Evaluation Technical Assistance Brief

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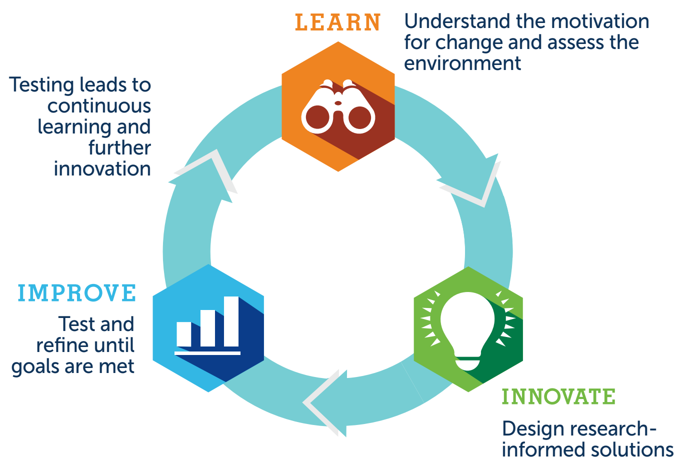
Testing Incremental Improvements to Program Enrollment: An Example of How RPG Projects Can Use the Learn, Innovate, Improve Framework

The goal of the Regional Partnership Grant (RPG) program is to improve child safety and well-being, family functioning, and adult recovery outcomes by funding collaborations that serve families and children who are in, or at risk of, out-of-home placement as the result of a parent or caregiver's substance use disorder.[1] To meet the needs of these families, RPG projects partner with child welfare, substance use treatment, mental health, and judicial systems, which requires extensive coordination and communication. Serving the complex needs of families and maintaining partnerships across various systems of care can make it difficult for RPG project teams and their partners to pinpoint the root cause of challenges and to develop effective, feasible, and scalable solutions to these challenges.

One approach that RPG projects can use to support this kind of problem solving is the Learn, Innovate, Improve framework, or LI^2. A framework for continuous quality improvement (CQI), LI^2 helps users identify program or evaluation improvements and iteratively test these improvements over time. LI^2 is intentionally collaborative and designed to bring together people from various roles; this helps ensure that staff at different levels and from different organizations have a say in the potential improvements and CQI processes. The framework has three phases—Learn, Innovate, and Improve—that build on one another, although projects can enter the process at any point, depending on their situation and needs (Exhibit 1).

This brief provides a detailed example of how an RPG project might use the LI^2 framework to solve a common problem: lower-than-expected program referrals and enrollment. This brief is a companion to two related briefs: the first describes [what happens in each phase of LI^2], and the second describes [how data collected for RPG evaluations can be used for LI^2 and other CQI processes.][2,3]

Exhibit 1. The LI^2 cycle



Who should read this brief?

The Children's Bureau within the Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, funded this brief for groups that have an RPG or for other agencies that want to evaluate their programs. This brief provides an example of how RPG projects could use the LI^2 framework to address challenges with referrals and enrollment. The brief was written with RPG project staff, their local evaluators, and other partners in mind, but it could also be relevant to other program areas and organizations.

RPG Regional Partnership Grants
Children's Bureau
Mathematica Progress Together

The RPG project's situation before using LI²

The problem: To recruit participants into its services, a recent RPG recipient developed a referral partnership with a community agency. The agency screens its clients to determine whether they meet the eligibility criteria for RPG and refers potentially eligible clients to the project. But since starting the project, referrals—and therefore enrollment in RPG services—have been lower than the RPG recipient expected. Fewer clients are receiving RPG services than planned, and frontline staff do not have full caseloads.

The goal: The RPG project team wants to increase the number of referrals so that it can serve the intended number of clients and give full caseloads to frontline staff. The project director decides to use the LI² framework to determine the root of the problem and then to identify and test new strategies for increasing referrals.

LEARN

The primary goal of the learn phase is to clarify the reason for making a programmatic change and ensure a shared understanding of the underlying problem. During the Learn phase, the project director led the activities, and the RPG project team—including the RPG organization and evaluation team—took the following steps:

1. **Met to discuss the problem and the need for change.** The project director worked with the RPG project team to identify staff with the range of perspectives needed to determine why referrals were so low. These staff included those who would be involved in any future programmatic changes (that is, staff who make and receive referrals), both to get "buy-in" from these staff and to ensure that the solutions chosen would be feasible. The resulting team consisted of frontline staff and managers from the RPG organization and the referral partner agency. Staff from the evaluation team would help review and collect data.

   The project director invited this group to a kickoff meeting. Before the meeting, the project director and evaluation team prepared a summary describing the project's original monthly enrollment goals and the monthly referral and enrollment data since the project began.

   During the kickoff meeting, team members discussed the extent of the problem, based on the data summary, and why change was necessary. To facilitate this discussion, the project director led the group through a problem-tree analysis, an activity that maps the anatomy of cause and effect around a particular issue (Box 1).

2. **Assessed the project environment to understand the factors that affect or contribute to the problem.** The team members decided to collect and analyze data from several sources, including quantitative information about referrals and enrollment and qualitative information from both staff and clients. To ensure their instructions on the referral process were clear and consistent, they also planned to review the training manual given to partner agency staff. Exhibit 2 describes each type of data they used, what they wanted to measure with the data, and what they learned (the findings) from their analysis.

Box 1. Example of a problem-tree analysis

Team members first devised a concise statement of the problem, which they placed at the trunk of the tree.

Next, they brainstormed the possible "roots," or underlying sources, of the challenge. They looked for themes among the roots and grouped them together accordingly.

They then brainstormed the "leaves," or the possible results if the challenge is left unaddressed.

Following this process, the team members agreed that they needed to collect more data to help verify which of the possible roots of the problem were the likeliest causes.

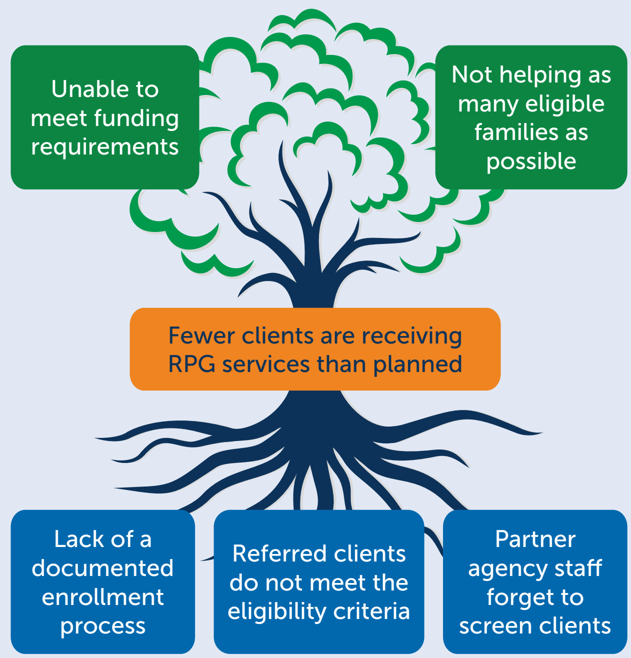


Exhibit 2. Data sources, purpose of data, and key findings identified from the Learn phase

Type of data collected	What the data were used to measure	Findings
Quantitative information about the client referral process, extracted from partner agency and RPG project's records	• Number of clients the partner agency has contact with every month that the agency estimates meet the RPG eligibility criteria • Number of potential RPG clients screened by partner agency staff • Number of potential RPG clients referred to the RPG project	• The partner agency estimated it has contact with about 15 clients each month who could be eligible for RPG. • The partner screened five clients per month for RPG eligibility. • Of the five clients screened, the partner agency referred three to the RPG organization.
Brief interviews with partner agency staff	• How well partner agency staff understand their role in the referral process, including identifying potential clients, screening them, and sending referrals to the RPG team	• Not all partner agency staff were aware of their role in screening potential clients. • Some partner agency staff did not know how to share information on eligible clients with the RPG team.
Walkthrough of referral process from the perspective of a client	• How easy the overall referral process is for clients to navigate	• Clients reported that the process was simple and easy to understand.
Review of training manual or other guidance documents provided to partner agency staff	• How clear the training and guidance documents are, including the diagram that maps client flow through referral and enrollment	• The training manual's diagram that maps client flow was outdated. It was from the beginning of the project period, and the team had changed the process since then. • The eligibility criteria for screening potential clients appeared many pages into the manual and were hard for partner agency staff to easily find.

3. **Held a debrief meeting to discuss what they learned from the data collection.** The full team met to discuss the results of the data collection and analyses. The project director shared their interpretation of the data and asked for others' impressions of the findings. The team ultimately agreed that the main cause of low referrals was staff not fully understanding the eligibility rules and referral process. As a result, staff were not consistently (1) screening potential clients and (2) sharing information about eligible clients with the RPG team.

INNOVATE

The primary goal of the Innovate phase it to explore and design evidence-informed solutions that address the root causes of the problems identified during the Learn phase.

Key terms for the Innovate phase

- **Design plan:** A plan that includes the "why, what, when, where, who, and how" of the design process
- **Strategy session:** A structured brainstorming and planning meeting to develop potential solutions to a problem
- **Road map for change:** A written summary of the specific changes the team plans to make, what the team hopes will occur as a result of the changes, what measurable success looks like, and factors outside the team's control that might affect the process

During the Innovate phase, the project director again led the activities, and the RPG project team took the following steps:

1. **Wrote a design plan to guide the process of developing solutions.** The project director wrote a *design plan* to guide the upcoming *strategy sessions* for developing solutions to the problems identified in the Learn phase. Exhibit 3 shows the elements of the design plan and the guiding questions the project director considered when developing each part of the plan.

   The design plan stated that everyone who participated in the Learn phase should attend the strategy sessions. The plan also said the goal of the sessions was to develop three strategies to address the problems and decide which to test first.

2. **Held strategy session to generate ideas for addressing the problems.** Together, the local evaluator and RPG project director led a strategy session. During the session, the local evaluator reviewed the findings based on the data gathered during the Learn phase to help identify solutions. Staff from the RPG project and partner agency explained, based on their experiences serving clients, what those findings meant in terms of making changes. Together, they developed eight ideas for addressing the root cause they identified. They agreed that three of the ideas had the most potential and should be pilot tested:

Exhibit 3. Guiding questions asked to form the design plan

Design plan elements	Guiding questions for developing each element of the plan
Problem statement (why)	What is the problem we are trying to solve? Why is this change needed?
Goals and objectives (what)	What do we hope to achieve during the design process? What are our goals? How will we know if we have made progress or achieved a goal?
Timeline and location (when and where)	When and where will we meet to conduct the design process?
People (who)	Who should be included in the design process? What roles will they play? Are there other key people who should be included to inform this process?
Strategies (how)	What strategies or activities will help us reach our goals? What evidence will we use to inform the design process?

- Clarify guidelines on who should conduct screenings, when, and how
- Update the training manual and retrain partner agency staff so the eligibility rules and screening guidelines are clear
- Create a checklist that partner agency staff could use when handing off information to the RPG project team to make sure all necessary information is included

3. **Created a plan describing the goals, solutions to test, and desired outcome.** Based on the consensus reached at the strategy session, the project director worked with the RPG project team to create a *road map for change*, specifying the changes the team would make and the desired results of those changes (Exhibit 4). The road map described the three potential solutions that the team identified and described the goals and outcomes for each. The team determined that its overarching goal was to increase referrals to the project team within two months.

   In the road map, the team also noted that fluctuations in the partner agency's caseload could be an external factor that keeps the partner agency from meeting goals. The team planned to track information on the partner agency's caseloads to determine if this affected the success of their tested strategies.

4. **Gathered more information and prepared to test potential solutions.** The RPG project team talked again with the staff responsible for screening to get their input on changes to the guidelines, training materials, and handoffs. The project director then worked with the local evaluator to update the screening guidelines and training manuals and to write a detailed checklist for partner agency staff to use when sending a referral.

IMPROVE

The primary goal of the Improve phase is to conduct road tests to gather feedback and further refine the solution.

Key terms for the Improve phase

- **Learning questions:** Questions that guide the road-test activities, identifying what a team hopes to learn and what it expects to change
- **Road test:** Small-scale pilot tests designed to gather feedback on a given strategy

During the Improve phase, the project director worked with the lead evaluator to oversee data collection activities. The RPG project team took the following steps:

Exhibit 4. Information in the road map for change

Potential solutions: The steps the team will take	Goals: What the team hopes will change	Outcomes: What success looks like to the team
Clarify screening guidelines	Partner agency is consistently screening clients	85 percent of the partner agency's clients are screened for eligibility for RPG services
Update the training manual and retrain staff	Partner agency staff feel confident that they know when and how to conduct the screenings and whom to screen	100 percent of partner agency staff feel comfortable with the process and can implement it as intended
Create a detailed checklist for partner agency staff to use when sending a referral	RPG staff receive clear and consistent information on all referrals	The RPG team receives a referral for all of the clients who meet eligibility criteria
Ultimate goal: Referrals to RPG services rise by 25 percent in two months		
External factor to watch: Fluctuations in the partner agency's caseload		

1. **Developed learning questions and data collection methods for the road test.** The RPG project team identified its *learning questions* and the data it will gather to answer the questions during the *road test*.

   Consistent with the road map for change, the three learning questions were:

   - Do the updated screening guidelines result in consistent screening of all potentially eligible clients?
   - Can the referral partner agency staff apply the screening guidelines confidently and correctly?
   - Does use of the detailed checklist assist with receiving clear and consistent information from partner agency staff during referrals?

The RPG project team decided to use four sources of information to answer these learning questions (Exhibit 5).

2. **Implemented the potential solutions identified for the road test.** The project director retrained a select group of three frontline staff on the revised screening guidelines with the updated training manual. The project director also trained the staff on using the detailed referral handoff checklist. Three staff from the partner agency implemented the revised guidelines for four weeks.

3. **Assessed the implementation of the solutions.** The evaluator analyzed data from the four data sources and shared the findings with the project director. Compared with the period before the road test, partner agency staff screened and referred a higher percentage of potentially eligible clients to the RPG organization during the road test. However, the partner agency staff did not reach the specified benchmarks of success as defined in the road map.

   Using data from the feedback survey, the evaluator identified a step in the revised screening guidelines that continued to confuse the partner agency staff conducting screening.

4. **Compiled findings into a brief report or memo.** The project director and evaluator wrote a brief report on the findings and shared it with the RPG project team. The report also described a proposed tweak to the screening guidelines to minimize the confusion identified during the road test. In the report, the team suggested conducting a second road test of the tweaked screening guidelines.

5. **Repeated the process.** The team agreed to conduct a second road test to assess the implementation of the tweaked screening guidelines. Team members collected the same data on the tweaked guidelines over a two-week period. The evaluator found that the tweaked guidelines eliminated partner agency staff confusion, and the team summarized the findings in a brief report. As the screening guidelines were successfully updated and the learning questions were answered, this cycle of LI^2 ended.

   Using a similar process, the team then kicked off a new cycle of LI^2 to pilot the revised training manual and the handoff checklist with a larger group of frontline staff.

   The team conducted several more cycles to keep refining and testing each of the three solutions, and explored scaling up these strategies until all RPG and partner agency staff were comfortable using the revised guidelines and checklist. Team members continued to review data on screening and referrals twice monthly for two months, checking whether they had achieved the outcomes described in their road map. They decided to continue to regularly review data on referrals and enrollments and to compare these numbers with their monthly goals. If they saw a dip in referrals and enrollments in the future, they planned to repeat the LI^2 process to identify solutions.

Exhibit 5. Data sources used for each learning question

Learning question	Observations	Review of partner agency data	Feedback survey	Review of RPG project data
Do the updated screening guidelines result in consistent screening of all potentially eligible clients?	✓	✓		✓
Can the referral partner agency staff apply the screening guidelines confidently and correctly?	✓		✓	
Does use of the detailed checklist assist with receiving clear and consistent information from partner agency staff during referrals?			✓	✓

Summary and additional resources

This brief shares an example of how an RPG project team might use the LI² framework to solve a problem. Specifically, it shows how a team can use LI² to understand the root causes of low enrollments and then identify and test incremental improvements to enhance their partner agency staff's referral processes. These types of improvements can help a team meet its RPG project goals.

The LI² framework incorporates sequential steps to help teams form and implement a plan for (1) deeply understanding challenges, (2) designing focused strategies to address the challenges, and (3) iteratively pilot testing and improving on those strategies. Given their collaborative nature, RPG teams are well-suited to conduct the LI² process by bringing together staff with programmatic, implementation, and research experience. Local evaluators, who are part of RPG project teams, can lead the LI² process or lend their expertise to the broader team by assisting with data collection and analytic techniques. LI², much like RPG projects, works best when there is close collaboration between all staff, partners, and leaders affected by the problem.

For more information and resources on LI², please visit https://mathematica.org/solutions/learn-innovate-improve.

Endnotes

[1] For more information on the RPG program, see https://ncsacw.acf.hhs.gov/technical/rpg.aspx.

[2] Kleinman, R., B. Keating, and E. Moiduddin. "Learn, Innovate, and Improve (LI²): How Regional Partnership Grantees Can Use a Continuous Quality Improvement Framework to Support Program Implementation and Evaluation." Evaluation Technical Assistance Brief No. 8. Washington, DC: Mathematica, 2022. https://www.mathematica.org/publications/learn-innovate-improve-li2-how-rpg-grantees-can-use-continuous-quality-improvement-to-support.

[3] Henke, J., and D. Robinson. "Continuous Quality Improvement: How Regional Partnership Grantees Can Use Data from the RPG Cross-Site Evaluation to Learn About Project Implementation." Evaluation Technical Assistance Brief No. 7. Washington, DC: Mathematica, 2022. https://www.mathematica.org/publications/continuous-quality-improvement-how-rpg-grantees-can-use-data-from-the-rpg-cross-site-evaluation.