

An aerial, high-angle photograph of a city street. The street is filled with cars and a few larger vehicles, moving in both directions. On the left side of the street, there are construction cranes and some industrial-looking structures. On the right side, there are several tall, modern buildings with many windows. The overall scene is a busy urban environment.

Evaluating Impact in the Realm of Mental Health:

How to measure, report,
and communicate impact to
stakeholders.

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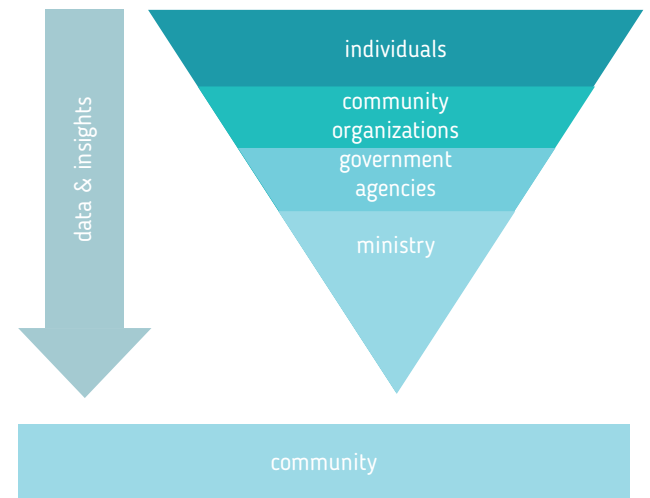
In 2010, the government of British Columbia introduced Healthy Minds, Healthy People, a 10-year plan aimed at addressing mental health and substance use in British Columbia. The vision of the BC government is to “achieve and maintain sound mental health and well-being” in communities and demographics across the province and to provide effective support to help people recovering from mental health and substance use problems. It hopes to measure this by meeting six major milestones through effective funding which aim to: increase the number of British Columbians who experience positive mental health; decrease social-economical vulnerability among youth; decrease alcohol and cannabis use among youth; increase the number of mental health and substance assessments, and increase the amount of effective care available to British Columbians.

Though these milestones seem achievable given the current annual funding and community partnerships, being able to measure progress towards these goals is difficult. Across the globe, many governments and organizations are investing in improving community mental health and substance use profiles, but face many of the same issues when it comes to being able to accurately report meaningful impact in the realm of well-being. Significant challenges that exist around reporting mental health and substance abuse include:

- **Different data types:** much of the data that is collected is qualitative, making it difficult to aggregate and analyze in a comprehensible way. Oftentimes when qualitative data is aggregated, the impact is ambiguous because the data being grouped together are dissimilar, resulting in generalized statements that lose their value.
- **Diverse community partners:** everyone’s mental health needs are different, and the government of British Columbia is doing an effective job of supporting that by funding many community initiatives across the province that cater to the vast needs of BC’s various demographics. However, because community partners have different objectives, their reporting schemas vary from partner to partner, making it difficult to gather and analyze the data in a meaningful and succinct way.

- **Individual vs. organizational reporting:** government-initiated goals like Healthy Minds, Healthy People are often focused on seeing results among individuals, however gathering accurate data relating to mental health is a challenge. People may be reluctant to disclose such personal information, their state of well-being may be different relative to others, and the sample size surveyed may not be the subset of the population that requires these services. Another issue is that the reporting this information may be relevant to an organization providing community services, but certain metrics such as the number of volunteers, may not be relevant when reporting the impact a service has on an overall goal.
- **Stakeholder communication:** being able to effectively communicate impact is the final piece in achieving major milestones. Information gathered will only be valuable to stakeholders if it is communicated in a meaningful way, which can prove challenging when there are multiple stakeholders with different vested interests.

Mental health and substance use are complex issues, but the solution does not have to be. If proper partnerships, funding and goals are in place, measuring impact can be done with the right set of tools and processes.



British Columbia Mental Health Landscape + Challenges

Solution:

Reporting Process Refinement

Given these challenges, the issue lies not in the way data is being analyzed, but in how it is being collected and from whom. Better collection methods will result in better data, allowing for meaningful insights to be gleaned and reported to stakeholders in an effective way.

Identify concrete and measurable objectives.

The first step is creating a short list of objectives that are both achievable and measurable in such a way that the metrics used will still be relevant at the end of the project. Highlighting key objectives is particularly important when working with a large number of organizations that have distinct goals but need to be unified under a common set of objectives to demonstrate impact.

Identify what data will be useful based on these objectives.

The objectives act as the foundation, establishing what measurable data is necessary to achieve the outlined objectives. This data can be quantitative as well as qualitative, and being able to find a balance is important, especially when it comes to social issues such as mental health where everyone has different experiences that cannot necessarily be reduced down to numbers.

Identify methods to collect data.

Based on the types of data that are required to report on the objectives, it is necessary to identify how the data will be collected and from whom, as well as who will be carrying out the data collection and how often. Collection methods can range from interviews to individual surveys to project updates, though it is highly recommended that they are structured so as to save time and efforts when gathering, cleaning, and analyzing the data. When working with qualitative data, structuring of collection

methods can be accomplished by using standardized scales that leave no room for interpretation. Creating and implementing processes to collect relevant data will likely be where most efforts are spent, especially when training stakeholders to use and understand the collection tools. In circumstances where program continuity is dependent on funding, the grantor can make grantee data collection and reporting mandatory. As partnerships are can be crucial to achieving intended outcomes, working with partners to establish processes that work for parties could benefit the quality of data that is collected.

Develop key performance indicators to effectively communicate impact to stakeholders.

Key performance indicators, or KPIs, are an insightful and digestible way to communicate findings from data collection. These KPIs should align with the objectives, and may even be the same metric used to determine whether the objective has been achieved. When working with different organizations that are unified under a common set of objectives, there may be some objectives that do not apply to those organizations as well as other objectives that do. In these circumstances, having a standardized core set of KPIs that each organization is required to use as well as a various sets of KPIs that they can elect to choose from. This way, partners do not feel forced to comply to certain KPIs, which help preserve the relevance and integrity of the data.

Balance qualitative and quantitative data.

While quantitative data is important when evaluating impact, qualitative data can help provide a fuller picture that is more meaningful and relatable to stakeholders. Particularly relevant to mental health and substance use recovery is storytelling, which humanizes the numbers while also raising awareness of the types of struggles and support that exists for people. When complemented with quantitative KPIs, qualitative data can add context to initiatives, demonstrating impact in a valuable way that can catalyze awareness and advocacy for social issues such as mental health and substance use

