



# Using Observations Throughout the Pascale Sykes Foundation Strengthening Families Initiative Evaluation



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The Senator Walter Rand Institute for Public Affairs (WRI) at Rutgers University - Camden produces and highlights research leading to sound public policy and practice, and with that as a foundation, aims to convene and engage stakeholders in making the connections across research, policy, and practice in support of Southern New Jersey residents. From 2013 to 2022, WRI has conducted a comprehensive evaluation of the implementation of the Pascale Sykes Foundation's Whole Family Approach initiative across 12 nonprofit collaboratives in Southern New Jersey. The Whole Family Approach is a preventative, family-led strategy that provides adults and children tools to set, plan for, and achieve goals together. Collaborating agencies work together with families with two adult caregivers to develop long- and short-term goals to thrive. WRI's evaluation of the Whole Family Approach includes:

- A longitudinal, quasi-experimental evaluation of families' changes in forming healthy relationships, child wellbeing, and financial stability,
- A process evaluation to understand how the Whole Family Approach was implemented across collaboratives, including observations, interviews, focus groups, and document review, and
- Multiple focused evaluations that examine the impact of the Whole Family Approach in areas of interest including student social, emotional, and behavioral growth, service model delivery, family-community partner relationship development, and the cultural responsiveness of the Whole Family Approach.

## The report presented here discusses the role of observation as a data collection method throughout WRI's partnership with Pascale Sykes Foundation-funded collaborative organizations, and how observations supported and contributed to changing collaborative-evaluator relationships over time.

The Pascale Sykes Foundation's (PSF) implementation of Whole Family Approach employs organizational collaboration among service providers to support families in defining and achieving attainable goals while fostering a dual-adult support approach to enhance child well-being, family financial stability, and healthy family relationships. In partnership with and through funding from the Pascale Sykes Foundation and their long standing Whole Family Approach, the Senator Walter Rand Institute for Public Affairs' (WRI) role as evaluators of implementation of the Whole Family Approach across social service agencies involved various data collection methods (i.e. surveys, focus groups, observation).

Throughout the course of a program evaluation, approaches to research design and methods employed can change due to participants involved, evaluation settings, and lead researchers. The flexibility of evaluation in many cases lies in its ability to respond to the needs of participants and supporting organization(s) in pursuit of evaluation goals. The PSF Strengthening Families initiative evaluation experienced multiple methodological changes throughout its evaluation period, one of those changes being the introduction and focus of collaborative organization meeting observations to aid in the process component of the overall evaluation.

Observation is a way of gathering data by watching behavior, events, or noting physical characteristics among individuals (CDC, 2018). Observational strategies often differ depending on the extent to which the observer or evaluator will be a participant in the setting. The extent of participation is a spectrum - varying from full immersion in the setting as a full participant to complete uninvolvedness, with great variation along this continuum (Patton, 2014). As such, the extent of participation can change over time. Throughout the ten year PSF evaluation, WRI collaborative coordinators attended regularly scheduled collaborative meetings. Collaborative meeting occurrence generally ranged from a minimum of one meeting per quarter to a maximum of one meeting per month. Collaborative organizations that had observation notes and observations conducted include The Network, Connected Families, Family Enrichment Network (FEN), Heart of South Jersey, First Star (FS), Connecting Families to Communities (CF2C), Family Strengthening Network (FSN), Families in Motion (FIM), Unidos para la Familia (UPF), Families to College (FTC), and Stronger Families (SF).

WRI observations of collaborative meetings began in 2012 and continued through 2021. Observations from 2012 to March 2020 occurred in person and switched to virtual/hybrid formats for the remainder of 2020 and 2021. With multiple research staffing and principal investigator changes overtime, observation meetings notes remain on file from 2015-2022 and results from observations appear in interim/annual reports as determined by the principal investigator(s) at those times.

The observation method employed throughout the evaluation was participant observation, where WRI collaborative coordinators participated (as appropriate) in collaborative meetings while observing and taking notes, engaging in activities such as talking with collaborative staff, and/or participating in some project activities. Participant observations were employed as an evaluation method to align with the evaluation goal of improved understanding of collaboratives' ongoing processes and contextualized decision-making. Collaboratives agreed on WRI participation in meetings and were knowledgeable about the observations happening, with variations in how much or little collaborative staff engaged WRI collaborative coordinators as participants during their meetings. WRI collaborative coordinators engaged in observations combined with multiple other data collection strategies to achieve deeper understanding of collaborative processes and to result in findings that reflect the characteristics, nuances, and context of each collaborative's approach to implementing the Whole Family Approach and supporting their clients/families.

Each observation was accompanied by an observation tool designed by the evaluation principal investigator - the observation tool is a guiding document that helps the observer outline notes in a systematic way, and gather data through guiding themes. These tools were used to describe the processes during collaborative meetings for organizations in the Pascale Sykes Strengthening Families Initiative. Data collected during these meetings through notes were/have been used in conjunction with data from focus groups to better detail collaborative processes in key areas.

Changes to the observation tool throughout the evaluation reflect the systematic yet adaptable approach of observation. From 2012 to 2018, the purpose of the collaborative observations was "to observe and monitor the functionality of the collaborative by assessing the following: participation and attendance at the meetings; problem identification and decision-making processes, as well as the leadership and governance structures." As noted above, WRI staffers formally observed different collaborative meetings across counties, and also attended additional collaborative meetings to build rapport and better understand the context of collaboratives, many of which were in developmental stages during the 2012-2015 timeframe.

During this time, WRI staffers engaged in a content analysis of written collaborative notes, using thematic and analytic

coding strategies. The data from the observations were initially classified into units (e.g., work process, problem-solving, and group cohesion). Each line was coded and then open coding was done to identify the additional concepts related to the aforementioned themes. WRI staff then also searched for emergent themes across collaboratives. Major focal areas from 2012 to 2013 included work process, problem-solving, and group cohesion. Results from 2014-2018 revealed the addition of accountability, decision making, and leadership as key areas.

Upon the hiring of a new principal investigator in 2018, the observation tool was reworked based on the goals of PSF and the recommendations of researchers who have been working on the evaluation for extended periods of time. WRI collaborative coordinator staff received initial training on the use of the qualitative observational tool, and the new qualitative data collection tool was implemented in September 2018. The major focal areas from 2018-2021 included problem-solving, process, best practices, and self-evaluation.

The four areas of focus defined in the observation tool identified in observation notes provided a structure to analyze process-related data. Problem-solving focused on problems the collaborative was currently encountering, the process used, and steps taken by the collaborative to solve problems, and whether the problem was tabled, progress made, a solution identified, or solved within the course of the discussion. Progress was described as efforts to advance the Whole Family Approach within their collaboratives. Best practices were activities or processes identified by the collaborative as effective either through concerted and careful deliberation or self-evaluation. Finally, information around how collaboratives review and alter their policies and practices through self-evaluation provided insights into their operations.

Guided by these four main areas of focus from the observation tool, data analysis employed thematic content analysis. Open coding was also employed to identify additional themes for the process evaluation component of the overall evaluation. Other themes of community development, education, internal processes, organizational collaboration, English as a Second Language (ESL), family, finances, recruitment, sustainability, and youth development emerged from the analyses during this time period.

In 2021, upon further review and continuation of the COVID-19 pandemic, the observation tool no longer met the needs of many collaboratives' meetings, and two categories of the tool (best practices and self-evaluation) were no longer applicable. Generally, as collaboratives wound down their activities towards the end of funding from the Pascale Sykes Foundation, conversations shifted from evaluation and improvement to sustainability and final reporting. The observation tool was reworked for the final year of data collection, and the key focus areas became operational context, problem solving, progress, and sustainability. Data

analyses and theme results from observations and focus groups from the final years of the evaluation will be included in the final evaluation report (Fall 2022).

Across the entire evaluation, the observational tools guided WRI collaborative coordinator staff in notes pertinent to the evaluation, with particular attention to the ways in which collaboratives' problem solved and worked through procedural and strategic challenges. Throughout the course of the PSF evaluation, WRI collaborative coordinator staff switched from unobtrusive observation, and no interaction with participants, to having limited or moderate interactions, intervening when further clarification of action is needed, or depending on the discussions and activities at hand. The unique presence and role of WRI collaborative coordinator staff at collaborative meetings illustrated the duality of objective evaluator and participant as necessary. As qualitative research methodology notes, evaluators must be flexible, sensitive, and adaptive in negotiating the precise degree of participation that is appropriate in any particular observational study (Patton, 2014). As the evaluation focused more on processes and strategy,

the observations' utility increased, and the deepening familiarity between WRI collaborative coordinator staff and collaborative staffers increased flexibility in participant observation implementation.

Overtime, as interactions during meetings grew more consistent, so did partner relationships with collaboratives. The trust built overtime deepened engagement with collaborative organizations and opened lines of communication that may have been previously stifled earlier in the evaluation. Thus, the observation tool served as a vessel for WRI collaborative coordinators to engage with collaboratives and deepen connections. These relationships and shared networks grew essential as the COVID-19 pandemic forced collaboratives to pivot to resource provision and different types of service delivery. Observations during these months' meetings revealed adaptability among collaborative members and open lines of communication between evaluator, funder, and grantee to facilitate access to resources for communities during this time.

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