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A Study of Program Outcomes and Community Need

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Abstract

The purpose of this research paper is to look at the effectiveness of programs that are funded by the organization INC Mental Health Alliance, which will be referred to as INCMHA. INCMHA-funded agencies provide services to seven townships of Aurora, Batavia, Big Rock, Blackberry, Kaneville, Sugar Grove, and Virgil. Part of their goal is to provide mental, intellectual, and developmental health free of charge or at a reduced rate to provide a system of care to the members of these townships. This study seeks to explore one of INCMHA's funded agencies and determine, based on their outcome data and evaluation practices if their services are effectively meeting the needs of their communities. To do this, the data of the INCMHA-funded agency, referred to as Agency 1, will be looked at comparatively between Financial Years (FY) 2021 and 2022. The quarterly outcomes for FY 2021 and FY 2022 will be numerically measured and compared against the other year while also taking the Agency 1's standard evaluation practice, if applicable, to provide additional knowledge that may affect the effectiveness of Agency 1 and their programs. Through this study, we can determine that Agency 1 does successfully meet the needs of their community through exceptional quarterly reports, even through the difficult time of COVID-19 restrictions.

Introduction

Program evaluation is a large and important part of any nonprofit organization. It is important to review programs and measure that they are achieving the goals that they've set for themselves through their purpose of creation. As nonprofit organizations are focused on serving communities, it is necessary to understand how those in the community feel about the program; those in the community can report if they feel the program is helping them, whether the program is reflective of the problem it seeks to help, how far the program goes to address these issues, if the program is accessible. If it is determined that the program is not effective, then it is not sustainable to keep it going. On the other hand, if the program is assisting the community, evaluation will help to determine what can be done to keep the program going strong. Program evaluation is done by assessing the program outcomes. Outcomes are not to be confused with outputs. Though similar, the two vary in important ways. Outcomes focus on the value created by a program and its measurable results. Through this, organizations can reflect on programs and their outcomes to determine if those results prove the effectiveness and necessity of a given program.

In the case of mental health organizations, program evaluation focuses mainly on if the program is helping those whom they serve by providing mental health services—therapy, psychiatric help, etc.—and if those services are changing the served individual's need for those services, their outlook on their mental, intellectual, and/or developmental health, or if the program provides a space for them to express their issues freely. Mental health outcomes can be difficult to measure as they are not as clean cut as, for example, an organization that measures legislation; this kind of organization could measure how many laws have been made towards their goals in a specific time limit. Mental health is harder to measure as it cannot be so easily understood. Determining if someone's mental, intellectual, and/or developmental health has been assisted cannot be limited to a few days or weeks. There is no set amount of time that a person will heal in, and on that note, a person will not be fully healed at any point of the program's service. Mental health does not depend on sending clients off fully healed of their traumas and experiences, but rather should measure that the individual has learned how to cope with their issues and live with them in mind. Measuring mental health outcomes, while difficult, is an extremely important part of any organization focused on mental, intellectual, and/or developmental health.

Literature Review

Outcome Framework

Some academics believe that there should be a framework for outcome measurement across platforms. One issue that organizations face when tracking and reporting their outcomes is that they must do so for a variety of sources. Agencies tend to have multiple different funding streams as to have a sustainable platform for all their different programs and each of their necessities. However, agencies face pressure from funders to use a prepared outcome framework. An article by Elizabeth T. Boris discusses the collaboration of The Urban Institute and The Center for What Works to identify a "common framework" of outcome measurement. They looked to make these identifications because of the pressure on agencies to preform by funders. To do this, the team examined fourteen program areas as to their missions, their potential outcomes, and their outcome indicators. As is the usual standard practice, agencies often have multiple sets of outcomes—the article refers to them as "intermediate outcomes" which are outcomes at the beginning and "end outcomes" which are reported at the end time of the program (Boris 2006: 4). They then created outcome sequence charts to portray outcomes. The chart flows to show that indicators are identified, then classified as useful for program data or outcome data, then assesses what works, and finally identifies what works best for the program. Part of this study discusses how difficult it can be to measure outcomes directly, and so to get around this they measure proxies. The study used these basic criteria for outcome indicators:

> "Basic criteria for quality indicators included ones that were: specific (unique, unambiguous); observable (practical, cost effective to collect, measurable); understandable (comprehensible); relevant (measured important dimensions, appropriate, related to program, of significance, predictive, timely); time bound (covered a specified period of time); and valid (provided reliable, accurate, unbiased, consistent, and verifiable data)" (Boris 2006: 6)

The fourteen programs were reviewed to determine what common elements they shred, this was the basis for the draft of the common framework. Some next steps included development of an interactive website tool to develop an outcome sequence chart, expanding the number of program areas, refinement of the outcome framework, and developing program outcomes and indicators for internal organizational strategy (Boris 2006: 7). For each of the fourteen programs, there was a short program description, an outcome sequence chart, and a spreadsheet of outcomes and indicators. The common framework ultimately determines if outcomes fall into a few specific categories: knowledge/learning/attitude, behavior, and condition/status (Boris 2006: 13-14). To conclude, the study says that the outcome framework should not be the end-all-be-all of outcome measurement but rather that it should be used to measure what is going well and what isn't and use that information to better the program.

Outcomes in Human Service Organizations and Mental Health Organizations

Outcomes are often measured very narrowly, being program specific; however, this approach leaves much unsaid when it comes to outcome evaluation. Mensing (2017) says that this approach leaves out the collateral, supportive, and linking work that ultimately is necessary to effectively help clients achieve a better quality of life. Mensing (2017) focuses mainly on Human Service Organizations (HSO) and how their outcomes should serve to be a continuous series of quality improvement. To achieve this Mensing says that HSOs need to increase their measurement and data-analysis capacity. An organization's continuous quality improvement (CQI) system should include addressing the question of providing service more effectively and efficiently, a structured planning and evaluation approach, integral service delivery and administrative activities, reciprocal information feedback loops, and a system to inform iterative change processes that drive the developmental evolution of the program (Mensing 2017). Mensing (2017) explains that outcomes should be measured based on a criterion that captures the different perspectives of each of the organization's stakeholders. This article also stresses the importance of knowing the difference between outcomes, outputs, and overall goals. Knowing these differences can help organizations distinguish what serves them best based on their past experiences. For HSOs to provide successful service to their intended clientele, they must provide service in an accessible way, provide to eligible clients, and provide in accordance with funding or reimbursement. A CQI also measures relationship outcomes, meaning the staff-client relationship, which can provide insight to the success rate of a program. Mensing (2017) explains that the presence or absence of a good working relationship can determine the effectiveness of a program. Agencies can attempt to assure that there are good staff-client relationships is to create a service model using feedback from both staff and clients about what works well (Mensing 2017). A study done by Segal, Silverman, and Temkin (2010) focused on Self Help Agencies (SHA) and Community Mental Health Agencies (CMHA). The study looked to measure the outcomes of SHAs and CMHAs and determine their usefulness to clients. Results of the study showed that the individually measured outcomes showed significant change in service condition and personal empowerment. This study shows us that outcome measurement in mental health organizations is different as what is being measured is not cut-and-dry but rather must be determined through client achievement. Another issue that this study addresses is that outcomes, and especially any positive outcomes, are mainly beneficial to the program if the clients stick with them. The study by Ostrow and Hayes (2015) uses the National Survey of Peer-Run Organizations survey data from 2012 to track organizational characteristics of peer-run organizations—nonprofits providing support and advocacy for people struggling with mental illnesses—and how they achieve better outcomes based on difference of consumer control. A survey was provided to 380 organizations, split into "peer-controlled" and "peer-directed"; the survey was 83 questions long. The questions asked about governance, staffing, activities, and perspectives. Ostrow and Hayes (2015) found that in peer-controlled organizations, at least 91% of members of the board were people with lived experience and for peer-directed organizations, between 51-90% of board members were people with lived experience (lived experience in this case living with or having lived with a mental health disorder at some point in their lives). The study also found that peer-directed services were more likely to have successful communication-based outcomes than peer-run services. Ostrow and Hayes (2015) determined that each type of organization had different strengths of outcomes. Lee and Clerkin (2017) stress the importance of outcome measurement in HSOs. The article states that nonprofits who do not engage in meaningful outcome measurement can produce goal displacement when they are only providing outcome data that appeases program stakeholders. There is also the issue that nonprofits will only measure outputs neglecting the long-term effects of programs thus not ensuring their ongoing success. Lee and Clerkin (2017) clarify that a large part of why outcome measurement and its importance has been taken so seriously is because it is a key part of what grant providers are looking for. The article addresses that, while strenuous and difficult, measuring outcomes is a key to success for a nonprofit. Miller, Weiss, and Macleod (1988) address organizational outcomes from the view of the board of directors. To do this, questionaries were sent to the executive directors (ED) of Philadelphia HSOs and of those, there were 158 usable questionaries. The ED is expected to have both organizational knowledge and knowledge about the board, which is why there were personally tasked with answering the questionaries. Eds were asked to report on board size, board activities, and agency outcomes. Results of the questionnaire showed that board members who have been trained in the service arena have better board involvement and activities. The study also shows that there is a connection between this better board involvement and the production of better agency outcomes.

Outcomes of Values and Participation

Nonprofits should not only consider the importance of program outcomes but also the importance of employee outcomes. Nonprofit strength may be shown by program outcomes, but it is maintained through employee outcomes—how well employees are working, how efficient the organization is, employee attitudes. Macy (2006) refers to “personal values” of employees and the effect on employee outcomes in addition to how it is undertested and underutilized. Macy (2006) looks to answer whether employee values influence work-related attitudes and behaviors. Values can be understood as an individual’s world view based on underlying principles which, socially, act as norms for treatment in society (Macy 2006: 2). The case study includes information that states when an organization has a high number of shared values, performance tends to increase. Another point of consideration in this is that, especially in nonprofit organizations, having shared values on human integrity and shared attitudes toward public service proved to increase effectiveness of employees. The case study found that shared values were found in the psychological participation of all employees. Their active participation in these contributed to overall employee effectiveness. This can be taken a step further to understand that the measurement employee effectiveness can be beneficial to the organizational outcomes. When nonprofits' employees and volunteers do well, they are providing better services to clients.

Evaluation in Practice

Carman and Fredricks (2008) makes the claim that agencies often see evaluation as one of three things: a resource drain and distraction, an external, promotional tool, or a strategic management tool. The article explains, again, that outcome evaluation is a stressful practice that agencies are expected to engage in from their funders; however, that does not make the practice any less useful and necessary. To expand on this, a survey was sent to 340 Indiana nonprofits to look at how agencies were practicing evaluation. Results of the survey showed that 90% of agencies engaged in any form of evaluation techniques. It went on to explain that 46% of agencies reported making a concerted effort towards outcome evaluation and 26% made some effort towards it. However, only 18% reported going out of their way to make outcome evaluations for all their programs. The survey also asked agencies what kind of data they were collecting during evaluation, 93% kept track of program expenditures and 78% did this in addition to resource expenditures. Eighty-nine percent gathered data about the number of clients served and 77% kept track of demographics. The study shows that while it is important to measure these things, it is not common practice of agencies to make extreme effort towards them, but they do make decent efforts.

Methodology

To study outcome evaluation and its reflection of community need, I would likely have to use a qualitative approach. I plan to look at past and present reported outcome data from a one of INCMHA's funded agencies. Through looking at submitted outcome data, I hope to determine how well the agency is supporting their served communities based on the achievements of their current programs.

Sample

For my sample, I will be using convivence sampling and have chosen one INCMHA's funded agencies, and their accompanying programs, to study. I will be reaching out to this agency and providing them with a consent form that informs them on the project being run using their information. Once I've gained consent, I will then use INCMHA outcome resources to study these agencies reported outcomes for the fiscal years (FY) 2021 and 2022. The agency, and accompanying programs, will be kept anonymous and will only be referred to as Agency 1.

Procedure

I will be going over the reported quarterly outcomes from FY2021 and FY2022 from the chosen agency. I will be looking at the outcome data for the agency's programs and comparing their reported quarterly outcomes for each fiscal year against each other. In analyzing the reported outcomes, I will be able to see if the agency's data reflects a completion of communities' needs. The outcome data is assessed using an outcome domain model, at the time that this data is captured. For Agency 1, the domains New Knowledge Gained, and Increased Skills were the two domains that were mainly used. These domains included numeric data that showed the number of clients that fit the objects of the domains. INCMHA asks that their funded agencies provide a prospective outcome percentage—a percentage that illustrates the projected amount clients that would fall into these outcome domains. This prospective percentage could then be used to compare the actual percentage against; however, Agency 1 did not give a prospective percentage and so the Agency 1 numeric outcome was combined—which causes a possibility of the percentages being skewed—and then a percentage was manufactured and measured out of 100%, which makes the outcomes present much harsher than they would with a prospective outcome. After gathering the numeric data and comparing FY2021 and FY2022 quarters, I then had a conversation with the executive director of Agency 1 about their standard evaluation practices. They told me that they collect evaluation data mainly for INCMHA purposes. They also explained that it is difficult to get evaluation back because the agency has no intake procedure.

Findings

The data for FY 2021 showed a success rate of 36% for the outcome domain New Knowledge Gained (NKG) and 63% in Increased Skills (IS) in Quarter 1, 41% NKG and 58% IS in Quarter 2, 48% NKG and 59% IS in Quarter 3, 23% KNG and 76% IS in Quarter 4. The quarterly reports for FY 2021 also reported a steady client attendance in most programs as well as a continuous increase in volunteerism from the community. Volunteerism produced 26 hours of service in Quarter 1, 45 hours of service in Quarter 2, 22 hours of service in Quarter 3, 158 hours of service in Quarter 4. Agency 1's reports also showed engagement in the community, especially in local schools. The FY 2022 data showed a success rate of 66% NKG and 33% IS in Quarter 1, 21% NKG and 78% IS in Quarter 2, 26% NKG and 73% IS in Quarter 3, 15% NKG and 84% IS in Quarter 4. FY 2022 also displayed a steady rate of attendance but exceeded the amounts for FY 2021. Volunteerism in FY 2022 was again on the rise with the following hours of service for each quarter: 60 hours in Quarter 1, 126 hours in Quarter 2, 47 hours in Quarter 3, and 219 hours in Quarter 4. Comparatively, the hours of service provided by volunteers in FY

2022 was far higher than the hours produced in FY 2021. Upon talking to the executive director of Agency 1, they explained that they do not implement evaluation practices. They explained that their main form of evaluation is done for INCMHA purposes, however they use these results to change and improve upon their programs. The executive director also explained that they had begun their time at the organization at the beginning of FY 2021, which was also during the height of COVID-19 restrictions in their Agency. This halted any intake that the agency could possibly take as their programs were moved online.

Conclusion

Researching the effectiveness of Agency 1 and their programs proved to be a lucrative narrative that showed that Agency 1 does provide for their community. When looking at the numeric data for Agency 1, it shows that over the two financial years, they experienced steady rates of client attendance. It also showed that the success rates of the outcome domains in each of the applicable programs were fluctuating, but never negative. We can also see that Agency 1 was actively working within the community and in turn was receiving an increasing amount of volunteerism over the two financial years. Overall, Agency 1 did effectively contribute to their served community despite the everchanging circumstances of a new executive director and issues concerning COVID-19.

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