

Introduction

“Free the child’s potential, and you will transform him into the world.”

—Maria Montessori



In 1998, the passage of Proposition 10 authorized the use of a tobacco tax to fund services for children ages 0-5 years and their families. This unprecedented decision to support early childhood programs created the First 5 Commission of San Diego County (First 5 San Diego), and gave this Commission the flexibility to determine its structure, approach and focus in response to local community needs. Now, a decade later, the Commission has developed as an organization, a key funder of services, and an agent of change. As San Diego County grows, the First 5 Commission of San Diego will continue to play a vital role. Estimates forecast that the county’s total population will reach 3.6 million in 2020, up from 3 million in 2004,¹ and that the number of children ages 0-5 years will increase by 9.2%, rising from 250,677 in 2004 to 273,767 in 2020.²

On an annual basis, the Commission receives a comprehensive public report on the results of its funded projects in order to ensure these public investments in the youngest members of our community are producing the desired results, examine the challenges encountered, and recommend improvements or new directions. In addition, the Commission uses these results for future planning and to determine new strategic investments. The Commission is committed to using data to continuously improve the systems and services it supports to benefit the young children and their families it serves.

The purpose of this report is to document the overall impact of First 5 San Diego’s work from July 2007 through June 2008 (FY 2007-08). It is an impact evaluation report, which seeks to address the successes and challenges of the Commission’s initiatives and activities on the children and families who access the services, the collective programs it funds and the health, education and family systems in this community. In addition, this report also highlights:

- The service system First 5 has enhanced and how it interconnects with existing systems
- Emerging needs and trends among San Diego’s 0-5 population and their families
- Promising practices

The report synthesizes the most relevant data collected by contracted programs and by the Harder+Company Community Research evaluation team. When appropriate, it includes benchmark data and research to contextualize the results of funded initiatives. This report is both a public accountability requirement to State and local First 5 Commissions and the San Diego County community concerning the public investments of

¹ SANDAG Regional Data Workbook: http://datawarehouse.sandag.org/defm_for_web.xls. Accessed: 10/8/2007.

² First 5 San Diego Strategic Plan: http://www.first5sandiego.org/uploads/Strat_Plan_2003-06.pdf

First 5 San Diego, as well as an analysis of how the results of the Commission's projects can contribute to best and promising practices in the fields serving young children and their families. It also provides information to inform the future decision making of First 5 San Diego.

Data gathered through the Commission's evaluation can provide valuable information concerning the condition of young children and families, community needs, and gaps in services. Persons requesting different, or more specific, data or information than is included in this report should contact the First 5 Commission of San Diego County at 616-230-6460 to make a data request.

Improving Outcomes and Strengthening Systems: First 5 San Diego's Evaluation Design for FY2007-08

First 5 San Diego generally funds multi-year initiatives that build on existing services, concentrate on community impact, and ensure that funded programs are strategically linked both to the Commission's Strategic Plan and its vision. "Initiatives" are defined as a group of programs that seek to produce common outcomes for young children and their families by pursuing similar activities and approaches. For example, the Healthy Development Services Initiative (HDS), funds six regional leads to coordinate a network of services that provide physical and developmental support services for young children and their families. By doing so, First 5 hopes to provide critical needed services for young children while building and strengthening relationships between providers that are sustained with or without First 5 funding.

In addition to strengthening systems, the Commission's strategic concentration of funding has allowed it to effectively and appropriately track and report contractor progress toward meeting the goals and objectives of its strategic plan.

The approach to evaluating the Commission's work is a partnership between the Commission staff, its contractors, and an advisory body, as well as the Commission's evaluation contractor, Harder+Company Community Research. This approach is depicted in Exhibit A.

The evaluation begins with the Evaluation Framework, which is part of the Commission's Strategic Plan. (see Appendix C). This framework was developed by Harder+Company and the Commission's Evaluation Leadership Team (ELT), an advisory body of local evaluation and program experts, to broadly define objectives and indicators of success. Using this Framework as a road map, the Commission selects from the Framework's indicators when developing new initiatives. These indicators are then refined by Harder+Company and the ELT in the context of the particular initiative and included in outgoing RFPs. Once contractors are selected, Harder+Company works in collaboration with the contractors to further refine the indicators in the context of the services they provide and develop a consensus on common data collection tools and implementation strategies. The initiative evaluations include individual, program, initiative, and system level analysis.³ As a result of this profoundly collaborative process, the Commission has an understanding of the impact of its

Key Components of the First 5 2007-08 Evaluation Design

- + **Consensus based:** Within the evaluation framework, each initiative's funded programs reach agreement on common tools and evaluation approaches.
- + **Utilization focused:** The evaluation balances rigor of academic research with what is meaningful, feasible and timely for use in planning, policy, and program improvement.
- + **Multi-level:** Evaluation information is collected from multiple sources at multiple levels (client, program, initiative, systems, and community).
- + **Mixed methods:** The design utilizes an array of quantitative and qualitative methods, ranging from surveys and assessments that quantify behavior change to focus groups and participatory photography that lend context and an opportunity to hear directly from families who receive services funded by First 5.

³ Program level findings are not presented in Annual Reports. Individual findings by lead contractors are provided at a later date as part of the Commission's "learning community" approach. At these meetings, initiative contractors meet with their peers to discuss their individual findings in relationship to the initiative as a whole. These meetings frequently provide opportunities to share successes, challenges, and possible solutions to program issues to improve future outcomes.

initiatives as a whole and contractors develop a “learning community” that can share data, compare findings, and discuss solutions to challenges — ultimately improving outcomes for young children and their families.

Each initiative has its own unique evaluation design that is tied to the Commission’s strategic plan. In keeping with the Commission’s approach of describing impact through “numbers and stories,” evaluation designs include common quantitative outcomes collected by child assessments, parent surveys, and funded program surveys, as well as qualitative methods, such as focus groups, case studies, and stakeholder interviews. Specific details of the designs are included in each initiative’s chapter and in Appendix B.

Exhibit A: Commission Approach to Evaluation



