

Northeast Florida Community Action Agency, Inc.
A Philosophical Change: Adapting to Outcomes Management

The Agency

America's community action agencies serve as the first line of defense against poverty in our country. Today there are approximately 1,000 Community Action Agencies serving the poor in every state as well as Puerto Rico and the Trust Territories.

The Northeast Florida Community Action Agency, Inc. was created to help eliminate the paradox of poverty in the midst of plenty and to open to everyone the opportunity for education, training, and work, to live in decency and dignity.

The community action agency is headquartered in Jacksonville, Florida and annually serves more than 18,000 low-income individuals and families in seven counties in northeast Florida.

Eight years ago, led by its Executive Director, John Edwards Jr., Northeast Florida Community Action shifted focus from providing emergency assistance only to providing more holistic measurable outcomes that improve the lives of people and enhance low-income communities.

The model selected to enable this enhancement is the Results Outcome Management and Accountability (ROMA) system of measuring outcomes.

Under this outcomes model, the organization provides a broad menu of programs and services, including Self-Sufficiency, Vulnerable Population Services (Elderly, Homebound, Disabled), Home Energy Assistance, Crisis Assistance, Weather Related or Supply Shortage, TEFAP, and LIHEAP.

The Challenge

"Restructuring a service delivery organization into an organization focused on managing outcomes is not a task accomplished over a weekend" stated Mr. Edwards. Therein was their challenge— one that would play out over several years. Major hurdles would have to be cleared.

Enfranchising Key Players

Mr. Edwards knew that it would be necessary to involve the board, staff and volunteers in the early planning phase. Outcomes management was going to not only change staff relationships with customers, but staff relationships with each other. An integrated, self sufficiency approach became the agency's new case management philosophy.

Determining the Metrics to Measure

As ROMA ramped up, there were several models of Outcomes and Indicators published by the federal government for Community Service Block Grant grantees, which include all Community Action Agencies. The agency had to build their own “catalog” of outcomes, based on the federal goal requirements.

Training, Tracking, and Reporting

It was evident that the agency staff, from the top down, would require both a philosophical and working knowledge of outcomes management. Outcomes management would have to become the yardstick for planning and implementing a variety of service programs, not just those funded by CSBG funds.

Management was aware that the key to successful outcomes tracking and reporting was an information system which provided the staff access to a common database. While the current software package worked in the past, it didn't address outcomes management needs.

The agency was currently spending \$16,800 annually to connect their remote offices via a frame relay network, yet the network was underpowered for its new role. The challenge became adapting to new information needs without overburdening the technology budget.

The Solution

During this period of rapid change, John Edwards, Jr. was also the President of the Florida Association for Community Action. John realized that his agency's challenges were the same as the other association members. Leveraging the knowledge and resources of these other agencies just made good sense.

Support by the Florida Department of Community Affairs and the Florida Association of Community Action provided extensive ROMA training sessions for both agency management and operational staff.

Outcome measures were defined and the outcome management philosophy became part of the local agency psyche. There remained one major hurdle to ROMA implementation: a robust data management system was needed to support the requirements of the agency's new model.

Mr. Edwards contacted CMA Technologies, a North Carolina software developer, to discuss the requirements. Northeast Florida Community Action Agency had been a client of CMA since 1998. The timing was right. CMA was currently performing the design phase of an Internet based version of its cmTools Community Action product.

CMA and Mr. Edwards gathered together a group of six Florida community action agencies who were current cmTools LAN users. The group committed to the new product and formed a user

committee to participate in CMA's design process. Spanning a period of several months, the group met with CMA management to formalize product functionality.

Over the following year the product developed, was beta tested and successfully installed in the six participating agencies. Mr. Edwards stated "The feedback was extremely positive. The new product, called cmTools Online, provided the data collection and reporting requirements necessary to support our outcome model. We gained powerful technology tools and saved money at the same time. Needless to say, we're extremely happy with the results."

Since the time of the initial installations, many other Florida agencies have joined the cmTools Online user community.

Many New Benefits, Some Unexpected

With the need for the frame relay network eliminated, monthly networking costs dropped from \$1,400 to \$335. A single, central database is now a reality, with all users having access to real-time customer information. A secondary benefit was discovered: customer attempts to receive duplicate services from multiple offices are now easy to identify.

cmTools Online provides the agency with stronger case management tools and provides the ability to refer customers to other agency service areas—a necessary requirement for effective customer outcome management.

With cmTools' open database, agency management now has the ability to generate information queries and reports without developer involvement or cost.

Looking Toward the Future

With the new rules and new tools in place, Northeast Florida Community Action Agency is in a better position to support their mission "...to open to everyone the opportunity for education, training, and work, to live in decency and dignity".

"We gained powerful technology tools and saved money at the same time. Needless to say, we're extremely happy with cmTools Online."

John Edwards, Jr., Executive Director

"cmTools' ability to handle growth is fantastic! We brought three new offices online without a hitch, and in less than an hour."

Ron Howell, Program Coordinator