



KING COUNTY AUDITOR'S OFFICE

December 28, 2018

Follow Up on Best Starts for Kids Evaluation Plan Audit

TO:

Metropolitan
King County
Councilmembers

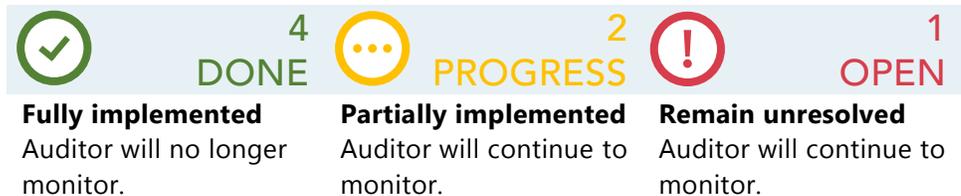
The Best Starts for Kids evaluation team has completed or made significant progress on the majority of our recommendations to improve the transparency and rigor of its evaluation. Since our 2017 audit, the team has bolstered its criteria for selecting programs for in-depth evaluations. As a result, the evaluation team will be using its limited evaluation resources to more effectively contribute to the evidence base for King County. The team has also worked to ensure data reliability for the interim data system by identifying and documenting internal controls and a plan for training users. This will improve the accuracy of the final evaluation results. Finally, the evaluation team has examined any potential areas of bias and developed mitigation steps. This transparency can increase public trust in the objectivity of evaluation findings.

FROM:

Kymber Waltmunson,
County Auditor

However, the evaluation team cannot complete some recommendations until other Best Starts for Kids programs and support systems are implemented. For example, the Department of Community and Human Services is still in the process of soliciting contracts to implement a new data system. Until a new system has been selected or designed, the evaluation team cannot develop specific rigorous training and quality checks for data entry. Additionally, some Best Starts for Kids (BSK) programs are still being developed. The evaluation team hasn't set performance measures for these programs because it wants to identify measures in collaboration with the participating organizations. It has, however, developed comprehensive performance measures for the programs that BSK has already established.

Of the seven audit recommendations:



Please see below for details on the implementation status of these recommendations.

Recommendation 1

PROGRESS 

The Department of Public Health – Seattle & King County and the Department of Community and Human Services should develop performance measures that adhere to the results-based accountability model for all programs receiving Best Starts for Kids funding.

STATUS UPDATE: The evaluation team has worked with the Department of Public Health (DPH), the Department of Community and Human Services (DCHS), individual King County programs, and state programs in order to develop performance measures that satisfy all three elements of BSK's results-based accountability model. This model requires that performance measures answer three questions:

- How many did we serve?
- How well did we serve them?
- Is anyone better off?

In our audit, we found several programs that lacked performance measures answering one or more of these questions. Most notably, multiple public health programs used pre-established statewide performance measures that pre-dated BSK and did not answer all three questions. Since then, the evaluation team has added the missing performance measures for these pre-existing state programs. For example, the Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) program did not include a performance measure that answered the question "How well did we serve them?" The evaluation team has added measures that address quality of service, including measuring the percentage of client visits in which nutrition educational information was provided and the number of clients that were referred to preventative services.

Since BSK has not rolled out and selected organizations for all its programs, the evaluation team will have more performance measures to develop in conjunction with the selected organizations. For this reason, we are listing the recommendation status as "in progress" rather than "done."

Recommendation 2

DONE 

The Department of Public Health – Seattle & King County and the Department of Community and Human Services should develop, document, and apply a plan with detailed criteria for selecting the appropriate types of evaluation for different programs.

STATUS UPDATE: The evaluation team has documented criteria for selecting the in-depth types of evaluation that programs will undergo (for example, development evaluations to support innovation in new untested programs, or impact evaluations to determine if expected changes took place). The team is determining the best type of evaluation for each program based on the amount of pre-existing evidence and the maturity of the program. In addition, it is consulting program managers, strategic advisors, and others about what type of information it hopes to gain from a program evaluation. These considerations are all captured in a two-stage interest assessment. This will increase the helpfulness of the evaluation results given the different informational needs of different programs. In addition, the evaluation team will be able to demonstrate why it chose a given type of evaluation for each evaluated program.

Recommendation 3

DONE 

The Department of Public Health – Seattle & King County and the Department of Community and Human Services should modify the existing criteria to identify programs for program evaluations to include the applicability of existing evidence.

STATUS UPDATE: To determine which programs to evaluate in-depth, the evaluation team has developed a scoring system that considers the applicability of existing evidence. Programs receive a higher score if an evaluation has the potential to add to or improve the existing evidence. This scoring criterion allows evaluators to consider not only whether evidence for the program already exists, but also whether that evidence is strong, recent, and tested in the local context. As a result, the team is equipped to select evaluations in a transparent manner, allocate limited resources effectively, and inform future investments and priorities.

Recommendation 4

DONE 

The Department of Public Health – Seattle & King County and the Department of Community and Human Services should document and communicate their data quality control procedures for the current data system.

STATUS UPDATE: The evaluation team has documented data control procedures and training procedures for the current interim data management system. This spreadsheet-based system includes controls in the spreadsheets themselves (for example, locked formatting and data type requirements) and post-submission controls (for example, flagging unreasonable results and missing data). The evaluation team has also documented the initial and follow-up training procedures for data collection and submission. These controls can help ensure that the evaluation team has access to reliable data until the new data system can be implemented. This in turn can lead to more accurate evaluation findings.

Recommendation 5

OPEN 

The Department of Public Health – Seattle & King County and the Department of Community and Human Services should update quality control practices for the new data collection system, including service provider training, before the new system is implemented.

STATUS UPDATE: The new data system has not yet been determined or implemented. DCHS and King County Information Technology are still in contract negotiations with vendors to develop the new database. Although our recommendation specifies that the quality control practices be developed “before the new system is implemented,” the evaluation will need more information about the system to begin this work. The evaluation team estimates that the system will be ready for testing by summer of 2019, which would allow it to begin developing preliminary control procedures.

Recommendation 6

DONE 

The Department of Public Health – Seattle & King County and the Department of Community and Human Services should require that all individuals conducting the Best Starts for Kids evaluation identify potential conflicts of interest and document their mitigation strategies as early as possible in order to increase transparency.

STATUS UPDATE: The evaluation team developed a conflict of interest form for all BSK program evaluators—both internal and external—to complete. The form directs evaluators to identify their role in the BSK evaluation, note whether they or family members have any potential conflicts (financial or otherwise) with any of the BSK programs or organizations, and explain the nature of the conflict. The evaluation team then determined necessary mitigation steps with those evaluators that reported a potential conflict of interest or the perception of a conflict of interest. In most cases, these mitigation steps were already in place through the external evaluation institutions. As a result of these efforts, the evaluation team can demonstrate its impartiality. This can increase public trust in the accuracy and objectivity of the evaluation findings.

Recommendation 7

PROGRESS 

The Department of Public Health – Seattle & King County and the Department of Community and Human Services should put procedures in place to protect the independence of the evaluation team. These procedures should include maintaining documentation of any report changes that they or the Executive propose and setting up a process to resolve disagreements with the evaluation team.

STATUS UPDATE: The evaluation team, BSK strategic management, and department management all met and agreed that the evaluation team will have final review of annual reports. In addition, they determined that any disagreements would be resolved in a standing meeting between the evaluation leads and the BSK Policy and Planning team. A written agreement has not been established with the Executive's Office, however. Since all reports include a period for executive review, the evaluation team should come to an agreement of similar protections and procedures with the Executive Office. As future reports increasingly focus on evaluation findings rather than implementation processes, the evaluation team's independence will become all the more important.

Mia Neidhardt conducted this review. Please contact Mia at 206-477-7958 if you have any questions about the issues discussed in this letter.

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