

CALIFORNIA DEPARTMENT OF COMMUNITY SERVICES AND DEVELOPMENT

AN APPROACH TO MEASURING OUTCOME AND IMPACT

The Original concept

Background

In response to federal requirements that Community Action Programs develop a process for measuring the outcomes and impact of their activities, both California's CSBG Information Systems Committee and the National Task Force on Monitoring and Assessment considered various strategies for complying with this mandate. In general, the parameters of the discussion seemed to encompass at least the following issues:

- Because Federal legislation now requires community action agencies to measure and report outcomes/impacts that result from their activities, essential elements of the planning process for each CAA must be strategies for:
 1. identifying and defining baseline conditions against which impact of agency services and activities can be measured;
 2. defining desired ultimate outcome goals, as well as interim stages of progress toward those goals which may be used to measure impact on an incremental basis;
 3. assessing impact on at least three levels: a) the individual client or client family, b) the community as whole, and c) the condition and capacities of the agency itself.
- Both Federal HHS and California Department of Economic Opportunity also insist:
 1. that methods for measuring impact fall within some basic parameters for standardization and consistency on both the state and national levels;
 2. that the categories in which outcome are measured can be related to the six general goals adopted by the national Task Force on Monitoring and Assessment;
 3. that, as a result of that national consistency, impact/outcome measures used by all CAA's quantifiable and subject to aggregation at both state and national levels; and
 4. that the outcomes reported tell the "story" of community action.
- Finally, individual community action agencies appear to need and desire a system for quantifying and measuring impact/outcomes which:
 1. allows each agency to report the full range of its work in its community;
 2. is flexible enough to accommodate local conditions when establishing baselines, identifying realistic and meaningful indicators of impact, and defining ultimate goals and interim benchmarks of progress toward those goals;

3. supports and reflects the broad and systemic approaches used by CAA's in serving their "customers," whether individuals, families, entire communities, or members and programs of the community action agency.

In addressing these points, the discussion at the Federal level has focused on the establishment of six general goals:

1. Low income people become more self-sufficient.
2. The conditions in which low income people live are improved.
3. Low income people own a stake in their community.
4. Partnerships among members of the community services network are achieved.
5. Agencies increase their capacity to achieve results.
6. Special populations achieve maximum potential by promoting family and other supportive environments.

The Federal task force has further identified a number of indicators in each of these categories that will be used on a national basis to measure the impact of community action agencies and of community action generally.

As the CSBG/IS Committee reviewed and discussed the ideas under consideration in Washington, it was clear that the Committee and its members had a number of concerns regarding the Federal strategy:

- The six goals settled on by the Task Force seemed appropriate and workable because they appear to encompass the range of work typically done by CAA'S. However, the CSBG/IS Committee believes that these could be readily consolidated into three general goals each relating to one of the levels on which CAAs work and produce outcomes: Family, Community, Agency. Proposed consolidated goals are attached. Use of the revised goals also supports aggregation of outcome data since outcomes are clearly related to specific national community action goals.
- The more significant concerns related to the use of community-wide data as the principal outcome indicators. The concern was that any single agency would be likely to have only small, indirect effects on these statistics; and for most it would be impossible to show direct cause and effect relationships between a CAA's activities and, for example, the overall crime rate for the agency's service area.
- Furthermore, the range of indicators proposed (originally 36, then 17 in number) did not seem broad enough to encompass the wide range of activities undertaken by CAA'S. And they were necessarily arbitrary as a result of having to choose such a small number of indicators from the multitude of outcomes and impacts that result or could result from CAA activities. A narrow spectrum of indicators seems likely to restrict fairly severely the network's capacity to report the full scope of its effort and its impact.

An Alternative Approach to Measuring Outcome and Impact

California CSD decided to develop and present a concept for an alternative approach to measuring outcomes and impact that has the benefit of a) being quantifiable and capable of measuring change, b) being capable of aggregation, c) demonstrating the systemic and holistic approaches used by CAA's in serving their clients and communities, d) allowing considerable local control both standards and indicators of impact based upon local conditions, e) enabling each CAA to reflect its full range of activity and impact, and f) redirecting focus from

narrow problem solving to a continuum of intervention from crisis management to self-sufficiency and prevention. The strategy uses matrices similar to those commonly used in Family Development work, but extends the concept to include analysis of community and agency as well as client/family.

The fundamental premise of this idea is that CAA's are best suited to make determinations regarding both the indicators of impact and the benchmarks that should be used in monitoring outcomes of their work in their own communities. This model proposes the use of general parameters in using the "development matrices," but otherwise CAA's would be free to use any indicator with which there is a cause and effect relationship with the agency's work. The benefits of this system are:

- The matrices provide a structure for organizing and presenting local decisions regarding indicators and benchmarks in a way that allows them to be cumulated even though there may be as many different indicators as there are CAA'S. Aggregation can be accomplished by assigning numerical values to progress through the matrix and those values would be cumulated rather than attempting to cumulate specific indicators themselves.
- Because the matrices reflect a systemic view of CAA's roles and work in their communities, they allow agencies to document multiple impacts of a single project or program.
- The analysis involved in completing the matrices in the context of local conditions and the use of the completed matrices to assess the conditions and circumstances of clients, community, and agency may strengthen an agency's strategic planning process.
- All three matrices can accommodate incorporation of nationally mandated indicators as well as those selected by each CAA.