

Faith and Facts: Measuring and Improving the Effectiveness of Social Services Delivery by Faith-Based Organizations

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Introduction

Should faith-based organizations delivering social services be held to the same standards of accountability as other government and non-profit providers in measuring their effectiveness? Believing the answer to this question is yes, Volunteers of America, one of the country's largest faith-based social service providers, recently embarked on an ambitious effort to collect outcome data on its diverse range of programs across the country. In this paper, the major characteristics of and lessons from this effort are shared.

Background

As a provider of services for over 100 different program types, ranging from services for children and youth to housing for the elderly and disabled, the challenges to this undertaking have been enormous. Additionally, these services are offered using a combination of professional and volunteer staff, and are delivered through 39 semi-autonomous local affiliate offices, each offering a differing set of programs.

Mixed opinion currently exists as to whether the effectiveness of social service delivery by faith-based organizations differs significantly from that of secular organizations. At the recent Nelson E. Rockefeller Institute of Government sponsored forum, held in Washington D.C., a study reported that those served by faith-based organizations tended to feel that the provision of services was done in a more caring manner by these organizations in contrast to similar services delivered by secular organizations. However, the study also reported that, in most cases, comprehensive and

on-going program evaluations were not being conducted by the faith-based organizations that were studied. (Goggin, 2002)

While anecdotal information on program effectiveness is useful, it is no replacement for more rigorous program evaluation. Yet, as reported in a recent Urban Institute report, systematic collection and reporting of outcome data by non-profits service agencies is still rare. (Morley, 2002) Until such information is commonly available, controversy will remain as to the relative effectiveness of services offered by faith-based versus secular organizations.

Characteristics of Volunteers of America Approach

Not content to simply improve program accountability, Volunteers of America (VOA) has created an integrated approach bringing together evaluation information with tools to improve program quality. A unifying aim of this effort has been the goal of creating a culture of self-improvement. Flexibility has also been of key importance with the diverse nature of the local offices delivering VOA programs.

Early in the process of developing an outcome evaluation system for the organization, a decision was made not to prescribe a particular approach to evaluation for all thirty-nine local VOA offices. Some local offices had already developed fairly sophisticated outcome evaluation systems (most often based on the United Way model), while others had no system in place. (Hatry, 1996) Rather, for the national system, standardization has been limited to the identification of a limited number of key program outcome goals and measures to be used throughout the organization.

Development of the national system has hinged on the building of consensus at the service delivery level on the key shared goals of each program type. Considering the

vast array of service program types offered throughout the organization, a phased approach was used for development of the system. During the first phase development—covering ten major VOA program types—a participatory process was established for the identification of common outcome goals and measures. Conference calls were held in each program area to be covered, pulling on the widest local office representation possible. Using materials developed from research on nationally recognized program goals and measures in each program area, consensus was reached on a few key, common outcome goals and measures for each VOA program type.

At the same time these goals and measures were being developed, pilot offices were identified to test the measures. Pilot offices were selected based on their expertise in delivering the program type to be tested and their representation of the range of VOA local offices in terms of their size and sophistication with outcome measurement. Once complete descriptions were developed for the goals, measures, indicators and data collection procedures to be used, a six-month piloting effort was begun in the selected pilot offices. During the pilot period, monthly conference calls were held with the pilot offices to identify any issues or problems they were encountering in collecting the data.

While outcome measures were being tested across the country, work was begun on developing program quality improvement components of the system in each of the first phase program areas. Two key quality improvement elements were brought into the system. The first element was outcome goal-related program standards adapted from relevant national accreditation standards. As the development of national program standards has, in most cases, been based on findings of research that associate certain program practices with more successful client outcomes, the establishment of these as

“recommended” program standards in key program goal and outcome areas is felt to increase the likelihood that high levels of success on the established outcome measure will occur.

A second quality improvement component added to the system has been the documentation and sharing of approaches for integrating outcome results into program quality improvement systems. In general, these approaches rely on the establishment, at the program level, of program logic models that allow staff to “track backwards” from a particular outcome goal and measure to the particular program services that were designed to promote accomplishment of the goal. Through this tracking chain, modifications can be tested in those particular areas where the desired outcomes have not been achieved. In addition, these approaches have built-in triggers for quality reviews on a regular basis (typically quarterly), for those areas where expected outcome targets are not reached.

At present, full implementation of first phase outcome measures is underway and development of second phase measures has begun. Information collected during the first year of data collection in each program area will be used as a baseline, upon which to set target performance levels in subsequent years. Beyond the reporting of program outcome data for accountability purposes, outcome data will be used to identify best practice models that can be shared across the organization and to recognize high performing programs and offices.

Case Example One: Corrections Programs

Developing outcome goals and measures for Volunteers of America’s corrections programs has pointed out a number of challenges that organizations offering services in

differing locations face. In approaching the development of measures for any program type, the first step has been identifying the major variations and consistencies in how the program is delivered and to whom across the organization. While in some locations VOA residential corrections programs serve adults with special needs (such as dual diagnoses and chronic substance abuse), in other locations these programs serve juveniles with less intensive needs. In defining measures to cover these distinct populations, common goals needed to be measured differently. For instance, a desired outcome for the adult population was self-sufficiency as defined by their ability to meet their, and if relevant, their family's basic needs through legal means of support. In contrast, self-sufficiency for youth needed to include participation in an education program with or without employment. Further, while the goal of rehabilitation exists for both populations, for adults, this goal is being measured through risk reduction scores shown on the LSI-R and, for youth (for whom the LSI-R is not yet commonly being used), rehabilitation is being measured less quantitatively in terms of the meeting of treatment plan goals.

The collection of follow-up data is also complicated for these programs. In some areas, it is possible for VOA program staff to contact past participant's community supervision officers to collect information on re-arrests while, in other areas, this resource can not be used and self-reports must be relied on. Thus, data collection procedures must be kept flexible and local staff must be closely involved in the development of the entire outcome evaluation system.

Case Example Two: Volunteers of America's National Retiree Volunteer Coalition

The challenge of measuring the outcomes of volunteer efforts is one often faced by faith-based organizations. Volunteers of America's National Retiree Volunteer

Coalition (NRVC) program serves as a good example of the range of challenges faced and how they can be addressed. The program's goal is to leverage the talents of corporate retirees to solve pressing community problems. In measuring the outcomes of this program, attention has been focused on three areas—the benefits of the program to those to the recipients of the volunteer's services (typically either individuals or communities), the benefits to the corporation sponsoring the retiree programs and the benefits to the retirees themselves. While a traditional outcome evaluation model is well suited to assessing community and volunteer outcomes, a different approach had to be developed for measuring corporate benefits. Research conducted by Boston College's Center for Corporate Citizenship and The Conference Board provided the foundation for the development of an effective approach to demonstrating how Corporations benefit from their volunteer programs. Among the measures devised for corporate assessments were economic value added, employee and customer attraction and retention, corporate reputation capital, and inclusion in social investment funds. From the array of potential measures identified, each corporate NRVC program is encouraged to use the measures most appropriate to its program and corporate environment. In Appendix A, further details on NRVC program measures are provided.

Lessons Learned

A “no sanctions” policy is key in collecting complete and accurate data – Early in the development of the VOA system, it was made clear that the outcome information would remain confidential and not be used to punish local offices that failed to achieve a high level of success. In adapting this policy, we wanted to ensure that we did not create a disincentive for outcome data collection, and that we did not create an incentive

for creaming (selecting those clients most likely to succeed) or misreporting outcome data. In carrying out this policy, we are publicly reporting only aggregate outcome statistics (from all VOA programs) and are keeping individual local office's outcome data confidential—internally and externally. Our only use of individual local office outcome data will be to recognize highly successful programs and share any best practices used in these programs.

Aim for the common few—It is critical that organizations carefully examine what level and types of outcome data they must have to meet their needs. At the national level, a determination was made that accountability for the key outcomes of our programs was most important. With this in mind, our national evaluation system contains information on only a few central outcome goals and measures for each of our major programs. However, recognizing the critical importance of outcome evaluation as a means to improve program effectiveness, collection of a full range of outcome data including input, process, output, and outcome measures along with development of a program logic model is strongly encouraged at the local services delivery level.

Pilot, then implement—Numerous changes were made as the result of information and comments gathered during the piloting phase of development of the VOA system. Among the issues that arose were: certain indicator terms needed further definitions (for example, adequate access and safe environment), some outcomes were too easy or too difficult to achieve and needed to be modified to a challenging but achievable level, local program variation created a need to alter data collection procedures and timelines, and the development of standardized assessment and survey instruments was needed for some measures.

The manner in which outcomes are measured should vary by the type of program—Shortly after the piloting of the measures began, two clear distinctions in program types emerged that influenced when data would be collected and the participants for whom data would be collected. To accurately reflect the effects of program intervention, a decision was made to identify different points at which it would be appropriate to collect outcome data—depending on the type of program. For this purpose, a distinction was made between “on-going” programs—those in which the services provided remain relatively constant throughout program involvement (for example, assisted living)—and “sequential” programs—those in which the participant goes through a series of distinct services and for which a defined completion point exists (for example, a drug treatment program). In the case of “on-going” programs, outcome data is being collected for all those participants who have been in the program for a certain number of days or more (typically 90 days). After this minimum period of time, it is felt that the effects of the program should occur. For “sequential” programs, outcome data is being collected only on those participants who complete the program, with the assumption that unless all components of the program are experienced, the effectiveness of the program can’t be fairly evaluated. In both cases, data on the number of dropouts (those leaving the program before the applicable outcome data collection period is reached) is also being collected to help programs identify problems in program retention. However, this data is not considered part of the program outcome data.

Self-reported and subjective opinion data should be used to supplement, rather than substitute for quantitative data—While the nature of some of our services makes it tempting to rely only on easier-to-collect self-reported opinion data, we have as a

standard that no program's outcome measurement will rely on this data alone. As our name implies, Volunteers of America operates a number of volunteer programs. It would be tempting to simply look at outcomes in terms of volunteers' opinions of how satisfied they are with their volunteer experience and how they feel volunteering has improved the quality of their life, or to poll placement organizations about how satisfied they are with the volunteer assistance they have received. However, to gain increased legitimacy, volunteer programs need to also attempt to collect quantitative data regarding how volunteer assistance has impacted the individuals served and/or the level of need in the community. For example, the impact of volunteer programs providing tutoring services in school can be assessed by gathering information from the participating schools (with parent's permission) on student's performance before and after tutoring services were received. Where volunteers are used as adjunct staff in a service organization, data can be gathered on changes in the organization's ability to serve greater numbers of individuals or offer a broader array of services. This information, coupled with information on the organization's effectiveness, can provide solid data for justifying the value of volunteer services.

Program follow-up data is as difficult as it is important to collect—Reaching former clients to collect follow-up data is arguably the most difficult challenge in outcome evaluation. Particularly in certain types of programs, such as those carrying a negative stigma or those serving a highly mobile population, reaching individuals after they leave the program can be very difficult. Among Volunteers of America local offices, a number of strategies have been employed to overcome these barriers. In some programs, aftercare groups or alumni clubs are offered in an attempt to continue contact

with individuals after they complete the program. Where such offerings are not possible, regular follow-up calls are made to past program participants. And, for former participants with intranet service, regular e-mail communication occurs. In one local office, a partnership has been formed with a local university to have research students help collect follow-up data. Finally, small rewards and lottery-type drawings offered to former participants have helped increase the rate of successful follow-up contacts. However, a key issue remains in ensuring that the follow-up data collected is representative of all those leaving the program. In addition, these follow-up efforts are costly in terms of the staff time they require.

Conclusion

As the review of Volunteers of America's efforts aptly demonstrates, creation of systems to evaluate the outcomes of faith-based organization's programs is possible, though not necessarily easy. In the view of this author, success depends on strong commitment from the top of the organization, a view of evaluation as a means to improve program effectiveness, and the close involvement of staff from all levels of the organization in system development and implementation. Fundamentally, more faith-based organizations must see that facts, as well as faith, must be present to provide the best care for those we serve.

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Appendix A

The National Retiree Volunteer Coalition Evaluation Approach

(excerpt of full approach)

NRVC PROGRAM - AREAS FOR POTENTIAL MEASUREMENT

GOAL AREA	POTENTIAL MEASUREMENT DIMENSIONS
Benefits to Retiree	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Health Status Outcomes• Emotional Well-being Outcomes• Social Well-being Outcomes• Economic Outcomes
Benefits to Host Organization	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• License to Operate• Competitive Advantage• Customer Attraction and Retention• Human Resources• Loyalty and Support• Perpetuation of Organizational Values/Climate• Reputation Capital• Innovation/Market Development• Organization Financial Performance• Social Investing• Economic Value Added
Benefits to Community	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Volunteer Resources• Community Resources• Community Needs/Problems• Economic Benefits
Benefits to Service Target Population	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Knowledge and Skill Level• Attitudes and Values• Behavior Changes• Condition Improvements

Below are examples of specific measures that might be used in each of the above areas.

Retiree Benefits:

- Health Status Outcomes – National research has shown that individuals involved in volunteer activities tend to have longer life spans and experience better health.
- Emotional Well-being Outcomes – Do volunteers report being more satisfied with life, and content through their volunteer activities?
- Social Well-being Outcomes – Do volunteers report that they experience greater social connection to others and engage in more social activities as a result of their volunteer activities?
- Economic Outcomes – Have volunteers received any financial incentives for their volunteer activities from their corporation, or have their retirement benefits or stock holdings risen due to the corporate benefits (see below) resulting from volunteer activities?

Host Organization Benefits:

- Freedom or License to Operate–The positive community work done through retiree volunteer programs has been found to increase community support and prevent constraints on how and where an organization can do business. Examples would include absence of new regulations or more favorable regulatory rulings, permits for facility expansion, and fewer community lawsuits.
- Competitive Advantage – In the age of benchmarking best practices, those organizations that wish to be considered among the best will find that community and volunteer activities are commonly considered a corporate best practice, and that they will need to undertake these activities if they want to be recognized as among the best.
- Customer Attraction and Retention – Both directly and indirectly, efforts to secure and keep customers are assisted by retiree volunteer programs. The people who are touched by or become aware of an organization's retiree volunteer activities are more likely to purchase the services of that organization. Examples of measures include positive media coverage/free advertising and new customers due to positive PR or experience.
- Human Resources – Today, many potential employees seek organizations that offer them a way of becoming involved in volunteer activities and show them that they will continue to be valued and included after their retirement.
- Loyalty and Support of Former Employees – Former employees of an organization who feel valued and connected through their participation in retiree volunteer activities, tend to be among the strongest and most knowledgeable ambassadors for the organization.
- Perpetuation of Organizational Values/Climate – When retirees remain linked to an organization through their volunteer activities, they also become a valuable resource for transferring core organizational values on to a new generation of employees.
- Reputation Capital – With the positive reputation gained by an organization's volunteer activities, organizations are often able to gain access to community or even national leaders, and establish key new partnerships.
- Innovation/Market Development – Greater involvement in the community often brings a better understanding of potential markets and needs. In addition, some of the

approaches, tools and services provided through retiree volunteer programs can lead to new organizational innovations, or these programs can provide a test ground for new innovations. For example, development of adaptive learning tools for disabled individuals leading to new product development.

- Organization Financial Performance – By improving employee morale and productivity, and providing the organization with information leading to more successful products, the organization may experience increased financial performance.
- Social Investing – Increasingly, investment funds and, in particular, social screens are recommending companies with demonstrated commitment to improving their communities and donating resources to meet critical social needs.
- Economic Value Added - In most cases, retiree volunteer programs turn formally untapped resources (whether in the form of retiree time or disadvantaged and unskilled community labor pools) into valuable and productive resources. Thus, rather than a more traditional return on investment analysis, the measurement of “economic value added” or the measurement of improvement on investment performance relative to the status quo is recommended (For more explanation of this concept, see The Conference Board Publication, *Corporate Community Development: Meeting the Measurement Challenge*).

Community Benefits:

- Volunteer Resources – An important benefit to the community is the value of the hours donate by retiree volunteer that otherwise may have had to be paid for from a non-volunteer source. A financial value for volunteer hours can be calculated specifically based on what would have been charged for the same task by a paid individual, or the current independent sector’s established hourly value can be used (this figure is revised on an annual basis).
- Community Resources – The dollar value of other resources donated to a community such as facilities, supplies, and education or training opportunities can also be calculated.
- Community Needs/Problems – Data can be collected on relevant community conditions that are effects of the retiree volunteer program/services. Examples of such conditions might include changes in rates of crime, poverty, homelessness, illiteracy, and pollution.
- Economic Benefits – The value to the community of improvements that result from retiree volunteer programs related to indirect economic improvements such as new business development and attraction are also important to capture. For example, urban development efforts may result in new businesses for a community.

Service Target Population Benefits:

- Knowledge and Skill Level – If some element of education and/or training is part of the retiree volunteer program, changes in participant knowledge and skill levels can be measured. Examples include improved grades among students mentored, and qualification for higher-level employment in training program participants.

- Attitudes and Values - While somewhat harder to measure, changes in attitudes and values may be very relevant effects of retiree volunteer programs. Examples include a change in attitudes toward smoking among school children, or change in beliefs toward the value of education among high school dropouts.
- Behavior Outcomes – More observable changes can be captured from target population behaviors. Depending on the nature of the retiree volunteer program such behaviors could include illegal substance use, criminal activity or school performance.
- Condition Outcomes – Similarly, changes in the conditions experienced by target populations can also be measured as program outcomes. Such changes include participant's economic, health or mental health status.