

# Glossary of Selected Outcome Measurement Terms

**Inputs** are resources a program uses to achieve program objectives. Examples are staff, volunteers, facilities, equipment, curricula, and money. A program uses *inputs* to support *activities*.

**Activities** are what a program does with its inputs—the services it provides—to fulfill its mission. Examples are sheltering homeless families, educating the public about signs of child abuse, and providing adult mentors for youth. Program *activities* result in *outputs*.

**Outputs** are products of a program's activities, such as the number of meals provided, classes taught, brochures distributed, or participants served. Another term for "outputs" is "units of service." A program's *outputs* should produce desired *outcomes* for the program's participants.

**Outcomes** are benefits for participants during or after their involvement with a program. Outcomes may relate to knowledge, skills, attitudes, values, behavior, condition, or status. Examples of outcomes include greater knowledge of nutritional needs, improved reading skills, more effective responses to conflict, getting a job, and having greater financial stability.

For a particular program, there can be various "levels" of outcomes, with initial outcomes leading to longer-term ones. For example, a youth in a mentoring program who receives one-to-one encouragement to improve academic performance may attend school more regularly, which can lead to getting better grades, which can lead to graduating.

**Outcome indicators** are the specific items of information that track a program's success on outcomes. They describe observable, measurable characteristics or changes that represent achievement of an outcome. For example, a program whose desired outcome is that participants pursue a healthy lifestyle could define "healthy lifestyle" as not smoking; maintaining a recommended weight, blood pressure, and cholesterol level; getting at least two hours of exercise each week; and wearing seat belts consistently. The number and percent of program participants who demonstrate these behaviors then is an *indicator* of how well the program is doing with respect to the outcome.

**Outcome targets** are numerical objectives for a program's level of achievement on its outcomes. After a program has had experience with measuring outcomes, it can use its findings to set targets for the number and percent of participants expected to achieve desired outcomes in the next reporting period. It also can set targets for the amount of change it expects participants to experience.

**Benchmarks** are performance data that are used for comparative purposes. A program can use its own data as a baseline benchmark against which to compare future performance. It also can use data from another program as a benchmark. In the latter case, the other program often is chosen because it is exemplary and its data are used as a target to strive for, rather than as a baseline.

"The reason we got into this business was to change lives. Now we have all the staff thinking in this orientation. Outcome measurement creates focus in a way no other management tool can do. We used to have forms we filled out that were meaningless. Now we have the same number of forms, but we get real information. We used to count the number of things we did. Now we count results."

*Jan Berry, Executive Director, Freeport West, Minneapolis, Minnesota*

"Outcome measurement provides very important internal benefits. If we find something we're doing that is giving less than satisfactory results, we can amend the program and make improvements. The process also has helped us actually discontinue one of our programs. We were concerned about it before, and our outcome assessment helped make the decision to discontinue it."

*Natalie R. Peterson, Executive Director, Family Service Association of San Antonio Inc., San Antonio, Texas*

"Outcome information is a real morale builder for the staff. They take it hard when teens get pregnant again, but I was able to show them that only 7 percent get pregnant while in the program, compared to 52 percent in the county and 44 percent in the state. It gives the staff a sense of pride to understand that these girls would be part of the 52 percent if we didn't work with them."

*Peggy Ann Dorrian, Talking, Listening, Caring Program Supervisor, Catholic Family and Community Services, Schenectady, New York*

"In our parenting skills class, the parents see the assessment as an empowering experience. People traditionally have a negative mind-set about tests, but these parents find the process helpful. It puts bookends on what it means to be a good parent. They can see they have specific skills. It's concrete. They go down the list and say 'I'm good at that.' They feel in control. The program participants have been so positive that it's rubbed off on the staff."

*David L. Hoffman, President, Family Service of Milwaukee, Milwaukee, Wisconsin*

"Outcome data gives our volunteer fund raisers a greater level of comfort to go out and represent us. Before, they were just able to tell anecdotal stories."

*Patricia C. Howard, Executive Director, Girls Incorporated of Memphis, Memphis, Tennessee*

"Our outcome measurement system has affected how we are viewed in the community. We can talk to Mr. and Mrs. John Doe in terms of cost-effectiveness for their dollars. It has given staff a sense of pride and accomplishment. We no longer have the turnover we had seven years ago. It also has affected our voluntarism. We had a 313 percent increase in one year."

*Kay Coffin, Executive Director, Big Brothers Big Sisters of Fresno County, Fresno, California*

"For us it was definitely worth the time we put into it. Definitely. Two years ago I would not have told you that. It has helped us recognize inefficiencies and helped us reorganize and improve services. I tell the staff over and over that it's not just a chore being mandated by our funder. It's a good thing to be doing anyway. People are beginning to understand."

*Michelle Gaynier, Director of Communications and Marketing, The Detroit Institute for Children, Detroit, Michigan*

"Kingsley House has been more successful in maintaining funding and getting supplemental funding because we are able to demonstrate the impact of dollars. Corporations particularly are quite impressed with our ability to show impact—the effect on kids and our ability to keep adults out of a nursing home."

*Michael Moreau, Executive Director, Kingsley House and New Orleans Day Nursery Association, New Orleans, Louisiana*

"We really feel we're going in the right direction. It's a lot of work, but well worth it. It provides a clarity to the staff, insures a continuation of funding and from a management perspective, you really need it. Now that we've done it I don't know how people make it without it."

*Nina Waters, Executive Director, Practical and Cultural Education (PACE) Center for Girls, Jacksonville, Florida*

"If United Way stopped requiring this today, we would keep doing it."

*Marilyn Lange, Executive Director, Village Adult Day Center, Inc., Milwaukee, Wisconsin*