

United Way Helps to Improve Program Effectiveness with the COMET® Data Management System



The mission of the United Way of Greater Rochester (N.Y.) is clear and direct: Magnify and focus the power of community resources to advance the common good. The 93-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.

Thus, it is no surprise that United Way's innovative community-driven strategic planning process, "Blueprint for Change," incorporates a powerful, real-time web-based data collection and management system to measure some of its key strategies. The COMET® System (COMET) was created by Children's Institute, a non-profit organization with more than 50 years of experience in improving children's social and emotional health, and its technology partner, software developer SophiTEC. They designed the COMET specifically to improve outcomes for children and for programs serving them.

Now a product of COMET Informatics LLC, COMET is helping United Way to evaluate its efforts. According to Dawn Borgeest, United Way's Senior Vice President and Chief Corporate Affairs Officer, COMET is vital. "That's because the blueprint," she said, "raises the bar to look at broader impact: Are our strategies working? What progress are we making toward our long-term goals?"

Blueprint for a community

United Way developed the Blueprint for Change addressing the groups of people on which the organization concentrates its efforts. The blueprint specifies a formal assessment and evaluation plan focused on program outcomes, intended to identify challenges and clarify



accomplishments, maximize understanding of relationships between service delivery and results, and ensure transparency to provider partners and others.

One focus of the Blueprint for Change is early childhood and incorporates a parent education strategy. To implement that strategy, United Way funds research- and evidence-based programs that help parents better meet the challenges of raising children, such as:

- The Incredible Years, a series of programs for reducing children's behavior problems and increasing their social competence at home and at school;
- Parents as Teachers, a curriculum that promotes optimal child development and positive parent-child relationships;
- Nurse-Family Partnership, a home-visiting program to help low-income first-time mothers and their children.

The evaluation plan of the Early Childhood portion of the Blueprint for Change, said Borgeest, "includes gathering real-time data to help us stay in sync with program providers. The data also will offer providers the chance to learn from what others are doing. If someone has better results, we as a community of providers can learn from them."

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Consistent measurement

United Way of Greater Rochester has required programs to measure their outcomes since the mid-'90s. "Providers chose how, what, and when they tracked information," said Patricia Davis, United Way's Director of Community Investment. That arrangement had its drawbacks, however. "If something needed attention, we might not know until the end of the program."

Without consistent evaluation methods or assessments, added Elizabeth Ramsay Marchese, United Way's Manager of Quality Assurance, "we couldn't assume that one program was more effective than another."

United Way was striving for uniformity in measurement of outcomes. To that end, they convened a learning circle of early childhood providers that determined suitable tools to measure their programs' intended outcomes: increased parental knowledge about child development; demonstrated parental use of that knowledge; and the quality of the attachment between parent and child. Children's Institute identified the assessment tools—including the Child-Parent Relationship Scale (CPRS) and the Adult-Adolescent Parenting Inventory (AAPI)—that could best measure the chosen outcomes.

Today, United Way's providers of The Incredible Years, Parents as Teachers, and Nurse-Family Partnership use the chosen assessments to measure parent skills and parent-child relationships, entering data into COMET for each assessment at the beginning, middle, and end of programs.

Multiple benefits

Using COMET as an evaluation tool offers a range of features to United Way and its providers. Among the most relevant to the organization:

- 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.

For an example of easy monitoring, Marchese monitors all providers' progress via COMET. In this way, she can determine if anyone is having difficulty entering data, and she can offer assistance.

The learning curve for users of COMET has been relatively gentle. Following group trainings held by the COMET team, Elizabeth Ramsay Marchese wrote a user manual for United Way and held one-on-one sessions with all providers to train them. Interestingly, Marchese noted, providers of the Parents as Teachers program already were using one of the assessments in COMET and were "thrilled" to find out that they didn't have to develop their own system to track and share their data. "They have all their parent educators enter and print out pre-test data to use in developing service plans with the families they work with. This helps inform their work."

United Way also has begun using COMET to measure program attendance in after-school programs that it supports in 10 agencies. "We know," said Marchese, "that the more often and more consistently kids participate in such programs, the more they benefit."

The COMET attendance module allows United Way to track precise attendance numbers. On any given day, Davis said, "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 that three enrolled and only one finished. 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."

That same attendance data will help United Way develop a baseline attendance indicator for a "best-practice" model of an ideal after-school program, a goal outlined in its Blueprint for Change.

Sharing with constituencies

United Way of Greater Rochester uses information from COMET internally to help it quickly evaluate programs and support their improvement. They can manipulate the data to look at collective outcomes or individual program outcomes. "With COMET, we can compare apples to apples," said Davis.

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United Way also can share the information it collects via COMET with other important constituencies.

- Program providers: United Way can generate customized reports for providers. “It’s a great tool for conversation and improvement. We always knew how agencies were doing at the end of the year,” said Davis. “But COMET gives us real-time information so we know right away how we can intervene and work through any ideas for what would work better.”
- External evaluators who help determine strategies’ effectiveness: “When you’re working with an external evaluator, you have to shift datasets easily. COMET collects information in an easy-to-use way and lets us analyze the data and have it reviewed independently,” Davis explained.
- Donors: “From a funder’s perspective,” said Davis, “COMET easily complements our 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. “COMET will help us as a community to get to the critical preventive questions,” Davis explained.

For the future

Now that United Way has been using COMET for a year, the organization is planning for future applications. According to Marchese, COMET is slated for use in evaluating a new program called Transition Coaching, which provides resources for people with a disability who are either not eligible for or not currently enrolled in a care system but who are nonetheless facing a professional or life transition. “At this point, we have no idea how successful Transition Coaching might be, but COMET lets us capture who’s showing up with what challenges, how we address those challenges, and other information,” said Marchese.

United Way of Greater Rochester’s continuing and growing use of COMET illustrates the importance it places on ensuring positive change for its community. Now that the Blueprint for Change has strategically narrowed United Way’s efforts to focus on certain strategies, said Davis, the organization wants to “make sure we’ve got the right strategies and measures. With COMET and external evaluators, we’ll know early on whether the strategies make sense.”

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