

Advancing the Use of Health Data

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A compelling story may convince a grantmaker to fund a program. But the data are what demonstrate the scope and importance of the problem at issue. If grantmakers want grantees to be data driven in their work, grantmakers need to model this behavior and make useable data available. With a few actions, grantmakers can boost the use of health data in their communities. This article draws upon the work of The Health Foundation of Greater Cincinnati and describes how it is using data and creating new data resources for its grantees and others in its service area – Cincinnati, Ohio and 20 surrounding counties in Ohio, Kentucky, and Indiana.

FUNDERS' USE OF DATA

Health grantmakers use data to inform their work, increase understanding, enhance dialogue, and demonstrate accountability. For example, prior to embarking on new program areas, foundations typically assess community need. Data from these assessments can be the baseline that allows the foundation to look at its impact on community health outcomes over time.

The grant management process provides many opportunities for data-driven decisions. The Health Foundation of Greater Cincinnati supports and encourages grantseekers and grantees in finding data for their proposals, developing evaluation plans, collecting data for these plans, and sharing the data with the community. Periodically throughout the grant period, foundation staff review data and data-gathering systems to ensure that these are on track. As appropriate, the foundation provides one-on-one consultation with the director of evaluation and assistance in helping grantees determine the best type of evaluation for their projects.

MINING THE DATA

The Health Foundation of Greater Cincinnati is continually improving its health data capabilities and resources. Many of its grants generate local health data that the foundation shares with grantees and the public. Following are some of the resources made possible through the work of the foundation.

- **Health Data Resources Directory**

The foundation improves access to health data by producing a *Health Data Resources Directory*. This directory includes hundreds of sources for local, state, and national health data for each of the foundation's focus areas – strengthening primary care providers to the poor, school-based child health interventions, substance abuse, and severe mental illness.

The intent of the directory is to reduce frustration in trying to find who has what data, and prevent many agencies from having to reinvent the wheel to get the data they want. The printed directory is updated every other year so it remains current. The on-line version of the directory is updated on a weekly basis as necessary. To date, over 5,000 directories have been distributed in the Cincinnati area, and, on average, people access the directory on the foundation's Web site over 100 times a week.

- **Health Data Archive**

Many of the foundation's grants generate local health data, and the foundation encourages its grantees to share these data. To help them do this, the foundation has developed two on-line resources in collaboration with the University of Cincinnati's Institute for Health Policy and Health Services Research (IHPHSR).

The Health Data Archive is a collection of local datasets that can be downloaded and analyzed by users with access to statistical software. Workshops are hosted each time a new dataset is posted so that people are aware of the new posting and learn how to download and use the dataset.

Local health planners, students, and grant proposal writers find the archive useful. One person noted, "I am a grant proposal writer for a nonprofit organization and have always struggled to find data to demonstrate the need for our programs. The archive has given my organization access to that data and has improved our programs because we have a better idea of what the community really needs." The archive is available on-line at www.healthfoundation.org/data.

- **OASIS**

After the archive was created, the foundation and the

IHPHSR began hearing from community members who wanted to use the archive but did not have the software or experience needed to use it. In response, the foundation and the IHPHSR created the Online Analysis and Statistical Information System (OASIS). OASIS is a Web-based program that allows users to analyze data without owning statistical software, thus allowing unparalleled access to data.

“OASIS has been an important tool in our planning efforts,” said Malcolm Adcock, health commissioner for the City of Cincinnati. “We don’t have to spend time and money collecting local data; we can just access what already exists. And, we have access to data we never thought of collecting but can use to get a better picture of the overall health status of our community.”

Nationally, OASIS is considered an innovative way to share health data. OASIS is available on-line at www.oasis.uc.edu.

- **Greater Cincinnati Community Health Status Survey**
During the early efforts to use data to select the foundation’s focus areas, it became apparent that state- and federal-level data existed, but there was little local data available. The foundation partnered with a local organization that had previously conducted a survey on community health to improve access to local data.

The *Greater Cincinnati Community Health Status Survey (CHSS)* tracks self-reported health status, health behaviors, and health opinions of area residents. The survey compares the health of the region with the nation’s health and shows how the community’s well-being is changing over time. The results of the survey provide useful information to local organizations, policymakers, and residents as they work toward improving the overall health of the greater Cincinnati area.

The foundation and its partnering organization distribute the *CHSS* widely throughout their community. For example, they hold regional outreach meetings that present tailored data from the study to the urban, suburban, and rural regions of the tri-state area. The foundation includes brief results from this and other studies in its weekly e-mail newsletter, which is sent to over 800 readers. And all *CHSS* datasets are available in the Health Data Archive and on OASIS.

Data from the *CHSS* are used in a variety of ways. Organizations use the data to justify the start up or expansion of projects. Policymakers examine the data for unmet needs or health problems. At times, the data have supported allocation of additional funds for the area. For example, the Northern Kentucky Regional Planning Council used data from the survey as part of its efforts to increase state funding for behavioral health services in the region. One of the principals involved noted, “We had data to demonstrate the local need for services, and we could compare our region to the rest of Kentucky. The survey data helped us prepare a

more compelling and factual case to the state.”

The survey was done in 1996, 1999, and 2002. After the 2005 survey, the foundation anticipates conducting the survey every five years.

CONCLUSION

Health data empower both grantees and grantmakers. Data are key to finding and monitoring progress in addressing health problems. Unfortunately, quality local data are too often hard to find. Foundations can be leaders in ensuring that health care decisions are data driven by becoming important players in the collection and use of quality data.

RESOURCES

The Health Foundation of Greater Cincinnati,
www.healthfoundation.org

Health Data Resources Directory, visit
www.healthfoundation.org/data and follow the link to the directory

Health Data Archive, www.healthfoundation.org/data

OASIS, www.oasis.uc.edu

Greater Cincinnati Community Health Status Survey,
www.ihphsr.uc.edu/Reports/reportDetail.cfm?id=9

The Health Foundation of Greater Cincinnati is an independent 501(c)(4) social welfare organization dedicated to improving community health. Its mission is to promote the health of the people of Cincinnati and the surrounding counties in Ohio, Kentucky, and Indiana through investing in enduring projects that improve community health status, health care delivery, and access to health care for all.

For more information regarding the foundation’s data creation efforts, the Health Data Archive, or OASIS, contact Shiloh Turner at 513.458.6608 or toll-free at 888.310.4904, ext. 6608.

Questions regarding the *Community Health Status Survey* should be directed to Ann McCracken at 513.458.6609, or toll-free at 888.310.4904, ext. 6609.

VIEWS FROM THE FIELD is offered by GIH as a forum for health grantmakers to share insights and experiences. If you are interested in participating, please contact Angela Saunders, GIH’s communications manager, at 202.452.8331 or asaunders@gih.org.