



COMMON OUTCOMES INITIATIVE

COMMON OUTCOMES REPORT EVALUATION



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Acknowledgement

The Common Outcomes Initiative embraces our connection to each other here on Treaty 6 Territory and Métis Nation of Alberta Region #4. We honour and thank the diverse Indigenous peoples including the Cree, Blackfoot, Métis, Nakota Sioux, Iroquois, Dene, and Saulteaux whose ancestors' footsteps have marked this territory for centuries and whose histories, languages, and cultures continue to influence our vibrant community. As treaty people we recognize the harms caused by colonialism and systemic racism, honour the knowledge and wisdom that has been shared with us, and endeavor to work in this spirit of community and relationship.

Introduction

The Common Outcomes Report (COR) is utilized by the Common Outcomes Initiative (COI) for reporting to City of Edmonton Family & Community Support Services (FCSS) and United Way of the Alberta Capital Region. COR was initially co-developed with the Social Sector with the intent to streamline reporting and tell a larger story of the Sector. As it evolved, COI also added a focus to building sector-wide evaluation capacity. COR was last evaluated in 2018.

Beginning in 2022, the following evaluation questions were developed to investigate whether COR is relevant and useful to stakeholders:

- To what extent is COR appropriate for and meeting the needs of stakeholders?
- How can COR be adjusted to be more meaningful and appropriate?
- How can COI implement a more culturally responsive and decolonized approach?

This document summarizes responses to these questions collected through the following evaluation activities:

- A series of interviews with internal funder stakeholders between November 2022 and January 2023 to understand funder needs with respect to reporting information, as well as interviews with individuals important in the development of COR (n=15).
- A questionnaire sent to all programs completing COR in January 2023 (n=38).
- A series of focus groups open to any agency completing COR held in April 2023 (n=80).

Results

A Common Report

Much of the feedback from agencies reflected a tension between the potential for a common reporting mechanism and aggregate data, and the challenges of a one-size-fits-all approach. While agencies saw value in funders working together and expressed desire for more alignment between reporting for different funders, it seems that the efforts of COR to streamline reporting while telling a common story for the Sector have not always been successful.

In order to be applicable to the wide variety of agencies reporting to COR, the report has attempted to use broad measures and definitions, and to be flexible to the different contexts of reporting agencies. Unintended consequences of this approach include:

- Ambiguity in definitions and expectations for what agencies are expected to measure and how.
- A lack of consistency in how data is being gathered, calling into question the meaningfulness of the aggregate report-backs that the funders provide.
- Certain program models, particularly volunteer programs, public education programs, food banks, and capacity building programs reporting into a system that does not reflect their realities.

Because of the challenges described above as well as variation in the programs reporting each year, agencies raised concern regarding the reliability and validity of the data collected in general, and specifically discussed difficulties in drawing meaningful and actionable insights from the data as a result.

To remedy the above consequences, agencies suggested that reporting allow for the following:

- More targeted, individualized reporting to their particular sub-sector or program model that would be more accurate and meaningful for them.
- Condensed mandatory reporting requirements with increased flexibility to share information that better demonstrates the depth of their impact.

Report Utility

Survey respondents generally reported high levels of utility with the following elements of their program reports:

- Outcomes and Indicators
- Unique Participant Data
- Success Stories

While survey participants indicated that program report **outcome and indicator data** was useful, a tension emerged when this data was discussed in focus groups. For many agencies, the current outcomes and indicators are either not indicative of their work or were written too broadly to be meaningful.

Similarly, survey participants found value in **unique participant data** in general; however, many agencies questioned the emphasis on this type of data in the report. While unique participant data is indicative of program reach, it does not reflect the depth of the impact on those participants. Instead, agencies suggested an increased emphasis on stories and other qualitative elements to further contextualize unique participant data and more insightfully communicate impact.

Both focus group participants and survey respondents viewed the **success stories** in the report as useful and called for more opportunity to communicate participant success.

Meanwhile, survey respondents found low levels of utility with the following reporting elements:

- Participant Barriers
- Funding Sources
- Human Resources Information (i.e., FTEs, Students & Volunteers)

With respect to **participant barrier** questions, agencies as well as internal stakeholders at funding organizations expressed that these questions do not meaningfully support the communication of community trends and needs. They suggested that more open-ended questions as well as more timely conversation and report-back on these trends would be more meaningful.

Funding Sources and **Human Resources** information were rated as having low utility by survey respondents and were not discussed in additional detail by focus group participants.

The Sneak Peek released in the spring of 2022, along with the Data Summary Report and Report Back Session, both released in the fall, were all considerably less accessed by survey respondents, and for those who did access, consistently low ratings of utility were reported.

Culturally Responsive Data Collection

Within this topic, the largest area of curiosity and concern for agencies was data regarding **participant identity**, as follows:

- Indigeneity
- Racialized Identity
- Newcomer Identity
- Gender Identity

Although the reporting of this identity-based data in COR is optional, many agencies shared that they feel pressure to collect it for the report.

While some agencies expressed interest in sector-wide identity-based data collection as a means to better support equity-deserving communities and better understand needs and gaps, many agencies expressed concern that collection of this data could retraumatize participants and damage relationships with program staff.

Further, agencies questioned the value that COR's current treatment of identity-based data was bringing to equity-deserving communities. The Common Outcomes Data Summary and Sneak Peek Reports share aggregate trend demographic data and this data is also shared at Sector Meetings for agencies to discuss. However, as previously described, the variability in programming and data collection make it difficult to draw meaningful conclusions from this aggregate data.

COI is currently engaging Indigenous-led agencies to provide feedback on how they experience reporting to COR and to understand what shifts should be made to create reporting options that align with Indigenous perspectives. This process will be reported on separately after its completion.

Additional Considerations

The following additional considerations also emerged in consultation with participants:

Survey respondents expressed interest in the following changes to the COR Reporting tool:

- Better navigation functionality (i.e., a navigable table of contents, rather than just a back/forward key)
- More intuitive print functionality

- Either remove character limits for the open ended questions or make them explicit in the COR Work book.

Agencies emphasized the transformational importance of relationships to their work - with participants, with other agencies, and with funders. They expressed interest in:

- Opportunities to connect and collaborate with other agencies. This includes time and potentially technology to support information sharing and the discussion of relevant data, common challenges, and ways to develop common solutions.
- More meaningful feedback, communication and collaboration with funders, including through alternative reporting methods.

Conclusion

Recommendations

From the feedback received, the COI working group has developed the following recommendations:

1. Allow space for agencies to define terms that may be nuanced at a program level, allowing for more detailed reporting at a sector level.

For example, allow for space in COR for agencies to articulate how they define a unique participant (UP). While most identify a UP as an individual person accessing programming, there are programs that define this as a program volunteer (i.e., volunteer programs) or as an organization rather than an individual in the case of many Strong Sector programs.

2. Introduce flexibility into Outcome and Indicator reporting to allow agencies to report on measures more meaningful to their program.
3. Streamline the amount of required reporting to include just the following:
 - Volunteer data
 - Unique participant data
 - Outcome data

Though many sections of the COR were not identified as significant areas of challenge, they also provide low value to both agencies and to funders, and as such, their place in the report should be questioned.

4. While minimizing the amount of required reporting, expand opportunities for agencies to report into COR in a manner that makes sense for both them and funders (i.e., more opportunities to share impact stories and meaningful qualitative information rather than just numbers).
5. Suspend the collection of data on gender, Indigenous, non-Indigenous Racialized, and Newcomer identities in COR, and instead focus on providing support to interested

programs in ethically collecting identity-based data in ways that are anti-racist and anti-oppressive. This can be accomplished through the following:

- Continue to provide support to community groups working in this space such as the Edmonton Race-Based Data Table.
 - Provide additional learning opportunities and other supports for agencies exploring the collection of demographic data.
6. Explore opportunities to make the reporting platform more user-friendly.
7. Continue to look at different ways the sector can be convened to:
- Network
 - Engaging in capacity building opportunities
 - Review and interpret sector-level data
 - Discuss common challenges and develop common solutions

Next Steps

- The COI working group welcomes feedback from COI agencies on the findings and recommendations in this report. Please reach out to us at CommonOutcomes@MyUnitedWay.ca.
- In consultation with United Way and City of Edmonton Leadership, a modified reporting outline will be released in late November for reporting on the 2024 program year.
- The results of the consultations with Indigenous-led organizations will be communicated as they become available.