

# Refining Program Data to Support Learning:

## How the Office of Refugee Resettlement and the Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation Assessed Data Collection for the Direct Services to Survivors of Torture Grants

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A key learning resource for federal programs is the data that grant recipient organizations report about program participants, services delivered, and outcomes. Federal programs can use these data for multiple knowledge-building activities such as tracking trends, monitoring performance, and evaluating the extent to which funded services are working. Data provided by grant recipients are better able to inform federal programs when they include relevant measures and when grant recipients report data consistently, completely, and accurately. Periodically assessing data reporting requirements and procedures can help ensure the data have the best potential to contribute to learning in the field.

This spotlight describes how the Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR), collaborating with the Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation (OPRE), reviewed the data reported by organizations receiving Direct Services to Survivors of Torture (SOT) grants. To accomplish this work, ORR and OPRE partnered with the [ACF Evidence Capacity Support project](#). Child Trends led the engagement, with support from Mathematica.

### The challenge: Assessing multiple factors affecting the usefulness of program data

For this effort, ORR and OPRE focused on assessing three aspects of data collection that contribute to the usefulness of program data:

- **Measures and data elements.** Information about activities and outcomes—including the granularity of the data and relevance to program goals—guides what questions ORR can answer.
- **Data collection tools and procedures.** Clear guidance and tools for collecting, organizing, and reporting data can improve grant recipients' data quality.
- **Grant recipient data capacity.** Staff skills and knowledge about data collection, management, and reporting, as well as their data routines and procedures, contribute to grant recipients' ability to produce high-quality data.

The Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR) awards Direct Services to Survivors of Torture grants to diverse organizations. The grants intend to ensure the direct delivery of holistic, strengths-based, and trauma-informed services to survivors of torture and their families, to assist them in the healing and recovery process. Grant recipient organizations report data about their activities and outcomes to ORR.

### About this spotlight series

Building and using evidence can require federal agencies to develop solutions for novel and complex challenges. Evidence describes the knowledge gained from systematic efforts to understand the effectiveness or efficiency of an organization's work, or to understand the context or communities in which an organization conducts its work. This series highlights aspects of work conducted by OPRE to extend and deepen evidence capacity among program offices at the Administration for Children and Families (ACF). The ACF Evidence Capacity Support project, led by Mathematica and partner Child Trends, supports this work by helping offices develop evidence-building plans, conducting needs assessments, and analyzing administrative data, among other tasks.

ORR and OPRE anticipated that, in the long run, focusing on these three aspects of data collection could build a foundation for an evaluation of how ORR-funded services improve client outcomes. In the short term, this work could also enhance the SOT program's performance measurement practices.

### The activities: Strategies to assess factors that affect the usefulness of program data

Over 10 months, ORR, OPRE, and the Evidence Capacity Support project team undertook five activities that enhanced understanding of SOT program data and generated ideas for improvement:

1. **A targeted literature review** about services for survivors of torture, strategies for providing services, commonly used program performance measures, and common measurement tools.
2. **Analysis of existing program data** to understand relationships among program characteristics, outputs, and outcomes.
3. **Systematic assessment of data reports from SOT grantees** to understand the content, quality, and consistency of data that grant recipients submit to SOT.
4. **Feedback sessions with SOT grant recipients** to understand their experiences with the data reporting requirements and the tools and procedures they use for data collection and reporting.
5. **Feedback sessions with clients receiving SOT services** to understand their program experiences and their views about the relevance of the outcomes that grant recipients are required to report.

### The solutions: Taking steps to improve the usefulness of program data

The team synthesized information gathered from the five activities. Based on that information, the team made three broad recommendations to improve program data and took initial steps to address each recommendation:

- **Measures and data elements.** To prepare for future evaluation efforts, the team recommended exploring the feasibility of collecting client-level data (in addition to the program-level data currently collected) and implementing additional data-sharing requirements for grant recipients.
- **Data collection tools and procedures.** The team recommended enhancing the guidance, content, and format of ORR's data collection tools to promote more consistent reporting, improve data quality, and support future evaluation efforts.
  - The team followed up by **developing two tools for grant recipients:** (1) an optional data validation worksheet that helps grant recipients accurately aggregate client-level data and (2) an optional data collection and tracking tool that uses raw data entered by grant recipients to generate reports that grant recipients can enter into the SOT program's online portal.
- **Grant recipient data capacity.** The team recommended seeking feedback from SOT grant recipients about their experiences with ORR's requirements for collecting and reporting data.
  - Subsequently, the team **fielded a survey to all SOT grant recipients** to learn about their capacity and processes for data collection and reporting, technical assistance and training needs, and previous evaluation efforts.

ORR incorporated some of the findings from this work into its Notice of Funding Opportunity for the next round of SOT grants. It also refined program reporting guidance for use in future funding cycles.

### How this work enhanced evidence capacity at ORR

Evidence capacity encompasses the range of knowledge, skills, behaviors, and resources that support an agency's ability to build and use evidence to inform its work. These attributes can be organized into five dimensions: evidence culture, leadership, evidence infrastructure, human capital, and engagement (see figure).

This partnership focused on the *evidence infrastructure* domain. Based on a literature review, analysis of existing SOT program data, and interviews with SOT grantees about their experiences with program

performance data, the Evidence Capacity Support Project team recommended revisions to data collection processes and tools. In addition, the engagement capitalized on ORR's interest in fostering an evidence culture within its programs. Additionally, the work highlighted ORR's organizational commitment to using evidence and its learning mindset to seek help improving its performance monitoring capacity.

For more information about the key dimensions of evidence capacity, see the [Evidence Capacity in Organizations: A Literature-Informed Framework](#), published by OPRE.



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