

## *Quality Data: Not Just for QA Managers Anymore*

As child welfare agencies become more sophisticated in their practice, there is a growing dependence on the data that live in their information systems. These data, and especially the quality of the data, exert powerful influences on many aspects of agency business, stakeholder views of the agency, and client outcomes. In this edition of *Tips, Tools, and Trends*, we explore how the quality of data affects agency business, why agencies must invest time and effort to assure that its data quality remains high, and steps to consider to fully use, and improve, its data.

### **Effects of Poor Quality Data**

**Programmatic:** The most serious effect of poor quality data is that programs suffer and families get less than optimal service. Good quality data are a pre-condition for being evidence-informed. Good data can help an agency to make good decisions; bad data can lead an agency down a wrong path. Promoting better outcomes for children and families starts by knowing, with confidence, what is really happening. Lack of confidence in your data, or worse, making a decision based on incomplete or untimely data, wastes time, money, and effort. Bad data can lead to duplication of services, mismatching needs and services, or working at cross-purposes with each other. This can have dire consequences for families and can certainly increase liability for agencies.

**Financial:** Though often invisible to frontline workers, bad or incomplete data can cause real financial problems for an agency. Incomplete counts can lead to fewer dollars than an agency might have legitimately earned (e.g., Adoption Incentives Payments). Bad or untimely data can also disrupt agency budgets and program plans when it shows up as after-the-fact disallowances (IV-E Eligibility Reviews) or sanctions (CFSR and NYTD). Inaccurate or incorrect coding can translate directly into decreased reimbursement for expenditures that could have earned Federal Financial Participation (IV-E claims). These budget mistakes can lead to error reports and reviews, often requiring caseworker and supervisor time away from working with children and families.

**Political:** Credibility with funders, consumers, and stakeholders depends on their confidence in your agency. Having and using high quality data is a tool that not only increases this confidence, but also allows an agency to accurately pinpoint resource needs, successes, and opportunities. Inaccurate data create uncertainty and mistrust. When you lose credibility, you often lose the ability to set your own agenda. When testifying before your legislative committees, would you rather argue over which data are correct, or make a strong case for lawmakers to trust your agency with precious resources?

### **Ways to Use, and IMPROVE, Data Quality**

Given the many costs that accrue due to bad data, but the important question is, what can a cash-strapped, overworked child welfare system do to enhance data quality? Here are a few simple tips for doing exactly that:

- **Collect it (with care)!** Data coming out of your system can only be as good as what goes in. Is there clear guidance about how data get into your systems? Who enters the data? When and how often? Is the guidance written down and easy accessible? Remember that ambiguity often leads to inconsistent and inaccurate data, so clear and well defined guidance is critical.
- **Use it!** Whether in the form of reports, charts, maps, dashboards or white papers, the frequency and the seriousness with which the agency uses the data to drive decision-making will have a direct relationship to the quality of the data. Often, new efforts to use data will meet with resistance. Staff will point to how wrong the data are, but if staff understand that you're going to use those data to make important decisions that could improve their work and the lives of the clients they serve, it is remarkable how quickly word spreads through the agency and how both the quality and timeliness of those data improve as a result.
- **Integrate it!** If you treat data clean up as a process that gets added to a worker's routine, it competes with everything else and may fall to the bottom of their priority list. By elevating the importance of high quality data at every level of the agency, it becomes a part of the agency culture. Workers, supervisors AND managers must think about data quality, and they will, but only if they think it's important. This isn't just an IT concern; everyone has a part of making, and using, high quality data.
- **Model it!** Data runs throughout the modern child welfare organization. Don't limit data use to your IT or Research Department. It is Executive Leadership's job to set the tone and be the example. If you make a point to use data in every meeting you attend and ask staff to support their positions with data, you send a clear message that data are important.
- **Own it!** In the end, agencies that rely on data exhibit all the characteristics noted here, but in addition, they have an identified person (or people) whose job it is to pursue data quality. You cannot let that responsibility reside only in a technical position. A dedicated quality function returns dividends throughout the organization.

Once you use data routinely, your data quality will improve and your organization will have taken the most important step towards becoming a learning organization. Organizations that can learn and self-correct are the ones that demonstrate improved outcomes, better serve their clients, and gain the trust of sponsors and stakeholders. These agencies are also more likely to thrive, even in harsh fiscal environments.

## *Technical Assistance*

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