Moving Towards Organizational Best Practice

# Operations: Measuring Impact

With the expansion of street intervention work in Chicago there has also occurred the expansion of research partnerships to evaluate the impact of the work. The Urban Labs of the University of Chicago has completed the first randomized control trial of a violence reduction program (READI Chicago, a company of Heartland Alliance), while the Northwestern Neighborhood Network Initiative (N3) is evaluating the impact of Communities Partnering for Peace (CP4P). Administrative staff of community-based organizations have the challenge of navigating research partnerships, providing data required to measure impact, and conforming to research designs that may/ may not fully incorporate all elements of a program’s impact.

Organizations have varying capacity to manage program evaluation and external research partnerships. An ideal arrangement for a nonprofit involves having a full-time administrative position that coordinates all activities related to measuring program impact. Few organizations, however, have this capacity and coordinating evaluation may fall upon program managers, chief operating officers, or even executive directors. Building organizational capacity for measuring impact benefits an organization in a variety of ways; first, it creates an opportunity for equitable research processes where community-based organizations, staff, and neighborhood residents are equitable partners and co-owners of the research outcomes. In Chicago Beyond’s report “Why Am I Always Being Researched” the uneven power dynamic between community organizations and researchers is highlighted as a significant source of bias in research outcomes.

In addition to creating opportunities for more equitable research processes, building capacity for evaluation generates benefits for street intervention workers. Study participant narratives indicated feeling disconnected from the metrics they are required to track as part of their work; keeping tabs on mediations, number of referrals, or volume of shootings in the community does not accurately reflect the impact of their work. Street intervention workers described research as a “numbers game” where they felt disconnected from research processes and little ownership over the impact statements generated.

*I felt like it really was just a numbers game in trying to satisfy some grant opportunity or provide information about follow-up. There was very little proximity between the people who were supporting the work, and those who were actually the beneficiaries of that support. The outreach worker is just in the middle, dealing with the real-life and having to translate and make most meaningful to the people higher up, why it needs to continue on.*

They even shared instances where research was used against them, when they were chastised for not meeting certain performance benchmarks. This statement should not be interpreted as an indication that performance metrics have no value in violence interruption work, but rather these metrics may have been developed without the input of street intervention workers *or* they did not receive training on the value of program evaluation. Phrased differently, there is an opportunity in street intervention work to reexamine the indicators of ‘success’, how they are defined, and their ability to adequately reflect the impact of street intervention work. For example, to what degree does a street intervention worker feel that the number of shootings within their police beat reflect the quality of their work? What do they think would be helpful to track for their work? What questions do street intervention workers have that could inform an external research collaborative?

# Food for Thought

* + What capacity exists internally to measure the impact of our programs
  + What unmet needs exist to measure our impact?
  + How are external research partnerships generated and the collaborative framework for research established?
  + To what extent to street intervention workers receive training or professional development on program evaluation?
  + How are program metrics defined in the organization, and how are they used in performance evaluations of programs and staff?
  + What research and evaluation questions do street intervention workers suggest would be helpful in advancing street intervention work? What would they like to learn about the impact of their efforts?