Measuring Outcomes in the Real World

How do you know your programs work? A new tool can provide the answers.

By Isaac D. Castillo

Like most human service organizations, the DC-based Latin American Youth Center (LAYC) focuses on improving people's lives. The realities of the nonprofit sector, however, also require organizations to measure and report progress to secure funding for continued operations.

> **Staff members can focus their time where it most belongs.**

This is the perennial, and often unpleasant, balancing act for nonprofits: taking time away from addressing *immediate* human needs to ensure the ability to address *future* human needs. The dichotomy can be challenging.

Over the past few years, however, new tools have begun minimizing the time required to measure and report an organization's progress toward its objectives. Electronic tools allow more targeted measures, helping employees allocate time and resources toward the initiatives that most effectively ad-

vance the organization's mission.

The Solution to a Knotty Problem

One of LAYC's key initiatives is its Independent Living Program (ILP). This program supports young adults as they "age out" of the foster care system, helping them become self-sufficient. The individuals in ILP, aged 16-21 years, live in a group home and learn such life skills as preparing meals, balancing a checkbook, and maintaining a job.

As with many human service programs, those involved—program participants and staff members alike—can clearly see from month to month and year to year the progress individuals are making. Painting a clear picture of this progress for benefactors, however, isn't easy. Moreover, LAYC staff

> **The software helps organizations discover which programs work.**

prefer to focus on ILP participants rather than "wasting" time writing reports for external agencies.

So when LAYC leaders discovered a solution that would help

them bridge the gap, they decided to try it out. They began by recording and tracking detailed demographic information on program participants. Over time, they used

> **Staff can quickly and easily generate up-to-date reports on specific milestones.**

this information to determine the demographic characteristics of those deriving the greatest benefits from the program. From there, they identified and tracked the life skills each participant needed to practice and eventually master, allowing LAYC to determine the relative success of individual program efforts.

To support this initiative, LAYC deployed ETO® (Efforts to Outcomes) software from Social Solutions (www.socialsolutions.com). The founders and principals of Social Solutions, all from human service backgrounds, created an automated system for tracking and reporting the progress of program initiatives—helping organizations discover which programs work and which to replicate. By customizing

reports, staff can now generate detailed information on the progress of the ILP program and individual participants.

The Quantified Results

With this new software, LAYC is working in a new reality. Instead of maintaining manually generated, paper-based records of participants' progress, LAYC now has useful electronic forms showing which competencies each participant mastered, which presented challenges, and which haven't yet been addressed.

For example, "housekeeping" is a key life skill. As Figure 1 demonstrates, the organization tracks progress against housekeeping skills in each of four levels: basic, intermediate, advanced, and exceptional. And housekeeping is just one of 18 categories, each of which contains multiple competencies and achievement levels. The new software makes it possible to track the number of competencies each participant has mastered at all four levels for all 18 categories. This lets the staff concentrate on the program areas, development categories, and life skills that offer the greatest challenges or the most benefits based on participants' skill levels. Staff members can thus focus their time where it most belongs.

The most exciting aspect of this system is that staff can compile *quantified evidence* of a participant's readiness for independent living. And when the development director asks for examples of program successes, staff can quickly

> Painting a clear picture of progress for benefactors isn't easy.

and easily generate up-to-date reports on specific milestones with a precision and specificity that was formerly available only in sophisticated commercial environments. ETO software has brought that kind of discipline to LAYC and the nonprofit sector.

Figure 1. Housekeeping Skills: Tracking Outcomes at Independent Living Program

Basic - Must know 3 of 4:
- ☐ Washes dishes adequately using soap and hot water.
- ☐ Can change a light bulb.
- ☐ Makes bed regularly.
- ☐ Regularly disposes of garbage.

Intermediate - Must know 3 of 5:
- ☐ Can use vacuum cleaner properly and change bags.
- ☐ Changes bed linen on a regular basis.
- ☐ Knows how to prevent sinks and toilets from clogging.
- ☐ Knows how to sweep floor and stairs, wash wood and linoleum floors, wash windows, dust, polish furniture, clean toilet, clean bathtub and sink.
- ☐ Knows appropriate cleaning products to use for different cleaning jobs.

Advanced - Must know 5 of 7:
- ☐ Knows how to stop a toilet from running.
- ☐ Knows how to use a plunger to unstop toilet or sink.
- ☐ Can defrost the refrigerator, if necessary.
- ☐ Can clean a stove.
- ☐ Knows how to conserve energy and water.
- ☐ Perform routine house-cleaning to maintain the home in a reasonably clean state.
- ☐ Uses drawers and closets appropriately for storage.

Exceptional - Must know at least 3:
- ☐ Knows what repairs a landlord should perform.
- ☐ Can do minor household repairs.
- ☐ Is able to contact the landlord and request repairs.
- ☐ Can change a fuse or reset a circuit breaker.
- ☐ Can measure a window for shades or curtains.
- ☐ Knows how to get rid of and avoid roaches, ants, mice, etc.

Even More Benefits

LAYC also tracks other achievements by its participants to gain a clearer picture of what a successful participant looks like. For example, there's a strong correlation between people's progress through the program and the number of out-of-school activities (such as classes offered in the group home after the agreed-to curfew) in which they participate. Armed with this knowledge, staff members have placed more emphasis on organizing fun, engaging educational activities.

Supporters have expressed their appreciation of the new system. Not only has LAYC received accolades, but cash and in-kind contributions have increased significantly since implementing the new software.

Finally, LAYC team members appreciate their increased ability to identify exactly where to dedicate their time and efforts. As employees see participants benefiting from LAYC's efforts, their resolve to continue making a difference only increases. ■

Isaac D. Castillo (isaac@layc-dc.org) is director of learning and evaluation with the Latin American Youth Center, a multicultural, community-based organization whose mission is to support youth and their families in their determination to live, work, and study with dignity, hope, and joy.

RESOURCES

Dixon, Greta Kmarie, "Evaluating Nonprofit Programs: Now It's Essential," *Nonprofit World,* Vol. 12, No. 3.

Minnis, William, "Four Steps to Evaluation Success," *Nonprofit World,* Vol. 12, No. 2.

Tom, Baldwin & Bill Frentzel, "Performance Based Management Builds Funding and Support," *Nonprofit World,* Vol. 23, No. 6.

Vogt, Jean, "Using Your Outcome Measurement System," *Nonprofit World,* Vol. 18, No. 1.

These resources are available at www.snpo.org/members. Also see Learning Institute programs on-line: Outcome Measurement (www.snpo.org/lino).