



Justifying Program Changes with Community Assessment Data

Many agencies Heartland works with across the country are redesigning their programs to match community needs. Often program changes are made in response to enrollment shifts, funding issues related to the cost of providing care, a desire to fill unmet needs for services, a need for change due to expansion of a service area, and other program and location specific issues. One key factor in justifying your program design modification is the ability of your application to connect your change to community assessment data. Listed below are key pieces of information that can set you on the path to success in gaining approval for your program modification.

Data to Collect: Collect data on infants and toddlers that capture risk factors present in the community. This includes at minimum the following data sets: rates of babies born with a low birth weight, teen pregnancy rates, the percent of mothers that did not receive prenatal care in the first trimester, the percent of mothers that smoked during pregnancy, and rates of mothers that were breastfeeding when they left the hospital.

Where to Collect the Data: Each state has different maternal and child health data systems. However, often visiting your state department of health website will provide you this information. Also, there are a number of other sources such as the Wood Rodgers Foundation Health Rankings which provide county-level data (<http://www.countyhealthrankings.org/>) and the Kids Count Data Center (<http://datacenter.kidscount.org/>).

Data to Collect: It is also important to create a picture of the early care and education landscape in your service area. Again, each state has a different way of tracking this data. The following information should be included in your community assessment whenever possible: the number of early care and education slots for preschoolers versus infants and toddlers, the number of slots that serve low-income children or slots available for families that receive childcare subsidies, the number of children that receive subsidies (and the waiting list or lack of waiting list for childcare subsidies), the number of slots that are full-day, full-year, the number of state preschool slots, the number of Head Start slots, and the number of slots by program type (family childcare, center-based, part-day prek, etc.). Sometimes it is also helpful to note how many programs participate in the state Quality Rating Improvement System. While your area might have adequate care slots, they may not be of sufficient quality or intensity which could also justify your program change.

Where to Collect the Data: Collecting childcare data is easy if you have a good relationship with your child care resource and referral agency. These entities often disseminate childcare subsidies and keep track of the number of children on a waiting list for subsidized childcare and available child care slots. State preschool programs also can be identified from your state department of education performance reports or through data requested from your state preschool program administrator. For a program wishing to convert Head Start slots to Early Head Start slots you may need to show that your area is over-served with preschool slots and underserved by infant and toddler slots. This may be possible using subsidy data and waiting list information. Other sources of data include the state licensing agency, who will often provide information in response to your request and the state quality rating system administrator.

Finally, use research studies to justify why you want to make a program change. Sources of research include the findings from the Head Start Impact Study and the research noted in the Notice of proposal Rule Making on Head Start Program Performance Standards as a justification for extending the day and year and limiting program options. Heartland staff are well versed in preparing program modification proposals and develops both full community assessments and updates for programs. If you are interested in learning about our services, please contact us or visit our website to download our other community assessment tip sheets.