

Overview of First Steps Data Collection

Since the beginning of First Steps, the initiative has contracted with a state agency partner, the former Office of Research and Statistics (now the Revenue and Fiscal Affairs Office) for data collection expertise. First Steps data collection began in the early 2000's via spreadsheets that local partnerships mailed on diskettes to ORS staff, who then compiled county and state level totals of numbers served and certain quantifiable data (i.e., number of client visits, books distributed) by program strategy.

In 2004-05, First Steps directed ORS to convert these output spreadsheets into web pages, and First Steps web-based data collection system was launched. Local partnership staff used password-protected logins to enter monthly data on the number of clients served and the number of services provided. While this system was an improvement from mailing in diskettes by county, the outputs system had three major limitations: 1. Entering monthly data resulted in duplications of numbers of clients served; 2. The system did not track individual client data - names, birthdates, etc. - and 3. Data on program activities and performance was not connected to the clients benefitting from those services. These weaknesses in First Steps' data collection infrastructure were highlighted in the initiative's 2006 external evaluation by High Scope.

In response to the 2006 High Scope evaluation, the First Steps state board and staff in 2006-07 worked in partnership with ORS to expand the web-based portal for output numbers into a client data system for First Steps local partnerships, in order to answer the following questions:

1. Are programs meeting SCFS BOT-approved program standards?
2. Are programs being implemented with fidelity to the research-based program model?
3. Are programs having their desired impact?

The system has two major sections for entering client-level data:

1. Cases Data Section

This section of the data system tracks client data within a "case", or family unit. All data collected is linked to an individual family. The Cases Data section tracks, by county, strategy, and program year:

- Individually identifiable information (name, SSN, birth date) for adults and children served
- Demographic information (age, race, gender, income)
- Risk factor information
- Program participation
- One-on-one visits (date, duration, content)
- Group meetings/group trainings (date, duration, content)
- Screenings and assessments
- Connections to other services (First Steps and non-First Steps)

The Cases Data section of the data system is used for strategies where it is appropriate and practical to collect data by individual, i.e., programs that provide multiple services per client over a period of time. The major programs that enter cases data are parenting home visitation, child care scholarships, and Countdown to Kindergarten. Standard reports track client targeting, intensity of services, pre-to-post change in assessments, connections to other services, client retention, and other key performance indicators.

2. Child Care Provider Section

This section tracks program services within child care quality initiatives, wherein the child care provider is the client. The system tracks, by child care provider:

- Provider information
- Child enrollment
- Classroom information
- Staff information and education levels
- Frequency, duration, and content of technical assistance visits
- Environmental Rating Scale (ERS), Program Administration Scale (PAS) assessments

Child care reports track intensity of services, advancement in ABC, and pre-to-post change in assessments.

System Gaps

The First Steps Data System currently tracks demographic information, service delivery, and screenings and assessments for approximately 10,000 child and adult clients annually, as well as information on technical assistance visits and assessments for hundreds of child care providers per year. According to the latest two external evaluations of First Steps - High Scope (2010) and Compass Evaluation (2015) - the First Steps Data System has done an effective job of collecting output and outcome data on clients receiving intensive services by local First Steps partnerships, by program and by year.

While the data system tracks the most prevalent, intensive programs offered by local partnerships, it does not currently track client data for all strategies for two reasons: 1. Some strategies, such as library programs, literacy support programs such as Imagination Library, and others serve large groups of children and adults in ways that aren't feasible to collect individual data on birth dates, risk factors, etc. and 2. Some strategy data is collected within other data systems, such as Early Head Start and Nurse-Family Partnership. For strategies whose data is not collected within the First Steps Data System, the challenge is how to define exactly what data should be collected, and how it should be collected, across all local partnership programs in ways that provide the most accurate, unduplicated data on clients served. To that end, two years ago the State Office of First Steps revamped the outputs spreadsheet to track unduplicated clients across all strategies, which are then totaled at the state level. The spreadsheet is used in conjunction with reports from the First Steps Data System to provide a more complete picture of the impact of First Steps at the partnership level.