

Using Data-driven Reflection to *Improve* Program Quality: New York City’s Human Resources Administration Redesigns Its Upfront Assessment Process for Youth and Families Receiving Cash Assistance

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Leaders of state, local, and tribal Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) programs and other human services agencies operate in a rapidly changing world with competing demands. Too often, programs design solutions, quickly implement them, and fail to reflect on their successes and challenges. They may lack the time, expertise, or infrastructure to engage in data-driven reflection— a critical step for successful change and continuous improvement. New and innovative methods for data-driven reflection focus on quick, low-burden strategies for exploring the success of a solution before an agency fully adopts it. When ready, programs can spread the solution to others and continue to test it in other settings and with different populations. This approach helps program leaders make evidence-driven decisions and builds evidence for the field.

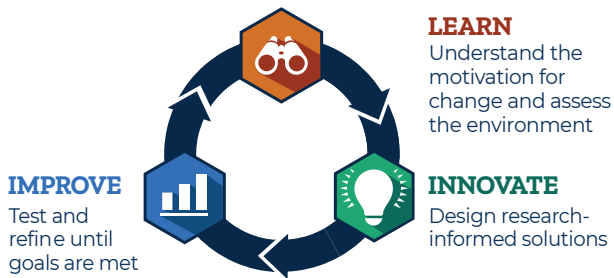
New York City’s Human Resources Administration (HRA) set out to redesign its upfront assessment process for participants receiving Cash Assistance (including TANF families and New York Safety Net participants) by incorporating data-driven reflection. The overall goals of the project were to build HRA’s capacity to test their own ideas, conduct analysis, and create next steps informed by their evidence. To accomplish these goals, HRA used [Learn, Innovate, Improve](#) (LI²)— an approach

that practitioners can use to support rapid change and continuous improvement, building data-driven reflection into the process of refining and testing solutions (see Figure 1). They were supported in this effort by Mathematica and The Adjacent Possible as part of the Supporting Partnerships to Advance Research and Knowledge (SPARK) project, which is funded by the Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation (OPRE) in the Administration for Children and Families (ACF) (see note).

Figure 1. Three phases of LI²

The LI² process

Testing leads to continuous learning and further innovation



In this brief, we focus on the third phase of the LI² process — the Improve phase — which is explicitly designed for testing, analysis, reflection, and evidence-informed action (see Box 1). Drawing on

Note: Project SPARK, sponsored by the Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation in consultation with the Office of Family Assistance—both part of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families—aims to bridge the gap between research and practice. Project SPARK is designed to help state and county TANF programs and related organizations build their evaluation capacity through technical assistance, with the goal of helping organizations strengthen employment services and improve outcomes for children and families.

HRA’s experience, this brief aims to help other practitioners learn how to incorporate data-driven reflection into their work using LI². In the next sections, we briefly describe the initial LI² phases HRA completed—Learn and Innovate—to get to the Improve phase. We then outline the steps HRA took in the Improve phase and the key lessons they learned.

Box 1. What is Learn, Innovate, Improve?

LI² is both a framework and a process model, grounded in implementation science, that helps practitioners unpack program challenges, develop evidence-informed solutions, and use analytic methods to gather data to assess the success of a solution (Derr 2022). The approach is grounded in four principles—cocreation (researchers and practitioners working in partnership), evidence-driven (using and building quality evidence to make decisions), iteration (fast-cycle, iterative approach to change), and impact (building capabilities of people and organizations to improve outcomes). These principles are well-aligned with the elements of equitable evaluation (Public Policy Associates 2015). ▲

The challenge: Strengthening the upfront assessment process for participants

HRA’s model for serving families and individuals receiving Cash Assistance is based on a customized service approach that prioritizes education and training in addition to work. As part of their work under SPARK, HRA was interested in redesigning its upfront assessment process to improve outcomes for adults and youth with low incomes. Prior to the redesign, participants completed an online comprehensive assessment that generated recommendations for service planning. Participants also completed the Test of Adult Basic Education, a measure of basic reading and math abilities. The full assessment took between four and six hours to complete and was designed to create an individualized pathway for participants based on their career goals.

The first step in this redesign process (the LI² “Learn” phase) involved gathering input from the agencies that HRA contracts with to provide employment and training services (providers) through a mix of in person and virtual listening sessions to pinpoint and prioritize the primary challenges. The HRA team led these sessions with coaching from the SPARK team. This process revealed several areas in which the current assessment could be improved, including the length, the transactional tone it set for the relationship between staff and participants, and the limited use of the findings for case planning. The HRA team also explored if contracted service providers who administered the assessments were ready for change (see Figure 2). With this information, HRA transitioned to focus on generating solutions.

Figure 2. Timeline for each phase of LI²

Learn*	
Oct 2019	Learn phase site visit ¹ to HRA providers
Mar 2020	In-person Learn design sessions with providers
Dec 2020 – Jan 2021	Virtual Learn phase with HRA and providers
Innovate	
Feb – Mar 2021	Redesigned assessment with HRA and providers
Improve	
Apr 2021	Planning for road test
May 2021	Training on revised assessment and road test
June 2021	Conducted four-week road test with providers
July 2021	HRA analyzed findings and presented to leadership
Aug 2021	HRA presented findings to providers and gathered recommendations for improvement

*COVID-19 disrupted the Learn phase activities and delayed the change process.

¹ In person site visits included individual interviews, small group interviews, focus groups with participants, and observations. Virtual Learn phase activities included sessions using human-centered design activities and small group interviews with providers.

Developing solutions: Redesigning the assessment

The HRA team set out to create a new assessment process and tool that was driven by participants, easy to use, supported meaningful exchanges between case managers and participants, and connected to the services available to participants (the LI2 “Innovate” phase). The team designed the new assessment by drawing from findings from the Learn phase, existing research, and human-centered design sessions and small group discussions held with providers between January and March 2021.² The final product, Stepping Stones to Success (see Box 2), is an assessment tool and process that draws from behavioral psychology research and theory and can be administered in 15 minutes. Working with the service providers, HRA tailored Stepping Stones to its needs and developed a theory of change (or road map for change) that specified both how to implement it and how HRA would know whether it was working.

Test, analyze, reflect, and act

Building on the work of the previous phases, HRA, in partnership with their evaluation support team at Mathematica and The Adjacent Possible, set out to do the following as part of the LI² “Improve” phase:



Design a road test

The HRA team used their road map for change to define their testing plan. A road test is a low-burden, quick-turnaround data collection from a small number of users on a core element of the solution to begin to identify what works, for whom, and under what circumstances. In this case, the solution they were road testing was the revised assessment process. The team developed a plan for conducting the road test that specified key research questions, the data collection approach, methods and instruments, key respondents,

Box 2. Stepping Stones to Success

Stepping Stones to Success is a tool and process informed by a prior project supported by OPRE that explored how research on self-regulation and goal attainment might help families achieve self-sufficiency (see Goal-Oriented Adult Learning in Self-Sufficiency ([GOALS](#)) project). Applying this research to practice, Stepping Stones is designed to engage participants in meaningful conversations about areas participants might want to work on to improve their economic and personal circumstances (for example, preparing for work, employment, education and training, and stress and wellness). The **tool** includes these possible areas and maps them to the services available to participants (see Appendix A). It creates a clear picture of the program and provides a way for coaches or case managers to track a participant’s progress over time. The **process** of using the tool engages participants in self-reflection and helps activate an inner motivation to pursue goals that are meaningful to them. Program coaches or case managers encourage the participant to identify what they feel motivated and able to do (their goal). This then becomes a launching point for goal planning. ▲

timing and sequencing of activities, and a plan for analyzing the data. The HRA team relied heavily on its internal research unit to assist with the testing phase. (However, the program implementation team could have conducted the road test on their own, as has been done by other programs without internal research units that engage in this type of work). Staff jointly decided to conduct a four-week road test inviting one supervisor and two staff from each of the six agencies that HRA contracts with to provide employment and training services to NYC’s TANF and Safety Net participants. Supervisors and staff from these agencies were instructed to use the new Stepping Stones to Success tool and process and to provide feedback.

² Human-centered design is a philosophy and set of practices that puts people at the center of innovation and program change. It draws upon the principles of empathy, co-creation, and iteration, among others (Liedtka et al. 2017).

Implement Stepping Stones and execute the test

Staff received training on Stepping Stones and the testing procedures. Each staff member used Stepping Stones with at least five participants per week over the four-week period of the road test. After each Stepping Stones meeting, staff completed a brief four-item online survey about their experience with the new assessment tool and process and asked the participant to do the same. In addition, provider supervisors held huddles (30-minute focus groups) with staff during the second and fourth week, for a total of 12 huddles. Box 3 includes highlights from the road test. Program staff also identified challenges during the road test, including difficulties with participants completing the tool electronically (given

Box 3. Road test highlights

Summary of perceptions of the Stepping Stones tool and process based on 188 provider/staff surveys, 121 participant surveys, and 12 provider huddles (focus groups).

Benefits of the tool:

- Liked the content
- Found it simple, easy, and enjoyable to use
- Felt it facilitated participant-staff relationships
- Helped staff be participant-centered and goal-driven
- Believed that the structure of the tool encouraged more open sharing
- Appreciated the short length, which they felt reduced participants' anxiety, fatigue, and frustration

Challenges of the tool:

- Found it difficult to complete electronically
- Was not clear how to use the findings for individualized planning ◀

the COVID-19 pandemic, many participants were engaged in services virtually) and a lack of clarity to Stepping Stones in multiple languages, and the lack of clarity regarding how to use the findings for individualized planning.

Make evidence-driven decisions

A primary task of data-driven reflection is to decide whether to refine the solution and retest; scale the solution because it is ready; or abandon it altogether because it isn't the right solution or the right time (or both). The HRA team held several sessions to process the findings and map potential next steps with HRA leaders and providers. They decided to revise the Stepping Stones tool and add an individualized planning process and retest.³

Lessons from the Improve phase

HRA partnered closely with the external evaluation support team to prepare for and conduct the road test. Throughout this process, HRA, providers, and the evaluation support team learned from one another. Here we describe the key lessons learned through the data-driven reflection (Improve) phase.

Designing and implementing a successful test required teams to consistently collaborate

During the initial launch of the project (Learn phase), HRA identified key partners, created teams that served different purposes, and defined their roles and responsibilities (see Appendix B). New York City has a complex service environment with multiple contracted service providers. It was important to engage and get buy-in from all of them. As one HRA leader shared, "The process of getting multiple stakeholders to collaborate. That's actually the magic that's going to bring the buy-in that makes the tool better in the end." This

³ The individualized planning process draws from behavioral psychology. It involves mapping small, achievable steps that are specific, including naming the time, place, and resources needed. It also includes identifying potential barriers (potholes) and solutions (detours) before the person takes action. This evidence-based technique—an "if/then" plan is called, "implementation intentions" in research studies. The retest was ongoing at the time of publication.

collaborative approach was particularly useful during the *Improve* phase, as each team brought unique contributions to the process.

The team found several helpful strategies for effective collaboration and co-creation. For example, early in the process, they defined the roles and responsibilities of managers, staff, and contracted providers and then revised when needed. By the time HRA reached the testing (*Improve*) phase, all the key partners had coalesced, established trusting working relationships, and understood their roles and contributions. In addition, they had a clear picture of what had been done in preparation for the road test. Good communication was another key to the success of the project. Good communication ensured everyone was on the same page. Partners met regularly throughout the engagement. In addition to regular meetings, HRA sent out emails to the provider leadership team to keep people informed about the project schedule and the progress of the road test.

Finally, HRA created an environment in which people could share feedback and ideas. Honest, constructive feedback was a critical ingredient in the collaborative change. To encourage input, the HRA leadership team held biweekly meetings with providers where they stressed the importance of provider and participant feedback in the change process. Providers became increasingly engaged as they saw how their feedback was used to strengthen the assessment tool and process. According to the HRA leadership team and providers, this collaborative process using LI² promoted transparency, collaboration, and trust.



Create the structure and analytic tools to make testing a change feel doable

Using existing, well-defined tools and methods made research accessible to the HRA team. Tools such as a theory of change (or road map for change) used during the *Innovate* phase and testing plan used during the *Improve* phase broke down the process into small steps. This provided the scaffolding the HRA team needed to design and test the solution during a chaotic time.

The HRA team did several things well to make the testing process feel doable. First, they clearly defined their research questions. Prior to testing, they focused concretely on the problems and the solutions to address them. This set up the team well to define their research questions and decide how to answer them. Second, the HRA team kept it simple. The team chose one small thing—the assessment tool—and tested it. This focus allowed them to focus data collection efforts. Based on findings from the road test, they returned to the problems (*Learn* phase), refined the *Stepping Stones* tool and process (*Innovate* phase), and developed a plan to retest (*Improve* phase). Finally, they tested with precision. The HRA team, in partnership with the SPARK team, carefully thought through the details of the test (for example, how often staff and participants should complete surveys) and analysis in advance so that they could gather the information with precision. This kind of detail is critical, but often overlooked.



Create a culture that inspires growth and learning within the organization

HRA leaders and staff indicated that this experience has helped them rethink how they approach change. One staff member said iterative testing is “now part of my professional DNA.” Staff noted that the collaborative nature of the process has transformed the perception of research and evaluation for the HRA team engaged in this work. One staff member said, “I don’t feel like I’m in the fish bowl—I feel I’m part of it. It feels more collaborative, and that helps demystify the process.”

HRA was committed to the process. Data-driven reflection required an upfront investment from leaders and staff. HRA leaders dedicated time and resources necessary to build trusting relationships and carry out the process in a systematic way using analytic methods. In addition, they learned that as an organization they had to be willing to fail and adapt. Embracing failure was an important practice in their iterative testing and data-driven reflection. The goal was to fail fast and early. This “fail fast” mindset can be difficult for leaders who are risk-

averse and react strongly to information indicating something is not working. However, the benefit to this mindset was that it enabled the HRA team to make necessary corrections that led to a better solution and, ultimately, better outcomes. As one leader shared, “You are not going to reach your goal or your outcome if you want a quick fix. Any type of systematic operational change is a cultural shift ... You can’t expect it to be done quickly.”

Conclusion

Through this process, the HRA team learned that collaborative, evidence-driven decision making is both doable and rewarding. Other programs might learn from HRA’s experience and rethink how they approach change using evidence and analytic methods to guide the process. Fast-cycle testing requires

some initial investment to learn the methods; however, with practice, the approach has the potential to continuously improve programs for children and families and, ultimately, improve their lives.

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Appendix A. Draft Stepping Stones to Success tool



MY NAME _____

DATE _____

Stepping Stones to Success

1 What is your overall stress level right now? (Fill in a circle)

I am VERY stressed!

I am not stressed at all.

2 Take some time to reflect on the following topic areas related to your career success. Where would you say you currently are in each of these areas?
Which area jumps out as the most important for setting a goal today?

		NEED HELP	READY TO EXPLORE	MAKING PROGRESS	CONFIDENT & GOOD TO GO	
HEALTH & WELLNESS	COVID-19 and Safety ▶ I do not feel safe in my current situation.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	I have control over my exposure and am safe.
	Personal Well-being ▶ My personal well-being needs my attention.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	I am doing well and fully able to work.
	Food Security ▶ I do not have access to nutritious foods regularly.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	I have access to nutritious meals every day.
SUPPORT SERVICES	Social Support ▶ I have no social support or my network is not supportive.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	I have consistent and effective social support.
	Housing ▶ My family doesn't have housing.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	We have stable and safe housing.
TECHNOLOGY	Dependent Care ▶ We have no child care, elder care, or other caregiving services in place.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	We have reliable child care, elder care, or other caregiving responsibilities in place.
	Access to Internet ▶ I don't have access to reliable internet to work remotely.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	I have access to reliable internet to work remotely.
	Access to Computer ▶ I don't have access to computer to work remotely.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	I have access to a computer to work remotely.
CAREER EXPLORATION	Computer Skills ▶ I do not feel comfortable or know how to use a computer (e.g., typing, using email).	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	I feel comfortable and have the skills to confidently use a computer.
	Occupational Identity ▶ I'm not sure what occupation I want.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	I know what occupation I want to work in.
	Professional Networks ▶ I do not have anyone I can call who works in the type of job that interests me or who can give me work-related advice.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	I am well-connected to people who are working, particularly in the type of job of interest to me.
	Career Opportunities ▶ I don't know where to go to find the "good jobs" (e.g., jobs that pay well, opportunities for promotion) that interest me.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	I know where to find "good jobs" that interest me.

Stepping Stones to Success

		NEED HELP	READY TO EXPLORE	MAKING PROGRESS	CONFIDENT & GOOD TO GO		
EDUCATION	Education and Training	I do not have the education or training I need to get a job in the field I want.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	I have completed the education/training I need to get a job in the field I want.
	Credentials	I do not have the professional certificates or credentials I need to get a job in the field I want.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	I have the credentialing I need to get a job in the field I want.
	Educational Supports	To succeed in education or training, I would like additional support to help me succeed.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	I feel ready to take on an education or training program without any individual supports.
GETTING A JOB	Job Search Skills	I don't know where or how to look for a job.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	I am aware of and know how to use resources for identifying available jobs.
	Job Qualifications	I don't know what jobs I qualify for.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	I know exactly what types of jobs I qualify for.
	Interview Skills	I don't have the confidence or skills to interview for a job.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	I feel confident and am ready to interview for a job.
JOB READINESS	Resume and Cover letter	I don't have a resume or cover letter.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	I have an up to date resume and standard cover letter.
	Working from Home	I do not have physical space or have too many distractions to work from home.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	My living situation allows me to work remotely.
	Work Supports	I do not have the necessary supports right now to go to a job site (e.g., child care, transportation).	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	I have the necessary supports and feel comfortable going to a job site if it is safe.
	Onsite Work	I do not feel comfortable working onsite right now.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	I feel comfortable going to a job site if it is safe.
FINANCIAL HEALTH	Money Management Skills	I often struggle to manage my money.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	I know how to manage my money.
	Financial Supports	I do not know what financial resources and supports are available to me (e.g., debt relief, increasing credit score).	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	I am aware of and use the financial resources and supports available to me.

3 What is one goal you have for today's meeting?

4 What are your short and long term goals?

5 Do we need to update any of your information? (Example: address, phone number, email, employment, etc.)

6 Is there anything else that's important for us to know in order to meet your needs?

Appendix B.

NYC assessment redesign teams

- **HRA implementation team.** The core group; the implementation team that included program leaders and specialists within HRA. This group defined the vision for the change, met regularly to advance the work, and led the Improve phase reflection session with provider staff who participated in the road test. They were foundational throughout the change process.
- **Office of Research and Policy Innovation (ORPI) research team.** The ORPI research team, an internal research unit within HRA, were key players on the implementation team, particularly during the Improve phase. They helped define the learning goals; weighed in on the road test design; and led data collection, analysis, and reporting. They brought valuable research and evaluation expertise.
- **Provider Implementation Team (PIT).** The PIT included leaders from each of the six providers who participated in LI². They weighed in on key decisions and provided targeted feedback on the Stepping Stones tool and process. Leaders of the PIT recommended a supervisor and two staff for the road test and weighed in on the findings. They championed the redesign within their organizations.
- **External evaluation support team.** The evaluation support team, made up of researchers and staff from Mathematica and TAP, guided the HRA implementation team through LI². They modeled activities, offered resources, coached the teams to execute tasks, reviewed materials, and participated in all team meetings and events.