



A Building Bridges Initiative Tip Sheet: Evaluating and Improving Outcomes for Youth *Executive Summary*

The goal of the Building Bridges Initiative (BBI) is to promote practices that lead to sustained positive outcomes for young people who have received residential services and their families. Efforts focus on improving outcomes in four domains identified by stakeholders:

- **Home** - a safe, stable, supportive living environment
- **Purpose** - meaningful daily activities, such as a job, school, volunteerism, and the independence, income and resources to participate in society
- **Community** - relationships and social networks that provide support, friendship, love
- **Health** - sustained basic physical and behavioral health, and overcoming or managing health challenges

The Building Bridges Initiative is a national endeavor to promote practice and policy that will create strong partnerships between families, youth, community - and residentially-based treatment and service providers, advocates and policy makers, to improve the lives of young people and their families. Its aim is to advance these partnerships in order to improve lives.

The Outcomes Tip Sheet outlines a framework for measuring meaningful, long term outcomes; promoting mutual accountability among residential and community programs, families, payers and regulators; and for using data to inform decision making to achieve better coordination of care for youth and families.

The Need for Outcomes Measurement

With the increasing recognition of the importance of behavioral health comes a challenge to be more outcomes-oriented and data-driven. National healthcare reform focuses on sustained, measurable results, and accountability. All healthcare providers are expected to be increasingly transparent with data and with outcomes.

Many programs can demonstrate success through reductions in reported or observed symptoms while youth and families are in a program; however, true success can only be gauged by the functional outcomes that are sustained when youth return to their families and communities. Effective long-term outcome measurement can help a program and community:

- Determine the degree to which a program's and community's services are working, for whom, and why
- Pinpoint areas for improvement, such as staff training or internal processes
- Demonstrate accountability to funders

Implementing a Functional Outcomes System

An organization or community partnership can take four practical steps to develop an outcomes system:

- 1) Choose *meaningful life domains* to evaluate that are important to youth and families;
- 2) Select *specific measures* within each of those *domains*;
- 3) Collect and analyze data; and
- 4) Share results and plan for improvement

Examples of functional outcomes in each of the four domains that should be considered by programs include:

Home

- Is the youth's current living situation safe and stable?
- Has there been any out of home care, readmission or hospitalization? If so, what were the factors that contributed to the readmission?
- Is the current living situation developmentally appropriate?

Purpose

- Is the youth attending and achieving in school, vocational training, or employment?
- Has the youth been involved with the criminal justice system?
- Is the youth involved in organized volunteer, faith-based and/or community activities?

Community

- Is the youth engaged in supportive relationships with family members, other significant adults and peers?
- Does the youth participate in community activities such as clubs, leisure activities, and faith-based groups?
- Are continuing community-based services needed/available?
- Youth self-reports – how are they doing? Strengths and concerns?

Health

- What emotional and behavioral health symptom is the youth exhibiting, and at what level of severity?
- Is the youth achieving developmentally relevant targets for independent self-management?
- Has the youth had a physical or seen a dentist within the last year?

Measures and the instruments chosen in each of these areas should be strength-based, culturally and linguistically competent, valid and reliable.

Using Outcomes

Share outcomes with internal quality improvement teams, agency staff, youth and families served, organizational and community boards and committees, funders and policymakers, and the public. A strong, culturally and linguistically competent and inclusive process for collecting, analyzing and sharing outcomes can engage diverse groups in support of community and program needs. This process can also serve to promote collaboration among youth-serving organizations.

Share responsibility for outcomes measurement and **accountability** for results. Desired outcomes must be mutually defined and reflect the perspectives of all stakeholders.

Conclusion

Tracking outcomes is feasible, and more importantly, it is increasingly essential. Demonstrating effectiveness is an emerging expectation in health care and social services. Outcomes data will help to meet that expectation while telling a compelling story and ensuring responsiveness to, youth, family, payers, and the general public.

While there is much involved to initiate outcome measurement, successful implementation leads to great transparency and more objectivity in assessing the impact of services. Children and families deserve no less.

For more information on BBI please refer to the website: www.buildingbridges4youth.org.

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