5.1: Guide to Data System Self-Assessment

This guide is an introduction to data system assessment. Your team uses it with tool 5.2: Data System Assessment Checklist to develop a better understand of the categories and considerations for assessing your system. The checklist facilitates a conversation among your team members about the current requirements and strengths of the system. Don't forget, no system is perfect. Often the challenges of a system are more related to the way it is *being used*, rather than the limitations of the actual technology.

Data System Assessment

Data system assessment is a systematic method used to identify program requirements and determine whether they are being met. Not every program requires an expensive, comprehensive case management data system. Depending on the number of families served, the experience and comfort of the staff, and the reporting requirements of the program, your team may decide it does not need all of the "bells and whistles" available. At the very least, an assessment is recommended annually to examine a few major data processes: input, storage and case management, and output.

Key Data System Processes

Data Input

Input refers to the way data is entered on to the system. Client service data is typically entered using electronic or paper forms that match the case files, notes, and assessments. This information can be first recorded on paper forms and then transferred to the data system or directly on to electronic forms.

Data Storage and Electronic Case Management

Data storage and management typically are held in two distinct forms. First the historical documentation of client services is in reports to funders, model developers, tribal leadership, other key individuals, and/or agencies. Storing this documentation in a safe, secure, and reliable manner is essential. Second, storage and management come into play in the client case management process. Data storage has to be secure and reliable, but also stored in a manner conducive to case management functions. In other words, a system not only holds/stores but also provides support to services. For example, some systems store and use key dates to identify or "trigger" when clients may need certain assessments.

But, not all data systems have case management capabilities nor do all programs use electronic case management. The need to assess the adequacy of case management on a system depends on whether it is a required feature.

Data Output

Data output refers to how data is made available for use by staff, funders, etc. Data output is presented in many forms; but the process is typically referred to as reporting. Many systems have built in reports with fixed fields – known as "canned" reports. These reports are generic and are most useful for general program monitoring but may not meet the reporting requirements of program models and funders. They are usually customized. All data systems have customized reports. Custom reports are generated with a reporting module such as SAP Business Objects or IBM Cognos by the agency using the system instead of the system vendor. These modules, known as Business Intelligence (BI) tools, allow users to control the database for fully customize reports. BI tools require training or high data capacity by the end users. Please refer to Module 4 of the toolkit where data reporting, an important part of assessment, is discussed in more detail.

Self-Assessing the Data System Sustainability of the Program

As a companion to this guide, the Current System Self-Assessment Checklist contains a set of questions categorized under **Data Input**, **Data Storage and Management**, and **Data Output** which helps teams assess whether their data systems meet all of their current requirements. If aspects of the software do not meet current requirements, different solutions may be possible to optimize the system to do so. Optimizing data systems can incur additional costs, time, and potential increased complexity. Optimizing the system may require hiring a data system developer or contracting for additional work with your current data system vendor. If your current data system developer is not available, you may have to consider either changing data systems to one that meets your requirements or check if the existing data system can be modified by a 3rd party developer.