

Ready4Work Peer Review of Data Collection

Background

Launched in March 2003, Ready4Work is a national demonstration project managed by Public/Private Ventures (P/PV) that aims to reduce recidivism and redress the personal and societal costs that recidivism poses. Ready4Work provides program services that are believed to facilitate successful reentry, including: 1) job training and placement services; 2) case management; and 3) mentoring from community or faith-based organizations, which is a key component of the Ready4Work model. The Ready4Work adult program has thus far served approximately 4,100 participants in 11 sites.

The eleven Ready4Work grantees are expected to provide a monthly data report on each program participant using data elements that provide a rich portrait of whom the program has served, what services participants received, and what outcomes were achieved. However, the ability of data collected by grantees to reliably document these activities is dependent on the data's accuracy. Therefore, in April 2006, the Department of Labor contracted with SPRA to conduct a peer review and data validation of the Ready4Work program's data collection system. The evaluation consisted of a series of data collection efforts over the course of six months. SPRA selected four grantees to visit and document their data collection, verification, storage, and transmission procedures. Following are the principle conclusions of SPRA's peer review and data validation efforts.

Principal Conclusions

- One of the best practices observed in several grantees was to have the project coordinator or other data manager serve as the single individual responsible for the management of the project's data, which helped to streamline the process and ensure accuracy in the data.
- Grantees with high staff turnover and grantees that had a difficult time obtaining legal documents from clients tended to have poorer data quality.
- Grantees expressed a desire to have more interaction with their fellow grantees to share best practices and lessons learned across the program.
- Electronic data could be verified with documentation in the form of case notes, rather than hard-copy documentation. Thus, the validity of the data was less clear, due to very little documentation, so it was less certain that the electronic data were valid for calculating elements like employment and recidivism outcomes.
- Employment outcomes were difficult to verify since a participant that secured *any* work was counted as a successful placement, regardless of how long the person worked, or if the job was a temporary placement.
- Collection of data for recidivism at the site level posed a concern. Although P/PV used the recidivism definition similar to the Bureau of Justice Statistics, staff at sites do not always use the same definition in calculating recidivism data.
- Recidivism data were difficult to collect because these figures were generally not tracked at the local or state level, the few data that were available could not be disaggregated to compare with Ready4Work participants, and there was considerable variability in how recidivism was measured in different localities and jurisdictions.

- Overall, P/PV used statistical and analytic methods that were technically sound and appropriate for determining outcomes. In addition, there was sufficient documentation to allow replication of these statistical and analytic methods by external reviewers.

Policy Implications

- **The project coordinator or data manager should serve as the single individual responsible for management of the project's data.** A single responsible individual ensures that the database is well organized, and that potentially erroneous data is identified early and corrections are made prior to submitting data to P/PV. Monthly update meetings attended by all relevant staff can also assist in ensuring high quality data collection.
- **Designate a single agency to provide as many of the supportive services as possible.** Although collecting data on services provided by outside agencies poses a significant challenge, when most, or all, services are provided by a single agency, the data collection process is simplified.
- **Develop a thorough and user-friendly management information system that can accurately capture a wide range of information about clients, services received, and outcomes obtained.** Grantees agreed that P/PV's training and assistance with the data system in place has helped in managing their programs and ensuring that data are as complete and accurate as possible.
- **Enrollment after release ensures that individuals are more motivated to participate in the project.** Although clients are eligible to enroll as early as 90 days prior to their release, sites found that many never showed up to participate upon release. As a result, the project had many "enrolled" clients who received few or no services, and they could not document whether the individuals found employment or recidivated.
- **More emphasis needs to be put on data collection and verification.** Sites had difficulty documenting birth dates and social security numbers because participants often had no formal identification, and thus had to rely on the attestation of the client as verification. In addition, stronger documentation efforts, other than case files, would increase confidence in the overall accuracy of the information.
- **Ready4Work should adopt a post-program earnings measure.** A similar measure is used in most other employment and training programs and will help improve overall understanding of the employment outcomes observed for participants.