Investing in Data to Influence Change

Data can be a powerful tool for influencing change in your community or state. While data are often collected and analyzed for reporting requirements, there are many other ways in which data can be used. Data can show how great a need is; for instance, how many eligible families in your community or state receive home visiting? Data can also help bring an issue to life; for instance, using qualitative data such as quotes or themes from interviews to help tell your story. This resource presents some ways that intentionally using data can benefit your community and its initiatives. Collecting additional data or using the data you are already collecting, but just in different ways, can help shed light on potential opportunities or existing challenges. Here are seven ways that data can be used to influence change in your community or state and examples of how you can apply them. This resource was developed with an understanding of the complexity of data in the PN-3 space, and the many purposes it can serve.

Data can be used to...

Improve equity

Historically, the allocation of resources has differentially benefitted people based on their race, ability, gender, and multiple other characteristics. Data can support your work to resolve these inequities by helping you identify the needs of populations and understand barriers that may be unique to people with a shared culture, economic status, or other characteristic.

How-to:

- Consider which demographic characteristics should be collected in order for you to understand the subpopulations in your community or state. Then, collect these data along with your program and outcome data so that it is possible to look for differences in outcomes by unique populations.

- Disaggregate by subgroup. When looking at the population in your community or state as a whole, you may not see disparities. It is important to disaggregate the data and see if there are differences in numbers served or outcomes based on characteristics like race, gender, ability, immigration status, geographic area, etc.

- For data you already have, make sure you have a thorough understanding of what types of data were collected. Consult data dictionaries (if available) or ask for more information from those who collected the data on how groupings were made and other practical considerations, such as classifying income and education levels. For instance, if the data says a family is "low-income" or from a "rural area," how is that being defined?

- When reporting about the data, be clear and specific about the populations you're discussing. For example, immigrant populations may come from vastly different cultures. Grouping them may obscure important distinctions.

- Involve stakeholders in data collection plans. Community leaders are a rich source of information on the best ways to reach and interact with the broader community. Developing respectful relationships improves your potential for collecting relevant, accurate, and meaningful data. Be sure to credit and compensate community members who help you with data collection plans and processes.

- Involve multiple stakeholders when interpreting the data. Consider the perspectives of the community members who are engaging with a program or service when you're looking at the data and communicating your findings, especially if your everyday experiences are very

different from theirs. For instance, if your team or leadership does not already include someone from the communities you engage with, ask a representative of that community for input. Remember that individuals are experts on their own experience and have great insights on how best to develop materials for communication with members of their communities. They will be reading your work, and messages about their communities and lives are very personal. Make sure you credit and compensate them for their contributions.

- Collect different types of data (e.g. qualitative and quantitative). Numbers that you can count and organize can be just as informative as the information you'll get from a personal interview. For example, you may find that 20% of the communities in your state are using a screening tool to track infant and toddler development. A qualitative interview of community members may reveal that some have embedded the measure in home visiting programs and pediatrician visits, which has improved family participation in developmental screening. Both pieces of information are valuable and give a different perspective on similar questions.

- Focus on the assets. Consider the resources and expertise a community or state already has and use these to highlight potential for further action. This can apply to expanding services to better support target populations or collecting input from community members and state organizations. For example, your state or community may hear that resources for pregnancy and birth-related care are limited for people who speak a language other than English. You could then expand existing services working with local community organizations who work closely with these families.

- Keep the context in mind. Including the systems surrounding a community and focusing on communities instead of individuals gives a more complete understanding of the issues you will be working on, and potential solutions. For example, kindergarten preliteracy skills

may be lower in one district compared to another. Instead of looking at teaching practices within that school district, consider the broader environment related to literacy skills. Are resources like libraries accessible? Are parents able to find child care options that provide opportunities to practice literacy skills? Do frequently changing work schedules prevent parents from setting aside time to read with their children?

Support quality improvement

Data can reveal multiple ways to improve the quality of a program or initiative. Instead of only using data for recordkeeping or reporting purposes, consider how the data you are already collecting can be used to improve the quality of a program, service, or initiative. Using data to evaluate efficiency, improve the quality of services delivered, and reduce barriers to accessing services ensures that you are continually progressing toward your goals and effectively using resources.

How-to:

- Intentionally create plans to investigate both setbacks and successes. Data can tell you more about why certain processes work or not, and how you can generalize that success to other tasks.

- Make small changes in any process that needs adjustment (e.g., service delivery, recruitment, etc.) and check your data after those changes have been implemented. Remember that some differences are not immediately visible, which is why tracking over time is important. Making smaller changes allows you to tease apart their effects.

- Collect data over a specific time period to examine trends and set aside time to examine it at regular intervals. This can help you understand whether a difficulty is related to a context or bigger problem, or just a normal variation. For example, if your state or community may have a universal family connection and referral program that was

seeing low rates of enrollment. Program staff could try out different strategies, one at a time, to determine the cause and address the low enrollment rates. Perhaps the cause was lack of targeted outreach, ineffective outreach, or language barriers. While testing out different strategies to understand the cause of low enrollment, program staff should also collect data over time to see which of these strategies are the most effective at improving the quality and access to services.

- Focus on the systems you are using in your work and investigate their efficiency. Is the work being done in the best way possible? Search for areas of growth in different levels of your program. For example, parents may be asked to fill out a developmental screen when interacting with a home visiting program, visiting the pediatrician, applying for services, and enrolling their child in preschool. A central system for data sharing would prevent them from needing to complete the assessment multiple times, and inform other community organizations that also need the data.

Support policy changes

Creating change starts with using data to identify an issue. Having a well-supported solution is even more helpful. Understanding the effects of current policies or developing new legislation requires evidence that can be trusted by stakeholders.

How-to:

- Identify opportunities to share data and learning with policymakers. Message your data in such a way that it is easily digestible, as policymakers do not have the time to absorb and learn the nuanced details of your data.

- Collect data before and after a new policy goes into effect. While you may not be able to say that a policy directly causes a change, having these data provides a better context for understanding relationships between policies and outcomes.

- The data necessary to illustrate the need for a policy change may already be collected. Find out what kinds of data are being collected in your community and state. For instance, data that has been collected from the Census or a local census home visiting program, or school readiness program may support your story.

- Draw examples from communities and states similar to yours. When you have a landscape of data that describes your setting, you can compare your communities to others facing similar issues. Additionally, you will be better equipped to explore effective solutions.

Effectively communicate, message or tell your story

Data can help set the scene for creating a better understanding of a situation or process. When your community's story can be anchored with facts, it becomes easier to create a narrative for communicating the needs in your community. Additionally, it helps people who are hearing your story understand and recall your message.

How-to:

- Create visuals that illustrate your point with charts or graphs.

- Find a case in your data that illustrates a larger pattern and link it to broader findings. For instance, consider using a quote from a family member about how a program or initiative made an impact in their lives. When based in data, associated anecdotes make your story easier to remember.

- Less is more: for each intended audience (e.g., policymakers, parents, funders, other advocates) choose one key datapoint you want them to walk away with and showcase that in your messaging. Be clear and succinct about the point you are trying to make, the story you are trying to tell, and the data you have to back up that story.

Encourage stakeholder buy-in

When engaging different stakeholders in your community or state around a particular initiative, it is important to effectively communicate what you are hoping to achieve. Data can be critical in demonstrating the need for an initiative or the implementation of new practices. When data are presented to back up your rationale for the need for an initiative, stakeholders at all levels can feel confident that their contributions to your work will be necessary, useful, and responsibly applied. It is important to note that data can still be used, even when it does not tell the story you expected. For instance, data can show if a current initiative is not working as expected and illustrate to stakeholders why there is a need for further evaluation, or for changes to be made to current implementation practices.

How-to:

- Be transparent about your approach to data collection and interpretation. Share your process and be open to feedback and suggestions for other data collection methods.

- Clearly outline your message and think about the most relevant data to illustrate your point. What types of data would be most useful to highlight the need for that initiative or the type of buy-in you are looking for? Be specific and intentional. For example, if you are trying to describe the need for improvements in emergency housing services, consider using data to tell the story of the average family that engages with these services. What kinds of issues typically arise when they seek services? How can their experience be improved? Weaving data into a narrative, even if it does not include personal anecdotes, helps people to envision the problem and context that you are discussing.

- Tailor your datapoints to the stakeholder audience. Messaging may be different for agency leadership compared to local

organizations, or families. What is important

- for each stakeholder audience to know and why?

- Ask for input and help from stakeholders on ways to put the data and findings into context. Stakeholders are more bought in when they are part of the process. Determine how can they help you better understand the data and subsequent findings, and credit and compensate them for their assistance.

Support requests for new and ongoing funding

Funders want to invest in work that is doable and likely to have the strongest impacts. What data should you include that will clearly demonstrate your past, current, and future impacts? When making a pitch to a funder or submitting a proposal for funding, it is important to use data to show what the need is, and how their funds will be used to improve outcomes. Data can also help quantify the amounts you will need to request, and/or demonstrate which areas of your work need additional support, resources, or staff. Once you have received funding, it will be important to continue to track how that funding is being used; how many children and families have benefited from services received, and what new initiatives have been created as a result of these funds.

How-to:

- Before a project is funded, data can make the case for why a project or initiative is necessary. Think about data as evidence that supports your ask of the funder.

- Make data projections – how much data do you plan to collect? This answers the question, "What will funders get for their money?" Having a plan for data use shows funders that you will be able to demonstrate impacts of your work.

- Outline the kinds of data you will collect to show the effectiveness of your initiative. Funders will want to see proof that your work has influenced a change. Remember to include the costs of collecting, analyzing and storing data in your proposal. For example, when implementing a new program for

prenatal health, you may want to collect data on the physical health of the infant, but also the parent's experience with the program and ability to care for the newborn.

Data can be 'mythbusting'

Occasionally, a rumor or myth gets started because of a few people who may be the most vocal about their concerns, but that may not represent what is actually happening. Collecting data can reveal that common perceptions are inaccurate, or more complicated than originally thought.

How-to:

- Identify as many influences as possible for a given situation, and their ramifications. For example, when studying healthy food options in an area, research might ask how many grocery stores are in a community but neglect to consider that transportation options are limited.

- Look for assumptions others have made when doing similar work. Are they well supported? For example, when looking at child care options in your community, someone may have neglected to consider friend and family networks as care options and conclude that only 30 percent of infants and toddlers are receiving some type of care outside their home.

- Data can help you understand the origins of certain perceptions and untangle the relationships that help a myth to persist. For example, community administrators may think that a certain population is not interested in community level supports, but after further study, find out that language barriers are preventing families from attending certain events.

- Consulting stakeholders and end users can give a dramatically different perspective from that of administrators and system designers. For example, a community or state could develop a service to assist with health care insurance options but notice no one is using it and conclude incorrectly that it is not needed. Instead, it may be that long wait times and poor handling of calls may render it unusable. Holding a community meeting or having a focus group where you interview families to learn why a service is not

being used can help provide important information to help fix an issue.

This resource provides a few brief examples of the many ways your community or state can use data. When used intentionally, data can improve your understanding of your community, support messaging to various stakeholder groups, and reveal opportunities for improvement and growth.