

Determining What Works (and What Doesn't) in the Public Sector

by Alan Brown

Public sector policymakers like governors, mayors, and local government managers must make decisions regularly on which public sector programs should be funded, at which levels, and for how long. Most often, however, these policymakers have little or no impartial evidence on which to base their investment decisions. Rigorous evaluations have been conducted on some currently funded public sector programs but not most. In light of the limited availability of rigorous evidence on program effectiveness, how can the policymakers determine if the programs they fund actually produce the desired results?

To deal with this issue, a partnership among the International City/County Management Association, the Arizona Prevention Resource Center at Arizona State University, and the Center for the Study and Prevention of Violence at the University of Colorado has been formed. The partnership will develop a process for policymakers to use in reviewing and judging the effectiveness of publicly funded programs in substance abuse and violence prevention that are currently funded by the public sector.

A consortium of researchers and practitioners from the partnership is devising an assessment protocol for states and counties to use in rating their existing programs. Using the federal government's newly developed What Works Repository classification framework, the assessment protocol will be the foundation for a longer-term effort to strengthen the program portfolios of states and counties. It will also encourage the use of performance data and other program evidence to achieve better results.

The design of the assessment protocol, as the first step, will be based on a program inventory of substance abuse and violence prevention programs in U.S. states and counties, similar to an inventory of programs that has been produced for the past 14 years for the state of Arizona. A catalog of all the distinct programs receiving public funds in a given jurisdiction, such as a city or county, will be produced. In-depth program descriptions will include data on which services are provided, who is served, staffing levels, funding sources, and the type of organization administering each program, among other factors. The inventory will be a useful resource for measuring the depth and breadth of programs available in a jurisdiction.

Researchers will then analyze data from the inventory and consider what additional information will need to be included in the assessment protocol, which will focus primarily on program processes and outcomes. Customer satisfaction with programs will also be taken into account. Each program will be asked to provide its best information on program processes, outcomes, and consumer satisfaction in response to a protocol. An appraisal of available evidence, drawn from the inventory, will then be made to support judgments on the extent of the program impacts.

This approach takes into account the most rigorous evidence, such as randomized, controlled clinical trials. It is not limited, however, to this kind of evidence because most programs have not yet been subjected to these in-depth evaluations. In lieu of such evidence, a determination will be made about what other types of viable documentation can be used for program assessment.

The emphasis is on helping policymakers reach decisions within an appropriate time frame, while at the same time setting higher standards for program effectiveness and developing better data on effectiveness for the long term.

A consortium of researchers and practitioners from the partnership is devising an assessment protocol for states and counties to use in rating their existing programs.

Significance

States and counties spend billions of dollars on substance abuse and violence prevention and intervention programs every year, in an effort to protect the health and safety of their residents. These intervention programs hold the promise of dramatically reducing future societal costs stemming from substance abuse and violent crime.

From saving lives and lowering health care costs to cutting crime and fostering a safe community environment, these programs could significantly enhance the overall quality of life of citizens. But do they deliver the promised results?

Researchers from across the United States have undertaken many studies to answer this question. As the body of research on the effectiveness of substance abuse and violence prevention/intervention programs has grown, however, it has become increasingly evident that a wide gap separates science from practice.

Widespread dissemination of research findings has not necessarily resulted in the widespread adoption of evidence-based practices and programs. Policymakers and practitioners struggle to apply research to practice. Most want a means of determining which programs work and should be funded. Practitioners also want tools to gauge their programs' effectiveness and to improve overall performance. Simply put, something more is needed. The multistage initiative is designed to help chief executives in states and localities improve their portfolios of programs for preventing or reducing substance abuse and violence. The proposed approach is a general one and could be adapted for use with other kinds of public sector programs, such as health, education, and others. Some work is already under way in these areas.

Unlike strategic planning—which generally begins with a broad vision and goals and moves on to more specific objectives, targets, measures, and action plans—this approach more directly addresses how public sector chief executives can improve their existing portfolios of programs by taking steps that are politically and economically feasible.

The approach assesses existing programs based on the best available evidence and takes incremental steps (designed according to the political, economic, cultural, and other needs of each state or locality) to increase the funding for effective programs; reduce or eliminate funding for ineffective ones; and invest in the improvement of programs that have not yet been proven to be effective but that are promising.

This approach addresses five questions:

1. Which programs work, based on the best available evidence on programs funded anywhere in the nation or elsewhere?
2. Which programs are currently funded in a particular state, region, or locality?
3. What are the needs in a particular jurisdiction, which are supposed to be addressed by the programs?
4. How effective are the funded programs in addressing and meeting these needs?
5. How can the jurisdiction improve its portfolio of funded programs to better meet the needs?

In an era of increasingly tight fiscal budgets, public sector policymakers need a more objective and impartial means of reviewing publicly funded programs to determine if the greatest value is being provided for the taxpayers' dollars. No longer can these policymakers assume that programs are effective simply because the programs' supporters assert that they are effective. Nor can the policymakers wait decades for rigorous research to be conducted on all the programs that are being funded currently.

Instead, policymakers are under increasing pressure to base their program funding decisions on information that is available in the near term and that is reviewed by objective, well trained, and independent reviewers.

Business operating principles are taking hold within government; program costs must be held in check, and benefits analyzed in relationship to long-term goals.

In the private sector, investors use a wealth of tools to assess their stock portfolios and determine which stocks to keep and which to sell. But government programs cannot operate in entirely the same way since profit is not the driving force of government programs. As a result, policymakers require new and different tools for rating the effectiveness of the programs in their portfolios.

This initiative is considering these differences and is building the tools needed by policymakers. But just as business management and evaluation tools can have commercial value, it is possible that a public program assessment package might also have commercial value and be marketable in the public sector. Potentially, numerous states and counties could use such a package.

How the Package Would Work

This initiative is closely linked to a parallel effort at the federal level, The What Works Repository, developed by the Working Group (WG) of the Federal Collaboration on What Works. The What Works Repository is an online resource

that, among other features, contains an archive of programs organized into levels of effectiveness based on the evaluation findings and strengths.

The assessment protocol discussed in this article will draw upon the repository's hierarchical classification framework for program effectiveness—a system for ranking programs according to their demonstrated effectiveness and readiness for dissemination, based on rigorous standards of evidence—developed by the WG as a common basis for program assessment. Likewise, the program inventory will contribute to the archive of effective programs that will be maintained by the repository. The goal is that the framework and its rankings will ultimately inform the most effective programs in the public sector.

The six levels of effectiveness in the framework are defined by an array of research criteria of which the initial four, listed here, are the core indicators of a program's usefulness:

- A. Significant effect (20 percent or greater, compared with a control/ comparison).
- B. Sustained effect (positive outcomes lasting for one year after program).
- C. Successful replication (results are the same when program is repeated at different sites with different populations).
- D. Adherence to research design standards.

Levels of effectiveness in the classification system go from highest to lowest as follows, with highly specific criteria for each level: effective (1), effective with reservation (2), promising (3), inconclusive evidence (4), ineffective (5), and insufficient evidence (6).

A package for assessing a city or county's resources, specifically, a resource inventory of programs, will be developed for each participating city or county. First, assistance will be provided in surveying its institutions, to establish a concise portfolio of programs being implemented.

A full description of each program will be compiled, including target population, numbers served, risk and protective factors targeted, costs, funding sources, and more. Also, the allocation of dollars and areas of greatest need will be mapped, to determine any inequities in the funding of programs and disjunctions in the match between where programs are being implemented and which locations have the greatest need for programs.

Second, an assessment of the effectiveness of each program in the state/community portfolio will be conducted using the What Works Repository standard, which has been reviewed and favorably commented on by federal agencies involved in youth health and development.

Third, a policy report with a series of recommendations will be generated to help the state or locality reallocate dollars and make the transition from less effective to more effective programs.

Throughout the assessment process, technical assistance will be afforded to states and localities. Technical assistance can help an agency make its transition to a

Level 1 or Level 2 (effective) program, can evaluate a current program, or can conduct fidelity checks to determine if a program that has been modeled on a rigorously evaluated effective program is being conducted with fidelity to the original program design. Measurement instruments for testing both fidelity and effectiveness will be made available.

At the state or community level, technical assistance will help in designing and implementing initiatives to adopt Level 1 and 2 programs on a large scale, or will devise new programs to address needs for which no evidence-based programs currently exist. Technical assistance will also be provided to help Level 1 and Level 2 programs identified in the state achieve dissemination capability.

Cost-benefit analysis can be a valuable feature of the assessment package and would consist of determining, wherever possible, a cost-benefit ratio for each program, as well as projections on the efficacy of investing in Level 1 or 2 programs. For instance, the analysis will show the reductions in crime rates that would be achieved using Level 1 or 2 programs, compared with standard practice in the city or county. This would help policymakers determine if there is credible scientific evidence that money is being well spent on a particular program and if there are other policy and program options that offer a better return on investment.

There are four keys to the success of this initiative, all of which will be facilitated and guided by the partnership:

1. The jurisdiction must describe the programs it is currently funding. This will require the compilation of a program inventory.
2. The jurisdiction must convene an independent review process to determine as well as it can, the costs and the effectiveness of those programs, based on the best currently available evidence on processes, outcomes, and consumer satisfaction that has been provided by the programs.
3. The jurisdiction must decide what it will do with programs that cannot establish they are highly cost effective. Will the jurisdiction, for example, recommend the immediate defunding of programs that have been proven to be ineffective, or will it give such programs a grace period for improving? And will the jurisdiction allow more time for programs that have little or no evidence about their effectiveness so that they can gather such evidence?
4. The jurisdiction will have to decide what kinds of assistance, if any, it intends to provide to help programs improve current models or shift to proven models. Holding public sector programs to a higher standard of effectiveness will often require, to be fair to those programs, that more time be devoted to helping improve them.

Conclusion

If this initiative is implemented properly and supported by the partnering organizations and jurisdictions, it seems likely that it can assist and ensure that cities and counties:

- Reduce substantially or even eliminate spending money on programs for which there is little or no evidence of program effectiveness and where there is evidence of negative program effects.
- Shift significant funds into more effective programs.
- Focus close attention on quality control and on adherence to effective program design and implementation since successful prevention strategies require more effort than just picking the right program.
- Keep abreast of the latest research-based findings.

Alan Brown, Ph.D., is principal investigator at the Arizona Prevention Resource Center, Arizona State University (alan.brown@asu.edu), Phoenix, Arizona. For more information on the assessment and review process, contact Dr. Brown by e-mail or calling 480/965-1352.

He wrote this article in collaboration with Dr. Wendy Wolfersteig, also of the Arizona Prevention Resource Center; Dr. Sharon Milhalic, Center for the Study and Prevention of Violence, University of Colorado; Tom Vischi, former senior adviser for drug policy, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Washington, D.C.; and Cory Fleming, senior project manager, International City/County Management Association, Washington, D.C.

© 2005 International City/County Management Association.