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Evaluation of the San Francisco Beacon Initiative

Executive Summary
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Executive Summary

In 2007, the SF Beacon Initiative (SFBI) underwent a major strategic planning process to re-examine SFBI's alignment with the Beacon vision and mission. The vision was to set a future course for the Initiative that ensures that the Beacon Centers promote youth *and family* centers in public schools that become beacons of activity for the surrounding neighborhood. In conjunction with this process, the goal of the 2007-2008 Evaluation of the SF Beacon Initiative was to take stock of the usefulness of the evaluation tools, data, and analysis while assuring alignment of the evaluation with the new SFBI strategic plan.[1] Towards this end, Social Policy Research Associates (SPR) helped SFBI review the existing San Francisco Beacon Theory of Change (ToC), Quality Standards, evaluation methods, and processes for continuous improvement. Specific evaluation objectives included:

- Conducting in-depth interviews with Beacon Center directors to review and recommend changes to the ToC, Quality Standards, and evaluation.

- Providing SFBI with information on the eight Beacon Centers' progress towards meeting quality standards and outcomes for youth.

- Making recommendations for future Beacon evaluations, specifically focusing on: (1) role of lead agencies, (2) role of SFBI, (3) family and adult engagement.

In addition, we were interested in examining the ways in which a number of the Beacon Centers have evolved from the original concept of the Beacon Centers as community hubs, and the impact of this on the Centers' structure, operation, and practices.

Methodology

In order to collect the data necessary to produce this report, we used a variety of data collection methods. The qualitative components included:

- Review of key documents, such as previous SFBI evaluation reports, the SFBI 2007 strategic plan, Beacon Center specific documents and websites, and the Minimum Compliance Quality Standards completed by the Beacon Directors in 2007.

- Site visits to all eight Beacon Centers to conduct (1) interviews with Beacon and Program Directors, line staff and school staff, youth (to produce mini-case studies); (2) focus groups with parents; and (3) observations.

- Focus groups with 95 middle school youth to understand motivations for their participation or non-participation in the eight Beacon Centers.

The quantitative component consisted of the following:

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[1] Since the 2005 San Francisco Beacon Initiative (SFBI) Evaluation by Resource Development Associates, there has been a hiatus of evaluation activities. In December 2007, SFBI commissioned SPR to resume evaluation activities and provide recommendations for new directions in the evaluation to reflect the latest strategic plan.

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- Review and analysis of the Contract Management System (CMS) data.

- Administration of a combined Youth Individual Assessment (YIA) and Youth Satisfaction Survey (YSS), which was administered in three languages: English, Spanish, and Chinese in May of 2008.

- Review of district data on Beacon and non-Beacon participants' school attendance, discipline, and test scores from the 2007-2008 school year.

The Beacon Centers

In Chapter 2 of the report, we provide an overview of the key characteristics of the eight Beacon Centers and the complexity of the efforts that have gone into operating the Centers. The Beacon Centers have grown tremendously over the years, operating in at least eight neighborhoods and across 27 school and other sites with budgets of approximately $7 million.

In assessing the extent to which the Centers are providing environments that are visible, accessible, and safe, a number of centers are reporting that they are "in progress" or have "not met" a few of the quality standards. For example, based on site visits and CMS data from Spring 2008, only four of eight of the Centers offered programming until 8:00 p.m. Monday through Friday. However, accessibility was a major area of focus for many of the Beacon Centers and all sites increased programming until 8 p.m. where it was possible (leaving only two sites without this cause of school issues). By the end of the year, Beacon Centers had programming at least two nights a week in 6 of 8 sites; whereas at the beginning of the school year, this was true in only in one or two sites.

The total number staffing positions funded by Beacon money varied considerably, ranging from 4.6 FTE to 10.4. The average is closer to 5.0 FTE, typically with a Beacon Director, a Program or Site coordinator, and Safety and Support staff forming the core staff.

The San Francisco Department of Children, Youth and Families provides a key funding source for Beacon centers; however, the Centers also reported receiving $2 million in ExCEL funding. Providing a diverse programming (e.g., academic support, enrichment, and recreational) is a strength of many of the Centers. However, the Centers were growing their family and community programming, and therefore, were not consistently offering adult- as youth programming.

Participation and Youth Developmental Experiences

Participant Characteristics

The analysis of demographic characteristics of participants during the Summer of 2007 and the 2007-2008 school year shows that the Beacon Centers had a higher percent (44%)[2] of youth in middle school than in any other grade level. Most participants (47%) were between 10 and 13 years old, and there was a slightly higher percentage (53%) of male youth. The racial/ethnic

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[2] Hub and satellite sites combined.

groups with the highest percentage of youth were Asian (46%) and African American (22%), and the majority (76%) of youth were fluent English speakers. The adult participants were distributed evenly across age brackets, although 40% of them were at least 55 years old. A higher percent (61%) of adult participants were female, and the majority of adult participants were Asian (62%). While most (67%) adults were fluent English speakers, nearly 25% were not.

Participation Patterns

Attendance across all eight Beacon Centers was an impressive total of 7,650. Following are some specifics on the participation patterns:

- **Total participation**: Six of the eight Beacon Centers met participation quality standards by serving at least 600 participants during the combined Summer of 2007 and 2007-2008 school year. Seven of the Centers served at least 70% youth participants as compared to adults.

- **Adult participation**: Overall, a substantive number (100 or more) of adult participants were concentrated at half of the sites. At three sites, adults comprised 5% or less of the total participants

- **Daily participation**: During the fall of the 2007-2008 school year, five out of eight Centers met the Beacon Quality Standard for daily attendance; however, only three sites met it during the Spring.[3]

- **Hub site participation**: Four of the eight Beacon Centers served a greater percentage of participants at their hub site. Overall, 58% of the total number of youth and adults participate in activities at the hub sites, although the quality standards specify that 80% of the programming should occur at the hub sites.

  - *Summer vs. school year participation.* At Beacon hubs, more youth attended during the 2007-2008 school year than during the summer of 2007, and averaged more overall days of attendance during the school year. However, youth averaged more days of attendance per week during the Summer session.

  - *Adult participation.* As for adult attendance at Beacon Center hubs, a greater number of adults attended during the school year. In addition, adult participants attended more days on average during the school year. This is largely due to the fact that SFUSD does not allow adequate school access to continue adult programming in summer.

- **Range of program/activity participation by school levels**: During the 2007-2008 school year, elementary school participants at Beacon hub sites attended more frequently and spent more total hours in group activities than middle and high school youth.

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[3]   The average daily attendance of some sites may be higher than is shown below because of activity days with missing attendance records. This may be especially true during the spring session, for which some sites are missing a great deal of missing attendance information.

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- *Middle vs. high school youth participation patterns.* During the school year, middle school participants attended Beacon Centers more frequently than high school participants did, but on the days that high school youth did attend, they spent more time at the Beacon Center than those youth in middle school.

- *Academic Support & Enrichment participation.* The average number of hours elementary participants spent in Academic Support & Enrichment was significantly higher than both other groups of participants. In addition, middle school youth spent a significantly higher average number of hours in Academic Support & Enrichment than hub participants in high school. Middle school participants also spent, on average, significantly fewer hours on Sports & Recreation than both elementary and high school participants.

Youth Survey Results

The survey data provided important youth feedback on the quality of their youth developmental experience at the Beacon hubs. Our analysis of the data show that the majority of youth who responded enjoyed coming to Beacon and felt safe at their Beacon Center. The majority also felt that they learned new things and did interesting activities at Beacon. In addition, most older respondents felt that Beacon encouraged them to achieve by having goals for the future. The majority of youth surveyed felt that people at Beacon respected their culture and heritage, but fewer replied that Beacon helped them know about their culture and heritage, or stated that they learned about people from different cultures. This suggests that Beacon Centers need to pay more attention to this aspect of programming, particularly given the diversity of their participants.

While higher percentages of middle/high school respondents than elementary respondents reported that they have developed supportive relationships with Beacon adults, over one-quarter of all youth felt that there was no Beacon adult who really cared about them. As for relationships with their peers, both elementary and middle/high school respondents reported having positive peer influences, and most of the older youth indicated they have friends with whom they have supportive relationships.

In the area of skill development, youth were asked about the leadership activities they participated in at Beacon. Most older respondents responded affirmatively on questions about opportunities to work with others, while lower percents of elementary respondents did so on these questions. However, fewer than half of older respondents had participated in the majority of the leadership activities.

Challenges to Achieving Beacon Mission and Quality Standards

Beacon Centers throughout the San Francisco Beacon Initiative continue to experience a number of challenges achieving Beacon mission and Quality Standards that also prevent them from

aligning with the community hub model. The most common sets of challenges that were cited include:

- **Parent and community engagement**: Engaging parents and the community in Beacon programs is a significant challenge for **seven of the eight** Beacon Centers. Many Centers continue to struggle in engaging parents in developmental, enrichment, and community activities (e.g. parenting classes, job training, violence prevention initiatives, etc.). Factors that prevent parents and the community from engaging in Beacon programming include the location of Beacon Centers and the large number of working class and immigrant families within these communities.

- **Availability of school space**: Five Beacon Centers reported the lack of available of space as a major issue. Key factors that affect a Center's ability to obtain adequate space include a lack of cooperation from school teachers and construction at school sites.

- **Relationship with host schools**: Five of the eight Centers reported a number of challenges in operating and implementing programs at their school sites. Beyond the availability of school space, these challenges, in most cases, were related to changes in school administrators and staff, and conflicting and/or a lack of understanding of Beacon goals.

- **Participant attendance requirement**: As described earlier, achieving the Quality Standard attendance requirement[4] is a major challenge experienced by a number of the Beacon Centers. Community violence, transportation, and types of programming were among the common factors that respondents expressed as factors associated with this challenge.

- **Integration of ExCEL funds**: Many Beacon directors blend the ExCEL funds with their other sources of funding to support the Beacon Center. As a result, many directors expressed some difficulty in offering programs outside of the ExCEL academic requirements. In addition, Beacon directors reported that the ExCEL funds only allow them to serve/count students who are attendees of the host school. Thus, this has limited many Centers' ability to provide programs and services to adults and the community, which further prevent them in aligning with the community hub model.

These challenges have greatly affected some Centers' ability to meet specific Beacon participation standards and achieve broader program outcomes. However, a number of Centers have utilized some promising practices that allow them overcome such challenges.

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[4] Beacon Centers are to serve at least 150 participants a day, and 600 or more children and youth, and adult family members unduplicated per year.

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Recommendations

A major focus of the 2008 Beacon evaluation was to understand the evolution of the Initiative over the past decade and the extent of mission drift as well as the development of creative practices, and provide recommendations from the Beacon directors on ways to revise both the San Francisco Beacon Theory of Change (ToC) and the Quality Standards. When asked, a number of Beacon directors and staff mentioned they had not seen the ToC model or Quality Standards in a while, or never knew they existed. However, upon closer examination most Beacon directors and staff stated that the ToC model is an accurate reflection of outcomes that they are trying to achieve at the Beacon site-level; yet, there were a few elements that they reported were missing from the ToC model. More specifically, the roles and responsibilities of Initiative-level leadership, while well laid out, do not accurately reflect who is or who *needs* to be responsible for ensuring that some Initiative-level or cross-site activities happen. The following are suggestions of how the ToC model can better assist Beacon Centers in achieving their outcomes.

- *Develop more clarity around the roles of key leaders within the Beacon governance structure.* When the ToC was developed, it did not specify that there would be an initiative-wide governance body, a role that the steering committee assumed. The role of key leadership groups, such the Steering Committee, needs to be more explicitly delineated within the ToC, particular because these groups can play a critical role in working to bring about systems accommodation and support, and also garner financial and other support from city departments and school district leaders.

- *Expand and standardize the role of the lead agencies*. Standard role of lead agencies are fiscal sponsorship, fiscal management, administrative oversight, and human resources. However, SFBI and Beacon directors and staff suggested that the role of the lead agencies be explicitly defined, expanded (e.g., around staff development) and standardized, so that Beacon Centers and SFBI can hold them accountable and build on their youth development and community building expertise.

- *Specify and who should play the role of the TA Intermediary and how to fully support and resource the "TA Intermediary" functions.* The ToC included the roles of the TA intermediary, which was formerly the role of the Community Network for Youth Development (CNYD). However, since CNYD is no longer a part of the Initiative, the SFBI Director has assumed some of the intermediary roles. However, it is not possible for SFBI's small staff to take on all of these responsibilities. Beacon directors and staff feel that the ToC needs to be updated to include which stakeholder is responsible for fulfilling these intermediary roles.

- *Strengthen and support the role of SFBI Director and staff.* Beacon Center leaders suggest that the SFBI staff continue to play the multiple roles of establishing a clear vision, coordinating relationship with SFUSD as a systems advocate, fundraising, and facilitating cross-site fertilization and development. Nevertheless, Beacon Center leaders acknowledge that the SFBI staff cannot assume all of the initiative level roles and responsibilities that were left unfulfilled after CNYD's departure.

Additions to the Quality Standards

Beacon directors and staff mentioned a number of elements that were missing from the Quality Standards and provided suggestions as to what standards and information should be included:

- ***Provide more clarity on expectations for particular outcomes standards.*** For instance, most Beacon directors and staff acknowledged that the **career development standard** was underdeveloped at their center. In developing programs and activities around this standard, Beacon staff articulated that they would like to be aware of what is required of them as a Center when offering career development services.

- ***Create more specific standards.*** Beacon staff stated that some standards are in need of sub-standards. For instance, while **health** is included as a standard, it could be expanded to include more specific standards of mental, physical, and/or sexual health.

- ***Increase host schools' accountability.*** A number of Beacon staff stated that they would like to see some explicit requirements for the host school to help ensure a positive relationship. For instance, one Beacon staff suggested that this standard be modified to require all school staff to be educated on the mission and purpose of a Beacon Center.

- ***Focus on adult and community development.*** A number of Beacon staff expressed that the Quality Standards heavily emphasize youth, and not adult, family, and community outcomes. Therefore, they suggest that the Quality Standards have specific outcomes for adults, the families, and communities.

Recommendations for Improving and Aligning the Evaluation and Data Collection Systems

The data collection system for the Beacon sites need considerable improvement to make any conclusion about the impacts of the Beacon Centers on youth, family, school, and community outcomes. Our overarching recommendation is:

- ***SFBI and Beacon Centers need to invest more time and energy to improve the (1) accessibility to district data for student outcomes; (2) accuracy and usability of the CMS data; and (3) redesign of the youth surveys to improve their validity.*** Specifically,

  - Ensure that Beacons administer properly worded permission slips that allow access to students' district data files including test scores, grade data, attendance, disciplinary action, and obtain timely comparison group data from the SFUSD early in the program year.

  - Train Beacon staff to do correct and thorough data entry of information on youth and adult participation. For example, ensure student's grade level and the school where a student is enrolled are required fields.

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- Develop a field that identify participants' activity location (hub vs. satellite) and ensure unique Client IDs (e.g., district HO numbers) for each Beacon participant to avoid duplicate entries when a participant moves from one center to another and from summer to school year sessions.

- Re-vamp pre- post survey so that it is more concise and better tracks to the expected outcomes of Beacon participation, and prioritize administration of surveys at hub sites because these sites are considered the core of Beacon services.

- Consider further focusing evaluation indicators of success to assure alignment with the Theory of Change, the Quality Standards, and SFUSD's outcome goals. See Appendix C, for example of indicators of a "Beacon Scorecard."

Conclusion

The SFBI and Beacon Centers have evolved and grown considerably since their establishment in 1994. The variety of programming, number of youth and adults served, involvement of numerous stakeholders, partners, and supporters, and the presence of innovative projects such as the Beacon Young Adolescent Initiative with New York Beacons and Gateway to Fitness attest to the scale and reach of a mature Initiative that is highly complex and sophisticated. At the same time, both external and internal factors such as the complexity of the neighborhoods, populations, blended-funding streams, changing initiative-level support structures, and cross-system relationships (e.g. SFUSD space issues), that each of the Beacon Centers serve suggests that more work needs to be done to reach out to community residents in order to become a true community hub. Although the ToC needs updating to clearly reflect stakeholders responsibilities for specific roles, it generally provides a robust framework to guide the Centers' work. The Quality Standards provide high expectations for Centers' performance that Beacon directors need to continue to meet; however, the conversations that will occur about revisions needed to this guiding document will likely determine whether there needs to be some customization to the local neighborhood context.