an integral TA resource for Tribal Home Visiting grantees. Because of the variety and complexity of data systems across tribal programs, the toolkit has five modules to support grantees where they are in their data system improvement process. They include—

1. Choosing a System and Working With a Vendor or Developer
2. Documenting and Improving Data System Processes
3. Protecting Data Ownership and Privacy
4. Displaying and Reporting Data
5. Optimizing Your Current Data System



Tribal Home Visiting Grantee Case Studies

The federal provision of TA has given Tribal Home Visiting grantees the support, time, and resources needed to build and strengthen their data systems and further their indigenous data sovereignty. This section presents three unique case studies of grantees using individualized data system TA. TA supported the Pueblo of San Felipe transition to a new data system. TA for the Inter-Tribal Council of Michigan grantee team focused on improving their existing system and building internal capacity. TA providers assisted the South Puget Intertribal Planning Agency grantee team in mapping their data system processes and transitioning to a new system. These case studies provide examples of how partnerships between federal agencies and tribal programs can lead to improved data system capacity.

Pueblo of San Felipe

Katishtya, the Pueblo of San Felipe, is a federally recognized tribe with approximately 3,700 enrolled tribal members. San Felipe Pueblo is located on approximately 68,000 acres between New Mexico's capitol city of Santa Fe and Albuquerque, its largest city (San Felipe Pueblo, 2020). The Pueblo's Tribal Home Visiting program is called Project Katishtya Eh-wahs Valued Always (KEVA) (ACF, 2019).

Overview

In 2017, the Pueblo of San Felipe team requested TA to select a new vendor to transition data systems and improve data reporting. TEI held multiple conference calls with the grantee to identify their data system needs and review the information vendors provided. TEI and the San Felipe team used tools in Modules 1 and 2 of the Data System Improvement Toolkit to guide discussions on—

- ◆ Vendor communication management
- ◆ What to expect during a system demonstration
- ◆ Examples of vendor contracts
- ◆ Documentation of system designs the vendor should provide

By the end of 2017, the San Felipe team selected a vendor and had successfully negotiated and signed a contract for a new data system.

In early 2018, the San Felipe team members requested in-person TA for support during their first onsite vendor meeting. TEI helped the grantee prepare vendor questions and set internal goals, then attended the full 2.5-day meeting. While TEI facilitated the meeting to ensure the necessary conversations about system development, the San Felipe team discussed key components of the data system project with the vendor. The planning stage included facilitated review of process maps and creation of a timeline for necessary design components (e.g., paper form

review, data mapping, report design review). Following the onsite meeting, TEI further supported the grantee in creating in-depth form reviews in the data system, managing vendor communications and expectations, drafting a staff training plan, and developing Tribal Home Visiting data reports.

Over time, TA requests from the San Felipe team transitioned from data system development support to vendor management—for instance, how to build better communication with the system vendor, submit system change requests, handle disagreements about system requirements, and address system issues or bugs.

Capacity Built

The same team of TA providers has consistently supported the San Felipe team members throughout their years of data system improvement work. Thus, TEI has witnessed the growth of the grantee’s expertise in data system comprehension, development, and vendor management. Following the TA, grantee team members felt more comfortable requesting conference calls and discussing system functionality. They better understood the capabilities and limits of their data system. As they move into the last phase of system development—postimplementation support—the grantee has been able to make their own vendor requests, articulate questions/concerns, and review vendor contracts to ensure their system needs are met.

It is important to recognize the time and resources the grantee team members put into system development. While they analyzed and selected every data element for the new system, they also reviewed service provision and program documentation processes. They needed to assess each home visitor data collection form and decide whether it would be used for federal reporting, home visiting model reporting, or program management.



“No matter how hard we have worked on the forms and no matter how much thought we have given them, I knew we needed expert guidance in a bunch of areas, and you provided it and more!”

— Pueblo San Felipe evaluator, 2018

In the end, the grantee truly appreciated the TA support. The evaluator said, “No matter how hard we have worked on the forms and no matter how much thought we have given them, I knew we needed expert guidance in a bunch of areas, and you provided it and more!” (Pueblo San Felipe evaluator, 2018).

Inter-Tribal Council of Michigan

Inter-Tribal Council of Michigan (ITC of MI) is a consortium that represents and serves 12 federally recognized tribes and 1 urban tribal organization in Michigan:

- ◆ Bay Mills Indian Community
- ◆ Hannahville Indian Community
- ◆ Keweenaw Bay Indian Community

- ◆ Saginaw Chippewa Indian Tribe
- ◆ Grand Traverse Band of Ottawa and Chippewa Indians
- ◆ Little River Band of Ottawa Indians
- ◆ Little Traverse Bay Bands of Odawa Indians
- ◆ Sault Ste. Marie Tribe of Chippewa Indians
- ◆ Lac Vieux Desert Band of Lake Superior Chippewa Indians
- ◆ Match-E-Be-Nash-She-Wish (Gun Lake Tribe)
- ◆ Pokagon Band of Potawatomi Indians
- ◆ Nottawaseppi Band of Huron Potawatomi
- ◆ American Indian Health and Family Services

ITC of MI is divided into several divisions, including health services; behavioral health; environmental services; child, family, and education services; and administration (Inter-Tribal Council of Michigan, 2012). The ITC of MI tribal home visiting program is called the Maaajtaag Mnobmaadzid Tribal Home Visiting Initiative (ACF, 2019).

Overview

ITC of MI team members requested TA support to improve their existing data system and build internal data analysis and reporting capacity. An onsite visit helped the TA provider better understand the grantee's needs and system. The site visit helped ITC of MI identify two priorities: improve the system's ability to capture, store, and retrieve data for annual grant reporting; and improve the team's ability to analyze reporting data.

During the site visit, TEI reviewed the current system with the grantee and identified specific data elements required for reporting. The grantee found several data elements being pulled for the reports were coming from different data fields than expected. TEI suggested the grantee team members work closely with their vendor to "map" the data in their system and identify any areas where the data elements used in reporting were not associated with the correct data fields. The team wrote guidance to help the vendor correct the data queries and improve the accuracy of ITC of MI tribal home visiting reporting. After the site visit, TEI provided monthly TA to review system changes and coach the grantee on how to communicate and document specific technical requests to the vendor using example templates.

Capacity Built

TA related to data systems helped several members of the ITC of MI team gain confidence in technical conversations and feel more comfortable making technical system requests using the examples TEI provided. The grantee now has a better understanding of how the system aggregates different data to create reports.



“The amount of time to do our initial benchmark report submission ... was easily less than half what it was last year because of cleaner data, [fewer] corrections, and better organization of data elements in our download tables.”

— ITC of MI team member

By improving the team’s understanding of the connections between data in the system and their team’s analysis skills, ITC of MI built its capacity to efficiently report valid data. After completing annual performance reporting following this TA process, a team member said, “The amount of time to do our initial benchmark report submission ... was easily less than half what it was last year because of cleaner data, [fewer] corrections, and better organization of data elements in our

download tables.” Overall, they felt they had accomplished more during the 6 months of direct TA than in several years when they had tried to address data system reporting issues on their own.

South Puget Intertribal Planning Agency

The South Puget Intertribal Planning Agency (SPIPA) is an intertribal nonprofit consortium that serves the Chehalis, Nisqually, Shoalwater Bay, Skokomish, and Squaxin Island tribes through planning, TA, and program management services to fulfill Consortium tribes’ directives. SPIPA was formed in 1976 as a 501(c)(3), tribally chartered, intergovernmental agency. It is wholly owned by the Consortium Tribes (SPIPA, 2017). The SPIPA home visiting program, called the Healthy Families Project, has six satellite offices that coordinate services to Chehalis, Nisqually, Skokomish, and Squaxin Island tribes and two urban sites in Kitsap and Pierce Counties (ACF, 2019).

Overview

SPIPA requested onsite data system TA to standardize processes across the six sites they serve and support their transition to a new data system. Specifically, SPIPA sought to (1) finalize a process map of the program’s intake data entry and collection, (2) begin a process map of service delivery, (3) create a plan for migrating data between data systems, and (4) identify questions and objectives for the first vendor onsite meeting.

The first TA site visit involved TEI, the Federal Project Officer, SPIPA, and home visitors from all six sites. TEI helped the grantee create a process map for the home visiting intake process, setting the foundation for data systems as a support to home visitors and program staff rather than a burden. By mapping what happens in good practice, the SPIPA team would be ready to align data system improvements with their practice needs. The group identified and discussed practice challenges such as variability in intake processes across home visitors and then agreed

on the processes by consensus. The discussion and consensus process gave insight into how and why each site did its work. The group discussed data quality, the purpose of accurate data collection, data challenges and potential solutions, and commitments to improve data practices across sites. TEI worked with SPIPA leadership to create a safe space for home visitors, their supervisors, and SPIPA staff to acknowledge that collecting program data was a large job and discuss how SPIPA and TA services could help home visitors succeed.

To prepare for the data system migration and transition, TEI, SPIPA, and ACF created a transition timeline. The timeline included milestones and action steps to manage the changes, concerns, and challenges that may be part of data system transition. From this effort, SPIPA finalized an internal plan for data system transition and defined specific goals for an upcoming onsite meeting with the vendor.

Additional follow-up TA included completing the service delivery process map, developing a home visitor peer-to-peer training plan, and creating a sustainable support model for system transition. TEI also provided a list of recommended system-specific questions for the vendor during the initial onsite meeting.

Capacity Built

After receiving data system TA, the grantee had a more consistent, documented home visiting practice and was better prepared to converse with the vendor. The SPIPA team created a supportive environment focused on how data systems could strengthen their home visiting practice. This enabled the team to openly share challenges and brainstorm how to address each concern. To increase sustainability, the team established a training network to identify the resources home visitors would need to support their work during the data system transition and beyond.



Recommendations

Functional data systems are critical to supporting high-quality service delivery for AI/AN programs. Data systems enable organizations to effectively manage and oversee programs; collect and use data for program improvement; monitor trends in service delivery; and report on program outcomes to funders, tribal leadership, staff, and clients. However, tribal programs often lack the infrastructure and resources necessary to build and maintain useful systems. Active engagement from tribal program staff along with intensive, tailored support and resources from the federal funder and TA provider can address this need and yield strong data systems for tribal organizations. TEI's TA on data systems provided to Tribal Home Visiting grantees exemplifies how TA can strengthen data systems. The TA also demonstrates the level of TA, federal support, and grantee engagement necessary to address data system challenges and build functioning systems. TEI and ACF offer the following take-aways and recommendations for federal agencies

funding tribes and tribal organizations. Federal agencies should support tribes and tribal/urban Indian organizations in building capacities in the following areas:

- ◆ **Facilitate regular team discussions on the data system.** Grantees should strive to prioritize data system improvement and incorporate regular discussions about the data system in team meetings. Discussions should offer a safe space where team members can ask questions about the system and related processes to build their confidence and expertise.
- ◆ **Understand technical language to communicate with vendors.** When the grantee cannot articulate functional requirements, the vendor will often make a best guess. Having a hardcopy screen print—not just the live screen review—can better document the conversation and the request. Grantees may also benefit from internal support from the tribe’s IT department or designated IT staff participation during system demonstrations, vendor selection, and contract negotiations.
- ◆ **Document existing data entry processes.** All staff using the data system should have a clear understanding of how, when, and where data are entered. Data entry processes should be documented, revisited regularly, and updated. For grantees serving multiple sites, best practices should be standard across all locations.
- ◆ **Understand the data system structure to improve data reporting.** Grantees should work with their vendors to establish which data fields the system uses to create the data reports. This understanding will reduce inconsistencies between the data entered and the data included in the report.

When supporting tribes and tribal/urban Indian organizations in data system improvement, federal agencies should—

- ◆ **Dedicate adequate time and TA support.** Federal agencies should allocate time and resources to understanding and building the technical capacity of grantees. This task may include assessing the complexity of the organization’s data system, IT support, and team skill levels. Through this experience, TEI and grantees learned that the entire data system improvement process (e.g., documentation, form review, timeline discussions, check-ins, testing, postimplementation support) requires resources and preparation.
- ◆ **Respect data sovereignty.** Federal agencies should include time and resources for tribal programs to work with their leadership to understand the important role of comprehensive data policy in indigenous data sovereignty. Agencies should respect indigenous data sovereignty and seek to understand how the tribe wants to manage their data
- ◆ **Ensure TA providers understand the context of data and data systems for tribes and tribal organizations.** TA providers should have a comprehensive understanding of the types of data system challenges AI/AN programs face and appropriate solutions to address those challenges. TA providers should be experienced in working respectfully and appropriately with tribes and tribal organizations to support capacity building and data system improvement.

- ◆ **Identify TA providers with strong technical *and* interpersonal skills.** Federal agencies should allow time for relationship and trust building between the TA providers and grantees because improving data systems can be a long and intensive journey. It is important for TA providers to facilitate communication between the grantee and the vendor at the beginning of the TA process. TA providers must interpret technical jargon and work with the vendor and the grantee to cultivate a productive and positive relationship.
- ◆ **Support flexibility in TA offerings.** Federal agencies should support TA providers in offering support at various levels of intensity, based on grantees' needs. One grantee may request TA in the form of a few initial phone calls with a vendor, and another may need onsite visits and a TA plan over a few months to document their processes (e.g., process and data mapping) and identify and implement a new data system.



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