IssueBRIEF

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Aligning Federal Performance Indicators Across Programs Promoting Self-Sufficiency: Actionable Steps for Program Design and Practice

The EMPOWERED study, conducted on behalf of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation (ASPE) at the Department of Health and Human Services, examines the use of performance measures, work requirements and child support cooperation requirements across human services programs. This issue brief is one of three briefs that examines the challenges and opportunities for cross-program alignment of performance indicators. Our findings are based on discussions with national and federal stakeholders, state program administrators in three states, and local program staff in three sites.

Based on discussions with key stakeholders and program staff, five actionable steps emerged that federal, state, and local administrators who design, administer, and deliver programs focused on employment and self-sufficiency can take to define shared goals and performance measures. These steps can help build a performance measurement framework to support program administrators and staff in using information to manage, improve, and coordinate programs and services:

- Develop common indicators within and across programs that supplement high-level federal performance measures.

- Build or improve a data infrastructure that can provide information to guide program management, coordinated service delivery, and aligned performance measurement.

- Leverage shared administrative structures or shared locations to coordinate services and align performance measurement.

- Increase connections with programs that share federal performance measures (or common goals) to build on specific program strengths.

- Engage different levels of staff within and across programs in the process of identifying and using indicators and data that will guide services and continuous improvement.

Many federal programs share the goal of promoting employment and self-sufficiency among low-income populations, but programs' philosophies, policy goals, and targeted populations vary in ways that have resulted in different indicators to measure performance. In addition, programs are administered by numerous federal agencies, are implemented by an array of entities at the state and local levels, and use different data systems, all of which challenge alignment of performance measures and services (Figure 1). Performance measurement is most successful when the information is reliable, accurate, and timely and is useful for both accountability and program management purposes (Borden 2011). Building a performance measurement framework that serves these purposes and promotes data quality and usefulness will also result in a data and service infrastructure across programs that facilitates coordination and efficiency.

All the programs examined in this study serve low-income populations; are designed to improve self-sufficiency and employment through a combination of education, training,

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and employment services; and rely on established indicators to gauge performance or support consistent reporting at the federal level. Five of the eight programs (TANF, SNAP E&T, FSS, Jobs Plus, and the Youth Program) focus on low-income individuals, a sixth (Adult Program) assigns priority to individuals with low incomes, one program (VR) focuses on individuals with disabilities who have barriers to employment, and one other (AEFLA) serves individuals not enrolled in secondary education and lacking mastery of adult basic education skills.

The programs of interest included in this study are: Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program Employment and Training (SNAP E&T), Family Self-Sufficiency (FSS), Jobs Plus, Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) Title I Adult and Dislocated Worker Programs, WIOA Title I Youth Program, WIOA Title II Adult Education and Family Literacy Act (AEFLA) program, and WIOA Title IV Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) program.[1]

	Adult and Dislocated Worker Programs	AEFLA	FSS	Jobs Plus	SNAP E&T	TANF	VR	Youth Program
Federal administering agency	DOL	ED	HUD	HUD	USDA	HHS	ED	DOL
Target population	All adults age 18 and older **Adult:** Priority to low-income individuals or those with barriers to employment **Dislocated Worker:** Individuals who are unemployed due to a business closure or general economic conditions in area in which they reside	Individuals age 16 and older who are not enrolled or required to be enrolled in secondary school and who are basic skills deficient, do not have a secondary school diploma, or are an English language learner	Public housing residents	Public housing residents	SNAP recipients between the ages of 16 and 59	Work-eligible individuals who are adults age 18 or older or single minor parents who receive assistance for both themselves and their children	Individuals with disabilities	Low-income out-of-school youth, ages 16–24 and in-school youth, ages 14-21
Range of implementing entities	State and local government employees, local workforce boards, contracted service providers	Education agencies, community-based organizations, volunteer literacy organizations, institutions of higher education, nonprofit agencies, libraries, public housing agencies	Public housing agencies	Public housing agencies	State and local government employees, contracted service providers	State and local government employees, contracted service providers	State and local government employees, contracted service providers	State and local government employees, local workforce boards, contracted service providers
Number of participants	Adult: 1,108,201 Dislocated Worker: 467,508	1,427,339	65,000	Not available	629,000	1,406,410	972,000	156,520

Source: Scan of publicly available documents, data, and reports, conducted by Mathematica November 2017–June 2018. The number of participants is the most recent available data from the federal administering agency.

Notes: This figure briefly summarizes federal characteristics and rules for each program, the details of which are not fully conveyed. For example, target populations may further vary based on state discretion for some programs.

DOL= U.S. Department of Labor; ED = U.S. Department of Education; HHS = U.S. Department of Health and Human Services; HUD = U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development; USDA FNS = U.S. Department of Agriculture, Food and Nutrition Service.

Figure 1. Program-administering agencies, target populations, and implementing entities

This brief outlines actionable steps that program designers and administrators at the federal, state, or local level can take to build or use aligned measures across programs in ways that can improve program management and increase service coordination. The steps outlined in this brief can be pursued at any time; they do not need to wait for changes in federal policy, or they could work in tandem with policy changes to help drive change toward aligned performance measures and service coordination across programs. A companion brief focuses on policy considerations for aligning federal performance measures across human services and workforce programs aimed at improving self-sufficiency.

ACTIONABLE STEPS FOR PROGRAM DESIGN AND PRACTICE

Federal, state, and local administrators and staff who design, administer, and deliver programs focused on employment and self-sufficiency can take several steps to define and attain shared goals and performance measures. These steps, informed by practices gathered through discussions with federal and state program administrators and site visits to three localities, can help build a performance measurement framework to aid program administrators and staff in using information to manage, improve, and coordinate programs and services. The first three steps present longer-term strategies toward which immediate actions are possible but that may take time to achieve; the two other steps are possible to realize in the short term.

Actionable Step 1. Develop common indicators within and across programs that supplement high-level federal performance measures.

The eight programs in this study have federal indicators in place that guide state and local program reporting requirements and are often used to measure and hold programs accountable for performance. Because high-quality performance indicators require an investment from staff to collect and report the data—from frontline workers to state administrators—the indicators must do more than assess the success of a program; they must be usable for delivering services and managing the program (Ladinsky 2015; Borden 2011). For common performance indicators to provide value to inform program management and service delivery, they need to

use common definitions. The current federal performance indicators focus primarily on outcomes (such as in the Adult and Dislocated Worker Programs) or on processes (such as in TANF), but they tend to be stand-alone measures of accountability that program staff are less likely to use to inform program management, improvement, and service delivery.

State and local program administrators can, and have, built out a series of additional indicators they use on a regular basis to guide services, manage workloads and resources, and check that they remain on track toward achieving good outcomes for participants. These indicators generally capture information on processes and outputs. Process indicators reflect the ways in which staff serve program participants, such as how timely the services or progression of services occur. Output indicators include details about the services or activities participants engage in or receive, such as the number of clients enrolled in training and education through the Adult and Dislocated Worker Programs, placed in a TANF or SNAP E&T work activity, or enrolled in an AEFLA class. Outputs also provide information on how well resources are being used, such as visits to a resource center or the balance of cases across frontline workers.

Respondents from all levels of government and across programs noted that indicators of processes and outputs that can be used to manage and assess programs—and make them better—are most useful for practice. At the state and local level, these types of indicators help program staff continually gauge what they are doing and how well they are doing it. At the federal level, these indicators can point to the technical assistance needs of states for improving service delivery.

In the current performance environment, some study programs use common federal measures, but a range of specific indicators are in use at the state and local levels that often differ even for the same program. For example, five of the study programs (Adult and Dislocated Worker Programs, Youth Program, AEFLA, VR, and SNAP E&T) use the federally defined indicators that were included in the WIOA authorizing legislation as performance measures that gauge accountability or as the basis for program reporting requirements, but also have a range of other indicators in use.[2]

Performance indicators can be used for both accountability and program management purposes, but to do so they must capture information about service delivery that makes a connection to the participant outcomes of interest.

Table 1. One local site's steps to develop common performance measures for select programs

Program	How much did we do?	How well did we do it?	Is anyone better off?
TANF	• Total referrals to TANF employment program • Total participants in TANF employment program	• Clients enrolled in TANF employment program within 30 days	• Participants employed or engaged in work activity • Average wage • Employed participants still employed after three months
American Job Center (includes Adult and Dislocated Worker Programs, TANF, SNAP E&T)	• Ongoing case management clients • Average caseload per case manager	• Average time from initial assessment to placement into employment for case-managed clients	• Placement rate of case-managed clients • Average wage at time of placement into employment • Case-managed clients still employed after six months

Source: Site visit conducted by Mathematica in October 2018.

At the state and local levels, program administrators and staff tend to view these measures as reflecting high-level goals for program participants, such as employment after exiting the program. However, administrators and staff use indicators that often differ by state, or within localities within one state, to inform program management and service delivery. For aligned performance measurement to increase program coordination and efficiency, program staff can work toward building a shared framework of indicators to inform regular service delivery and program management while maintaining a focus on participant outcomes. In one study site, as shown in Table 1, administrators have started to develop indicators to capture similar concepts across programs and that lead to measuring shared outcomes related to wages and employment. Program designers and practitioners can begin this work to build a common measurement framework on the ground and, in time, connect with and potentially inform the direction of policy that defines program accountability.

Actionable Step 2. Build or improve a data infrastructure that can provide information to guide program management, coordinated service delivery, and aligned performance measurement.

Data systems—who governs them, how they are funded and supported, and the quality, comparability, and accessibility of information that goes into them—affect the usefulness of performance indicators and the ability to coordinate services across programs. Respondents across programs and levels of government agreed that data quality, consistency, and reporting varied by state and locality. State and local data systems and staff have different levels of capacity and experience when it comes to gathering, manipulating, and interpreting the data needed to track services, participant experiences, and program outcomes.

A data infrastructure comprises four pieces (shown in Figure 2) that are interrelated but for which incremental steps can lead to progress toward system change and coordination across programs.

Figure 2. Building a data infrastructure to support program coordination and performance measurement

Guidance on system specifications.

The amount and type of guidance on data system specifications or requirements that federal agencies provide to states varies across the study programs. As a result, programs at the state and local levels have varying degrees of capacity to accurately maintain and report data. Differences in the sophistication of the data systems can be reflected in the quality of the data across states and across programs, which presents a challenge to consistency in performance measurement.

All but one of the eight study programs (FSS) rely on the states or localities to procure their own data systems. Federal guidance for one program (AEFLA) specifies the requirements that state data systems must meet and requires corrective action plans if the systems do not meet the standards. Across the study programs, information systems vary from state-developed databases to tailor-made Microsoft Access databases or Excel spreadsheets specific to different locations for data collection. Increased guidance and support from federal and state administrators is needed to build a data system infrastructure that can better ensure the quality and consistency in the data used for program management and performance measurement.

Shifting systems to a focus on helping end users manage programs and provide services.

Data systems in states and localities are primarily designed to track program compliance and meet federal reporting requirements. The focus on data for compliance and reporting has detracted from the usefulness of the data to inform program management and service delivery. Stakeholders across the programs agree that state and local staff do not have access to the data necessary for program management. This is because their existing systems are not set up to capture or report information in a way that would prove useful for guiding decisions about service delivery. In some cases, data fields on participant characteristics or referrals to services do not exist, and in other cases, data that go into the systems are not readily accessible to administrators or staff in the form of custom queries or reports. This results in a lack of real-time information on program participants that would help both staff provide services and administrators to make quick course corrections. Staff end up creating makeshift means of organizing information, such as spreadsheets or case notes.

> Administrators across levels of government could work toward shifting data systems from a primary focus on compliance and reporting to systems that assist end users.

Data-sharing across programs.

Almost all federal employment and training programs overlap target populations with at least one other program (U.S. Government Accountability Office 2011); however, data are rarely available to frontline program staff about whether individuals are served by multiple programs to guide coordinated services. Differences in program requirements and confidentiality restrictions often prevent integrating systems and inhibit data-sharing across programs. The result is the use of an array of distinct and disconnected data systems that create redundancies in data entry and inhibit program staff from seeing a program participant holistically. Even when local staff hold responsibilities across programs, they may have to enter the same data into two or three different systems. This duplication of effort takes time away from serving program participants, coordinating services, and achieving good outcomes.

Ideally, a single data system would exist to serve multiple programs, but this would be very expensive and time consuming to create. Shared data interfaces on the front end (such as common data entry screens that populate fields in different systems) or data warehouses that integrate data from different systems on the back end could bring information together from across programs even while program systems remain distinct. Data-sharing agreements between programs, negotiated at some level of government (which may vary by program), would facilitate data-sharing efforts.

Local program staff can make efforts to share information to improve cross-program service delivery and coordination within the specified parameters. They can develop common forms, when possible, and gain view-only access to certain non-sensitive screens across programs. In one study site, staff of a large county human services department can access a client dashboard to view an individual's profile of all services received across the department's programs. In another site, the TANF and housing program staff can view whether their program participants are receiving certain services through the Adult and Dislocated Worker Programs' data system.

Funding and technical support.

Stakeholders across programs reported that states and localities do not have the resources to develop or maintain a data infrastructure that could result in more accurate,

complete, and comparable data across different programs. There is no dedicated funding within programs to create, revise, or merge the data infrastructure. Keeping up with upgrades and changes to data systems—some that result from changes in performance measurement or reporting—is time consuming and expensive to implement even within specific programs. Two local sites included in this study attempted to build systems that would integrate data across multiple human services or employment programs; both had to abandon the effort because it was too costly and technically challenging. Local efforts that do pull together data from across programs tend to require labor-intensive processes to conduct manual counts to reconcile data or identify duplications or missing data across systems, or to structure information in a way that is useful for end users. Working across programs to build a data infrastructure may require significant investment in funding or technical support. It may be an area in which foundations could help bridge the gap between public funding and program and participant needs.

Actionable Step 3. Develop and leverage shared administrative structures or shared locations to coordinate services and align performance measurement.

Specific program requirements and data systems that do not align across programs present challenges to coordinating services and aligning performance measurement. For example, TANF participants who must complete a certain number of hours per week in specifically defined allowable work activities may not be able to also enroll in training for an Adult and Dislocated Worker Programs' high-demand industry due to timing conflicts. This friction between program requirements can affect services, as well as the ability to work across programs toward improved client outcomes. Diverse administrative and service delivery structures at the state and local levels can also challenge the use of cross-program indicators when multiple entities must be involved in collecting and reporting data.

Shared administrative structures—at some level—can help staff make progress toward building relationships and working together to mitigate the effect of program requirements that may be at odds. Numerous studies of coordination between the TANF and Workforce Investment Act programs (the predecessor to

WIOA) have described higher levels of local service coordination when there was state-level integration of administrative structures or when program services were co-located (Kirby et al. 2015; Wright and Montiel 2010; Pindus et al. 2000). One local study site benefited from common local county governance over most of the programs included in this study as well as co-location of program services. This site created a results-based, data-driven culture across programs; has coordinated services; and has aligned a few key indicators including employment entry, earnings, and employment at certain periods after program exit across the TANF, SNAP E&T, and the Adult and Dislocated Worker Programs. In locations that do not have shared administrative structures, staff can build and foster relationships with others across programs to share information, coordinate services, and find common ground in producing results for program participants.

Actionable Step 4. Increase connections with programs that share federal performance measures (or common goals) to build on specific program strengths.

Programs can rely more on the services of other programs to help meet common federal performance indicators and achieve shared service delivery goals and outcomes for participants. Staff in the sites included in this study took the opportunity of WIOA implementation to push cross-program partnerships forward at the state and local level to serve the needs of program participants and improve their program's performance on WIOA indicators. For example, staff from the AEFLA program in one site found it increasingly important to partner with the TANF or Adult and Dislocated Worker Programs to build job readiness and life skills for students. They reported having less room in their curriculum to incorporate these lessons with an increased focus by WIOA on college and career readiness standards. For the Adult and Dislocated Worker Programs, the increased emphasis on understanding participant characteristics as part of setting WIOA performance indicator targets could motivate stronger partnerships with AEFLA, VR, or TANF to help identify and address barriers to employment.

Resource or asset mapping and program cross-training can help programs identify where and

American Job Centers often bring together many programs under one roof, and additional partners in these centers could prove useful in building service connections and supporting program performance. Alternatively, employment programs located in low-income housing complexes are directly meeting people where they live. Building out connections between these employment programs with additional services and supports through programs such as TANF, SNAP E&T, or AEFLA could increase participant access to and involvement in a range of programs that could lead to better outcomes.

how services can best address participant needs. State and local administrators may find it useful to clearly document the hubs of service receipt, particularly among low-income populations that the study programs seek to engage, to identify locations that will maximize participant engagement and efficiency in service delivery.

Relatively low effort program cross-training and communication can be a good starting point for building connections. For example, in one site, TANF staff wanted to use labor market information to guide participants into high-demand industries. This information is a cornerstone of Adult and Dislocated Worker Programs' services and is publicly available but TANF staff did not know how to access or use this information; program cross-training could alleviate this disconnect. In another study state, program administrators from the core programs that use the WIOA primary indicators of performance and TANF developed regular roundtable discussions to share information about their programs' services, eligibility requirements, and performance requirements. State staff viewed these discussions as the first steps in understanding the services available to participants and sparking ideas about ways to improve service delivery across programs, and ultimately improving performance on outcomes that gauge program accountability.

Actionable Step 5. Engage different levels of staff within and across programs in the process of identifying and using indicators and data that will guide services and continuous improvement.

A legislative mandate, such as under WIOA, is often the catalyst to move programs toward aligned performance indicators, but the relevance and usefulness of the indicators could be improved if program staff provide input to federal administrators during the regulatory process. Program staff (at any level) often do not have an opportunity to provide input during the development of performance measures, which creates the impression that performance measurement is done "to the program" and not "for the program." Work groups on

> Respondents across the three local sites found that engaging staff at all levels is important in the development and ongoing use of data to inform service delivery and program performance.

performance indicators can bring in the practice perspective about either existing or proposed indicators. Federal staff across four programs used work groups with state and local staff to share knowledge and gather practical insights about collecting and using federal performance indicators included under WIOA. One program recently brought together 10 state administrators to look closely at the first year of data required for WIOA performance indicators to interpret what the data tell them about their states.

Ongoing discussions between administrators, supervisors, and staff within and, when possible, across programs, that focus on the stories behind the data can keep everyone engaged in continuous improvement—for service delivery, data collection, and improved coordination. Staff are more motivated to collect information when they understand the need for data and how the data inform what they do. For example, program staff indicated that they want to understand the reasons for lack of continued engagement in activities such as adult basic education classes or TANF job search and work experience so they could better accommodate program participant needs or connect participants with other services. Similarly, program staff want to identify potential barriers to employment their program participants may face throughout their work with them, enabling staff to connect participants to services that can help, and track the various services and benefits that a participant receives. Staff were willing to collect these types of data, given the usefulness to their work, even though the effort added to their workload.

FUTURE DIRECTIONS

The intended goal of performance measurement and service coordination is to improve program services and outcomes for participants through a focus on accountability or efficiency, or both. Policy and program implementation changes take time. Program designers, administrators, and staff at all levels can work across programs to take steps toward further aligning goals, service delivery, and performance indicators, even while there are ongoing efforts to align programs through policy and performance measurement at the federal level.

Overview of data sources for the EMPOWERED performance measurement study

The EMPOWERED performance measurement study component explored perspectives and practices focused on the question of how performance measurement may achieve accountability across programs that share similar goals and support efficient program management and service coordination. To identify programs to include in the study, we reviewed human services and workforce programs that promote self-sufficiency and employment, serve low-income populations similar to those served by TANF, and rely on established performance or reporting indicators at the federal level. Data collection occurred between November 2017 and October 2018 and included these steps:

- A scan of publicly available documents describing human services and workforce programs and policies related to performance indicators to summarize information across programs
- Reviews of federal program administrative data
- Semi-structured discussions with 29 national and federal stakeholders and 15 state program administrators in three states
- In-depth case studies of approaches to performance measurement across select programs in three localities

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ENDNOTES

[1] The study included programs that provide education or training services, often coupled with employment services. WIOA Title III Employment Services (Wagner-Peyser) was not included among the study programs because it provides employment services only.

[2] SNAP E&T specifies reporting requirements rather than performance measures or indicators.

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