16. OUTCOME MEASURES

There are a number of reasons to maintain data and measure outcomes of a veteran initiative. Data and outcome measures provide information about who is being served, which can inform outreach. Because numbers represent people, they show the impact of services on a personal level. As partners assess how effective services have been for veterans, they can make adjustments as needed. Outcome measures ensure partners are informed of collaboration results; otherwise each partner only has access to data related to its own role. Outcome measures can also assist the collaboration in receiving funding for continued or expanded services.

Unfortunately, all of the pilot sites reported that measuring outcomes was the weakest part of the collaboration. Reasons included:

- Lack of administrative support
- Lack of clarity among partners as to what should be measured and who was in the best position to collection such information
- Lack of funding to conduct an evaluation study

Collecting Data

If you know you intend to use an evaluation partner, that partner will assist you in identifying the quantitative data that project partners should collect, and the protocols for collecting such data. The evaluation partner can also collect qualitative data through client interviews, focus groups, and similar methods. In the absence of a formal evaluation, the project should still seek to obtain outcome measures. The section below identifies important decisions that the project partners need to make.
Identify What Information You Want to Collect

A partner will need to know the veteran’s location and the best way to communicate with the veteran, should follow-up be needed. However, the partners should determine what additional information they want to collect.

- Source of referral?
  - Phone
  - Legal clinic
  - Stand Down
  - Partner (such as the VA, a veteran service provider, a legal partner, or a child support agency)
  - Another veteran
  - Homeless shelter
  - Self-referral
  - Other (such as a veteran treatment court, the Department of Employment Services)

- Demographic information?
  - Race, gender, age
  - Branch of service
  - Whether veteran served in combat
  - Whether veteran is in reserves

- Assistance requested?
  - Help with arrears
  - Restoration of license
  - Modification of current support
  - Setting aside of default order
  - Paternity establishment or disestablishment
  - Removal of warrant
  - Help with access/visitation
  - Employment assistance
  - Other
Information specific to child support?
The child support agency needs certain information to review the veteran’s child support issues.
- Number of support orders and states that entered the orders
- Names of children
- Amount and types of income that the veteran receives, including any benefits

Information specific to the legal provider?
The legal provider may require certain information to ensure that the veteran meets the provider’s eligibility requirements.
- Amount and types of income that the veteran receives, if the legal provider has income eligibility requirements

Other partner-specific information?
Depending on the partner, additional information may be necessary
- A partner may require certain information based upon its funding source. For example, a partner who receives a HUD grant may require information about whether the veteran has a history of domestic violence.

Outcome?
- No follow-through
- Order modified and amount
- Arrears forgiven and amount
- Establishment of arrears repayment plan
- Number of payments after contact with veteran
- License restored
- Veteran has continued to communicate about case
- Case closed
- Referral to another state
- Referral to other resource (explain)
- Other

To the extent possible, tie the outcome into the assistance requested.
Outcomes that are harder to track, but much more important, are those affecting the veteran. One way to collect such information is to interview the veteran.

- Did the project help you connect with your family?
- Are you seeing your child(ren) more?
- Did you feel engaged in the child support process?
- Are you satisfied with the results?
- Did the child support assistance help you find employment?
- Did the child support assistance help you get housing?

- Length of time from referral to resolution?
- Barriers to resolution?
  Barriers may include the need for the veteran to obtain copies of documents from third parties. Interstate child support cases are also often problematic because successful resolution requires coordinated effort to work with multiple state laws, procedures, and child support agencies. Interstate cases may also require a legal provider in the jurisdiction that issued the support order.

- Long-term results?

- Determine Who Will Collect the Information
  The partner in the best position to collect data may vary depending upon the data sought. For example, each partner may wish to collect demographic information, the source of the referral, and the assistance requested. However, the child support agency will be in the best position to collect information about the resolution of the child support issue. And the VA or veteran service provider may be the better partner to track long-term results on the veteran’s ability to obtain housing. The VA or veteran service provider may also be the best partner to conduct an interview with the veteran about the effect of the child support initiative. If the VA is the entity collecting information, such participation must be approved — potentially through a local Institutional Review Board (IRB) or through an exemption as non-research.

- Determine When to Collect the Information
  It is important to determine at what point to collect information. Some information can be documented at the point of intake. However, at what point do you measure outcome?
It may take several contacts with the veteran to establish trust. The child support process itself may take time. Partners need to establish a plan for regularly collecting information at certain time periods.

### Methods of Data Collection

There are different methods to collect information. One way is through intake forms. It is likely that each partner uses its own standardized intake form. Make sure that the form captures the information that the collaboration decides to collect. If it does not, and the partner does not have the flexibility to amend the intake form, ask the partner to use an addendum that captures the needed data.

Some partners may use a spreadsheet to keep track of veteran referrals. A paper form can be an inexpensive and effective tool to capture who met with the veteran, the context of the meeting, the child support or related issue that the veteran identified, and the outcome of the meeting. Other partners may have an online system that allows such tracking.

### Partner Collaboration

- **Provide updates.**
  
  Make sure all the partners receive updates on case referrals. Each pilot site stressed the importance of this communication. If necessary, have the veteran sign confidentiality waivers or a release of information so that the partners can share case information.

- **Ensure there is a common definition of terms regarding data collection.**

- **Collect data at intake and agreed-upon time intervals.**

- **Develop a standardized data collection tool that each partner consistently uses to report agreed-upon information to each other.**

- **Depending on resources, identify one partner who has responsibility for maintaining comprehensive data.**
Because each partner may only work with the veteran on one aspect, it is important that one partner agrees to put together all the information related to a particular veteran.

- Prepare quarterly reports.

Each partner should prepare quarterly reports that summarize the number of veterans they have served as part of the collaboration, agreed-upon demographic information, the issues raised by the veterans, the number and types of referrals, and any outcomes related to that partner's involvement. The partner with responsibility for compiling the reports should also prepare a comprehensive report at agreed-upon intervals.

- Collect and share stories.

Statistics are great, but stories reveal more about the personal impact. Did the initiative help the veteran reconnect with his or her family? Did the child support assistance help the veteran obtain employment or housing? Sharing success stories helps energize the collaboration and reminds partners of the positive impact the initiative can have. Personal stories resonate with funding sources and are the best way to attract volunteers.

At a stand down in Minneapolis, a homeless veteran learned there was $8,000 in support payments he had made over the years that was on hold. The child support agency had wanted to return the money to him because it had closed the case, but had been unable to locate him. He just happened to come by the legal table at the stand down, asking about his case! He was so excited, knowing that chance encounter could change his life.