

CALIFORNIA DEPARTMENT OF COMMUNITY SERVICES AND DEVELOPMENT

OUTCOME SCALES

Some History

The California Department of Community Services and Development (CSD) and the statewide network of service providers have developed and implemented a system of **scales** used in measuring outcomes of interventions by members of the network in their local communities. The three tier scaling structure examines outcomes at the Family, Community, and Agency levels, and is fully consistent with the six national goals adopted by the OCS MATF. Key features include:

- *Incorporates local conditions and values* into outcomes measures;
- *Is fully aggregable*;
- Measures *incremental change*;
- *Is flexible* in accommodating a wide spectrum of outcome measures.

In 1994, the California Department of Economic Opportunity (now the Department of Community Services and Development- CSD) and its statewide network of CSBG service providers embarked on the process of developing strategies for state and local agency compliance with the requirement of the Government Performance and Results Act. The forum in which this work has taken place is the Community Services Block Grant Information Systems Committee (CSBG/IS). The Committee includes representation from CSD and from local agencies who are members of the CSBG network; it functions as a genuine collaborative partnership in attempting to design mutually acceptable solutions to common problems such as GPRA compliance.

The CSBG/IS Committee began its work with regard to GPRA by reviewing and commenting on proposals developed by the OCS Monitoring and Assessment Task Force (MATF). While appreciating and applauding the efforts of the Task Force, members of the Committee, after much deliberation, decided that there would be value in considering alternative outcome measurement strategies that, while using a different structure and general approach, would also be reasonably consistent with the direction of the MATF. After six months of intensive work, the CSBG/IS Committee designed a scaling approach to measuring outcomes resulting from local agency services and interventions.

The California Development Scales were based conceptually on the Family Development Matrix created by Mid-Iowa Community Action Agency in Marshalltown, Iowa. Members of the CSBG/IS Committee noted that the matrix structure could be applied not just to family/client outcomes, but also to outcomes at the community and agency levels as well, and that these three tiers were consistent with the six national goals of the MATF-which included two family, two community, and two agency goals. Within this conceptual framework, the CSBG/IS Committee designed the outcome scales structure that is illustrated in Figure 1. It is a client and community driven evaluation system that consists of a Family Development Scale, a Community Development Scale, and an Agency Development Scale, each including eleven dimensions intended to encompass the full range of activities commonly associated with community action. Key features of this system include the following:

- It invites and encourages incorporation of local conditions, perspectives, and values in the selection of measures and scale thresholds through its emphasis on locally developed scales and/or subscales. It establishes *reasonable* interagency consistency through use of general guidelines for designing local scale content.
- It supports and encourages interagency collaboration by providing a universal scaling framework usable by virtually any organization to scale any outcome indicator and, concomitantly, by establishing a common outcome language that facilitates communication among organizations regarding common clients and community conditions.
- It is aggregable, even though specific measures may vary, as a result of adoption of a standard five-level, multi-dimension matrix format and the adoption of a standard set of dimensions for each of the three scales.
- It supports the Community Action principle and tradition of local determination.
- It measures *incremental* change, readily accommodating multi-year goals and objectives and allowing families, communities, and agencies to identify, track, and celebrate multiple successes across a defined continuum of change.
- It is comprehensive and so will enable any service provider to "tell its story" in full. Because it is comprehensive, it encourages a systemic and holistic approach to assessing conditions and establishing targets for change.

Even though it was analogous to "building an airplane in flight," California embarked on pre-piloting and piloting this system in July of 1995, recognizing that it would continue to evolve and that the network would learn by doing. This strategy was consistent with the strongly "grassroots" origin, development, and implementation of this model.

Since California agencies began using this approach more than two years ago, the scaling format which is at the heart of the system has attracted considerable attention and gained wide acceptance. The basic concepts have been adopted by the MATF Scales and Ladders Subcommittee as the framework for the development of a national set of community, agency, and family scales. At least forty jurisdictions, networks, and service providers of various types (in addition to the entire California CSBG network) are using or considering using this model or some variation or adaptation.

It is evident that interest in replication is strong, and that replication is actively in progress in a variety of settings.

The California Department of Community Services and Development and its network of services providers have learned much in the design and implementation of the California scales that will be of use to others who are following a similar course. California has also identified areas in which further development and refinement are essential to 1) "finish" development of the model in California, 2) offer a complete system for replication or adaptation by others, and 3) contribute to and collaborate in efforts at the national level to develop and disseminate a standard set of scaling tools with broad applicability in the community services network and in other services sectors as well.

In furtherance of these goals, California CSD organized a symposium intended to provide an assessment of the model conceptually and in application, to develop of recommendations for refinements and improvements, and to

verify the credibility of the approach as a tool for measuring and documenting outcomes. CSD believes that effective "marketing," extensive replication, and effective use in telling the story of community action are dependent to a significant degree on acceptance of this particular approach to scaling by recognized evaluation professionals. There will inevitably be questions regarding such principles as validity, reliability, objectivity, and consistency and the degree to which they are or are not applicable in this context. CSD's position is that, in developing this model, the goal has been to strike just the right balance between consistency and flexibility, between objectivity and subjectivity, between scientific accuracy and practicality, between the art and the science of social and community service delivery. Determining whether that balance has been achieved and, if not, what additional steps must be taken is important to everyone using or considering using this scaling format. However, making that determination is not within the capacity of CSD or any of the members of its network. Accordingly, CSD:

- Convened representatives of key organizations and entities that are using the California outcome scales (or some variation of those scales) or are developing a scales structure and strategy based on the California model. The group included CSD and representation from the California network, the MATF Scales and Ladders Committee, and a consortium of agencies in Marin County, CA, that is working to develop a community-wide set of outcome scales, and other interested participants.
- Identified four evaluators or evaluation specialists of national stature whose knowledge and experience would be informative in a "conversation" about the California scales, were relevant to an assessment of the model, and would provide the basis for constructive recommendations regarding the future development of the system.

A summary transcript of the Symposium follows.