

Revised Evaluation and Accountability Framework

Background

The accountability framework described in our current five-year strategic plan contains four levels of accountability. The first three levels, namely County, Goal (a.k.a. Initiative) and grantee, comprise the core elements of a results-based accountability system. The fourth, Commission-level accountability, is intended to capture how the Commission is doing more globally in terms of building capacity, improving systems, leveraging social and financial capital and advocating on behalf of children and families.

To date, much of First 5 LA's evaluation work has focused on the first three levels of accountability and less on the fourth level. In other words, the evaluation work thus far has focused primarily on tracking population based indicators of children's well-being, answering questions about the process and outcomes of specific initiatives, documenting grantee and contractor compliance, and supporting continuous quality improvement. These efforts are critical to help the Commission make initiative-specific decisions and to help First 5 LA staff manage and support grantees and contractors. However, they do not address the important questions regarding the Commission's impact across initiatives and focus areas and within communities. While Commission-level accountability addresses these broader questions, the details of how it will be implemented were not fully articulated in the strategic plan.

In order to further define Commission-level accountability, a review of the literature was conducted. The information gleaned from this process, particularly the work of Mark, Henry, and Julnes (2000)¹, prompted a re-examination of the Accountability Framework as a whole. As a result, the *Revised Evaluation and Accountability Framework* details the purposes of grantee and initiative-level accountability and further refines our approach to Commission-level accountability.

Grantee-Level Accountability

There are two purposes to grantee-level accountability: (1) oversight and compliance and (2) program and organizational improvement.

Oversight and Compliance

This first purpose of grantee-level accountability is to 1) facilitate stewardship of funds by ensuring that all grantees are operating their programs in accordance with provisions of the First 5 LA grant agreement/contract including the submission of all required documents and 2) review the extent to which grantees meet specified levels of performance. Due to the complexity of assessing and assigning value to grantee reported outcomes, oversight and compliance-related performance review typically includes process-related factors such as staffing levels, client counts, client eligibility, and quantities of services provided. Because there are a number of

¹ Mark, M., Henry, G., Julnes, G., *Evaluation: An Integrated Framework for Understanding, Guiding, and Improving Policies and Programs* (Jossey-Bass, 2000).

unforeseen factors such as staff recruitment, staff turnover, participant attrition, and program and community design challenges that can impact a grantee's ability to achieve performance targets within the projected timeframe, First 5 LA staff work closely with grantees to monitor their progress and provide technical assistance as needed.

Program and Organizational Improvement

This second purpose of grantee-level accountability is to both 1) provide timely feedback to modify and enhance individual programs over the course of implementation; and 2) provide lessons learned on "promising practices" to inform goal/initiative-level accountability. Grantees are required to identify and track performance measures, which are intended to be linked logically to goal/initiative-level indicators and benchmarks, that allow program staff and First 5 LA staff to gauge the program's progress toward achieving their short and mid-term outcomes. These performance measures relate to both process/implementation (for example, the number of program staff who have completed a training on a given curriculum) and client-level outcomes (for example, the percent of clients who will achieve a given score on an assessment). *In reality process-related measures are components of both compliance and program improvement as they provide two dimensions for presenting and understanding the "impact" of projects.* By tracking and reviewing data on these short and mid-term performance measures, program staff can make mid-course corrections to improve their program and/or organizational operations.

First 5 LA staff use these data to review the grantee's progress towards achieving proposed outcomes and identify areas where they may need technical assistance and support.

Initiative-Level Accountability

There are two purposes to initiative-level accountability: (1) program and organizational improvement and (2) assessment of merit and worth.

Program and Organizational Improvement

As with grantee-level accountability, a primary purpose of initiative-level accountability is improvement. At the initiative level, the intent is to provide timely feedback to modify and enhance initiatives over the course of their implementation and provide lessons learned for future initiatives. By tracking and reviewing data on short and mid-term performance measures in the aggregate, First 5 LA staff can identify common barriers across programs and create opportunities for capacity building in those areas. In addition, data at the initiative level provide information on important issues about initiative design and implementation that can inform the development and planning of future First 5 LA initiatives.

Assessment of Merit and Worth

According to Mark, Henry and Julnes (2000), the "assessment of merit and worth refers to the development of warranted judgments about the effects and other valued

characteristics of a program or policy—and thus about a program or policy’s value.”¹ The assessment of merit and worth is also referred to in the evaluation literature as “summative evaluation” and informs decision making about whether or not to continue a program or policy.

The designs best suited to an assessment of merit and worth are experimental and quasi-experimental designs that involve comparing a group of individuals who received a given intervention with a group of individuals who did not receive that intervention. Experimental designs require random assignment of individuals to treatment and control groups – an approach that is often not politically or practically viable. Quasi-experimental designs, on the other hand, allow for causal inference but do not require the random assignment of individuals. Rather, quasi-experimental designs compare individuals in a treatment groups with individuals in either another treatment of interest or some other matched group. Unfortunately, it is often difficult to find an appropriate comparison group suited to be compared with the type of complex community initiatives often funded by First 5 LA.

Not only are experimental and quasi-experimental designs not feasible in many instances, they are often not warranted. For example, if an initiative is based on a well-established model whose merit has already been established scientifically, then it does not make sense to “re-invent the wheel” by investing significant dollars in another experimental evaluation study of that same intervention. Conversely, if an initiative is implementing something entirely new and innovative, it would not be advisable to fund an experimental evaluation design until the initiative model has matured through trial and error of early implementation guided by program improvement evaluation. For these reasons, **not all initiatives will require an experimental (or quasi-experimental) assessment of merit and worth.**

The decision about whether or not to invest in an experimental or quasi-experimental assessment of an initiative’s merit and worth will be made for each initiative based on the following criteria: 1) the level of prior evidence of merit and worth, 2) the maturity of the initiative model, 3) the complexity of the initiative model, and 4) the feasibility of selecting an appropriate comparison group or gaining support for the use of random assignment.

When an experimental (or quasi-experimental) evaluation design is either not feasible or not appropriate, the merit and worth of an initiative will be addressed through the development of a sound theory of change. By laying out in explicit terms the pathway that an initiative will take to get from its earliest activities to its ultimate desired outcomes and tracking performance measures at each step in the pathway, a coherent story can be told about whether the initiative is achieving what it set out to achieve, even in the absence of a more rigorous evaluation design. These performance measures will be the same measures used for program improvement evaluation and will thus also be guided by the Commission adopted strategies (capacity building, systems improvement, sustainability, data improvement and policy and advocacy) and by evidence-based domains of protective factors (Parental

² Ibid, p. 54

resilience, Social connections, Knowledge of parenting and child development, Concrete support in times of need, and Social and emotional competence of children).

Commission-Level Accountability

Commission-level accountability is designed to examine the more global impacts of First 5 LA, above and beyond the Commission's individual investments. One purpose of this *Revised Evaluation and Accountability Framework* is to further refine this concept which was not fully articulated in the strategic plan. A review of the literature along with helpful feedback from Commissioners and other stakeholders has helped staff to define Commission-level accountability as: 1) place-based, 2) systems and policy oriented, 3) contextual, and 4) knowledge generating. The accompanying *Commission-level Evaluation Implementation Plan* (attachment B) summarizes four distinct yet related projects designed to launch us into this important area of evaluation at First 5 LA.

Place-Based

Due to the targeted nature of much of First 5 LA's funding, it is critical for Commission-level accountability to be place-based. Based on a review of the literature, staff recommends that this place-based approach focus attention simultaneously on 1) the theory building required to clarify the intended effects of First 5 LA initiatives on the overlapping geographies that they target, and 2) the community-level resource mapping and indicator development and that will allow us to begin tracking relationships between community resource and outcomes while a theory of change is being developed.

Although "place-based evaluation" is not a term found in the literature, there is a growing body of literature on the evaluation of Comprehensive Community Initiatives (CCIs) that First 5 LA is in a position to learn from and contribute to. CCIs are characterized as place-based, but their place orientation is only one of several important attributes which also include: 1) a comprehensive programmatic scope (i.e., working across multiple sectors simultaneously), and 2) an adherence to community-building principles (i.e., aiming to strengthen community capacity, enhance social capital and empower neighborhoods). The challenge of evaluating CCIs centers on the difficulty of attributing change to such complex initiatives through traditional experimental and quasi-experimental evaluation methods. This challenge has given rise to a Theory of Change (TOC) approach to evaluating CCIs. A TOC articulates how and why an initiative works and helps evaluators articulate hypothesized relationships between planned activities and desired outcomes.

Another relatively new body of literature related to place-based evaluation focuses on the use of neighborhood-level assets and social indicators to evaluate social programs. While broad social indicators (e.g., rates of premature birth, rates disease prevalence, etc.), have long acted as barometers for where society stands with respect to its values and goals, there have been recent attempts to track meaningful community-level assets and social indicators to examine programs impacts on trends over time at the neighborhood level. These neighborhood indicator systems, which are also taking advantage of new GIS mapping technologies, are designed to

democratize information, build community capacity to use data, and analyze neighborhood change for evaluation and policy making purposes.

Systems and Policy Oriented

Due to the potential for First 5 LA to affect broad systems and policy-level changes across its initiatives, it is critical for Commission-level accountability to be systems and policy oriented. Based on a review of the literature and the Commission's adopted funding policies, staff recommends that this systems and policy orientation include 1) articulating the systems and policy changes that can best help us achieve our desired outcomes, and 2) tracking the progress of our systems and policy change efforts at the community and county wide level.

In September 2004, the Commission adopted a community-based funding policy which balances *universal* components (i.e., strategies intended to have a widespread impact) with *targeted* components (i.e., efforts focused on targeted geographic communities of need based on risk factor/asset data). Based on this policy, all of our more recent geographically targeted initiatives have a systems and policy change component. Thus, our Commission-level accountability should capture our cross-initiative systems and policy change impacts in addition to our cross-initiative place-based impacts.

As discussed above, the literature on the evaluation of place-based Comprehensive Community Initiatives has focused much attention on the articulation of a sound theory of change to capture the complexity of how and why the initiative works. One of the particular challenges in capturing this complexity lies in the fact that CCIs aim for changes at multiple levels, including family, community, systems and policy levels. It is therefore essential that systems and policy influences on ultimate outcomes are clearly articulated in the theory of change. The neighborhood social indicator literature also points to the importance of using community-level indicator data that can highlight systems change opportunities.

Contextual

Due to the fact that First 5 LA exists within a larger context of programs, systems and policies for young children and their families, and that First 5 LA's potential resource contribution is relatively modest in comparison to existing resources, it is critical that Commission-level accountability examine First 5 LA investments in the context of other efforts in the County (i.e., First 5 LA's value added). Based on feedback from Commissioners and other stakeholder and a review of the literature, staff recommends that Commission-level accountability place First 5 LA efforts in context by 1) articulating intended connections with other efforts in the County as part of our examination of cross-initiative linkages and all future theory of change exercises, and 2) including non-First 5 LA public and private resources in our resource mapping activities.

The literature on theory based program evaluation supports Commission and stakeholder feedback on this issue. The ecological context, as well as all associated

organizations and community partners, are critical elements of the pathway between an initiative and its intended effects on a target population.

Knowledge Generating

By using Commission-level accountability as a tool for analyzing First 5 LA's community-specific and broader systems and policy change efforts in the context of other efforts in the County, First 5 LA is in a position to make a sustainable contribution to the knowledge base on how to support communities in creating nurturing environments for children and families. All projects and activities associated with the implementation of Commission-level accountability are designed to contribute sustainable knowledge and practical tools useful to all organizations working to improve the lives of young children and their families in LA County.