

The Power of Assessment Helps United Way Improve Program Effectiveness



CASE STUDY: Monitor & Improve Program Effectiveness

United Way of Greater Rochester has a mission to unite the good will and resources of the Greater Rochester community so that everyone can thrive.

“I can check on how many children are enrolled in a program and how many attend. I don’t have to wait until the end of a session to see a program report when it is too late to intervene if things aren’t going as well as expected or to learn from programs that are doing very well. I can also review program data whenever I want to prepare for meetings with the agencies. They don’t have to spend a day preparing reports for me.”

Patricia Leo
Director of Community Impact
United Way of Greater Rochester



Executive Summary

United Way of Greater Rochester (NY) identifies the greatest needs in its local community, invests donor dollars in evidence-based and preventative programs to solve problems, and measures results to ensure a return on donor investments. The nearly 100-year-old organization has a well-earned reputation for using ground-breaking approaches to achieve its goals. United Way also has been at the forefront of funders in tracking outcomes of the programs in which it invests.

Measured outcomes vary by program type and include:

- Program attendance and dosage
- Services received
- Basic needs met
- GPA and school attendance
- Child maltreatment risk

Challenges

United Way of Greater Rochester has required programs to measure their outcomes since the mid-90s but allowed providers to choose how, what, and when they tracked information. That arrangement had its drawbacks, however, and United Way was striving for uniformity in measurement of outcomes. To that end, they worked with home visitation providers and the Children's Institute to develop common measurement protocols. The Adult Adolescent Parenting Inventory was chosen to measure key parenting beliefs that correlate with child maltreatment risk, with the tool given at program entry and one year intervals to measure how parenting beliefs and child maltreatment risk change as they progress through services. The tool and related reports were added to COMET.

"If something needed attention, we might not know until the end of the program. We couldn't assume that one program was more effective than another."

Elizabeth Ramsay Marchese
Evaluation Manager, United Way of Greater Rochester

How COMET Helped

Using COMET as an evaluation tool offers a range of features including:

- A systematic way to record the information consistently
- Access to program data from any internet-connected computer
- Integration of evaluation into providers' work, a key goal for United Way
- Easy monitoring of provider success in data collection

United Way can share the information it collects via COMET with other important constituencies, including:

- Program providers: United Way can generate customized reports for providers. It's a great tool for conversation and improvement. COMET

gives real-time information so they know right away how to intervene and improve.

- Donors: From a funder's perspective, COMET easily complements their accountability work, program oversight, and investment analysis, in a cost- and time-efficient way.
- The community: COMET offers a wealth of data on United Way's results, which can influence and inform other community efforts.

The positive experiences with COMET lead United Way to expand its use to other type programs. Another way United Way uses COMET is to measure program attendance in funded after-school and summer programs. "We know that the more often and more consistently kids participate in such programs, the more they benefit." said Marchese. The COMET attendance module allows United Way and programs to track individual student and program attendance metrics. Additionally, United Way basic needs programs use COMET to track services including provision of food, clothing, and personal items.

Results and Future Plans

COMET has been integral in allowing programs to track client services and progress, and to evaluate programs as a whole. For example, COMET shows home visitation providers which clients are at risk for child abuse in different domains, allowing programs to individually tailor services.

Program evaluations utilizing COMET data have shown the impact of United Way funded programs and services on positively influencing client outcomes. For example, student and program attendance records recorded in COMET have been combined with school records and shown that United Way supported programming is associated with improvement of students' school attendance and grades. AAPI-2 results analyzed over time have shown that the average parent served by home visitation program risk for child abuse decreased as s/he progresses through services.

United Way of Greater Rochester uses information from COMET to quickly evaluate programs and support their improvement. The organization can manipulate the data to look at collective outcomes or individual program outcomes and compare 'apples to apples'. United Way of Greater Rochester's continuing and growing use of COMET illustrates the importance it places on ensuring positive change for its community.

"We want to make sure we've got the right strategies and measures," said Leo. "With COMET and Children's Institute as an external evaluator, we know early on whether the strategies make sense."

Questions? Call 585-673-3200

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