NJJEC Bulletin

What’s Going On at NJJEC?

NJJEC has released an online tutorial about the basics of performance measurement, evaluation, and program design. The tutorial covers such topics as selecting an evidence-based program, developing program logic and constructing a logic model, and establishing performance measures.

The material is presented through the story of a fictional program manager trying to secure funding for her community center by using an evidence-based program. The tutorial is divided into modules so users can easily navigate through different topics to review the material. Users can assess their own knowledge by completing two quizzes, and have their results e-mailed to them upon completion.

NJJEC staff members continue to develop two Sustainability Toolkits to assist direct service providers and grant-making agencies. The toolkits will be available on the NJJEC website this fall.

Check out other trainings and presentations on the NJJEC website!

Upcoming Events of Interest

American Society of Criminology Annual Meeting November 2012
The American Society of Criminology will hold its annual meeting November 14-17 in Chicago, IL. Topics of interest include policing juveniles, juvenile corrections and detention alternatives, and youth-focused risk assessment. Be sure to check out the session Want Data? We Got It! Information on and Access to OJJDP’s Juvenile Justice Data Collections on November 14.

Featured Resources: Screening and Assessment Tools

We have received many questions about risk assessment and screening tools—where to find them, how to know if they are appropriate for the population and problem at hand, and how to use them correctly. The Technical Assistance Partnership for Child and Family Mental Health has released a resource series dedicated to youth mental health issues in juvenile justice. One of these
resources focuses on screening and assessment tools to determine both the mental health needs of youth and the risk that youth will participate in delinquent activities in the future.

**Screening and Assessment in Juvenile Justice Systems: Identifying Mental Health Needs and Risk of Reoffending** describes the uses of screening and assessment tools and provides specific examples of tools used to address juvenile mental health issues. The author notes that “screening” tools can be used widely to determine the general needs of all youth involved in the justice system, while “assessment” tools provide more in-depth information about a youth’s problems and the appropriate course of treatment when such additional information is needed.

This resource explains that it is important for juvenile justice professionals to consider the reason for using the tool, when and by whom it will be administered, whether it examines a question of interest to the administering practitioner or agency, and whether it has been supported by research evidence. Consider, for example, whether the tool will be administered by a clinical psychologist or a detention officer. The tool must be reliable (consistently measuring the same phenomena in the same way) and valid (measuring what it is intended to measure), but it is also important to consider the usefulness of this information once it has been collected and whether the accuracy of the information has been verified by research.

Let’s take a look the 10-Question Tool that was featured in the most recent edition of OJJDP’s *Journal of Juvenile Justice* article entitled, *The 10-Question Tool: A Novel Screening Instrument for Runaway Youth*. The 10-Question Tool is a screening instrument: it is intended to be administered to all runaway youth encountered by police officers to provide some basic information about safety concerns related to runaway youth so that the officers can provide the most effective service referrals possible. Runaway youth have high rates of physical and sexual abuse, mental illness, and substance abuse, so the 10-Question Tool is designed specifically to examine these issues. The questions posed to youth by law enforcement officers include, “why did you leave home?” and “has anyone hurt you or tried to hurt you while you were away from home?” The structure of the tool is simple and it can be completely quickly, so is appropriate for administration to a large number of youth—all runaways encountered by law enforcement—and can be administered by police officers without extensive background in counseling or psychology.

The authors examined the prevalence of problems faced by runaway youth by gender and race, and attempted to verify much of the information provided by the youth and the likelihood that youth were referred to appropriate social services to assess the usefulness of the tool. The study found that many teens did in fact disclose drug and alcohol use, and the majority of teens who reported sexual assault victimization had not sought prior help for this abuse.

The findings indicate that the screening tool might assist law enforcement in identifying assault victims who do not independently report their abuse. More complex, in-depth assessments can be used to determine the extent of a youth’s problems and the appropriate treatments, but the 10 Question Tool provides an adequate initial determination of how to deal with runaway youth.

Evaluation Feature: Using Anecdotal Evidence

Typically, when grant administering agencies ask for information about a program, they request data that has been systematically collected—that is, the same information has been collected for each participant involved in a program. These data are analyzed collectively to make determinations about how well a program is functioning and its achievement of expected outcomes. Practitioners sometimes feel that this information does not completely illustrate some of the issues faced during implementation, or ways the program has affected participants that are not captured in data collection. Often, they want to use anecdotal evidence to tell the full story.

Evidence is “anecdotal” when a small, non-representative sample of participating youth is used to illustrate program performance. For example, a program manager with 100 youth in a mentoring program might want to highlight the experiences of 5 students whose grades and attendance improved dramatically over the course of the program, rather than presenting grade and attendance changes for the entire group, or 50 randomly selected students. Because non-representative samples can tell a biased story about the successes and failures of a program, the use of anecdotal evidence is often discouraged.

However, there are some ways anecdotal evidence can be used to supplement systematically collected program data in order to illustrate how a program works to outside stakeholders. Anecdotal evidence can add richness and clarity to process and outcome quantitative data, particularly when illustrating the challenges involved in implementation.

The Center for Court Innovation recently published an evaluation of New York’s QUEST Futures program that uses anecdotal evidence in conjunction with systematically collected data to illustrate program successes and challenges. The report includes quantitative case-level data (for example, youth demographic information, sources of referral into the program, youth’s history of mental illness) as well as quantitative measures aggregated by month (the number of referrals, screenings, active cases, etc. in the program). Qualitative data are also provided as a component of the process evaluation, including stakeholder interviews, meeting notes, court proceeding observations, and a review of relevant documents.

The QUEST Futures evaluation includes anecdotal evidence in the form of six case studies of program youth (see page 47). These brief stories illustrate some of the complex issues involved in implementing the various components of the QUEST program plan, particularly the intersection of youth, school, and family and the interactions between mental health and substance abuse issues.

The case studies include both successful and unsuccessful examples, lending credibility to the story that is being told throughout the narratives. The information might be particularly useful for an outsider with little knowledge of QUEST Futures or some of the compound issues involved in juvenile justice and mental health services for youth, and adds clarity to the data presented throughout the report. The reader is able to see the need for changes in treatment plan and approach, and the sometimes extensive limitations on the ability to complete a course of treatment as intended.

Some things to consider when you might use
anecdotal evidence:

1. **Choose a realistic balance of success and failure.** Both success and failure can be used to make program improvements.

2. **Use anecdotes to supplement systematically collected data, and clarify aspects of program operation that might otherwise be unclear.** Anecdotal information should highlight or further clarify quantitative and qualitative data included in your report.


**State Spotlight: Arkansas**

In recent years, the Arkansas juvenile justice system has undergone extensive reform. The state’s efforts are documented in *Arkansas Youth Justice: The Architecture of Reform*. Arkansas’ juvenile justice reform strategic plan sought to address overuse of confinement, the lack of information sharing and coordination among public agencies interacting with justice-involved youth, and more effectively address the variety of needs presented by youth in the juvenile justice system. The report details the importance of data and the use of evidence-based practices in improving the effectiveness of the system and reducing youth confinement.

These efforts included the improvement of data collection across agencies at multiple points of contact through the creation of the Rite Track data management system, which is used by both the Division of Youth Services and child welfare agencies to improve coordination of efforts. Arkansas has also increased its use of validated risk assessment tools to better determine the needs of and most appropriate responses to youth in the system.

DYS has also increased the requirements related to data collection for the youth service agencies and organizations it funds. Most agencies are required to work towards reduction in state commitments, and agencies achieving a substantially greater reduction (20%) are eligible for grant funds otherwise unavailable to them had they not met this benchmark. Further, service providers are contractually obligated to input into the System of Care data system used by the Department of Human Services.

The Arkansas reform process illustrates the importance of establishing baseline data and documenting change.