

Evaluation for Internal Feedback  
Bernie Fabry, 12/97

One rationale for monitoring outcomes is to be accountable to our consumers. Most program evaluation reports are designed to show others the outcomes of our services. An equally if not more important use of our outcomes is as feedback to ourselves. Ford Motor Company developed the slogan, "Anything we can do, we can do better." Program evaluation can serve as our own mirror to help us see how we are doing, and do better. Exploratory data analysis described elsewhere on this web site can also help us identify where we do well and where we need improvement.

Preparing aggregated outcomes gives us the big picture. We can see how our agency and programs are doing overall. The people who directly deliver treatment to our kids and families may be only slightly interested in the overall outcomes, though. There is so much that goes into the overall outcomes, that an individual worker may feel little connection. To provide feedback directly relevant to each worker, we developed brief outcome stories for all of the youngsters who were followed up a year after discharge. These stories, internally called "Vergil stories" to acknowledge the originator (Carter, 1983), were written by the evaluators who collected information on the kids. Each story presented a brief history of a kid, and then summarized in a standard narrative format the outcomes for that kid. A semifictional example follows:

Tracy entered the PP program on July 3, 1996, after discharge from the Children's Psychiatric Center. After 14 months in PP, she was discharged to independent living on October 14, 1997, at age 15. We were able to reach Tracy by phone. She is living with her fiancé in an apartment in Rolling Hills. They plan to be married in 1999. She reports that her family was upset when she moved in with her fiancé, but that things have calmed down and both families are helping them prepare for the wedding. Tracy has no plans for additional schooling (she did earn her diploma at Washington High School). She isn't employed now, but her fiancé has a full-time job that supports them adequately. She has had no drug, alcohol, or antisocial behavior problems. She hopes to begin running a day care center in her home when she is married. Tracy reported that PP did her a lot of good, though she didn't like it at first and tried to run away. She is happy with her life now.

When given to direct-service staff, the stories have provided feedback on the effectiveness of their work with each individual client. The stories have been of greater interest to them than the quantitative data. The stories also have been of special interest to internal people who have minimal contact with the youngsters but are interested in better understanding who the kids are, such as administrators and board members. Such accounts help people see the practical outcomes of the programs, make the grouped data on youngsters more meaningful, make the difficulty of youngsters' lives clearer, and emphasize the importance of outcomes in the natural environment, thus maintaining everyone's focus on producing the best achievable long-term outcomes for each youngster.

Another function the stories have served is to provide a clearer picture of who our failures were

and what happened to them. Overall numbers (e.g., 77% successful) tend to focus on the successes. The Vergil stories make the other 23% real.

Another way we have brought our outcomes closer to home has been to disseminate the results in short news stories in our in-house newsletter. Each story was written to be readable in “USAToday” style. Usually only one graph was presented in each story. To illustrate:

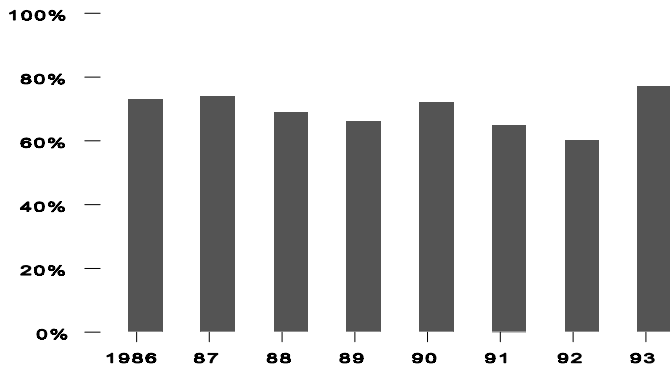
For the past eight years a few of your colleagues have changed hats during the summer to become follow-up investigators. They have tried to find out what has been happening in the lives of kids who had been discharged from the Pressley Ridge programs. The kids were contacted about a year after their discharge. Since the start of the project in 1986, the follow-up investigators have collected information on **1,190 kids**.

The follow-up investigators write short stories, referred to as **Vergil stories**, describing what has been happening in the kids' lives. Some of the stories are cause for celebration: by far most of our kids are succeeding in their lives after leaving Pressley. Other stories are real tragedies. All of them are worth reading both to know how your kids are doing as well as to get some insight into what you might do differently to better help the kids with whom you work now. You can read any and all of the stories by asking your program director for the stories.

For many people the stories are more meaningful than statistics. However, it is difficult to get an overall picture from just the stories. So we have some figures to share with you. This week we have information on **Where Kids Live** about a year after leaving Pressley.

The figure here shows the percent of kids who were not in any kind of treatment program the year after leaving Pressley Ridge. It shows the percent of kids who were living either with regular foster families, with their own families or relatives, or living independently. Each bar represents a different graduating class a year after graduation. As the figure shows, anywhere from 60% to 77% of the kids were

living in non-treatment situations about a year after discharge. 1992 was our worst year with only slightly more than half (60%) of the kids living with their families, with regular foster families, or independently. This means that 40% were in restrictive treatment programs — in some cases hospitals or jails. This year, though, was our best: 77% of the kids were living in non-treatment settings. A new year's resolution worth making is to turn this change in trend into a lasting one.



Vergil stories and USAToday newsletter articles are just two of many ways data from program evaluation projects can be brought back home to impact the people who directly serve clients.

#### Reference

Carter, R.K. (1983). The Accountable Agency. Beverly Hills, CA: Sage.