Issue Brief #3: Using Data to Improve SIF Programs: Lessons from Practitioners

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Using Data to Improve SIF Programs: Lessons from Practitioners

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This document is a product of the National Assessment of the SIF, which seeks to document and capture the impact the SIF has on key program stakeholders. Its findings will provide evidence and tell the story of the SIF as well as identify lessons learned. The National Assessment is sponsored by the Corporation for National and Community Service's Social Innovation Fund, designed and managed by CNCS Office of Research and Evaluation, and conducted by ICF International.

1. Introduction

Key Research Question:

How do SIF grantees and subgrantees use data to improve their programs?

The Social Innovation Fund (SIF) leverages public and private resources to grow community solutions based on evidence of results. The National Assessment of the SIF seeks to document and capture the impact the SIF has on key program stakeholders. Findings from this multi-component independent assessment, sponsored by the Corporation for National and Community Service's (CNCS) Office of Research and Evaluation and conducted by ICF International, will tell the story of the SIF and identify lessons learned. The SIF makes grants to experienced grant-making organizations, which identify promising programs within communities through an open and competitive process and distribute funds to high-performing nonprofit organizations that implement them, and match the federal funds dollar-for-dollar. SIF subgrantees also match the funding they receive dollar-for-dollar. All SIF-funded interventions undergo rigorous, independent evaluations to advance the base of evidence for the funded intervention.

This issue brief shares lessons about how SIF grantees and subgrantees use data to improve their programs. It provides action-oriented recommendations for current, incoming, and prospective SIF grantees, private and nonprofit organizations that might implement a SIF model, and policy makers. This brief is informed by insights from three SIF "Classic" [1] grantees and six subgrantees.

Over the course of their grants, many grantees and subgrantees have found ways to use data collected through their SIF evaluation efforts to improve their programs. This brief highlights the variety of ways in which SIF grantees and subgrantees have used data collected as a result of their participation in the SIF to continually adjust and improve their programs, long before the final results of the impact evaluation are available.

2. Using Data to Build a "Data Culture"

"You can't just look in the evaluation report and turn around and make that change. Depending on what the change is, different staff members will need to be educated on that. You need buy-in. There are so many things that come into play that it really calls for a thoughtful approach."

--Jennifer Callans, SIF Grantee, United Way for Southeastern Michigan

One of the biggest challenges SIF subgrantees face in their efforts to use data to guide program improvement is building an organizational culture in which staff value data and embrace the opportunity to make data-based program improvements. Subgrantees reported that sharing program data across the organization can be sensitive, because people may associate the program data with individual performance, and making adjustments based on those data can be challenging if staff are invested in the way they currently operate their existing programs. Many SIF grantees and subgrantees have tried to address these concerns head-on by working to build a "data culture" in their organizations, in which all staff discuss data regularly and openly, understand the value of data for

[1] The SIF has two grant programs: Classic and Pay for Success (PFS). The Classic program unites public and private resources to evaluate and grow innovative community-based solutions that have evidence of results in low-income communities. PFS is a strategy that seeks to better connect government funding of services with real world effects by tying funding for a service intervention to its impact in the community. The PFS contracting and financing model that leverages philanthropic and private dollars to fund services up front, with the government, or other entity, paying after they generate results is sometimes referred to as the Social Impact Bond. As part of both the 2014 and 2015 Congressional appropriations, the SIF was given authority to use up to 20% of grant funds to implement a competition to test PFS approaches.

program improvement, engage in analyzing the data and determining how to respond, and embrace the opportunity to make changes to improve outcomes for the clients they serve.

One wide-spread tactic for creating a data culture among SIF subgrantees involved building data-grounded discussions into the day-to-day business of the organization. But subgrantees found that the data could be confusing to staff, and that if not presented and discussed effectively, staff could feel defensive about data related to their job functions. SIF subgrantees Madison Strategies Group (MSG) and Chrysalis, as well as grantee Venture Philanthropy Partners (VPP) all emphasized that regular staff meetings provide a great opportunity to ensure that staff across the organization discuss program data, internalize what the data show, and understand what those data imply for their individual roles, for their programs, and for their organizations' work. Leaders of these organizations believe that data can be an empowering tool for guiding staff toward ever-more-effective program delivery when shared in a constructive, problem-solving spirit.

Several SIF grantees and subgrantees stressed the importance of discussing data in a positive way that centers on client outcomes rather than employee performance. Subgrantee leaders reported that staff in their organizations tend to be highly committed to the organizational mission and to serving clients effectively. They found that carefully collecting and analyzing data, then adjusting accordingly, improved outcomes for clients, and pointing this out was an excellent catalyst for engaging staff in the discussion and helping them keep open minds about possible ways to adjust the ways in which they had been carrying out existing programs. For example, the National Kidney Foundation of Michigan needed staff to make changes in their standard operating procedures in order to provide the level of detailed reporting that would be needed for the SIF evaluation – changes that were "adding components to individuals' jobs, where they might have already felt maxed out." They got the staff buy-in they needed by discussing why the changes were more than just added job responsibilities – they were vital for program improvements, enhancing services for participants, and ensuring program sustainability.

> *"Connect with everybody's desire to see the organization move forward. Communicate the value of how data helps us get grants and be sustainable."*
>
> *--Lauren Nichols, SIF Subgrantee, National Kidney Foundation of Michigan*

One key to becoming an effective data-centric organization was to provide the right data to the right people at the right time. Too much data causes information overload and can't be applied effectively to program improvements; too little data leaves staff without the information needed to make effective program improvement decisions. Chrysalis emphasized the importance of simplifying the available data and providing timely, relevant indicators to each line of business to allow managers to make data-informed decisions. Chrysalis asked staff within each line of business to identify their data needs, and now produces weekly and monthly dashboards with program performance data that employees can use to track progress and make adjustments. By involving the lines of business in the planning and design process, Chrysalis ensured that the dashboards would contain information that actually mattered to the program team, and that the program team understood exactly how to use the data.

> *"Don't be scared of the data, but embrace it and share it at all levels. Share it with staff, they are eager to know that they're doing the very best that they can. Make them part of the process."*
>
> *--Miranda Cook, SIF Subgrantee, The Bridge Project*

Another key to building a data-centric organization was involving the whole organization – not only top-level decision-makers – in looking at data and envisioning next steps. For example, SIF grantee Corporation for Supportive Housing (CSH) highlighted the need to communicate with frontline staff about their role in the evaluation process. From a data collection perspective, it is easy for service providers who are focused on their daily work with clients to treat data entry as an afterthought. To address this, CSH suggested spelling out roles in the subgrantee agreements and ensuring that everyone in the organization understands their role in the evaluation efforts.

Subgrantee Madison Strategies Group found that sharing data with front-line staff, engaging them in understanding what the data meant in context, and determining what the team might do about it added real value to their problem-solving conversations. It ensured that the team really thought through "the program goals in relation to their job responsibilities and priorities and metrics they are responsible to report." Involving staff in the planning process also ensured their buy-in, because the program adjustments made sense to staff as ways to maximize positive client outcomes and increase program and organizational success.

> *"We've gotten significantly better over the last two years at taking the sea of information that we have and putting it in monthly reports that managers can make decisions based on, or in reports that the board might be interested to see, really learning how to distill all that information."*
>
> *--Trevor Kale, SIF Subgrantee, Chrysalis*

The Colorado Statewide Parent Coalition (CSPC) found value in establishing an inclusive process for reviewing data and developing program adjustments. CSPC initially implemented significant changes to program forms used for collecting child outcome data as well as training materials used with childcare providers based on data analysis conducted by the organization's leadership. However, when rolling out the new forms, they encountered internal resistance. To address this challenge, CSPC brought the staff involved with the forms into the process and asked for their input and feedback on proposed changes. Leadership also took time to thoroughly explain the value of the new forms, and how the data would be essential for demonstrating the real impact of their work. Involving staff and focusing on benefits of the change to the program brought staff around to supporting the needed changes.

A "data culture" also needs to be willing to experiment with new approaches to service delivery, assess their effectiveness, and make long-term decisions accordingly. Subgrantee Madison Strategies Group (MSG), which provides sector-based technical training, job placement and advancement services to individuals, traditionally had two staff positions interacting with clients. One was responsible for helping clients find jobs, while the other provided clients the support they needed to advance in their jobs. MSG experimented with combining both roles in one staff position. MSG monitored the results of this adjustment, and determined that combining the roles caused confusion among staff, employers, and clients. When MSG determined that this strategy was not proving effective, they returned to the prior model.

Recommendations for Using Data to Build a "Data Culture":

- Secure buy in and commitment from the organization's leadership to promote a "data culture" where data is routinely used to inform programmatic decisions.
- Create an atmosphere where program performance data, good or bad, can be discussed openly and used as a basis for decision making by building data-sharing into the organization's DNA. Share information at staff meetings, distribute dashboards with relevant indicators, and involve staff at all levels of the organization in interpreting data and developing strategies for continuous improvement.

- Get input from staff about what data they need to inform their work, and the most effective format for getting that information to them.

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- Make clear how the data analysis supports what staff value – serving clients more effectively by helping staff focus their efforts on what is working well and adjusting or discontinuing those things that aren't.

- Communicate to staff the benefits of having reliable data to demonstrate the impact of their work to clients, partners, and funders.

3. Using Data to Ensure Program Fidelity

Attention to fidelity when replicating a program model is critical in working with evidence-based programs. Grantees used a variety of approaches to assess the fidelity or variations in the way their programs were implemented. The Colorado Statewide Parent Coalition, for example, enhanced the rigor of the home visit logs kept by staff working with home child care providers. This provided the information the Coalition needed to assess the number and duration of visits being accomplished – and to determine that there was lots of variation. They are now working with staff to ensure that the visits are taking place at appropriate intervals and are the needed length. Without the more detailed logs created because of participation in the SIF, the organization would not have identified that consistency of delivery was an issue. By tightening up their processes to ensure greater fidelity in program implementation, they will have both a better-implemented program and stronger data.

Another example comes from the Bridge Project's reading initiatives, in which the SIF evaluation process included classroom observations by an outside evaluator. Those observations revealed inconsistencies in the way educators were delivering the curriculum and guided the Bridge Project in determining what professional development opportunities they needed to offer to their educators to ensure that the same curriculum, the same number of sessions, and that similar quality trainings were offered at all four of their sites. The Bridge Project built on these process evaluations further, by having their educators use the observation form as a tool for peer observations. Peer observations helped the educators learn from others implementing their program, enhancing their skills and contributing to consistent delivery of the training. The Bridge Project reported that this peer observation and feedback model has significantly raised the consistency and quality of the educators' teaching.

> *"Being able within SIF to have a literacy intervention program has been amazing. Then being able to say we observed these educators this many sessions... that's been able to direct our professional development with educators so that all of our young people are getting the same kind of teaching and getting the exact curriculum delivered in a valid and reliable way."*
>
> *--Miranda Cook, SIF Subgrantee,*

Recommendations for Using Data to Ensure Program Fidelity:

- Develop clear protocols for program delivery, and train front line staff so they know both what they need to do and why it is important.

- Use quality control mechanisms such as observations and logs to ensure that services are delivered as intended.

- Track program delivery metrics such as number and length of client contacts and the nature of the content delivered, and adjust as needed to ensure consistent program delivery.

4. Using Data to Improve Program Delivery

Grantees and subgrantees used data to identify areas of high performance to expand or replicate, as well as to make adjustments in areas where programs were not performing as expected. These data proved useful for program improvements at all points in the program delivery cycle, from client recruitment and placement, to program implementation, to long-term follow-up.

4.1 Recruitment and Placement

Several subgrantees made use of data to affect the very earliest points in the process, as they recruited and placed clients in their programs. AIDS Connecticut, for example, devised a formula to ensure that they were serving their most at risk homeless clients. With the help of their evaluator, NYU, they matched Homeless Management Information System data with state Medicaid information to identify potential clients who fit their selection criteria. When the established criteria did not produce the needed client base, AIDS Connecticut revisited the data to adjust their criteria accordingly.

> *"We really tried to choose providers that really understood the difficulty around engagement and for us, given that we're using data driven targeting, we never stop engaging. Someone may say no or they may drop off our radar for a little bit but that doesn't mean that they're out of the program for us and they can come back."*
>
> *--Sarah Gallagher, SIF Grantee, Corporation for Supportive Housing*

Early on, Madison Strategies Group focused on tracking the number of people who attended orientation for their sector-based career advancement program. After encountering higher-than-expected attrition rates resulting in low levels of enrollment after orientation, they did some careful analysis to gain insight into weaknesses in their program recruitment strategy. MSG used findings from a funnel analysis conducted by third party evaluator MDRC, to gain insight into effective recruitment strategies for successful candidates. MSG continues to use the findings of the funnel analysis and has performed subsequent similar analyses in order to target clients that have a higher chance of success in the program, manage client expectations when joining the program, and identify additional resources needed to help weaker candidates prepare for success before pursuing the program.

4.2 Program Implementation

SIF subgrantees used evaluation findings to identify effective interventions that could be adjusted and replicated in other communities. This was the case of United Way for Southeastern Michigan's subgrantee Southwest Counseling Solutions. The organization runs a family literacy program with non-English speaking households that incorporates interactive activities aimed at increasing parents' capacity to support their children academically. Program outcomes showed great success in reducing truancy rates and increasing children's test scores. Staff believe that a key factor is the 8 hours of classroom time that these parents spent with their children, reinforcing the importance of education and giving them skills to use in reinforcing this message at home. In an effort to obtain similar results in a community where ESL is not a significant issue, Southwest Counseling Solutions is now considering modifying this model for use with English-speaking parents, replacing ESL sessions with interactive life skills training.

Several grantees and subgrantees provided examples of ways in which the programs successfully used data to identify 'trouble spots' and seek targeted solutions. For example, a Venture Philanthropy Partners subgrantee observed in the performance management data for their youth development project that sophomore year was a particularly critical point for keeping students from dropping out of school. As a result, they reallocated their resources to focus more intensively on providing support to 9th and 10th graders, followed by continuing support to 11th and 12th graders at somewhat lower levels. This reallocation of resources resulted in better student outcomes in high school and prepared students better for college.

The Bridge Project combined child literacy data with data from observations of their tutoring sessions. They found that while tutors could benefit from additional support in teaching academic subjects such as reading and math, the areas in which they could most benefit from support were the 'soft' skills around behavior management, child engagement, and relationship building. They also found through systematic program observations that noise levels created significant distractions. With this information, they were able to secure a more appropriate space with lower noise levels through a partnership with the Denver Housing Authority, allowing the children to focus and engage more effectively in the program.

Through data from client surveys, intake assessments and observations from patient navigators AIDS Connecticut identified higher-than-expected levels of substance abuse among their clients. Many of these clients required long-term treatment in order to prepare them for successful independent living, but this could lead to loss of stable housing situations. Based on this analysis, AIDS Connecticut began connecting clients with long-term treatment and worked to ensure extensions for housing arrangements to allow clients time to complete treatment. As a result of this intervention, their clients were in a better position to move on to independent living situations at the end of their work with AIDS Connecticut.

> *"Since our primary focus was patient navigation and improved health status, we were confronted by broader systemic inadequacies that thwarted our clients (such as transportation to appointments, behavioral healthcare, absence of primary care, limited housing case management, etc.) which required us to meet with community partners to round out our efforts and address these issues."*
>
> *--John Merz, SIF Subgrantee, AIDS Connecticut*

A final example of data used to make mid-course adjustments also comes from AIDS Connecticut. In reviewing information about their clients' barriers in a data dashboard, they found that many clients had criminal histories, and were unable to get housing assistance due to a pending court case on their records. AIDS Connecticut partnered with the office of court services to provide staff training about how to work with the court to clear up these records, and to help clients follow the necessary steps to obtain housing. By identifying this systematic barrier through their dashboard data, AIDS Connecticut was able to build staff skills and establish processes to help clients effectively work through this significant barr

4.3 Program Follow-Up

As part of their SIF evaluation Chrysalis, a SIF subgrantee that provides employment support services, tracked clients to see if they were still employed one year after they had exited the program. The organization had invested in improving the employment placement and support services they provide during a client's time in the program, but wanted to better understand what happened to those clients after they had left the program. "While we hoped and believed that our retention efforts were successful and that our clients stayed employed, we had limited data to support this conclusion. We wanted to know exactly what was going on with our clients post-employment." By improving their data collection methods Chrysalis was able to obtain more reliable data that they used to adjust their programs and improve their services. Chrysalis established a new staff position to focus on post-employment supports with the goal of improving client retention rates and long-term client outcomes. Because of this change more clients have contact with Chrysalis post-employment, resulting in better information about their employment outcomes, and a reconnection to Chrysalis services for those who have been unable to retain employment.

Similarly, Madison Strategies Group looked at data from their WorkAdvance program and saw that they were doing a great job with job placement, but expected to see higher job retention rates. They used employer feedback to ascertain that the primary issue did not have to do with job skills, but with career readiness. Based on this information, they worked with a consultant to develop a highly interactive career readiness curriculum focusing on ways to enhance short and long term goal setting, decision making and ramifications, and critical thinking skills to help address those less tangible skills required for job retention. As a result of these gathering feedback from employers and modifying their career readiness curriculum, Madison Strategies Group has seen an increase in their job retention rates.

> *"A big theme out of our SIF evaluation was that post-employment support was leading to significantly better outcomes at that one-year mark. We used to have all of our case managers calling their working caseload at certain checkpoints. We've now changed and hired someone who is our retention coordinator, whose only duty is to track these people down, get their information, and steer them back into the program if need be, and it's not this extra thing at the end of the month that [they] have to do."*
>
> *--Trevor Kale, SIF Subgrantee, Chrysalis*

Recommendations for using data to improve program delivery:

- Collect data about all aspects of the program, not just the direct service delivery components. Information about recruitment (pre-program) and long term outcomes (post-program) can provide important insights for program improvement.
- Look for barriers to client success, and focus on program modifications to address them – whether that means providing extra support during the program, recommending "pre-work" to prepare for success in the program, or offering post-program support for longer-term success.
- Use mixed method data collection techniques. While survey data can provide key information, focus groups, interviews, and observations can bring to light program needs and delivery inconsistencies that can be masked in a survey.
- Collect data in a systematic way to ensure data reliability. Design a data collection strategy that is consistent and can be used to compare performance over time.
- Design data dashboards that present data in a simple, graphic way to facilitate easy comprehension, then make sure that staff use them regularly. Pay attention to the data, consider possible options with an open mind, and be willing to take a risk by trying a new approach – with data collection to inform choices about subsequent adjustments.

5. Using Data to Increase Client Recruitment, Engagement, and Retention

To document what works, SIF grantees must collect data about the effectiveness of their programs. But other types of data can be critically important for program improvement. In particular, grantees and subgrantees noted the importance of using data to identify problems with client recruitment, engagement, and retention, and for identifying solutions and gauging success.

Early on, Madison Strategies Group made concerted efforts to recruit participants for their WorkAdvance program by doing personalized outreach through partner organizations and at community events, libraries, and apartment complexes in areas with high rates of unemployment and poverty. Then they looked at their data. They found that their traditional recruiting avenues were yielding relatively few participants; Craigslist was their best resource. Based on these data, they began closely monitoring referral sources and adjusting their methods to incorporate newspaper, radio, and television. They became more sophisticated over time, gathering still more data to assess the results of advertising on different TV shows and radio stations. They also monitored the types of messages associated with increased responses, finding that longer ads with more specifics about the program's impact on earnings were worth the investment. MSG's investments in mainstream marketing strategies ran counter to their original assumptions about effective outreach, and were informed and refined over time through their data collection and analysis efforts.

Subgrantee Chrysalis offers job readiness, employment, and post-employment support for homeless and low- and moderate-income (LMI) individuals. The organization originally opted not to require clients to participate in programming, but rather to allow clients to use services if they wanted to. They found that many clients signed up for services but did not actually use them – and therefore were not successfully transitioning to outside employment after leaving the program. To address this challenge, Chrysalis began requiring clients to use their employment services, and paid them to do so (as required by State law). They also invested in additional resources by hiring a job readiness coordinator and offering in-house legal and mental health services. With these new changes in place, Chrysalis expects to see an increase in the number of clients successfully transitioning to employment.

> *Managing engagement is a big area for us. We have special giveaways for baseball tickets and we use those to motivate folks to come in and stay engaged with us. It's really about building a meaningful relationship beyond work. We provide movie tickets for disengaged customers to come in a talk about their career path. We have giveaways for Thanksgiving dinners, because we know that the holidays are creating undue stress. All of that came (about), because we couldn't understand why our great program had 30% of the people who didn't care about it.*
>
> *-- Karen Pennington, SIF Subgrantee,*

United Way for Southeastern Michigan helped subgrantees set up tracking systems to capture client exit interview data to identify barriers that were causing clients to leave the program. One subgrantee found many respondents reporting that lack of transportation was a significant barrier. Although field staff had identified transportation as an issue based on anecdotal evidence, data from the exit interviews provided a tool that allowed program staff to say "All right, this is the number of people that we are losing because of this issue. Let's all sit down and figure it out." The discussion resulted in establishing a van service to assist clients with transportation.

Recommendations for Increasing Client Recruitment, Engagement, and Retention

- Use field staff observations, focus groups, and anecdotal information to gather preliminary information about program strengths and weaknesses; then gather quantitative data to test those observations.
- After implementing a change to improve the program, collect more fine-grained data to test the effectiveness of the change, and to identify areas for further improvements.

6. About This Issue Brief

This issue brief was informed by input from the following people from SIF Classic recipient organizations and their subgrantees:

- Jennifer Callans and Jeff Miles, United Way for Southeastern Michigan (2011 SIF grantee) and Lauren Nichols and Crystal D'Agostino from subgrantee National Kidney Foundation of Michigan;
- Sarah Gallagher, Corporation for Supportive Housing (2011 SIF grantee) and John Merz and Cecilia Woods from subgrantee AIDS Connecticut;
- Ayo Atterberry, Venture Philanthropy Partners (VPP) (2010 SIF grantee);
- Trevor Kale, Chrysalis, a subgrantee of REDF (2010 SIF grantee);
- Richard Garcia and Valerie Gonzales, Colorado Statewide Parent Coalition, PASO (Providers Advancing Student Outcomes) Program, a subgrantee of Mile High United Way (2011 SIF grantee);
- Jesse Burne and Miranda Cook, The Bridge Project, a subgrantee of Mile High United Way (2011 SIF grantee); and
- Karen Pennington and Rachel Griffin, Madison Strategies Group, a subgrantee of the Mayor's Fund to Advance New York City (2010 SIF grantee).

7. About The Social Innovation Fund

The Social Innovation Fund, an initiative of the Corporation for National and Community Service (CNCS) under the Edward M. Kennedy Serve America Act, is a new approach by the federal government to address urgent national challenges. The fund mobilizes public and private resources to grow the impact of promising, innovative community-based solutions that have evidence of compelling results in three areas of priority need: economic opportunity, healthy futures, and youth development.

The operating model of the SIF is distinguished by the following six elements:

Innovation | Evidence | Scale | Grantmakers | Match | Knowledge Sharing

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