Santa Cruz County's Cross-Jurisdictional Contract Management Website

Valerie Stewart

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Introduction

Santa Cruz County is developing a new contract management website called the Cross-Jurisdictional Contract Management Website. This system is being developed in order to streamline contracts, measure outcomes, and minimize service duplication. Involved in this project are 53 community-based organizations along with the United Way, cities of Watsonville, Scotts Valley, Capitola, and Santa Cruz County. These jurisdictions are all working with Santa Cruz County Human Resource Agency (HRA) and the Human Care Alliance (HCA), a consortium of local human service nonprofits.

History

The Cross-Jurisdictional Contract Management website is being designed as a result of the Santa Cruz County Board of Supervisors directing HRA and HCA to develop recommendations for modification of their current program evaluation system that would include a new fiscal and programmatic accountability system. They were also directed to develop a standardized tool to measure outcomes so that the Board of Supervisors and the public would have a better sense of their investments.

Findings

The collaborative partners of this website design expect this project to involve four phases. They have already completed phase one which was to deconstruct and rebuild their current contract management system. This allowed the partners along with a web designer to create a conceptualization phase. Phase two has also been completed. It was a feasibility analysis to determine if the web site could actually be built. Phase three is in the pre-implementation stage. An operating contract management website will be built and piloted by three nonprofit agencies and two county departments. If initial evaluations are successful, the fourth and final phase would be full implementation.

Conclusion

The success of the Cross-Jurisdictional Contract Management Website could prove to be valuable to Santa Cruz County and other counties and agencies. It will accomplish a standardized approach to measuring outcomes, applying for and updating contracts, and identifying services that are available in the county.

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Introduction

Declining resources, demand for services, and increased demand for accountability for utilization of public resources are primary reasons that a standardized reporting process and a Cross-Jurisdictional Contract Management Website are being developed in Santa Cruz County. This system is being designed to streamline contracts, identify services offered through community-based organizations, measure outcomes, and minimize service duplication. Currently, 53 community-based organizations, along with the United Way, cities of Watsonville, Santa Cruz County, Scotts Valley, and Capitola are working with Santa Cruz County Human Resource Agency (HRA) and Human Care Alliance, a consortium of local human service nonprofits, on this project.

History

Each year, Santa Cruz County provides approximately $3.7 million of general funds for health and human services to local public and private nonprofit agencies. Historically, various nonprofit agencies and community-based organizations applied for funding to the Board of Supervisors to provide a range of services including nutrition, health, housing, and child care, to low-income and at-risk Santa Cruz County families and individuals. Many of these organizations emerged during the War on Poverty and federal revenue sharing eras, and have subsequently requested county funding. Many of the 53 nonprofit agencies have continued to be funded over the last 16 years without going through a request for proposal (RFP) process. In effect, there is a closed funding system. Generally new applicants are not awarded funding, due to the longstanding commitment of county funds to these community-based agencies. In turn, these agencies have come to rely on county funding.

In June 2003, the Santa Cruz local newspaper, *The Sentinel,* published a front-page article that criticized public and private nonprofit agencies for poor financial management. The reporter who wrote the story had reviewed agency audit reports, and took numerous audit exceptions out of context in order to paint a picture of official mismanagement in the county nonprofit sector. Even though the article was filled with errors and misstatements of fact, and actually was retracted a week later, HRA was also accused of not properly monitoring these programs. In addressing accountability concerns made by the local paper, it was noted that there was no standard method of measuring the quality of services that were being provided by these agencies.

To address this perceived lack of accountability, the Board of Supervisors directed HRA and the Human Care Alliance (HCA) to develop recommendations for modification of the current program evaluation system, which would include a new fiscal and programmatic accountability system. They also directed HRA to develop a standardized tool to measure outcomes, which would give the Board of Supervisors and the public a better sense of their investment. This initial request was made June 2002. It was believed that this project would take approximately 3 months to complete. It has now been 4 years and phase one and phase two of the project are complete. All participants in this process agreed that they did not want to rush this project. They believed that you have to "go slow to go fast" in order to achieve better results and make certain everyone's needs were being met. The partners to this collaboration all feel that they are building consensus of how programs can better report their outcomes.

Streamlining Management Contracts

In order to build the new website, HRA had to deconstruct and re-build its current contract administration system. It considered current functionality and how it should look in the new system. The collaborative partners had regular meetings and many discussions on what each organization had to bring to the table and what potential they saw for their own department. An example of this process is the deconstruction of the common application used by all Santa Cruz County nonprofit and private nonprofit agencies applying for county and city funding. The committee broke down this application and established that it asks the following basic questions:

- Who are you? (what agency)
- What services do you deliver? (eg., housing, emergency shelter, etc.)
- What are the costs of these services?
- Who do you provide these services for? (e.g., age group, single, families, etc.)

The committee then looked at the quality of service indicators which ask:

- Is it cost effective?
- Are the services sufficient and appropriate?
- What percentage of clients will maintain stability after utilizing the services?

Working with a web designer, the group then determined how these same basic questions could be integrated into a website application or format. Through the proposed website, the participating agencies will eventually be able to apply and submit required reports and contracts electronically. An editing feature will be added to the system to prompt agencies to update their information in the web site when contracts are updated so that the most current version would always be available. With this design, the committee believes that the basic elements of contract administration can be administered through the web site.

Challenges

Numerous meetings have been held with the volunteering collaborative partners on this project.

Decisions had to be made about common service strategies. Goals had to be standardized. These steps have been difficult because of the different business practices utilized by jurisdictional funders as well as the nonprofits. There were disagreements on how outcomes should be reported. These were also challenges in designing outcomes that promoted standardization, yet flexibility based on the type of services and kinds of outcomes that are appropriate for that service.

The group agreed that they had to develop a set of values to keep people on the same page. Initially there was tension between county and non-profit agencies. However, the collaborative partners realized that they needed to work together to achieve a common goal. They also realized that the success of outcomes can be measured in different ways. For example, Meals on Wheels, (a local agency that provide meals to elderly or disabled homebound individuals), may measure success by comparing health, body fat, weight, body density of a homebound individual who receives their service to a homebound individual who does not benefit from their balanced meals. Another example would be how the Health Department might measure success by counting the amount of AIDS prevention literature that was distributed to individuals on the street. Determining how to measure outcomes has been a major challenge for this project. The group now confronts one of the most daunting challenges in this project—looking at how contracts have been managed in the past and turning it into a more technical process.

Successes

After many collaborative meetings, the Outcome Reporting Committee convened in order to develop a standardized approach for demonstrating how community-based contractors support the mission and goals of local jurisdictions and county departments. The goal of the committee was to create clear and reasonable expectations with regard to outcomes reporting and whether outcomes were successful. The committee's efforts are guided by the following core values.

Outcomes should:

1 make sense and be clear and relevant to consumers, policy-makers, community, and service providers;
2 be developed and implemented strategically and with simplification in mind;
3 allow for the agency and environmental "story" to be told;
4 do not require "proof beyond a reasonable doubt" (for consumer outcomes);
5 track realistic results for clients and agencies (i.e., do not have ending homelessness in Santa Cruz County as a goal, but a goal such as increase consumer self-sufficiency); and
6 rely on data that shows quantity of activities, quality of performance, and answers the question "Is anybody better off?"

The process of enhancing outcomes should:

1 build on what they're already doing;
2 use data that is readily available;
3 require minimal or no additional cost;
4 utilize and value technology-based solutions; and
5 Communicated to other jurisdictions and departments in order to advocate for coordination.

The outcomes reporting approach developed will:

1 ensure consistency in reporting;
2 provide a standard format and allow for flexible content;
3 recognize that identifying and measuring outcomes is a developmental process and will be implemented in stages;
4 allow agencies/programs to articulate how they improve the community; and
5 ensure information required in reports is useful to all stakeholders.

The Website

The Cross-Jurisdictional Contract Management website is under construction and is being developed by consulting web master, Suzanne Mann. She received agreed upon input from the collaborative and created a prototype with a storyboard that partially works with drop-down menus and active pages. The web-site can be accessed at www.suzannemann.com/outcomes for viewing. Once in the website, collaborative members will have access to update information on the web site electronically. They will be able to update their contract, input information about their service strategy, what population they serve, and their availability. They will ultimately be able to renew their contracts online.

Collaborative nonprofit and funding agency members will each have a splash page that has their mission statement, contact information, log in, and links to other collaborative sites. The agreed upon standard service strategies were developed by evaluating the American Information and Referral System, also known as the "AIRS" taxonomy. This is a system that has a listing of over 6,000 descriptions of human services. The collaborative partners agreed to break it down into 12 primary service categories. These include:

- Basic needs (housing, utilities, food, clothing)
- Employment
- Child Care
- Mental Health
- Counseling
- Education
- Consumer Services
- Criminal Justice
- Health Care
- Individual and Family Life
- Organizational Services
- Community Services

The website will allow collaborative partners to look at outcomes across various programs.

The collaborative partners have determined that this project will proceed in four phases. The first is the conceptualization phase, which has now been completed. Phase two is the feasibility analysis to determine if the website can actually be built. This phase has also been completed, and the Santa Cruz County Information Services Department has indicated the project is feasible. Phase three is the pre-implementation phase, where an operating contract management website is being built and then will be

piloted by up to three nonprofit agencies and perhaps two county departments. Assuming the evaluation of the website shows success, the fourth phase would be full implementation.

Costs/Funding

Costs for this project have not yet been projected. HRA intends to put together a proposal to submit to the Board of Supervisors for the 2006-2007 fiscal years. All stakeholders sent staff members to participate in this project but there have been no financial contributions so far. The collaborative partners have discussed the need for the fiscal commitment of the cities and county to make this project work. These constituents recognize that they will have to contribute proportionally. For the City of Watsonville, a major consideration regarding the funding of this project will be the result of the vote on Measure E, a ballot measure on the June, 2006 ballot. This measure would repeal a local retirement tax. If approved, this would affect 10% of the general fund for the city. The City of Watsonville is currently trying to adopt a contingency plan. If Measure E passes, it would severely restrict funding for human service and cultural enrichment programs in Watsonville.

Comparison/Recommendation

As a Contra Costa County Employment and Human Service Employee, I find that this type of technology could benefit our county. We currently have 600 contracts that are awarded through various procurement processes that include the following:

- the request for proposal (RFP)—this process defines the elements and roles of those who can participate;
- the request for qualifications (RFQ)—this process is when agencies are asked to describe their established process of services provided and why they qualify;
- the request for information (RFI)—this process gathers information that will be needed for the bid.

Contracts over $100,000 require an RFP-mandatory bidder's conference. Contracts over $2,500

require an RFI. Each bureau of the agency, Aging & Adult, Administration, Children & Family Services, Workforce Services, and Workforce Investment Board, identifies a gap or a need for the agency. The Program Director then authorizes a needs assessment or a survey of the community to determine the need for services. A RFI, RFQ or RFP is then published.

Funding for these contracts is budgeted from federal and state allocations for mandated services. Though most of the contracts are awarded to community-based organizations, public or private nonprofits, a few for profit agencies are also awarded. Once a contract has been established, at the end of the fiscal year, the contract and grants unit sends a list of active contracts to each program director and asks if the contract should be renewed for the following year. If the answer is yes, the contract and grants unit contacts the agency to let them know that the county would like to renew their contract.

There is no current method established in the county to be able to view contracts easily. If we need information about available resources, we have to contact that specific bureau or contact the public information officer in our county. Our contracts are not on-line. A contract management web-site, like the one proposed in Santa Cruz County, would be a faster, more efficient way to obtain information about available services, the population served, client demographics, the amount of the contract awarded, and the outcomes from receiving that service.

Conclusion

The success of the Cross Jurisdictional Contract Management website would mean a great deal to Santa Cruz County in many ways. It would also be of value to other counties that might adopt their model. These new reporting systems will show how investments of public resources are being put to good use. The web site is being designed to be a consistent outcome reporting system that is technology-oriented. It will allow for flexibility so that information can be retrieved to produce required reports to various entities. Agencies will have to demonstrate accountability for services delivered so that an interested party

can review it. Those collaborative partners, who in the past may not have demonstrated client successes, will now have to step up to the plate to be successful. This web site also creates the opportunity for contracts and renewals to be submitted easily and efficiently. Another benefit of this project, as reflected in the Santa Cruz County planning process, is that new relationships have developed between the collaborative partners. Nonprofit agencies and funders have had to step outside of their boundaries to become involved in the other partners' business processes. Agencies have stepped out of the box to see what other agencies have to offer and to share ideals. Most importantly, the collaborative partners are working together to achieve a common goal, making a differ-ence in people's lives.