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## United Way to launch data evaluation system

By NATE DOUGHERTY - 5/28/2010

Next month the United Way of Greater Rochester Inc. will begin using a new data evaluation system that employs locally developed information technology to assess the effectiveness of individual programs and its overarching funding strategies.

The system allows different service providers to input data and measure outcomes of programs or specific approaches. It will be used in each of the United Way's five focus areas of its "Blueprint for Change," which were identified as the major issues affecting the local community. The first implementation will come in the area of early childhood, with data input starting in June.

Known as Comet, the program was developed by the Children's Institute, a local organization that partners with community agencies and schools to implement prevention and early intervention programs related to children's health.

Dirk Hightower, executive director of the Children's Institute, said the program originated five years ago when he noticed that information the organization shared with its partners was taking months to get back to them. The Children's Institute worked with SophiTEC Inc., a local IT firm, to create a platform that would take the data normally on paper and consolidate it into one program that then could help evaluate the results.

"We were collecting information, but if people don't have it right at their fingertips to use, it becomes stale and old," Hightower said.

The program showed great promise in one of its earliest uses, helping to measure universal pre-K programs in Rochester. By monitoring different elements of the program, Comet was able to identify areas in need of improvement and strengths to build on, Hightower said.

"Right now Rochester is in the top 2 or 3 percent in the nation for quality of pre-K programs," Hightower said. "What we're doing with Comet is taking those same processes we used and making them faster."

Comet was designed so that any size agency could afford its use, Hightower said. There is a \$300 annual fee and \$25 per site, with training, setup and ongoing consultation included. The Children's Institute has 46 clients across the United States and Canada.

Data collection and study have long been crucial in human services and education, but often there was no clear way to aggregate the data or no centralized location to store it, said Patricia Davis, director of community investment for United Way. Comet simplifies the process, providing a common program to enter data and view results.

Agencies using Comet can select the factors they want to measure, Davis said. For example, a group with a focus on preventing child abuse and neglect can measure areas such as parent and child interaction or parental views on discipline.

"It's nice, easy and all in one place where staff members can just pop into a computer, log in the answers and it's stored in one central location," Davis said. "Then caseworkers can instantly compare six months ago to now and computers can create charts that show changes."

Comet will be an effective tool for United Way because it can identify weaknesses or strengths within specific programs and can quantify the overall effectiveness of the organization's focus in the areas it chose for the blueprint, Davis said.

"We could just look at each individual program we're funding, but we not only want to know if each program is doing well but as a collective if the right set of programs is being funded to get the change we want to see," she said. "We will be able to see if they are working independently and together to do things like prevent abuse and neglect."

United Way officials will meet in June to launch Comet for after-school programs and summer enrichment programs and for transition coaching strategies to help individuals with disabilities. Shortly after, Comet will be implemented for emergency services programs and United Way officials will determine strategies for how to apply it to programs for the aging, Davis said.

"The neat thing about Comet is you can measure anything you need," Davis said. "The IT platform allows the data to be collected quickly and for any measurement tool to be put in Comet."

Once enough information is available to see past the normal ebb and flow and develop meaningful patterns, United Way will share it with decision-makers and could push for policy or law changes based on the findings, Davis said. The database will not be open for public scrutiny, but United Way periodically will release results so donors can see where and how a program is effective.

The United Way has not had such a deep level of evaluation in its history, Davis said. Because the program was developed locally and is being piloted, the local United Way has not shared Comet with other branches nationwide, but it could do so in the future, Davis added.

As the branch locally and others across the country have been hit by the economic decline in the form of shrinking donations, a tool that can help identify and promote efficiency is critical, Davis said. United Way officials have said that with the Blueprint for Change will come some changes in the agencies it chooses to fund, focusing on those that operate most efficiently and have strong, measurable effects on the community.

"It's always been critically important to be sure that our dollars are used in the best way, and with fewer dollars it's even more important to make sure you're using it for the best services," she said. "Whether we're in a year of a great campaign or reduced funding, we owe it to our donors and funders to make sure we're doing this level of evaluation work."

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