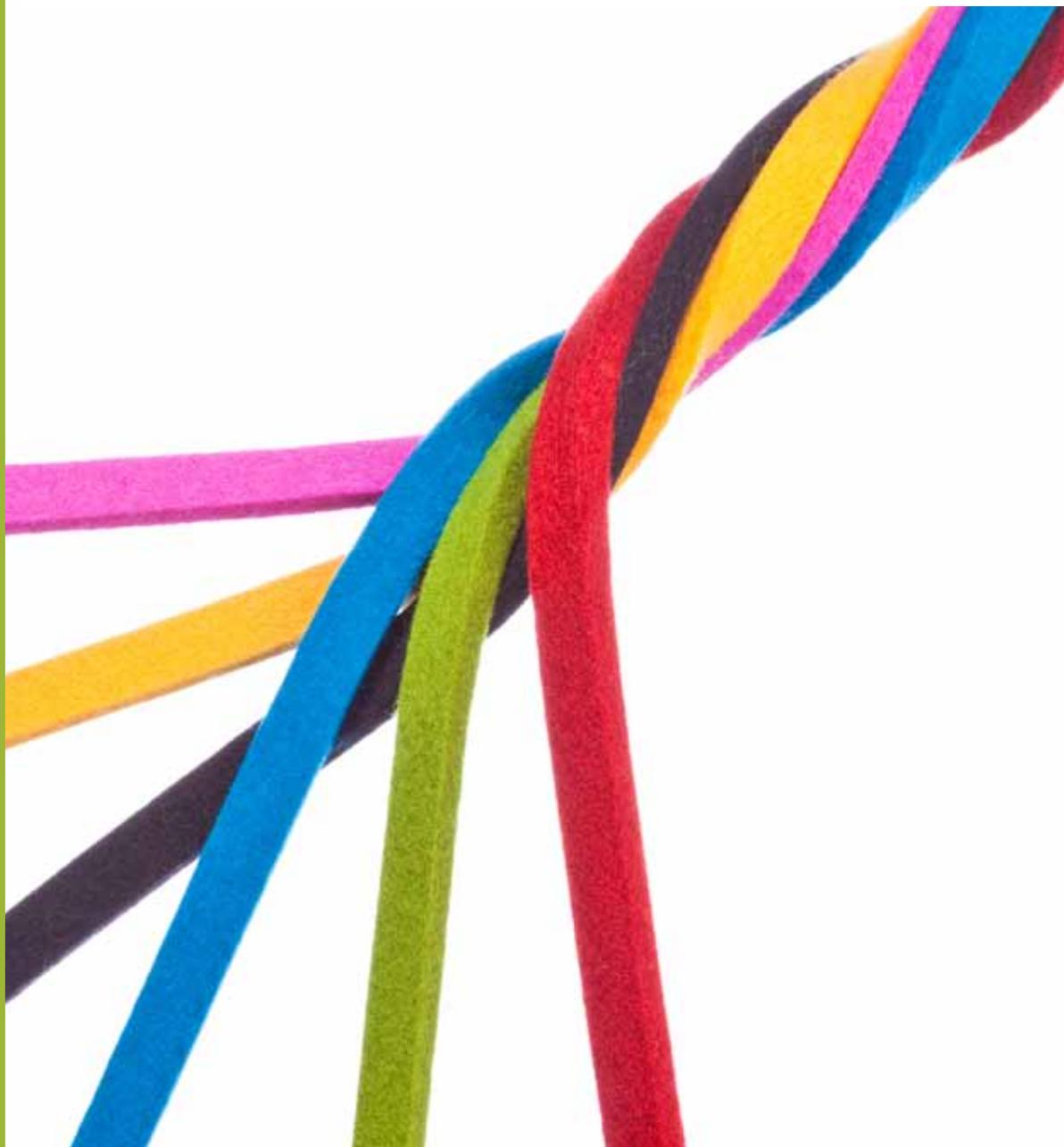# Using Data in Multi-Agency Collaborations:

Guiding Performance to Ensure Accountability and Improve Programs

By Karen E. Walker, Chelsea Farley and Meridith Polin

P/PV **Public/Private Ventures**
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Public/Private Ventures (P/PV)

P/PV is a national nonprofit whose mission is to improve the effectiveness of social programs, particularly those that aim to help young people from high-poverty communities successfully transition to adulthood. Working in close partnership with organizations and their leaders, P/PV aims to:

- Promote the broad adoption of appropriate evaluation methods;

- Advance knowledge in several specific areas in which we have long-standing experience: juvenile and criminal justice, youth development (particularly out-of-school time and mentoring) and labor market transitions for young people; and

- Enable practitioners and organizations to use their own data, as well as evidence in these fields, to develop and improve their programs.

Ultimately, we believe this work will lead to more programs that make a positive difference for youth in high-poverty communities.

For more information, please visit: www.ppv.org.

Child Trends

Child Trends is a nonprofit, nonpartisan research center that studies children at all stages of development, across all major domains, and in the important contexts of their lives. Our mission is to improve outcomes for children by providing research, data, and analysis to the people and institutions whose decisions and actions affect children.

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Introduction

For years, social service, healthcare and educational institutions have sought to collaborate with other organizations in their communities—to create screening and referral systems, to coordinate services and to advocate for policy changes—all in the interest of serving clients more effectively. The pace of these efforts has increased noticeably over the past 10 years, culminating in several recent large-scale federal initiatives explicitly designed to foster collaboration within communities. The Department of Education's Promise Neighborhood grants, for example, engage multiple agency partners in creating a "cradle to career" continuum of services, designed to break down silos and better meet the needs of local children and families. Likewise, the Department of Housing and Urban Development's Choice Neighborhoods program supports neighborhood transformation through extensive collaboration among housing, economic development, education and social service providers.

Foundations are also investing in collaborative efforts. The California Endowment, for instance, is supporting a decade-long initiative, Building Healthy Communities, in 10 areas across the state. And the Annie E. Casey Foundation has funded several community-based initiatives that emphasize local collaboration. These and other efforts are premised on the notion that multiple providers working together can have a stronger and more lasting impact than any one agency working in isolation.

This generation of community collaborations differs from those of the past in two primary (and related) ways. First, many of them emphasize the use of evidence-based[1] programs wherever possible, informed by earlier community-based initiatives that foundered by using untested strategies. Other past initiatives *intended* to use proven strategies but failed to implement them well—which helped spawn the second major trend influencing community collaborations: an increasing focus on performance management. The federal government has defined performance management as "the systematic process by which an agency involves its employees…in improving organizational effectiveness in the accomplishment of agency mission and goals."[2] Community collaborations are increasingly expected to use data for performance management purposes.

Of course, performance management across multiple agencies is more complex than performance management within a single organization. Partners may come to the table with differing expectations about the work. Agencies may compete for state or federal funds, making trust and cooperation challenging. Different organizational cultures and structures may impede communication across agencies. And concerns over client confidentiality may restrict the flow of information. *Fostering shared accountability* is an important piece of cross-agency performance management and one of the biggest challenges to successful collaboration. How can collaborating organizations ensure that agreed-upon work is being accomplished? How can they identify issues and make timely adjustments to improve the effectiveness of their services?

Funders, policymakers and social service providers increasingly understand that to implement evidence-based programs and practices well—and to ensure that people in communities receive the services they need—agencies must work together to collect relevant data and *use it* to inform their programming.

Electronic data systems are a major part of the solution. They can track information about the service population, the services received (within and across collaborating agencies), who provided each service, and the outcomes experienced by clients. But getting the most out of these systems is far from simple. While more and more collaborations are adopting centralized data systems, most of them are still working their way through the myriad challenges that such an effort involves—from ensuring the data's integrity to establishing meaningful common definitions of the outcomes being tracked.

This report is designed to help collaborating organizations anticipate and address the most common challenges associated with multi-agency performance management systems. The first section, "Getting Started," offers practical advice about launching such a system, including clarifying the purpose of the collaboration and of the data collection effort, determining what data to collect, choosing a system to use and conducting initial staff training. "Making It Work" suggests strategies for helping partners work together to collect accurate and complete data. "Using Data to Improve the Initiative" focuses on how data from multiple agencies can be mined and acted on to strengthen programming. Finally, "Sustaining the System" provides tips for ensuring that a multi-agency data collection effort thrives over time.

The report taps Public/Private Ventures' experience evaluating and managing a range of multi-agency initiatives that developed and used electronic data systems. These include:

- **AfterZone** — A citywide after-school initiative for middle school youth in Providence, RI, which uses a neighborhood "campus" structure, with services offered at multiple sites in geographically clustered areas. Numerous local nonprofits collaborate with a local intermediary (the Providence After-School Alliance), the school district and participating schools to design and deliver programming.

- **Children's Futures (CF)**[3] — A citywide effort to improve the health and well-being of children from birth to age three in Trenton, NJ. Partners include Children's Futures, Inc. (a nonprofit set up to lead the initiative); Catholic Charities of the Trenton Diocese; Child Care Connection; the Children's Home Society of New Jersey; Greater Trenton Behavioral Health Care; Mercer Street Friends; St. Francis Community Hospital; the Trenton Division of Health; and the New Jersey Chapter of the American Academy of Pediatrics, among others.

- **Elev8** — A flexible, full-service community school model that focuses on middle-grade youth in low-income areas of Baltimore, Chicago, New Mexico and Oakland. At each participating school, a constellation of partners works to integrate services that will support student success, including extended-day learning opportunities, school-based healthcare, and resources for families (e.g., tax prep clinics, help accessing health insurance, English as a Second Language classes, etc.).

- **The San Francisco Beacon Initiative (SFBI)** — A collaboration providing after-school, evening and summer programs in six middle schools, one elementary school and one high school in San Francisco. A range of community providers offers programming in five areas: education, career development, arts and recreation, leadership and health.

- **Youth Violence Reduction Partnership (YVRP)** — A collaborative effort involving law enforcement, city agencies and nonprofits working together to reduce youth homicide and other violent crime in Philadelphia's most violent neighborhoods. The city's police department, adult and juvenile probation office, and a local nonprofit organization work together to provide high-risk youth with extensive supervision and support.

Each of these collaborations developed a centralized database, into which multiple partners fed information about participants and services. Their efforts have met with varying degrees of success over time, but taken together, they underscore the value of a well-thought-out and well-implemented cross-agency performance management system. Collecting and responding to data *together* allows organizations to ensure accountability and to deliver better, more efficient services for clients and communities. The lessons that have emerged from these past efforts are outlined in the following pages.

Getting Started

Launching a successful multi-agency performance management system is a complex endeavor. It requires clarity about the goals of the work and the definitions of key indicators, wise decisions about which data to collect and what technology system to use, and thoughtful training for staff. In many ways, the success of a performance management system hinges on expectations that are established at the beginning—how will agencies work together in the data collection effort, how will they be supported and how will they be held accountable? Approaching the data system's development in a collaborative and methodical way will help ensure that it is a useful tool for all partners.

It should be noted that each of the steps outlined in this guide builds on the ones that precede it. Attempting to move on to the next step without appropriate closure, agreement or definition may lead to greater struggles down the road. We strongly recommend that agencies devote sufficient time and attention to each of the tasks summarized below.

1. Create a shared sense of purpose.

It may seem self-evident that collaborating agencies need to have a shared understanding of what they are working to achieve. But a surprising number of collaborations are tripped up by this essential early task. Organizations come to a partnership with individual missions and goals, which are generally related to—but distinct from—the mission and goals of the larger collaborative effort. They may share a vague idea of what they have come together to accomplish (improving outcomes for middle school youth, for example) but have different underlying assumptions about exactly what that means (better standardized test scores? improved health? fewer disciplinary problems?). Arriving at a consensus—and achieving real buy-in from all partners—about the collaboration's core goals is critically important for the agencies to work together effectively.

Collaborating agencies (and often their funders and evaluation partners) should clearly articulate answers to the following questions:

- ***"What are we trying to accomplish for our clients and community?"***
  This is where agencies must distinguish between their own goals, as single organizations, and the goals of the larger partnership. Working toward both simultaneously can be challenging, and agencies should try to foresee and mediate any tensions that may arise. In Children's Futures (CF), for instance, the collaboration's mission was to ensure that all Trenton's children were healthy and ready for school. The Trenton Division of Health played a strong leadership role in the initiative's planning and focused primarily on the health of mothers and infants; it saw the CF funding as an opportunity to improve birth outcomes, based on the assumption that babies born at full term and at healthy weights had better chances of being ready for school several years later. Although the Division of Health brought both funding and important leadership to the initiative, its focus on health tended to exclude voices concerned with other aspects of growth and development. As a result, the initiative's leaders selected a relatively narrow range of programs, an oversight that was recognized and addressed later.

- ***"How do we plan to accomplish our goals?"***
  Many organizations have benefited from the creation of clear logic models that outline exactly how their activities and services are expected to produce a particular set of outcomes.[4] This exercise may be even more important for multi-agency efforts, since partnering organizations need to understand how their work fits together with other agencies' work and how it contributes to a larger vision for change. Evaluators of the CF initiative found that its initial failure to articulate a comprehensive logic model undermined its effectiveness. For example, one of CF's early objectives was to ensure that women entered prenatal care in their first trimester, because early prenatal care contributes to better birth outcomes. However, the initiative recruited women primarily from prenatal clinics. While this approach made sense as a way of recruiting some at-risk women into home visiting programs, it did not address the need to reach women who weren't already receiving prenatal care. Had the logic model been articulated, shared and discussed, agency leaders might have identified and remedied these kinds of gaps.[5]

- ***"Why are we collecting data?"***
  Even when partners are entirely on board with a collaboration's goals and clear about how it seeks to achieve those goals, agencies may not support a data collection effort if they do not fully understand its purpose. It is important that agency staff—including frontline providers—comprehend the reasons for the data collection effort, including the ways that it can help them achieve their programmatic goals. At the beginning, agency staff often perceive that data are being gathered primarily to monitor their performance. However, there are multiple reasons for collecting information.

  At the most basic level, information can be used to determine whether or not programmatic benchmarks are being met. These benchmarks can include a variety of concrete measures that a program and/or collaboration have identified as vital to successful operations, such as the number of participants served, the amount of services received or the number of participants who have reached desired outcomes. Using information in this way often causes anxiety among staff. However, if they are invited to participate in the process of discussing progress on benchmarks, they are likely to feel less anxious, and they may be able to shed light on important operational challenges.

  Another reason to collect data is to learn about the characteristics of the populations being served and the types of services they are receiving. Such information requires individual-level data (as opposed to the aggregated data that can be used to assess whether a program is meeting its benchmarks). This information can help initiatives better understand the ongoing needs of their clients, a goal that resonates well with most frontline staff.

  Initiatives should also collect detailed program-level data, to understand the nature and amount of the services being provided across agencies. This provides a different perspective than the one held by individual agencies and their staff, and it is essential for helping collaborative partners assess service gaps or unnecessary redundancies.

  Finally, collaborations should collect information on individual participant outcomes, and examine it in relation to participant characteristics, services provided and participation levels. Together, this information can illuminate whether specific services (e.g., particular activities in an after-school initiative) or participation thresholds (e.g., students who attended that activity at least 80 percent of the time) are related to desired outcomes. Are outcomes for particular programs better than for others?

Are some programs serving a different population? Do some programs have better attendance and participation? Asking these types of questions—and thinking carefully about the possible explanations for any observed differences—allows partners to determine where programs and the larger initiative could be improved.[6]

2. Decide what data to collect.

Being clear about the purpose of a data collection effort is important not only for creating buy-in, but also for determining what kinds of data to collect. Once an initiative's logic model and the reasons for collecting and analyzing data have been clearly laid out, collaborating partners should consider the following questions:

- *"What indicators are useful to track?"*
  First and foremost, partners must decide what information will be most useful to understand if the collaboration is accomplishing its goals. Initiatives should collect several types of data, including:

  ~ Basic information about participants to determine if the target population is reached (e.g., demographic characteristics, how they became enrolled in the program);

  ~ Information about the services received (e.g., the types of services accessed; the location, frequency, intensity and duration of participation);

  ~ Indicators of program quality (e.g., the average length of "matches" in a mentoring program, or job placement rates for a workforce development initiative);

  ~ Data on the long-term outcomes of interest (e.g., high school graduation rates); and

  ~ Data on interim outcomes to assess whether participants are on track toward meeting longer-term goals (e.g., if high school graduation is the long-term outcome of interest, collaborations may want to track such interim outcomes as grades in core classes, school attendance and misconduct).

It is important to think early on about the full spectrum of information that an initiative may need, since collecting data retroactively can be extremely difficult. For example, after several years, the Elev8 initiative decided to redesign its evaluation. Program leaders and funders wanted to know if students' grades and test scores

had improved or if incidents of school discipline had declined after the introduction of the Elev8 model. But this information wasn't included in the original evaluation design, and researchers have found that obtaining it after the fact is complicated. For one thing, agreements with the schools and school districts do not explicitly outline data-sharing obligations. Also, at several sites, consent forms that students' parents had signed did not ask for permission to obtain these data. Going back to renegotiate guidelines with the districts and getting new consent forms—especially for students who are no longer involved in the initiative—may prove difficult and time-consuming.

There is a tension to manage here, however. Trying to collect too much data can be as problematic as not collecting enough. There are no easy answers about how to manage this tension. But several practical questions can guide a collaboration's decision-making: How much time does it take staff to collect and enter this information? Why is the information important? And, if we don't collect the information now, how difficult will it be to get access to it in the future?

- ***"What data are agencies already collecting?"***
  Many education and social service agencies struggle to keep up with demands for data. They often have to feed the same information into multiple databases for different funders and contracts. Multi-agency collaborations should attempt to minimize this burden by looking carefully at the data that agencies are already gathering. Where possible, those data should be used, rather than introducing entirely new formats and systems.

As part of the YVRP initiative, for instance, probation officers were required to report various kinds of contacts with participating youth, all of which they also had to report to the probation department on a daily basis. Initiative leaders realized that if they could have the probation department conduct a monthly "data dump" of the pertinent information, then officers would be relieved of duplicate data entry. It took a bit of trial and error to figure out, but the process ultimately worked well.

The Elev8 initiative was also successful in minimizing the introduction of new systems—at least for some partners. Where agencies were already collecting needed data, researchers developed a "bridge" linking the existing system with the new Elev8 database. Initiative leaders found that this approach was not only more efficient but also helped build goodwill with the agencies and staff who were spared the burden of entering data into multiple systems.

Unfortunately, few partnerships have been able to avoid the introduction of new systems entirely, often because participating agencies collect similar information using slightly different definitions and also because of competing demands from the agencies' funders and intermediaries. Before instituting a centralized database, CF used a common screening form in prenatal clinics, to identify women who could benefit from the initiative's home visiting programs. The form ensured that comparable data on pregnant mothers could be collected across the clinics, which was a major accomplishment. But the initiative's two providers of home visitation services—the Nurse-Family Partnership and Healthy Families—maintained separate databases at the time, and CF, Inc., had limited access to the information they collected. As a result, it was challenging to track families' participation after they entered the home visiting programs. Examples like this ultimately made it clear that CF would need a new centralized data system.

The Era of Dueling Data Systems

The challenges of multiple data systems and duplicate data entry are only slowly being addressed by public and private funders, the intermediaries that help manage and disseminate evidence-based programs, and commercial software developers. In 2004, P/PV launched *The Benchmarking Project* to examine and address some of these challenges. The project's goal is to identify realistic performance standards for the workforce development field, using a tool that allows similar organizations to compare outcomes; it also seeks to cultivate a robust "learning community" that helps organizations use data to strengthen their performance.

While this initiative and others are testing innovative ways to share and assess outcomes information, the reality remains that most social service agencies face multiple, sometimes competing demands for data. In this environment, collaborations can minimize the burden on partners by involving them in establishing shared initiative-wide indicators for participant characteristics and outcomes. That way, agencies can at least make informed choices between duplicative data entry and the adoption of shared indicators.

As funders of social programs become more focused on collaboration and program measurement, it is likely that efforts to establish common indicators will increase. If common standards are widely adopted, agencies and collaborations may find themselves making major changes to their data collection systems and processes. In anticipation of these challenges, agencies may be wise start thinking about shared indicators sooner rather than later.

- ***"Do we need agency-specific indicators?"***
  Sometimes collaborating agencies do such different things and have such different roles in the collaboration that it is necessary to track agency-specific indicators, as well as common, initiative-wide indicators. Under these circumstances, partnering agencies may want to consider a three-pronged approach:

  ~ First, working together, agencies should be able to agree on a small number of shared indicators for which they will all be accountable.

  ~ Second, they can develop a larger menu of shared indicators from which partners can pick and choose. This permits the use of shared indicators across subsets of agencies, even when it does not make sense for all the agencies in the initiative to collect the same information.

  ~ And, finally, for agencies that provide services no other agency provides, there can be indicators that are unique to their work.

3. Establish common definitions of indicators.

One challenge to pooling and assessing data from multiple agencies is that they may define common indicators very differently. Are participants "enrolled" when they fill out a form with their basic information, or only after they have substantively participated (e.g., for one class)? Has a student actually "attended" an after-school session if he or she stays only for the first 15 minutes? When is a young person officially "matched" with a mentor?

Collaborating agencies should be very explicit about how they want to define key terms and make sure that staff who are entering data fully understand these definitions. Inconsistent definitions can crop up in surprising places. For instance, in the SFBI, staff had to collect information about the types of activities that were offered, identifying them in the database as fitting within one of the SFBI core program areas. Early on in the initiative, it was discovered that some staff were coding certain sports activities as "health," while others categorized them under "art and recreation." This kind of discrepancy might seem inconsequential, but it matters if an initiative is trying to identify gaps in services, or show that a certain type of service was provided. To help ensure that staff across partner agencies are using the same terms to mean the same thing, initiatives can develop guides outlining all the data that needs to be collected, including clear definitions of various indicators.

4. Choose a system.

Social service and education agencies vary considerably in their technological capacity. Some small organizations track their data using handwritten sign-in sheets; they may lack even the most basic equipment, software and internet access. Other organizations collect information in spreadsheets or basic databases, while still others use advanced, custom-built or web-based data systems. Selecting a solution that will work well for all the players involved in a multi-agency effort requires, first, an understanding of local conditions:

- *"What technical capacity exists across agencies?"*
  From the least to the most technologically advanced partners, what systems, skills and equipment are already in place?

- *"Can current systems be modified for the initiative?"*
  Can the systems that agencies are already using be modified to meet the initiative's needs, and if yes, what does such modification entail?

> ### "Should we choose a customized database or an off-the-shelf solution?"
>
> This is a challenging decision because the technology for cross-agency data sharing is still in its infancy. However, our experience suggests that purchasing commercial products may have distinct advantages over customized databases. In the long run, off-the-shelf systems are less expensive to operate. They may be easier to use, with vendors offering standardized trainings. And users often benefit from improvements and upgrades at minimal cost. Conversely, customized databases generally require significant investments in upfront development, training and maintenance. In many instances, customized systems are designed in such a way that only their original designer truly understands them. If the designer leaves, the organization or initiative may struggle to maintain the system. Although large agencies with complex government reporting needs often have the resources and capacity to maintain customized systems, the budgets of smaller community-based organizations may preclude this option.

- *"How much of a burden will be imposed by introducing a new data system?"*
  What will staff across agencies be expected to do with respect to data entry, data downloads, data management and reporting—above and beyond what they already do? How much time will those activities take? Do the agencies have the in-house capacity to carry out all required tasks? What would it take to train staff to use the new system? Who will pay for the work?

Collaborative partners should also learn about the features, limitations and strengths of the available commercial technology. The text box on the next page suggests key questions to ask when choosing a new system.

5. Involve frontline staff from the earliest stages.

The quality of an initiative's data is dependent on the skills and commitment of the people who are entering those data on a daily basis. Frontline staff often have valuable insights about what kinds of information to collect and, ultimately, what the information might mean. Unfortunately, these insights are often overlooked. Involving frontline staff from the very beginning, making sure they understand the purpose of the data collection effort and arming them with the skills needed to be actively engaged with the data will greatly increase the odds of success.

Strong staff trainings are one of the most important aspects of launching and maintaining an effective performance management system. Partners should:

- Identify data collectors and managers at every agency and design trainings to meet their needs. If there is an external evaluator, they might be responsible for providing the training, but individual agency leaders must ensure that staff understand why the training is important.

- Provide follow-up support. Consider using webinars and phone conversations to clarify or reinforce information from the training or help staff troubleshoot issues as they arise.

- Know that a single training session will not be enough. Staff are being asked to absorb large amounts of new information and develop new skills. One-shot trainings won't be effective. Rather, training should be presented in stages, with ample opportunity for hands-on practice. In the Elev8 initiative, the first training was used to introduce staff to the data collection system, teach them how to enter data, and practice data entry. Subsequent trainings focused on reporting, analysis, and more sophisticated ways they could manipulate data. The subsequent trainings were optional, so that only those who were interested (or in need of additional support) participated.

Questions to Ask a Potential Technology Vendor

- **"How are data shared in a multi-agency collaboration?"**
  Individual information may be shared as is, or it may be aggregated with other clients' data and shared in a report—for example, in an attendance report for a group activity. If a social worker in one agency wishes to share information about a client assessment with a provider in another agency, is it possible to do so electronically? What steps would be required to share the information? Would the social worker be able to restrict some but not all data if desired?

- **"How is access to confidential information restricted?"**
  Generally, there is no need for all staff members in an agency to have access to all clients' information. At the same time, some data needs to be shared among key staff. Can the database offer some staff limited access and others extensive access? How does it do so?

- **"What standard reports are built into the system?"**
  Ask to see examples of standardized reports that you might need. Such reports can include attendance reports, demographic reports by agency, demographic reports across agencies, missing data reports, educational or job placement reports, and reports on referrals, to name just a few. Does the example provide information in the way you will need to see it?

- **"Is it possible to generate customized reports?"**
  What skills are required to do so? How much training is required?

- **"What steps are necessary to download raw data from the system?"**
  Although standard reports and the ability to query the data within the system can be very useful, there will probably be times when people involved in the initiative would simply like to output raw data—so it can be summarized using Excel, for instance, or run through a statistical software program. Find out how easy or difficult these downloads will be.

- **"What steps are required to link client-level information on one screen with client-level information on another?"**
  Staff who enter data often complain when they must enter the same information, such as date of birth or gender, into multiple screens. A good system will make it easy to link information about clients across screens, lowering data entry demands and reducing the likelihood of data entry errors.

- **"If the system is web-based, what are the typical wait times for generating reports?"**
  Large databases require considerable computing capacity, and if a system is web-based, the servers are likely servicing many clients, which can slow certain functions. Are there times during the day when heavy traffic creates long wait times?

- **"Are there any technical limitations that we should know about?"**
  Does the system work only with certain web browsers or operating systems? Does it work on mobile devices (tablets, phones, etc.)?

- **"What kind of technical support is available?"**
  If we run into problems, how do we access help with the system? Is there a cost for this kind of support? How long does it usually take to get questions answered?

Making It Work

Even after a central database is in place, collaborating agencies face many challenges to ensuring that accurate and complete data are collected across the initiative. Strategies to overcome these challenges include establishing clear roles and responsibilities (and documenting them in print); tasking the right agency staff with entering data and the right initiative leader with overseeing the larger data collection effort; and providing ongoing training and support.

1. Establish clear roles, responsibilities and consequences.

Collaborating agencies need to have clarity about what they are responsible for—and what they can expect from their partners. Effective collaborations hinge on accountability, both in terms of collecting good, complete data and in terms of responding to it programmatically. At the outset of the data collection effort, partners should establish:

- Exactly what data is being collected, by whom and how often;

- Who is responsible for analyzing those data and how often;

- How will that analysis be shared among the partners;

- What mechanisms will be put in place to discuss trends and identify needed course corrections; and

- What will the consequences be if a partner fails to live up to these responsibilities.

Collaborations should develop formal agreements about how data are to be used and secured, with staff signing statements promising to share information only as appropriate and as permitted by participants. Although federal regulations about patient or student privacy (such as the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act or the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act) are frequently cited as reasons for not sharing information, this issue is often a red herring. Those regulations actually spell out circumstances

under which data may be shared with others, as well as situations that require organizations to ask for consent to share information. Tapping the wisdom of someone who is knowledgeable and experienced with such regulations may be extremely helpful as an initiative grapples with questions about data confidentiality.

Collaborating partners must also decide about publication rights. Will the collaboration (or its external evaluator) publish the initiative's data? Do individual partners also have the right to publish? If so, are they limited to using their "own" data, or can they present information about other agencies involved in the collaboration? And will there be a process for partners to review, comment on or "approve" publications? Answering these questions upfront will help avoid misunderstandings and tensions that frequently arise among collaborating agencies.

2. Create Memoranda of Understanding (MOU).

It is a good idea to codify agreements about roles, responsibilities, rights and consequences in a formal MOU. In CF, data collection improved substantially when CF, Inc., inserted language about it into the annual agreements it signed with partners. Similarly, the Elev8 initiative in New Mexico used MOUs with partner organizations, covering a number of areas, including timely data collection. In contrast, P/PV has had experience with a number of other initiatives where such agreements were not in place, and data collection was uneven.

3. Have the right people in place— with dedicated time.

In order to deliver on their data collection commitments, individual agencies need to ensure that staff have adequate time, training and support to perform the requisite duties. At a minimum, agency staff must have the skills to enter data into a system. Direct providers often complain about the burden this activity places on their already full workdays, and it is important for supervisors and initiative leaders to have a good understanding of how much time is required.[7]

At the initiative level, one person should be responsible for tracking key indicators across agencies, and in an ongoing way. This person is the primary point of contact for all questions regarding the collaborative data effort. He or she oversees trainings and regularly prepares and distributes cross-agency reports.

This person is also responsible for monitoring the *quality of the data*. Initially, data collected from different agencies may be incomplete, for a number of possible reasons: Staff may not have adequate time carved out of their schedules to enter all the data. Or so many pieces of data may be required that staff are picking and choosing which ones to collect. Perhaps procedures are not yet in place to collect data and transmit it to the person or people responsible for entering it into the centralized system. Challenges can also arise if data are very sensitive in nature, as staff may hesitate to document this information.

Therefore, "missing data" reports are crucial, especially (although not only) in the early months of data collection. These reports have several purposes: to ensure the timeliness of data collection, to highlight information that is missing and to help spot data entry errors. The initiative-level staff person should run missing data reports routinely and share them with agency leaders and supervisors to encourage better data collection.

Initiatives also need someone who is responsible for spearheading discussions among agency leaders about what their data reveal. In the best cases, these discussions are taking place at multiple levels within the initiative: Executives, program directors, and direct-service providers at individual agencies should all be examining, discussing and using the data to improve their collective performance. Building this kind of broad interest in using data to improve programming is a long-term and ongoing undertaking, but it is extremely important for delivering effective services.

4. Have a champion (and/or a "hammer").

Identifying a champion who has the standing or authority to induce partners to act can be hugely valuable for a multi-agency data collection effort. For example, YVRP selected a particular member of its board to work with partners around data collection. He was selected because he was well respected, had good relationships across partner agencies, had the ability to "move" the work forward through conversation and negotiation, and had a fundamental understanding of evaluation. He was successful in part because he listened to agencies' feedback about what would make the data collection effort more useful to their staff and made changes based on their input. At the same time, he held

agencies accountable for collecting complete and accurate data and for taking action in response to those data, as needed. His role was critical to the development of a strong performance management system.

In some multi-agency initiatives, the person with authority is as much "hammer" as champion. Often funders play this role—with the tacit understanding that agencies must participate actively in developing the performance management system if they want to continue to receive funding. While establishing these kinds of expectations is important, it is equally important that agencies feel a sense of ownership over the data collection effort. It is not useful for them to grudgingly participate simply to meet funder requirements. Ideally, collaborations will have funders who make their objectives clear and agency partners who are genuinely, actively engaged in shaping and using the performance management system.

5. Provide ongoing training and support.

As noted above, making sure agency staff are able to effectively input and manipulate data generally requires ongoing training and support. It may be useful to integrate training on using the data system with substantive programmatic technical assistance— "what are the data showing us about our participants and programming, and how should we respond?" Dealing with data collection and program improvement simultaneously can help foster a strong data-driven culture.

Using Data to Improve the Initiative

One of the most difficult—and important—shifts for a single organization or a multi-agency initiative is moving from simply collecting data (generally because funders require it) to actually using data to improve programming. This requires mechanisms to share information in a timely fashion and engage agency leaders and staff in discussions about how to interpret and respond to trends. Initiatives should consider how data can inform day-to-day programmatic decisions (e.g., is this class scheduled at the best time for our participants?), as well as larger midcourse corrections (e.g., do we need to rethink our programming to better respond to community needs?).

1. Share the right information at the right times and with the right people.

Information is useful only if it is shared. Deciding when and with whom to share data from multi-agency systems is critical, and these decisions should be informed by the maturity of both the data collection effort and the initiative itself.

Early in a data system's development, information may be incomplete and analysis may provide an inaccurate picture of what is happening on the ground. In these early days, information may also be entered incorrectly. For example, a staff member may enter monthly earnings into an income field that was intended to track annual earnings instead. At this point, it is important to share information with agency managers and their data entry staff about how complete and accurate the data seem to be. The focus of discussion should be, "How do we improve data collection and data entry?" As the data collection effort matures, and agency staff become adept in working with data, it begins to paint a more accurate picture of the initiative's participants and programming. This is the time to start actively using information to inform agency and initiative decisions.

The age of the initiative matters as much as the age of the data collection effort. Early in an initiative, the information that should be shared first is typically about participant char-acteristics. This permits initiative partners to ask, "Are we reaching those we intended to

reach? If not, do we need to reconsider our recruitment methods?" In the early years of implementation, for instance, the Elev8 initiative in Chicago realized that it wasn't serving the "highest risk" youth. This prompted program staff to become much more intentional in their recruitment practices—they started using a set of early warning indicators to identify, recruit and retain high-risk youth.

As an initiative progresses, data on participation rates and service provision should also be shared, and as program cycles are completed, information on outcomes should be made available as well. Ideally, an initiative will be able to link data about participants to information about participation and outcomes, which can help identify ways to improve services for future program cycles. In a mature initiative, periodic reports that address all these questions should be developed and widely distributed.

The best way to share information may be different for different audiences. For example, "dashboard" reports that provide broad summaries of a few key indicators are great for identifying overall progress and trends. These reports may be most useful when developed on a regular basis and shared with executives and others who want a broad overview of how the collaboration is going. Reports summarizing participant outcomes by staff, program site, attendance rates and other programmatic features are often useful for program managers. And reports with tables showing details about participants (such as age, gender, income or service needs) can help program managers and staff understand whether they are reaching the desired populations. In general, it helps if the expected users of the data can have a say in how reports are designed (both in terms of the information presented and how it is displayed).

2. Analyze and interpret the data, including all levels of staff.

Collecting and circulating information only gets an initiative so far. Data need to be thoughtfully examined and analyzed to be valuable for program improvement. Attendance rates in an after-school program, for instance, should be considered in the context of other similar programs. Are the rates comparatively high or low? If they're low, what factors might explain this? Staff at all levels should participate in such discussions. Elev8 Chicago has been very intentional about this kind of team-based analysis. School

partners and program staff review data dashboards each month. Together with their evaluator, the group addresses incomplete or incorrect data, identifies important data trends, and talks about what those trends may mean.

Frontline staff often have unique insight about the situational or programmatic issues that might help explain trends in the data. In SFBI, for example, participation among Asian youth was lower than expected, given their population in the middle schools. In examining these data, program staff noted that there were "Chinese schools" in the neighborhoods and that parents may have been signing up their children for those, instead of the Beacon centers. Frontline staff can help brainstorm solutions when data reveal less-than-optimal results. This empowers staff, makes the data collection feel real and relevant to their jobs, and brings everyone's best thinking to the table about how the initiative can improve.

3. Respond to data (in everyday decisions and major course corrections).

Multi-agency collaborations need to build mechanisms for discussing and processing the trends that data reveal and making initiative-wide decisions about how to respond. Data can be used to inform day-to-day programmatic details or large-scale strategic shifts.

The initiatives that do this well make real-time data widely available and use it as a regular part of their operations. For example, in the AfterZone initiative, the lead agency, PASA, uses a customized web-based system to track daily attendance across all its after-school programs. This system is used to support daily operations (creating atten-dance sheets, producing mailing labels, etc.) and to coordinate bus transportation at the end of each day. It also enables partners to obtain accurate system-wide assessments of participation on a daily basis and to analyze participation in a variety of ways. Over time, the AfterZone's data revealed that most youth were attending programs intensely but only for short "bursts." So, the initiative's leaders instituted a number of changes designed to increase the duration of participation, including the elimination of one-day programs and more targeted recruitment.

The YVRP initiative provides partners with monthly reports tracking key performance indicators and outcomes, such as the number of visits with program participants, par-ticipants' involvement in constructive activities, and their involvement in violence. The partners review and discuss these data, measure them against benchmarks and make

necessary adjustments to strengthen operations. The initiative also uses data as the basis for other important decisions—for example, to identify groups of young people who should be enrolled and to pinpoint additional police districts where the initiative should be operating.

At its most advanced, performance management should lead partners to ask increasingly nuanced questions about program operations and to regularly examine desired programmatic outcomes in relation to services and service use. For example, collaborative partners could review client outcomes at an agency level to ask:

- Why are Agency A's participants showing better outcomes than Agency B's?

- Is Agency A serving a higher-risk population that is more responsive to the services provided, or is Agency A serving a less vulnerable population that will do better in general (with or without services)?

- Are Agency A's staff better trained?

- Do Agency B's participants face challenges in accessing its services?

- Is Agency A's program model more intensive?

The performance management system will not provide definitive answers to any of these questions, but it does allow collaborative partners to identify and investigate problems.

As the preceding example suggests, performance management is an inherently evaluative and comparative activity, which often causes anxiety among agency staff. That anxiety is unlikely to be completely eliminated, but it can be managed if frontline staff are involved in regular discussions about what the data mean and how agency and initiative performance could be improved.

Sustaining the System

To sustain a performance management system and truly embed a data-driven culture, agencies involved in a collaboration may need to make permanent changes in the way they do business. At the very least, they will have to include the costs of the data collection effort in their annual budget and find ways to support this work for the long term. Participating agencies should also institutionalize expectations that their staff work with data regularly and effectively—by including these tasks in job descriptions and performance assessments.

1. Plan for ongoing costs.

Performance management systems require continued investments of time and money—for staff and managers to collect, enter, analyze and act on data; for hardware, software and system development; and for training and support. These expenditures should be viewed as fundamental ongoing costs of operation, not time-limited expenses. Thus, although start-up costs may be financed with grants for "special projects," ongoing costs should be incorporated into an organization's overhead.

2. Build data tasks into job descriptions and performance assessments.

Agencies must ensure that staff are provided with ongoing and ample time to attend necessary trainings and to do the work associated with data entry and analysis. Responsibilities for collecting, checking, analyzing and acting on data should be written into appropriate staff's job descriptions and taken into account during performance reviews. This means that supervisors will also need training—so they have a firm foundation for determining whether their staff are performing data tasks successfully.

3. Revisit the system periodically.

As an initiative evolves and matures, it is likely that data collection needs will also change. Initiative leaders should periodically revisit the information being collected, the processes in place for analyzing and acting on the data, and the system itself—to ensure that it continues to function optimally. As in other phases of performance management, it is important to involve frontline staff in discussions about system upgrades. Is there additional information they would find useful? Are there more efficient ways to collect data? Are proposed changes going to work, from their perspective? In YVRP, for example, when a change is made to one of the standard reporting forms, a handful of staff are asked to pilot the new version before it's officially rolled out.

Initiatives should take a methodical approach to reviewing and modifying their systems. The pros and cons of any changes must be discussed among agency managers. It is vital to be clear about how proposed changes to shared indicators will alter what can and cannot be said about the initiative's work.

4. Expect it to take time.

While some benefits may be seen almost immediately—for example, having quick access to information about the people using services across multiple agencies—it is important to have realistic expectations about the time required to get a system up and running. If the system is truly expected to help manage and improve performance, program service details will need to be examined in relation to participation and outcomes data. Making this kind of system fully functional as a performance management tool can easily take three or more years.

Typically, collaboratives go through a number of stages as they work to develop robust performance management systems:

- Stage 1 includes the time needed to identify indicators, build or customize a system, develop manuals and other documentation, and provide initial staff training. This can take six months to a year or more.

- Stage 2 is early start-up and generally lasts three to six months. During this period, those leading the effort will spend time helping staff who need extra support, troubleshooting problems in either the electronic system or in the processes for collecting data, and preparing missing and inaccurate data reports to share with staff

across agencies. These tasks will continue into the future, but they are a primary focus during the early start-up phase.

- During Stage 3, data are flowing into the system and begin to be useful for a variety of stakeholders. Initiative leaders should be developing easy-to-read reports about participant characteristics, service provision and attendance, and establishing regular opportunities to discuss emerging trends. This stage might last six months or more.

- In Stage 4, outcomes data for participants start to be available in sufficient quantity that initiatives can begin to really manage their performance. At this point, the collaboration can ask questions that link program operations to program outcomes. Do certain staff or certain programs seem to have better outcomes, and, if so, why?

- Stage 5 is full maturity. Tasks conducted in previous stages will need to be revisited periodically. Staff will continue to need training.[8] Missing data reports will be required to ensure that staff keep up-to-date with data collection and entry. Data systems will need to be tweaked, as new partner agencies come on board, others leave, and programs change. However, at this point, the sharing and use of information is routinized across the initiative. Partners have embraced the data system and see it as integral to their work.

The time—and significant financial investment—to get these systems up and running should not be underestimated. Collaborating agencies (and their funders) should discuss the timeline and costs upfront, so all parties understand what will be required to be successful.

Concluding Thoughts

More and more funders, both public and private, are interested in supporting collaborative efforts. But developing appropriate performance management systems for these collaborations is a complex and challenging undertaking.

By thinking carefully about goals and strategies, establishing clear roles and responsibilities, involving all partners—and all levels of staff—in meaningful ways, and creating mechanisms to share and act on data, multi-agency collaborations can make the most of what electronic data systems have to offer. Such systems have the potential to greatly improve the effectiveness of services being delivered in communities across the country.

Endnotes

1. Evidence-based programs are programs that have been found effective using rigorous evaluation techniques. See Flay, Robert R., et al. 2005. "Standards of Evidence: Criteria for Efficacy, Dissemination and Effectiveness." Prevention Science. Vol. 6, No. 3. Also, Cooney, Siobhan M. 2007. "Evidence-Based Programs: An Overview." *What Works, Wisconsin — Research to Practice Series.* Issue 6. University of Wisconsin, Madison.

2. "Performance Management Overview," US Office of Personnel Management, downloaded 7/19/10 from http://www.opm.gov/hcaaf_resource_center/assets/Ropc_tool3.pdf.

3. This report was prepared with support from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, as part of P/PV's evaluation of the Children's Futures initiative.

4. For a brief description of logic models and theories of change and a list of other helpful resources, see Hamilton, Jenny and Jacinta Bronte-Tinkew. 2007. *Logic Models in Out-of-School Time Programs: What Are They and Why Are They Important?* Child Trends. Washington, DC.

5. See Walker, Karen E., Claire Gibbons and Marco Navarro. 2009. "Children's Futures: Lessons from a Second-Generation Community Change Initiative." The Foundation Review, Vol. 1.1.

6. It is important to note that the information collected through performance management systems is not the best way of determining whether or not a collaboration is effective in improving people's lives. Although performance management systems may provide evaluators with useful information about how programs operate, these evaluators must also collect additional information to truly gauge an initiative's impact. Performance management systems are rarely able to collect extensive information on past clients, for example, including those who left before completing the program and its post-program assessments. Because people who leave programs early are probably different in motivation and other characteristics than those who complete programs, the information on program completers cannot be used to make generalizations about program participants overall. The vast majority of clients in social service programs participate voluntarily, and rates of non-completers are high. Although some programs attempt to follow up with their alumni, they often reach only a small proportion of them. As a result of these challenges, the outcomes information collected in performance management systems is often best used in addressing questions about program operations, not program effectiveness.

7. Naturally, the time required for data collection will vary greatly from initiative to initiative. It may take as little as an hour per week for a staff person who simply has to enter attendance data. Five hours per week is more realistic if staff need to enter information on individually provided services (e.g., case management). And it can take several days a week if a single staff person is responsible for most data entry (especially if an initiative is collecting a lot of data about individual participants).

8. Existing staff will need training on new features/changes to the system, as well as general refreshers. And when turnover happens, new staff members will need a top-to-bottom orientation. Training materials can easily become outdated; initiatives and agency partners should make a concerted effort to keep these materials current and complete.