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Lindsay Harrison

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Transforming Data into Action: The Sonoma County Human Services Department

LINDSAY HARRISON

School of Social Welfare, University of California, Berkeley, California, USA

In order to centralize data-based initiatives, the Director of the Department worked with the Board of Supervisors and the executive team to develop a new Planning, Research, and Evaluation (PRE) division. PRE is establishing rules for data-based decision making and consolidating data collection to ensure quality and consistency. It aims to target resources toward visionary, pro-active program planning and implementation, and inform the public about the role of Human Services in creating a healthy, safe and productive environment. PRE staff spent several months studying the job functions of staff, to determine how they use information to inform practice, consulting other counties about their experiences. The PRE team developed Datascript, outlining two agency aims: (a) foster a decision-making environment that values and successfully uses empirical evidence for strategic change, and (b) manage the role and image of the Human Services Department in the external environment. The case study describes action steps developed to achieve each aim.

KEYWORDS *Transforming data, data-based decision-making, human service planning, human service evaluation*

INTRODUCTION

The Sonoma County Human Service Department (HSD) is actively pursuing and implementing processes that support the use of data in decision making and program management. HSD Director, Jo Weber, saw the need for a more centralized division working on data-based initiatives, that would support the department by serving as the focal point for program analysis and design,

Address correspondence to Lindsay Harrison, School of Social Welfare, University of California, 120 Haviland Hall #7400, Berkeley, CA 94720. E-mail: lharrison@berkeley.edu

reporting, and presenting both internally and to the public. The director worked with the board of supervisors and the executive team within the department to develop a new division called Planning, Research, and Evaluation (PRE) that began in August 2007 and currently has three staff members. PRE is one of seven divisions within the 630-member agency (Family, Youth, and Children [FYC], Employment and Training, Economic Assistance, Adult and Aging, Fiscal, and Administration are the other six).

DATA-BASED DECISION MAKING PRIOR TO PRE

Prior to the creation of the PRE division, when decisions were informed by data analysis, the data was used to make very reactive decisions. The department currently has over 600 databases, causing yet another layer of complexity in using data to inform practice and operations. These complexities include difficulties in accessing, processing, and sharing data in efficient ways as well as reconciling information from varying sources. PRE is establishing rules for data-based decision making by consolidating data gathering to ensure quality and consistency of data. The goal of PRE is to more efficiently target the resources devoted to managing data across the department, so that divisions can do more visionary, pro-active program planning and implementation and so that the public can be further informed about HSD and the role they play in creating a healthy, safe, and productive environment.

Before the PRE division was developed in HSD, inquiries from the community, press, or internal staff, involved gathering and synthesizing data from any number of places, requiring many staff hours. One role for PRE is to serve as a central team creating a reporting core for the agency, a central location where staff can turn to for help with inquiries from external or internal sources. Additional objectives for PRE include positioning the department to develop program strategies to improve outcomes for clients, and being pro-active in how data is used to improve the quality and accuracy of communications internally and externally—especially being more responsive to the media and promoting high quality media coverage.

An additional role for which PRE has been tapped is in the development of strategies to address other cost pressures within the county that are identified in the Sonoma County Strategic Plan. These strategies will focus on preventing entrance into correctional systems, and require considerable data and research to support the goals and objectives of making up-stream investments to reduce downstream costs while improving the community environment. It was a convergence of ideas that helped the county support the development of this capacity (PRE) and assess the benefits it could provide to the community. The PRE division of the HSD is a new division not only to HSD but also to Sonoma County as a whole. It models the benefits

of a centralized approach to planning, research, and evaluation for other county departments.

ASSESSING ADMINISTRATIVE DATA

The new division director of PRE (Director Marla Stuart) began in August 2007 to assess the data that are currently collected and disseminated, and how the processes could be improved. Staff in PRE spent several months observing, interacting, and discussing the job function of line staff, supervisors, and division directors to see how they use information to serve clients and inform their practice. In addition, other counties were consulted about their experiences with data-based decision making, including software, procedures, and processes. The PRE division synthesized the information and recommended *Datascript*, a document summarizing the department's goals for using data (approved by the executive team in November 2007) in the form of the following strategies:

- Foster an HSD decision-making environment that values and successfully uses empirical evidence for strategic change (internal focus on how the department can use data to create and reach outcome goals).
- Manage the role and image of the HSD in the external environment (effectively communicate with the media, community partners, and legislature).

Datascript represents an important step toward creating a centralized data-based decision making process that reflects the support of the executive team members. For each strategy, *Datascript* defines HSD department-wide goals and the role of the PRE division (See Appendix A).

DATASCRIPPT PROCESSES

The process of implementing *Datascript* includes the following four actions:

- Action 1: Promote the effective and efficient use of accurate data.
- Action 2: Institutionalize data-based planning practices.
- Action 3: Implement research to develop best practices.
- Action 4: Conduct comprehensive and informative evaluations.

One of the first projects PRE is working on for Action 1 is HSD Data-AMP (**H**uman **S**ervice **D**epartment **D**ata **A**ccuracy **M**atters to **P**eople). 'AMP' is also a metaphor for the department's goal of amplifying the importance and impact of the data collected and used in the organization. A committee with representatives from every division is engaged in defining the steps

needed for HSD to promote the effective and efficient use of accurate data. The effort began by conducting an inventory of all the reports produced by the department. The committee defined “report” as something that the department produces that includes a title, author, and date (not just a data extract from an existing database). They found hundreds of reports, some with data that has been aggregated and analyzed and others that were simply raw data. The committee members discovered that there was no standardized way of reporting findings and no person or group that was familiar with every report in the inventory. The next step is to recommend changes and an implementation plan to promote the effective and efficient use of accurate data.

Another aspect of effective and efficient use of accurate data relates to department brochures and formal presentations. Brochures can help disseminate accurate data internally and to the community by describing HSD’s clients and the services they receive. Similarly, when the agency director presents the department’s budget via formal presentations in each division meeting to inform staff about department resources, it is important for staff providing direct services to clients to understand the financial context behind departmental decisions, such as hiring more administrative support rather than more line staff. For example, it helps to see the distribution of department resources (e.g., 38% to client cash assistance, 53% for direct services or program operations [social work services, employment services] and 9% to administrative support). Staff can see that over 90% of the department’s resources are going directly to clients and the department uses about 10% to administer the programs. While the cost of doing business has increased each year, it is important for all department staff to see the transparency of budget reductions that do not reflect an over-abundance of administrative support compared to direct services, or conversely, that represent a lack of management support for their work.

The creation of an executive dashboard is an example of *Action 2: Institutionalize data-based planning practices*. The executive team is in the process of selecting data elements that are needed on a regular basis to inform departmental decisions. The executive dashboard is a step toward increased data-based decision making. In addition, division-level dashboards (e.g., a dashboard for only FYC) are being developed in order to capture the most meaningful and useful indicators. The goal of the dashboards is to specify overall department and division specific objectives, identify relevant performance measures for each objective, and analyze this data on a regular basis to identify progress being made and important trends.

Future planning will focus on *Action 3: Implement primary research to develop best practices*. Similarly, the fourth action item, *Conduct comprehensive and informative evaluations* to inform effective program planning is currently in operation. For example, a report was recently compiled on an evaluation of the effects of methamphetamines on the child welfare system.

Since there is no data in the statewide child welfare database (CWS/CMS) specifically about drug use, PRE worked with the FYC division staff to define evaluation questions, select a methodology (e.g., 400 chart reviews of FYC clients), analyze the data (PRE team), and involve the FYC division in the interpretation of the findings in order to draw conclusions and make recommendations.

The results from the analysis showed that 49% of the open cases in Sonoma County at the time of review were affected by parental methamphetamine use (every other case is meth-impacted) and that meth cases are more complicated and difficult for workers to manage. The report included the following five recommendations:¹

1. Implement a standardized electronic method for capturing parental methamphetamine use to monitor change over time and evaluate the effectiveness of different interventions.
2. Assess the adequacy and effectiveness of available community resources for methamphetamine-affected families (e.g., appropriate court programs and readily available treatment programs) and identify resources that may be needed to meet the needs of these families and adequately protect children.
3. To most effectively protect children and strengthen families, interventions for methamphetamine using individuals should start as soon as a problem is identified and if possible, before legal outcomes have been determined.
4. Recovering from methamphetamine use appears to take longer than recovery from other substances and mandated permanency timeframes need to take this factor into account, especially longer timeframes for reunification.
5. Identify staff training needs related to this population as well as new or different services needed to assist this segment of the FYC caseload.

Another example that involves the presentation of data, is a report created by the PRE and FYC teams called, “Patchworked Lives: Sonoma County’s Emancipating Dependents” for presentation to a local foundation. This report is an example of being thoughtful about crafting a message, how it looks, and how it sounds. The goal was to present accurate data in a way that captures the attention of its audience related to the need for support of emancipating foster youth. The report includes recent legislation (state and national facts) on the financial, medical, educational, and living skills needs of emancipating youth. In addition, it provides a detailed description of the number of Sonoma County youth in the foster system, their average age at first placement, average number of placements, reasons for removal, demographic data, gender, primary language, ethnicity, and most importantly, the wide range of services provided for these youth.

With respect to the external-facing strategy of Datascript, “Manage the role and image of the HSD in the external environment,” there are five action items identified to support this strategy:

1. Monitor county, state, and federal legislative and policy activities and coordinate HSD input and responses.
2. Increase HSD funding.
3. Strategically position HSD in partner planning initiatives.
4. Maximize HSD’s marketing and community-relations opportunities.
5. Engage the media.

The media in Sonoma County is not pro-active in seeking out stories from HSD and the feeling within the department is that the community in general is not aware of what happens in human services. At the same time, the public appears very supportive of human and health services. Part of PRE’s role is to engage the press and inform them of the services that HSD provides. HSD pro-actively called the press to engage them in a discussion of the current California budget crisis; how many people would be affected by a reduced budget; and how this reduction would impact the department and the community. An illustration of a 10% cut in Adult and Aging Services’ budget was used to show that one staff person would be laid off and this would be detrimental to a division that has an 84% substantiated abuse rate, causing substantial delays before these abuses could be investigated by an adult protective services worker.

HSD views media relations as an important way to educate people about services and the need for support. HSD has had about 10 articles in the paper from November 2007 through June 2008 and other examples of pro-active media exposure include published editorials, being cited in budget news articles, featured in an NPR spot, and responding to TV interviewers. The goal is to get more information out into the press in order to increase HSD credibility and voice in the community.

HSD has also become much more responsive over the last six months to making timely responses to inquiries from the press. When it takes several days to get back to a media inquiry, the opportunity to be heard is lost due to the fast pace of the media. The division directors are increasingly becoming more involved in press coverage because they see the benefits; if something comes up and PRE is requesting data quickly, the divisions work with PRE to get data and craft the message for the press as soon as possible. This was not always the case. HSD had been reluctant to step out into the spotlight because there was no standardized way to address media inquiries and communicating accurate data. The culture has slowly changed with the creation of the PRE division, as the directors have gained more confidence in communicating externally because HSD responses are based on accurate data, department director support, and their own desire to tell their stories.

Responses to inquiries have become less reactive and more informed, with HSD being more proactive. The department looks at interacting with the media as an opportunity (something they can do, and not something they have to do).

After Datascript was created, another logical next step was to document the guiding principles of the HSD as part of the top-level planning of the goals and objectives for the organization. The current departmental mission and vision statements were only altered slightly as the executive team came up with two new categories of goals: the director's goals, and the 2008–2009 executive priorities. The executive team wanted the guiding principles to be brief so that they could be posted in staff's workspace (see Appendix B).

LESSONS LEARNED TO DATE

Changing Department Culture

Given that the PRE division is new to HSD and to Sonoma County government, considerable time and effort is being expended by the executive team and new PRE division director to explain why planning, research, and evaluation is important to HSD for improving services to clients. The new PRE division director has been spending an extensive amount of time with line staff, supervisors, and directors in order to listen and ask for feedback on how they use data, how they would like to use data, and their struggles in effectively and efficiently working with clients. Many staff suggestions went into the creation of Datascript and provided a better way for the divisions to request work from PRE. There was a perception by staff that the PRE division was going to add more work on top of the already large workloads they were managing. It was not easy for staff to see a different way of operating as well as the opportunities to benefit from the work of PRE. Incorporating planning, research, and evaluation into the daily workings of the department is an ongoing process for PRE and the executive team.

Managing and Sharing Data

Another lesson learned relates to managing data internally as well as research and reports coming into the department from outside sources. DataAMP is a process designed to inventory and store online all of the reports produced internally by HSD but it remains to be seen how the department will effectively track, use, and share reports with staff that come from external sources. A project has been started to create an electronic library database that stores published research, literature reviews, media articles, journal articles, or other outside resources. Anyone can search the library to find information that may be of use to them and their clients. For example, staff do not have time to

conduct full literature reviews on a topic of interest to their practice, so the electronic library will be an easy place to search and quickly access information.

Future

Through Datascript and the guiding principles, there is a good understanding and agreement among the members of the executive team regarding the future direction of the department and how they plan to get there. The PRE division has developed useful evidence to demonstrate how: (a) data can be used effectively and efficiently, (b) media exposure is increased, and (c) executive dashboards are in development. PRE and the executive team are positioned to meet the data and reporting needs of staff in an effort to balance the bottom-up with the top-down approaches. There are ongoing efforts to assess the organizational structure to see what is getting in the way of data coordination and reporting. HSD is engaged in a substantial capacity-building process in order to effectively use data throughout all divisions of the organization.

NOTE

1. *Methamphetamine Use and Child Welfare in Sonoma County*. Human Services Department, January 17, 2008.

APPENDIX A: DATASCRIPIT



Human Services Department
COUNTY OF SONOMA



Division of Planning, Research and Evaluation (PRE)

Sonoma County Human Services Department transforms data to action.

Strategy A: Foster an HSD decision-making environment that values and successfully uses empirical evidence for strategic change.

- Action 1: Promote the effective and efficient use of accurate data.
- Action 2: Institutionalize data-based planning practices.
- Action 3: Implement research to develop best practices.
- Action 4: Conduct comprehensive and informative evaluations.

Strategy B: Manage the role and image of the Human Services Department in the external environment.

Action 1: Monitor county, state, and federal legislative and policy activities and coordinate HSD input and responses.

Action 2: Increase HSD funding.

Action 3: Strategically position HSD in partner planning initiatives.

Action 4: Maximize HSD's marketing and community relations opportunities.

Action 5: Engage the media.

Strategy A: Foster an HSD decision-making environment that values and successfully uses empirical evidence for strategic change.

Action 1: Promote the effective and efficient use of accurate data.

HSD Outcomes

- HSD responds quickly and accurately to stakeholders' requests for information and easily answers questions about types of services and numbers of clients.
- HSD data collection, analysis, and reporting is managed efficiently and without redundancy.
- Utilization of accurate data promotes HSD employee confidence and reduces reliance on anecdotal information and data myths.

PRE Roles

- Develop automated, centralized, standardized and easily accessible reports (for instance, via a data warehouse and dashboards).
 - Maintain an inventory of HSD information (electronic, manual, anecdotal).
 - Create a system to prioritize and create ad-hoc reports.
 - Manage data collection resources based on what should be measured (based on program) rather than what can be measured (based on technology or convenience).
- Develop and maintain trended information.
- Assess HSD employee learning needs regarding the creation and use of information and coordinate learning opportunities.

Action 2: Institutionalize data-based planning practices.

HSD Outcomes

- HSD policies and practices are evidence based.
- HSD uses information to determine the impact of and how to implement new regulations.
- HSD is recognized as a human services environment that manages data, uses data, and manages programs from an empirical point of view.
- HSD anticipates changes in community demographics and plans appropriately.

PRE Roles

- Lead and support collaborative planning activities to:
 - Manage purposefully.
 - Develop policy recommendations.
 - Strategize and implement new initiatives.
 - Plan for the future.

Action 3: Implement research to develop best practices.

HSD Outcomes

- HSD conducts and uses research to determine factors impacting client success and the long-term effects of HSD's programs and services.

PRE Roles

- Conduct literature reviews, based on Division needs, to identify best practices and disseminate summaries of relevant information.
- Support the design and evaluation of innovative service interventions.
- Foster relationships with local research resources.
- Coordinate the HSD response to survey requests from external sources.
- Represent HSD in research initiatives.

Action 4: Conduct comprehensive and informative evaluations.

HSD Outcomes

- HSD regularly assesses and publicizes program effectiveness and implements improvements based on evaluation results.
- HSD services and operations are responsive to clients, stakeholders and employees.

PRE Roles

- Support HSD programs in the measurement, reporting and improvement of mandated performance measures.
- Coordinate the implementation of additional evaluation methodologies.
- Develop and implement methods to measure, report and respond to client, stakeholder and employee perceptions.
- Conduct and report meta data analyses (cross HSD Divisions, cross County Departments, and with other sources of information such as the Census).
- Identify and publicize information for varied audiences (line staff, supervisors, managers, executives, and stakeholders) to increase knowledge of program effectiveness and goal achievement and to promote program improvements.
- Maintain current information about the needs of clients and the community.

Strategy B: Manage the role and image of the Human Services Department in the external environment.

Action 1: Monitor county, state, and federal legislative and policy activities and coordinate HSD input and responses.

HSD Outcomes

- Elected officials understand HSD's mission and programs.
- Elected officials sponsor and vote for legislation that supports the HSD agenda.

PRE Roles

- Develop and submit CWDA Legislative Proposals.
- Prepare and coordinate HSD testimony at legislative hearings.
- Develop and present educational presentations to elected officials and other influential stakeholders.
- Track federal, state, and local legislative proposals and analyze their impact on the Sonoma County human services environment.
- Monitor the news and coordinate HSD responses.
- Actively participate in CWDA and other relevant professional associations.

Action 2: Increase HSD funding.

HSD Outcomes

- HSD receives new funding.

PRE Roles

- Collaborate to write and submit funding proposals.
- Develop and present information and reports that will influence funders.
- Identify potential funding sources.
- Foster relationships with foundations, funders and donors.
- Maintain an electronic library of HSD funding proposals and associated documents.

Action 3: Strategically position HSD in partner planning initiatives.

HSD Outcomes

- HSD is viewed as a valuable collaborator in partner planning initiatives.

PRE Roles

- Answer partner requests for information about HSD clients and services while maintaining appropriate oversight to ensure client confidentiality.
- Liaison with state and federal agencies.
- Represent HSD at state and national forums and associations.
- Engage HSD in the County Strategic Plan.

Action 4: Maximize HSD's marketing and community relations opportunities.

HSD Outcomes

- HSD receives measurable community support for HSD mission and programs (for instance, in-kind and cash donations, volunteer hours, tax initiatives).

PRE Roles

- Produce compelling marketing materials (for instance, newsletters, billboards, news articles, advertisements, PowerPoint presentations, fact sheets, brochures, videos and web sites).
- Put a human face on the data.
- Assist in crafting accurate, positive and effective community messages.

Action 5: Engage the media.

HSD Outcomes

- HSD receives increased, accurate and positive media coverage.

PRE Roles

- Coordinate press releases and events that create media interest.
- Act as the HSD point of contact for media inquiries.
- Encourage positive relationships with media representatives.
- Provide technical assistance for media interactions including crafting and delivering effective messages.

APPENDIX B: GUIDING PRINCIPLES OF THE SONOMA COUNTY HUMAN SERVICES DEPARTMENT



Human Services Department
COUNTY OF SONOMA



Vision

Meeting the needs of our community and empowering our clients through accessible and responsive services.

Mission

We protect vulnerable children and adults. We promote maximum independence and well-being for individuals and families.

Director’s Goals Values

- Clients feel welcomed and get help to meet their needs.
- Staff feel valued, safe, and are happy to work at HSD.
- The community looks to HSD as a resource and values human services.

Values

Integrity, Teamwork, Leadership, Making a Difference

Executive Priorities (FY2008-09)

Maximize community relationships

Focusing on education, advocacy, visibility, and partnerships.

Increase new funding

Focusing on grants, advocacy, and leveraging funding.

Implement planning capacity

Focusing on actively responding to changes, gathering and using data, implementing the Planning, Research and Evaluation Division, and legislative advocacy.

Increase client satisfaction

Focusing on client needs within the scope of our programs.

Meet key performance standards

Focusing on Child Welfare Services, SonomaWORKs, Medi-Cal, and In Home Support Services.

Recruit and retain qualified staff

Focusing on bilingual staff, filling vacancies and adding more staff as appropriate.

Improve staff satisfaction

Focusing on safety, training, workload, equipment, and communication.

Increase collaboration with others

Focusing on strategic alliances, government entities, and community based organizations.

Increase efficiency

Focusing on technology, organization, and business process.

Improve HSD infrastructure

Focusing on information technology and facilities.

APPENDIX C: SOURCE OF INFORMATION

Interview

Marla Stuart, Director of Planning, Research and Evaluation, Sonoma County Human Services Department, CA