Using Rapid Learning Methods to Design and Test Promising Interventions for Low-Income Families: Jefferson County (CO) Department of Human Services

OPRE Methods Meeting

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presentation overview

• Introduce an analytic, rapid learning approach for working with practitioners to improve programs

• Illustrate how the approach has been used to transform practice using the Jefferson County (CO) Department of Human Services as a case study

• Demonstrate how rapid learning methods can be used to build research evidence for practitioners making everyday decisions and to build research evidence for the field
Most employment programs for low-income families have modest impacts on sustained employment; very limited success moving people out of poverty.

Limited capacity among public agencies for research-driven innovation and program improvement.

Is it that the programs don’t work, implementation is poor, or something else?

a transformation of practice
...but why?
rapid learning methods:
Learn, Innovate, Improve (LI²)
key features of LI²

• Close collaboration between the technical assistance (TA) team and program staff
  ▪ Co-creative: TA team inspires and supports program improvement but the program owns it

• Evidence and strong analytic approaches in all stages

• Capacity building so programs can use the methods on their own

• Differs from other continuous quality improvement methods in that it:
  ▪ Draws upon qualitative and quantitative analytic methods
  ▪ Focuses on evidence using and building
  ▪ Uses iterative “road tests” to design, refine, and integrate the intervention or program change into existing services before rigorous testing
Jefferson County (JeffCo) Department of Human Services serves roughly 2,600 TANF clients per year.

Like many TANF programs, it struggles with:
- Low engagement rate
- Transactional, compliance-driven relationships
- Cumbersome paperwork and processes
- Limited ability to focus on skill and capacity building

Participated in the statewide Colorado Works Innovation Initiative to increase client engagement.

Contracted with Mathematica to further program improvement.
Research questions:

• What factors contributed to low client engagement in TANF program activities?

• What program conditions might help or hinder the implementation of promising strategies for improving employment outcomes in JeffCo?

Methods:

• Implementation study to identify targeted problem(s) and assess the program’s readiness for change

Select findings:

• Inconsistency in the quality and implementation of case management

• Contradictory messages between the individualized, “family-centered” approach and adherence to federal work participation rate (WPR)
Research questions:

• What strategies might improve the quality and consistency of case management practices to improve client outcomes?

• What are the expected outcomes of the targeted strategies?

• How will the proposed strategies change staff and/or client attitudes, behaviors, or skills to produce the outcomes?

Methods:

• Logic model/theory of change (or “road map”)
  ▪ Create narrative alignment between the intervention and expected outcomes
  ▪ Convert elements of road map to intervention “fidelity measures”
the intervention

Goal4 It!™ Framework

- **Goal Set**: Use *Goal Storming* to brainstorm potential goals, steps to achieve them, and resources needed for success.
- **Goal Review**: Hold a *RAP Session* with the customer via phone or in-person to complete the Review & Revise aspects of My Goal Plan.
- **Goal Plan**: Introduce the goal-achievement process. Use *My Goal Plan* initially and on an ongoing basis to engage the customer in meaningful goal pursuit.
- **Goal Family Takes Action**: Use *Stepping Stones to Success* online or in the office – a short questionnaire to see what's changed in the customer's life.
- **Goal Plan**: Use *Potholes & Detours* to identify what might get in the way of success and possible actions the customer can take to prevent or address these issues.
Research questions:

• What is the experience of JeffCo staff in using Goal4 It!? Which tools are they using? Under what circumstances? How long does it take to use the different tools?

• What are case managers’ perceptions of the clients’ reactions to using Goal4 It!? Do they like it?

• What are the strengths and limitations of Goal4 It!?

• What recommendations do JeffCo staff have for revising Goal4 It!?
Methods:

• Road tests
  ▪ Segment and test targeted aspects of the intervention
  ▪ Collect feedback: staff surveys, focus groups, client interviews
  ▪ Analyze feedback and administrative data to identify what works, for whom, and under which circumstances
  ▪ Use the results to refine the intervention

• Rapid cycle and opportunistic experiments
  ▪ Analyze existing administrative data to assess progress toward expected targets and outcomes
  ▪ Use the results to refine the intervention
JeffCo road test

**Learning Cycle 1**
- 7 line staff working with 10 clients each to try out the Goal4 It! process
- 4 weeks

- Analyze feedback, synthesize themes, make targeted improvements

**Learning Cycle 2**
- 7 line staff working with all clients on their caseload to refine the implementation and integration of Goal4 It! into existing services
- 4 weeks

- Analyze feedback, synthesize themes, make targeted improvements

**Learning Cycle 3**
- 7 line staff working with all clients on their caseload to fully implement Goal4 It!, included daily reporting (“boot camp”)  
- 2 weeks

- Analyze feedback, synthesize themes, make targeted improvements

**Data collection:** staff online surveys, telephone interviews with supervisors and staff, summaries from weekly Goal4 It! practice groups, and client surveys
implementing goal4 it! in a public agency with complex regulatory requirements is complicated

the fix: align the curriculum to meet state requirements and eliminate redundant paperwork and processes (for example, required assessments)

policies, procedures, and performance measures are not well-aligned with an individualized approach and create mixed messages for staff and customers (e.g., tanf wpr)

the fix: provide staff with guidance for managing the wpr and develop performance measures that encourage client accountability and progress

for maximum benefit, encourage goal-directed behaviors at all levels within the organization, especially in supervision

the fix: implement goal4 it! professional (pro), a parallel process where supervisors work with staff on their personal and professional goals
JeffCo is now a site in OPRE’s Employment Coaching Evaluation!
• Anna’s obsession with using rapid learning methods to improve program efficiency
• Staff pretended to be participants for a day in Philadelphia’s TANF program
• Paperwork before rapid learning (right)
• Paperwork after (left)
• Approximately 20,000 hours per year of client and staff time saved
for more information

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