

The Service Delivery Information System: A Tool for Accountability

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Introduction

Accountability, put in its most concrete terms, means that specified services are being delivered to appropriate populations in a manner which is consistent with established policy. Widely accepted as a goal, accountability has been a difficult concept for the Jewish community to implement in practice. This has been due both to logistical and political factors.

By introducing a computerized Service Delivery Information System for constituent agencies the Planning and Budgeting Department of the Los Angeles Jewish Federation Council (JFC-LA) found that it solved the data collection problem while facilitating mutual confidence and communication between the Federation and its agencies.

In this paper we will present a conceptual model which sets forth the kinds of information relevant to typical agencies funded by Federations. We will then describe the implementation of this conceptual framework to the casework agencies funded by the Jewish Federation Council Los Angeles.

I. A Model for Federation-Wide Service Delivery "Info" Systems

There are five service elements about which information is essential: unit of service, program, client population, service activity and termination of service. These

elements are not the totality of information which can be collected, but they are all essential to any system. Using these five "info" elements, we have found that agencies can be grouped into six categories: casework, resettlement, groupwork, non-membership, residential treatment, walk-in service centers. The last two agency categories were not included in developing a Federation-wide information system for Los Angeles. Residential treatment facilities were left out because their current manual systems were adequate. The walk-in service centers on the other hand were excluded because the public funding they receive involved almost monthly changes in the data collected and reports required. The four remaining agency groupings are described here in terms of the five basic elements of a system. This conceptual scheme provides the blueprint from which the JFC Los Angeles is working to implement an agency-wide "info" system.

A. Casework Agencies

1. Unit of Service: The case can be either a family or an individual. For Jewish Family Service and Jewish Big Brothers the case is the family, which means that service delivery is measured on family by family basis. For Jewish Vocational Service the "case" is the individual seeking vocational counseling and/or placement.

2. Program: Program is a conceptual construct used to differentiate qualitatively among service categories. Program is typically defined in terms of target population or service provided, or both. For example, Jewish Vocational Service has two basic casework programs: counseling and placement. Jewish Big Brothers defines program as a combination of service and population: Volunteer Big Brothers program, parent-child counseling, and Camp Max Straus. Jewish Family Service defines program in terms of target population: the elderly, single parent families, inter-generational families and so on.

3. Information about the Client Population: The information about the client population differs from agency to agency according to its relevance to the individual agency.

4. Information about Service Activity: Service can be provided through a number of modalities in social casework agencies. For example, home visits, collateral contacts, family counseling, etc.

5. Information about Termination of Service: Information about how and why service ended includes such information as reason for case closing, length of service and outside consultation used.

B. Resettlement

1. Unit of Analysis: Resettlement combines two units of analysis: the family and the individual. This is because some services are provided on a family basis (counseling) while others are provided on an individual basis (job placement).

2. Program: In resettlement the program is defined functionally in terms of specific resettlement goals such as finding an apartment, job placement, becoming economically self-sufficient, etc.

3. Information about the Client Population: Resettlement requires special information related to understanding factors related to the success of the resettlement effort. This would include such factors as

previous occupation, urban-rural background, education, etc.

4. Type of Service Activity: In resettlement, type of activity closely follows the specific program in which the activity is taking place.

5. Termination of Service: Resettlement differs most from other casework with regards to information about client population and information about termination of service. Unlike other casework, resettlement policy requires deadlines for meeting certain goals. For example, financial assistance ends after a given period, vocational service ends after its own period, and counseling services have yet another deadline. This requires specialized reporting for the purposes of tracking.

C. Groupwork

1. Unit of Analysis: The unit of analysis for the groupwork agency is the "group." This means that data about activity is collected on a group basis rather than about individuals in those groups. At a groupwork agency such as the Jewish Center, (JCA) it is important to differentiate between a regularly scheduled group and a non-regularly scheduled mass activity such as a Purim carnival. Not making this differentiation causes an increase in the total attendance figure for the individual Center.

2. Program: JCA programs are defined by the age level or population of the group. Thus the "teen" program consists of groups for teens. Of course the program may also include a non-regularly scheduled activity such as a teen dance: and again this must be kept analytically separate.

3. Client Population: For the Jewish Center there are really two distinct client populations: users and members. Not all users are members, and not all members are users. Thus there are two collection strategies involved. Users can be given a questionnaire during a census-week via the groups in which they are enrolled. Mem-

bers can be sampled from the membership rosters and mailed a questionnaire or even interviewed over the phone. In this case the sampling would be on a family basis, but information would be collected about individual members of the family as well. The information collected would essentially be demographic or related to Center use.

4. *Type of Service Activity:* The type of activity recorded by the information system is the activity of the group. For example, there are physical education groups, social clubs, classes and so forth.

It should be pointed out that there are three data collection routines. First, there is the monthly report completed by groupworkers about their groups. The census of users and members is done on a less frequent periodic basis (between one and three times per year).

5. *Termination of Service:* This is a category less relevant to groupwork than to casework agencies. Groups are designed to end on a more regular basis than cases, so that information about termination is less significant here.

d. Non-Membership

1. *Unit of Analysis:* Hillel is a typical non-membership organization in that there are no dues and all Jewish students on campus are considered to be members of Hillel whether active or not. The unit of analysis becomes the activity, whether this be folkdancing, discussion groups, classes, or special events. In this respect the Hillel system would be like that for JCA.

2. *Program:* For non-membership program is a description of the purpose of the activity.

3. *Client Population:* There are two client population involved at Hillel, the actual and the potential. The actual populations could be given a questionnaire as part of the groups in which they are found. The potential population of all Jewish students on a given campus can be studied only through survey research methodologies.

4. *Type of Service:* The type of service delivered includes the scheduled and non-regularly scheduled group activities as well as professional activities such as counseling and outreach.

II. Implementing an Information System

With the blueprint in hand, the Jewish Federation Council Los Angeles has initiated the process of implementing its information system on a component basis, starting with the casework agencies. In this section we will outline the major steps of that process, drawing examples from the first agency put up on the system, Jewish Family Service (JFS-LA).

A. Getting Started

The first step in designing a new information system is to set up two levels of task-groups: a policy level and a working level. For the JFC casework agencies the policy group consisted of the agency directors and other key executive staff meeting with the research specialist and director of the Planning and Budgeting Department. The function of this group was to set overall guidelines and parameters for the system. For example:

1. Complete confidentiality must be maintained, and client names shall not appear in the automated data processing system.
2. The automated data processing system should not interfere with the on-going service delivery function not delete or create any positions.
3. The information system is to be budgeted centrally and not compete with other allocations to the agency.

The working level task group is the one which designs and implements the system within the guidelines outlined by the policy group. Within each agency the working task group is given the responsibility of defining the information needs and data collection procedures to make the system operational. The personnel of the working task groups for the casework agencies in

the JFC-LA systems are listed below along with their functions.

Research Specialist (P&B Dept.)

1. Represents the information of the Planning and Budgeting Department.
2. Provides expertise on problems of data collection.
3. Coordinates JFS component with other agencies within the system.

Agency Director, Associate and Assistant Directors

1. Interprets information required of agency by United Way.
2. Interprets information most useful for setting and implementing agency policy.
3. Determines information usable for agency planning.

Agency District Directors

1. Interpret information useful for worker, supervisor and district administration.
2. Provide expertise on data collection problems and procedures within District Office.

Systems Specialist

1. Translates information requirements into data processing considerations.
2. Provides feedback to task group on feasibility and cost of suggestions made.
3. Designs system when requirements finalized.
4. Supervises programming and testing of final system.

Additional discussions should also be held which include line workers, clerical staff as well as members of lay committees.

B. Definition of Data Needs

The first step in definition of data needs is to specify the primary users of the information system. For the casework agencies these are the agency itself (both administrative personnel and lay boards), the Planning and Budgeting Department, and the United Way (which requires monthly standard reports). The next step is to put together a comprehensive list of seemingly required input. We say seemingly because the third step for the task group is to divide the list into three categories: essential, important, and "perhaps nice-to-have." In our experience, when the systems specialist

brought in the factor of the cost of collection, storage and processing of data, the task group decided to implement only that information determined to be essential. The JF-C task groups developed three useful criteria for identifying this essential information:

1. Usability: How would the proposed information be used, and what sorts of decisions might be made with this information? What would be the consequences of not having this information?

2. Appropriateness to Computerization: Is it appropriate, efficient and accurate to deal with this information without including it in a computerized system.

3. Computer System Implication: What is the cost of collecting this information? Does it present any special problems for data collection or data processing?

C. Development of Data Collection Procedures

Once the task group has determined the information to be included the next step is to decide in how much detail. Also included here are the design of forms to be used, data collection procedures (who records what information), and the interface between the system and other clerical, clinical and administrative procedures.

D. Implementation

Implementation begins with a thorough testing of the system laid out on the drawing board. Do the forms make sense? Do they take too long to fill out? Are there too many sub-procedures? Once the workability of the system has been determined, the specifications for computer programming can be finalized and tested by the systems specialist. In the meantime reference manuals are created and all staff are trained in the procedures and usage of the new system. These are all considered aspects of implementation.

III. Applications

The system produces two kinds of reports: routine monthly reports and special reports. Routine monthly reports are used by the agencies to monitor their ongoing activity and volume of service. Special reports produce specific information required for decision-making. Two such applications are presented here: one requested by the Planning and Budgeting Department and one requested by the agency.

The Planning and Budgeting Department was interested in the volume and the cost of service to the elderly (defined as 65 and older). Using date of birth to compute age, a report was prepared which provided the proportion of elderly in the caseload of each district as compared with the proportion of direct service time expended on them. Interestingly, in some districts the proportion of time taken up by the elderly was significantly greater than their proportion in the caseload, while in other districts the opposite was true.

The program committee of JFS was charged with reviewing the district struc-

ture of the agency. One report run for this study compared the average time spent per case, the average duration of cases (in days), and the average number of contacts per case in each district. Another report in the study compared the focus of service and source of referral patterns for each district.

Conclusion

Automated information systems unlike hand systems, have built-in speed, accuracy and flexible reportings. For example, a report for United Way counting the number of cases by zip code previously took five working days, and was not accurate. In the new system, it takes only a few minutes to produce the same report at the computer terminal. This means that information can be made available on a timely basis for decision-making. The SDIS, then, has made it possible for the JFC-LA and its agencies to talk realistically about such goals as accountability, planning, and management control. Although the system is now only a year old, those closest to it (lay and professional) find it difficult to imagine that they ever functioned without it.