

## 5. USING DATA FOR CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT

### Objectives:

At the end of this module, you will be able to:

- Identify key principles for using data for continuous improvement
- Describe the differences between evaluation and use of data for continuous improvement
- Understand the key components of an ideal data management system to track performance vis-à-vis the Reclaiming Futures model
- Assess your community's strengths and challenges in developing a data system

**Note:** While this module is intended to help new sites plan to track and review quantitative data in support of the Reclaiming Futures model, it's important to remember that qualitative data is also important, because it serves the goal of providing youth and family members with a voice. Checking in with youth, parents, and the staff who serve them on a regular basis through focus groups, surveys, or informal conversations will tell you a lot about whether or not real change is occurring. To be meaningful, such efforts also require planning, structure, and oversight.

## Using Data to Improve Performance and Guide System Change

The goals of the Reclaiming Futures model are to reinvent the way that substance abuse problems are acknowledged, identified and dealt with among all of the system players; to provide youth and family members with a voice; and to expand the service continuum to include the community.

In order to assess performance and progress in implementing the Reclaiming Futures model, your site needs to collect data at each of the model's stages. A good way to start is to move through the model from left to right, asking:

- How many young people enter our system (as defined at the local level)?
- How many are screened?
- How many are assessed?
- Of those youth assessed, how many move on to receive care coordination?
- How many actually initiate care (i.e., start treatment and other positive youth-development-oriented activities, per the model's definition of initiation)?
- How many youth engage (as defined in the Reclaiming Futures model) in care?
- And finally, how many make it to the finish line and complete their services?

For all the Reclaiming Futures pilot sites, this was a difficult and stressful exercise to complete. Each site was dismayed to learn how little information it actually had about youth in its system, and how little of what it did possess could be linked in a meaningful way. Learning to collect, share and utilize the right kind of data, then, became one of the most important developmental steps for each of the pilot sites.

The ability of a leadership team, therefore, is measured not just by its ability to use skills and strategies to explore, plan, develop and execute both the philosophical and administrative components of the Reclaiming Futures approach, but also its ability to assure that a data system is available to track whether or not the changes are occurring.

There are many barriers to creating such structures and processes. Strong leadership (described in greater detail in other modules) is an essential ingredient for success. It takes a combination of tenacity, focus, determination, political strategy, extraordinary networking and sheer muscle to get everyone on the same page and address the barriers involved in implementing a cross-system data sharing process.

Going through the steps of the model and asking the questions listed above demonstrated great courage on the part of the pilot sites. This is because even when all the players desired and agreed to address the gaps, confidentiality barriers, inconsistencies, and cracks in the system, it was still difficult to create an accurate and consistent profile of the numbers across all the players. In addition, initial data revealed numbers that were less than desirable. As an example, imagine learning that 600 youth had come into the juvenile justice system during a given period, and in that same period, only 5 made it through treatment—and no one was able to tell how many youth had been referred to, or shown up for, treatment.

In other words, to get the data for the Reclaiming Futures model and successfully use it to improve your system will require determined leadership, in order to address resistance to change and data that could be surprising or even embarrassing.

But once a data tracking system is in place, sites can drill down and explore with greater precision why it is that youth aren't progressing through a certain phase of the process as successfully as desired, targeting adjustments to ensure improvements. A data tracking system can also indicate gaps in local treatment capacity, or demonstrate that services for youth are improving.

### **Data Moves Mountains**

Tracking data can be a powerful tool for system change, as the experience of the Reclaiming Futures pilot sites shows:

- Rosebud, South Dakota: Case managers began by manually collecting baseline data on youth in Wellness Court from court reports and other sources. They found that youth weren't being screened, assessed or counseled until at least their fifth offense. As a result, the judge ordered the creation of a diversion program for first offenders, and screening and assessment of youth at the front end of the system.
- Seattle: The Reclaiming Futures model made it clear that King County did not have a substance abuse screen or standardized assessment. Their primary focus was to screen and assess youth for their risk to recidivate. Although the risk assessment had questions about substance abuse and mental health, those questions were rated in terms of risk to recidivate. Now the site uses a screening tool to triage those in need of an in-depth assessment, and providers have been shifted from using 15 different types of substance abuse assessments to one standardized assessment, the Global Appraisal of Individual Needs (GAIN). GAIN data helps the site write grants based on accurate information about youth clinical needs and gaps in the treatment service structure.
- Dayton: Using data as a guide, the Dayton Reclaiming Futures team made sure that more youth began treatment after completing their assessments. (For example, in 2007, the average show rate for youth initiating service after assessment went from 35% to 61%.) Furthermore, by improving communication between probation, treatment, and the court's "front-door" staff, they also increased the number of youth who went on to engage in treatment after their initial visits.

## **Evaluation vs. Use of Data for Continuous Improvement**

While it may be useful to evaluate a new Reclaiming Futures effort, we have purposely restricted our discussion to developing a strong data tracking system.

Outcome studies—which is what most people mean when they speak of an evaluation—can be very useful, but they sometimes cost a lot of money, and can take a long time. In fact, when such studies are done over time in complex service delivery systems, key components in the system often shift due to external pressures (such as budget cuts or personnel changes) before the evaluation is complete, undermining the usefulness of the results.

Furthermore, to build such a study and the corresponding infrastructure is generally not desirable or recommended at the early stages of a system improvement initiative. It's more effective to begin by creating a data system (or improving an existing one) that will measure and lead to gradual improvements in system performance.

Along the same lines, to effectively implement the Reclaiming Futures model, sites can use the basic data they collect about how many youth are entering the system, getting screened or assessed and engaging or completing care to make and measure targeted changes to the system. But getting the data will require a well-planned, collaboratively-designed data tracking system.

### **Don't Wait for Perfect**

Doing a full-scale evaluation and developing a comprehensive data system can be daunting tasks. But quick-and-dirty solutions can get you invaluable information about youth progress in treatment that help you manage the system in the short-term, and inspire greater commitment to better data among your partners.

- Portland: The Portland team modified an existing web-based reporting system for the use of probation officers and treatment providers. This was easier and cheaper than creating the ideal system. Though imperfect, the new system provides aggregate information about the numbers of youth being assessed and arriving in and completing treatment. This information was never before accessible. Referrals to providers have been streamlined, progress reports to probation officers increased and a “treatment expediter” can monitor the reports and respond when youth appear to be falling between the cracks.
- New Hampshire: As the Reclaiming Futures initiative progressed, information not previously available was shared routinely with project partners and its leadership. Advisory board meetings consistently included time for discussion of data findings, and whether procedural or policy changes were warranted. Routine sharing of measures relevant to the Reclaiming Futures model has reshaped the way the state’s drug courts do business, and continues to this day. New commitment to better data led to the development of a grant-funded Access database now in use by all seven of the state’s juvenile drug court treatment teams during weekly meetings.

## Key Components of an Ideal Data Management System

It can be easy to get carried away in developing a comprehensive data management system that will incorporate all of the complexities of system change. For this reason, we urge you to use the following principles when developing your own data system:

- Only gather data that is useful and upon which you can act.
- The process should be participatory – those who design the system should work with those who will use the system.
- The design plan that emerges should be feasible, accessible, and efficient.
- The plan should be based on a theory or model of systems change (in this case, the Reclaiming Futures model).

To bring these ideas to life, each site should attempt to build a data system (or use an existing one) that is:

- Goal-oriented: Data should measure how each site wants its system to work.
- Inter-agency: The data system should cover the entire process, including juvenile justice, treatment, schools, youth leadership and other positive youth development activity providers. While it may not be possible to include every point in the system, the more that can be included, the better.
- Problem-solving: If you need line staff to collect the data you need, try to design your system in a way that helps them do their jobs more efficiently or more effectively at the same time they're collecting data. If you can make one of their tasks quicker even though they're also collecting data (by automating a report, for example), you'll get better data and more buy-in.
- Performance-based: The data should measure the degree to which goals are being met.
- In real-time: Data should be current, not from previous years.

On a practical level, here are a few things to keep in mind:

- Keep it simple. A paper-and-pencil file review may be just as (or more effective) than designing a complex IT system, especially for a smaller site. Either way, make it achievable.
- Appoint someone to review the data on a regular basis. If staff regularly submit reports or case notes on client progress, someone should be responsible for monitoring the information coming in to be sure that each staff person submits the information in a timely manner and to catch errors (for example, youth's name misspelled, or the wrong treatment provider listed).
- Lastly, as you build your data system, you might find the following list of data elements helpful. It was created jointly by the Project Directors of the Reclaiming Futures pilot sites, and published in their monograph, *How to Implement a Model to Get Youth Off Drugs and Out of Crime*, available on the Reclaiming Futures website.

Many of the items on this list are probably already collected somewhere in your system, though not necessarily in one place. Items 1-12 represent the minimum data set required to track youth through the Reclaiming Futures model. Tracking items 13-16 would provide a rough-and-ready evaluation of the impact of your services on public safety.

1. Name (or some other identifier)
2. Age
3. Sex
4. Date of screening for substance abuse
5. Result of screening
6. Date of assessment for substance abuse
7. Result of assessment
8. Date of service coordination meeting (defined by each site)
9. List of services recommended
10. Date services were started
11. Dates services are provided
12. Date services are completed
13. Number of offenses prior to screening
14. Most serious offense prior to screening
15. Number of offenses at completion of services (and at least a 3- and 6-month check)
16. Most serious offense at completion of services (and at least a 3- and 6-month check)

## **Engaging Colleagues to Uncover Site Strengths and Needs**

The Reclaiming Futures model is a road map to assist sites in building a performance measurement system. However, the RF model does not prescribe specific performance goals, though it does recommend goals for the initiation and engagement stages. Instead, using the model as a guide, you must develop your own local definitions for the core components.

There is no need to collect more data than is useful to the cause – and most experienced system change professionals agree that too much data can cause harm and introduce early frustrations. Each selected data element should be built on the capacities and strengths of the local system, avoiding duplication and reinvention wherever possible.

Critical tasks for accomplishing these goals are to:

- Introduce and explain the Reclaiming Futures model to key officials.
- Facilitate workshops with local agency staff to introduce and explain the Reclaiming Futures model.
- Investigate current information systems and client tracking in key agencies. Bear in mind that agencies may have statutory or regulatory constraints, or organizational commitments (e.g., investment in a new agency-wide information system) that will affect their ability to collaborate.
- Facilitate workshops with agency managers and IT staff to discover approaches for merging/sharing data.
- Address concerns about confidentiality. Though it is a common roadblock, it can usually be protected without preventing the sort of data sharing envisioned here, though you may need to implement safeguards to insure that information about specific clients is not shared inappropriately. (You may find it helpful to review the resources on confidentiality available at the end of this module.)

A variety of data collection tools and methods are currently being used by the Reclaiming Futures pilot sites. These include:

- Paper-based case closure tools (e.g. Marquette)
- Paper-based client tracking/system navigation data (e.g. New Hampshire)
- Web-based real time client tracking/system navigation (e.g. Anchorage and Portland)
- Large-scale merging of electronic records from agency information systems, augmented with manual searching (e.g. Santa Cruz, Chicago)

A critical step for each site is to determine current strengths, resources, capabilities and needs in order to devise a method for either developing or adopting a tool that best fits the local circumstances.

### **It Takes a Village ... to Collect Data on a Child**

Working with representatives of multiple agencies to collect data in common can have pitfalls. It is imperative for all partners to talk through their assumptions, definitions, and concerns as they develop a local plan to collect data for the Reclaiming Futures model.

- Kentucky: Sharing data was a high priority for the Kentucky Reclaiming Futures (RF) initiative. But early on, Department of Juvenile Justice staff were advised by their legal counsel not to participate in discussions about sharing data, because of concerns about complying with the Health Insurance Portability & Accountability Act (HIPAA). As Kentucky's former RF project director reports, "Time, patience and many attorneys moved our agencies forward, but it took a good two years to begin capturing data from multiple systems. A statewide interagency agreement supported data releases, and a specific data memorandum with the Administrative Office of the Courts and the Department for Juvenile Justice also helped."

Kentucky wisely took the time to develop a "data dictionary" that could be used by the multiple partner agencies. Though time-consuming, it proved necessary, as partners had to discuss and agree on questions like these:

- How was a client "contact" defined?
- Did all "contacts" meet the Washington Circle standards for "initiation" and "engagement"?
- What was considered a "treatment session" or a "case management contact"?
- When did "initiation" occur?
- How were "pro-social activities" to be monitored and counted?
- And, when did a youth "complete" services (since a youth could be done with probation but still in treatment, or vice versa)?

## Activity

Download the Word document of the Reclaiming Futures Model Data Grid ([http://www.reclaimingfutures.org/sites/default/files/documents/RF\\_Model\\_Data\\_Grid.doc](http://www.reclaimingfutures.org/sites/default/files/documents/RF_Model_Data_Grid.doc)). With your leadership team, and a poster-sized version of the Reclaiming Futures model, complete each cell with the information currently available.

**Note:** This activity is likely to serve as the beginning of a much longer process. It will help your community uncover what data is currently tracked, what data is not being tracked and help you begin to develop a strategy to begin collecting the additional data.

**Guiding Questions:** Completing the Reclaiming Futures Model Data Grid looks simpler than it is. Here are some things to consider as you work through it.

1. Who exactly is in your target population? Youth on diversion as well as probation, with misdemeanors and felonies? Or a subset? Are you looking only at a particular age range?
2. What time period will you use? Most sites will want to be able to fill in the grid with annual numbers. Whatever your parameters, however, you'll need to determine how you will count youth screened toward the end of a report period but whose services carry over into the next, etc.
3. How will you handle multiple episodes of care for a single youth? The Reclaiming Futures model requires that you track the numbers of unduplicated youth moving through the system. But many youth have more than one treatment episode in a given year. For example, a youth may complete residential treatment at one agency and then fail to complete outpatient treatment at another. Your team will need to determine a consistent method for addressing this issue in a way that yields useful information.
4. How will you define initiation, engagement, and completion? This will be an important topic for your leadership team to discuss, as representatives of different disciplines will likely disagree at first about how these should be defined.
5. How will you link up the data from each stage with data from other stages? Will each record for each youth at each stage in the model have the same identifying number attached to it? For example, will you need to add the ID number to report forms used by treatment staff when they submit paperwork to juvenile probation?
6. Who has the data? You may find that no one has the data for a particular stage of the model. On the other hand, you may find that different agencies hold the data for different stages, and they may balk at sharing it. In this case, your team may need to rely on the leadership of its judge or that of other local authorities to remove roadblocks.

But matching client records between different databases can also present real barriers. For example, if you're pooling databases with another agency that doesn't use the same ID number as your own agency, how will you match the relevant records—first name, last name, and birth date? Who will double-check the matched records to be sure the matches are high-quality? What will you do with unmatched records? Clarifying these questions will be a critical part of pooling data in a useful way.

## Resources

### Books & Papers

#### "Using Outcome Information: Making Data Pay Off"

Series on Outcome Management for Nonprofit Organizations. Washington, D.C.: The Urban Institute, 2004.

**Description:** Many organizations do a great job of collecting data, but falter when it comes to using it. This guide from The Urban Institute shows how to put the data to use.

[http://www.urban.org/UploadedPDF/311040\\_OutcomeInformation.pdf](http://www.urban.org/UploadedPDF/311040_OutcomeInformation.pdf)

#### *Confidentiality and Communication: A Guide to the Federal Alcohol & Drug Confidentiality Law and HIPAA.*

New York: Legal Action Center, 2006. Revised Edition.

**Description:** Publication from a nationally-known nonprofit that advocates for the rights of individuals with histories of addiction, among others. The book also is used in conjunction with online courses described below.

<http://lac.org/index.php/lac/230>

#### "In Brief: Confidentiality and Information Sharing, Volume One."

Bridgett E. Jones, J.D., with the assistance of Andrea Shorter and Tricia Stapleton from The Center on Juvenile & Criminal Justice. Portland: Reclaiming Futures, 2002.

**Description:** "A legal primer to help the community, the bench and the bar implement change in the juvenile justice system."

<http://www.reclaimingfutures.org/sites/default/files/documents/lglprmr.pdf>

#### *Defining the prize: From agreed-upon outcomes to results-based accountability.*

Bruner, C. Volume 2: Community Collaboration Series. Des Moines, IA: National Center for Service Integration, 1998.

#### *Confidentiality and collaboration: Information sharing in interagency efforts.*

Greenberg, M. & Levy, J. Denver, CO: Education Commission of the States, 1992.

## Websites

### **[How Do We Know We Are Making a Difference](#)**

This website about indicator reporting programs serves as a companion to the Join Together publication, *Indicators Handbook*, and helps communities design an effective indicators program around substance abuse prevention and treatment strategies.

<http://indicatorshandbook.org/>

### **[The Network for the Improvement of Addiction Treatment \(NIATx\)](#)**

This initiative, launched by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation and the Center for Substance Abuse Treatment (CSAT), has shown how effective “rapid-cycle testing” can be to effect change in service delivery. Rather than wait months or years for a formal evaluation to be completed, NIATx encourages its members to collect a small amount of easily-obtained baseline data related to key performance indicators; use it to make small changes in their delivery systems; review the results within a few weeks or a month; then collect a new round of data; and so on, in a “rapid-cycle,” until they reach their goals.

The NIATx self-study exercises have been integrated into the Reclaiming Futures *Adolescent Treatment Improvement Self-Study Workbook* that you team will be using at the end of module 8, “Treatment Initiation, Engagement, and Completion.”

[www.niatx.org](http://www.niatx.org)

## Online Courses

### **[“Confidentiality: Federal Alcohol and Drug Law and HIPAA.”](#)**

The Legal Action Center, a nationally-respected law and policy center, offers two courses on this topic that come with an updated manual and continuing education credits.

<http://www.lac.org/index.php/lac/C46>