

Management and Technical Assistance Publication Series No. 3

The Benchmarks are Coming! The Benchmarks are Coming!

by Positive Outcomes™

Eleanor W. Hunnemann and Frederick K. Richmond, Partners

Government reinvention strategies are not new, so what makes us certain that the furor over outcome measurement is really a fundamental change in the way we do business, and not just another management fad? One clue is the breadth of the changes taking place nationwide. The universality of the principles appeal to the common sense of taxpayers and donors while providing easily understandable language to some of the most difficult subjects politicians have grappled with for years. To be sure, the early stages of the transition to results-based accountability provide opportunities for creative grantsmanship and double-speak. Adapting a few of our already accountable programs into outcome language will be of little challenge, and may actually blind us to the intricacies that lie ahead. It is only when we step away from our local programming, and look at the state and national applications, that we sense the overwhelming power of the transition and the speed at which it is occurring.

Greater demands on public and private charitable funds have raised questions about the sheer number of service providers and their overhead costs. Accountability provides a natural barometer of agency health. The focus on results shifts emphasis away from the service delivery system. Mergers and acquisitions, once the domain of big business, are growing more frequent in government and non-profit sectors as traditional turf boundaries dissolve. The largest challenge our agencies face now is to help define which results we will be held accountable for. Our old system of counting outputs is dying on the vine, while the opportunity for a new form of advocacy is ripening right under our noses.

Workforce Development Leads the Way:

Workforce development is more than just a substitute buzzword for job training. At the national level, the concept involves melding funding for employment, training, and education programs to produce long-term labor quality, job availability, and job security strategies. Practitioners of government reinvention strategies have seized on the trends to reduce red tape by suggesting the consolidation of hundreds of separate programs into a Workforce Development Block Grant. Customer satisfaction measurements would be expanded beyond program participants to now include business owners and the taxpayers. Quality of life measurements such as length of commute, living wage rates, school-to-work transitions, and technology literacy would be factored into definitions of success.

The Management and Technical Assistance Publication Series is supported by a grant from the Pennsylvania Department of Community and Economic Development, Bureau of Community Empowerment. Permission is granted to use this article with the following citation: Hunnemann, E. W., and Richmond, F. K., *The Benchmarks Are Coming! The Benchmarks Are Coming!* Community Action Association of Pennsylvania Management and Technical Assistance Publication Series Number 3, Harrisburg, PA; © Community Action Association of Pennsylvania, 1996.

Pennsylvania is not waiting for a federal block grant to define the new parameters. Members of the Workforce Development Initiative held a teleconference on June 20, 1996 to inform the community, local officials, and current service providers about the upcoming changes. Attendees heard results-based accountability, performance measures, and benchmarks discussed by Deputy Secretaries and Policy Directors from the Departments of Labor and Industry, Commerce, Public Welfare, Education, and the Governor's Policy Office. This language was a shock to audience members unfamiliar with outcome concepts.

Alan Williamson, Deputy Secretary for Employment Security and Job Training at the Department of Labor and Industry, outlined the creation of benchmarks for employment, education, and special populations. A "benchmark" is simply a snapshot of a statistic taken at a specific point in time, although the word benchmark is often used as a substitute for the word "goal." Suggested Pennsylvania benchmarks for employment include measures of placements in unsubsidized employment, and employment-retention rates 12 months after placement. Education benchmarks could include measures of the attainment of occupational skills and job-retention rates related to higher education programs. Employment rates for low-income people, dislocated and at-risk workers, veterans, persons with disabilities, and persons with limited literacy skills are also being considered. Life-long learning strategies are viewed as a necessity for helping older workers remain employed.

Clearly, many states are conducting statewide strategic planning processes using existing benchmarks as a baseline, and forecasting changes in the statistical measure as a result of government-funded programs. In May 1989, the Governor of Oregon involved hundreds of citizens in producing *Oregon Shines*, Oregon's strategic plan for prosperity. In June 1989, the Oregon Legislature created the Progress Board, directing it to translate the strategies in *Oregon Shines* into measurable goals for Oregon. In January 1991, the Progress Board released the *Oregon Benchmarks*, measurable indicators that Oregon uses at the statewide level to assess its progress towards broad strategic goals. These include the construction of 15- and 30-year goals ranging from anti-poverty, literacy, and employment issues to environmental quality and economic development. Minnesota's Milestones represent a similar statewide effort to link quality of life measurements to a state's ability to attract and retain businesses which provide family-sustaining jobs. Just a few days before Pennsylvania's Workforce Development Teleconference, the Pennsylvania Economy League hosted a seminar on benchmarking which brought together over 200 local, county, city, state, business, and academic leaders. The *Patriot News* in Harrisburg reported on the Economy League's drive to follow the Oregon model within Pennsylvania.

The Management and Technical Assistance Publication Series is supported by a grant from the Pennsylvania Department of Community and Economic Development, Bureau of Community Empowerment. Permission is granted to use this article with the following citation: Hunnemann, E. W., and Richmond, F. K., *The Benchmarks Are Coming! The Benchmarks Are Coming!* Community Action Association of Pennsylvania Management and Technical Assistance Publication Series Number 3, Harrisburg, PA; © Community Action Association of Pennsylvania, 1996.

We CAN influence the Benchmarks!

Pete Tartline, Deputy Director of the Governor's Policy Office, told the teleconference participants that the Workforce Development Team is seeking input in defining the oversight and management roles of the state, designing the structure of the sub-state delivery system, developing results-based accountability measures, and establishing the funding criteria that use accountability standards and performance measures. Many attendees struggled with the terminology so much that they missed the central messages and opportunities which the panel presented. The new system will include both state-level and many local boards, but current providers are **not** guaranteed a seat or a voice. The panelists were clear that "current players will have to meet the new accountability standards."

From a contracting perspective, agencies with the tools and skills to produce results in the accountability environment will have every advantage to excel. But the great frontier is our ability to help create the standards and influence the measures which affect programs that assist low-income people. We can hold up for scrutiny the relationship between the economic viability of our communities and the economic well-being of our citizens. We can force the examination of issues such as access to capital and community infrastructure improvements. We can demand entrepreneurial links between our schools, youth employment, and job-training programs. We can emphasize the importance of transferable skills needed to maintain employment or be re-employed. We can examine job retention strategies in partnership with job creation ideas. We can enhance school-to-work transitions for persons with disabilities.

But we can't be everywhere at one time. So we must develop our local connections and advocacy networks and educate everyone on the new language and processes of results and performance-based contracting. We need to orchestrate our concerns so that they are heard in focus groups consisting of local business representatives and educators. We need to organize our clients so that they may insist on more input than a token seat on the local board. Our staffs must understand the opportunities and consequences of performance-based contracting so they can negotiate and manage for best results. The window of opportunity will be small, and we must recognize and accept this. The opportunity for statewide input is great, if we act NOW!