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DATA INTEGRITY: THE UNTAPPED TREASURE OF LEGAL SERVICES DATA

*By Rachel J. Perry, Principal
Strategic Data Analytics, LLC*

The growing volume and complexity of data gathered by legal aid organizations makes ensuring data quality a difficult task for even the most data-savvy and



technology-savvy organizations. At the same time, many more legal aid organizations than ever before are starting to analyze data to gain a better understanding of their clients' needs and the effectiveness of their service offerings. Unfortunately, analysis of erroneous

or incomplete data is counterproductive as a gauge of client service effectiveness and efficiency. The good news is that there are some very simple steps every legal aid organization can take to improve the data integrity of their case management systems.

The wealth of information at your fingertips can, if properly harnessed, drive better client service. All legal aid organizations are required to gather voluminous data about clients, cases, volunteers, and services provided. Gathering required data often feels burdensome and prompts frustration. Combat the frustration by reframing the required data as a strategic tool, something you have actively decided to gather because it helps you understand your client community and your clients' legal needs.

In 2012, The Legal Aid Society of Cleveland and Montana Legal Services Association received a two-year Legal Services Corporation (LSC) Technology Initiative Grant to develop data analysis strategies to increase client service effectiveness and organizational efficiencies. One of the project's significant tasks involves a thorough review of existing internal data to understand its data analysis potential. Assisting with this and other project tasks is Brian A. Mikelbank, Associate Professor at the Cleveland State University Maxine Goodman Levin College of Urban Affairs. In reviewing Cleveland's data, Professor Mikelbank confirmed that legal aid organizations are sitting on

mountains of extraordinarily valuable data that has great strategic potential: "When I started working with The Legal Aid Society of Cleveland, I wanted to know all about their data, and I was pleasantly surprised. Data on whom they serve, how they serve them, and outcomes of that service. On top of that, each record is tied to a point in time, and an address. The quality and quantity of the data initially available has allowed us to get to the 'information to support decision-making' stage much more efficiently."

Remember Strategic Goals

Remind yourself of your organization's core values at the start of this, or any, effort designed to improve organizational effectiveness and efficiency. Re-read your strategic plan. And if your organization does not have a strategic plan, start with your priorities, your case acceptance guidelines, your mission — whatever guides your organization. As you continue to pursue your organization's objectives, periodically re-read these guiding documents and ask yourself about your organization's progress towards achieving its goals.

When an organization starts to think critically about the data it has and how to improve and use the data, project scope can sprawl. Use the guiding principles to help set limits on what you gather and how you use it. With every improvement, addition, or deletion to your case management system, ask yourself if the change you are making will help measure progress towards your strategic goals. Even a seemingly small change that improves clarity or increases efficiency has strategic advantages; and sometimes it is easiest to start with discrete, well-defined, and easy-to-spot improvements.

Data Deep Dive

With organizational goals in mind, look at the data you already gather. Download a list of variables from your case management system. Define the variables and determine how staff use them. Specifying

definitions and use is necessary because people with different responsibilities have different understandings of variables. Especially useful is walking through the intake process with an intake worker. Screen by screen, variable by variable, have the intake worker show you what variables they enter, what they ignore, what is confusing and why, and what is hard to collect and why. You will gather a wealth of knowledge about the state of your organization's data from a stroll through your case management system with an intake worker as your guide.

Supplement the list with concerns about data limitations. Identify the variables about which you wish you knew more but that consistently show missing data, erroneous data, or data that are hard to interpret when you run a report or ask your staff to run a report analyzing the variable. In addition, identify variables that still show up in the case management system but that are no longer useful.

Clean-Up

The following includes samples of data issues and suggested solutions. What you target for clean-up will come from the list generated during your own data deep dive.

- **Sample Issue: The variable is a check box, making analysis difficult.** Check box data are hard to interpret because blank check boxes might mean "No" or they might mean that the variable was ignored. For example, blanks for a check box indicating the Disabled Status of a client make it difficult to know whether the client was deemed not disabled or whether the staff person neglected to review the disabled status of the client. Solution: Change the variable so that it defaults to blank and offers "Yes," "No," and, in some cases, "N/A" options. With these options, real analysis of the variable becomes possible and you will know that blank unmistakably means the variable was ignored. Note that check boxes can be more effective when they are used to indicate whether a procedural step has been completed, such as attaching a required document.
- **Sample Issue: The variable is consistently blank.** Apart from check boxes, another reason for blank variables is their placement in the case management system. For example, a Domestic Violence indicator variable located at the bottom of the screen in a section with a significant amount of unrelated information might get overlooked. The same can happen with variables located at the bottom or far right of the screen or using a small font size. Solutions: Consider placing the overlooked variable in a more prominent position on the screen, increasing the font size, or moving it to a section with related or similar variables.
- **Sample Issue: The variable has a default value, causing potential over-reporting of the default answer option.** In this instance, it is difficult to know if the default value actually applies to the case/client or if the variable was ignored and inappropriately kept the default value. It is likely that analysis of this variable will show a misleadingly high number of entries with the default value compared to alternative answer options. For example, a Language variable that defaults to English is likely to give misinformation about the languages of some clients because some non-English speakers will show English in the Language variable. As another example, Intake Type variables that default to Telephone not only over-report Telephone as the Intake Type, but in doing so fail to accurately indicate the need for citizenship attestations. Solution: Make variables default to blank. With a blank default, reliable analysis of the various answer options is possible, you will satisfy important requirements, and you will know that a blank variable means the variable was ignored.
- **Sample Issue: The variable calls for text answers, making analysis difficult.** Text variables are difficult to analyze because of the infinite possible answers. For example, it is hard to generate a list of volunteer attorneys with specific legal expertise when the variable is a text variable because of the various ways legal expertise might be described, spelled, or abbreviated. Solution: Consider changing the variable to one with defined answer options and then develop a comprehensive list of answer options.
- **Sample Issue: The variable has with too many answer options leading to unreliable answer data.** For some variables with varied possible answers, there is a tendency to offer too many answer options. For example, case outcome options provided in one long, unsorted list tend to propel staff to pick outcome options that appear at the top of the list, whether or not they are the best outcome measures for the case. As a result, outcome data often show the same two or three outcome measures for the majority of closed cases, regardless of problem code. Solution: Identify discrete answer options and sort them by topic. Specifically related to outcome answer options, sort them by substantive area and only show those relevant to

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the case's substantive area, create a thorough but short list of outcome measures for each substantive area, avoid vague or overlapping outcome options, and do not include output measures in the list.

- **Sample Issue: The variable's answer options include outdated options that staff continue to select.** For example, a Funding Code variable that shows several former funders and data that show current cases assigned to those funders. Assignment to former funders potentially excludes cases from being reported under current grants and could diminish grant payments. Solution: Make outdated answer options inactive and remove them from view. Do not delete outdated answer options altogether because that damages historical data. Note that outdated variables, like outdated answer options, should become inactive rather than deleted from the case management system in order to protect historic data integrity.

Wish List

Cleaning up existing data and judicious collecting of additional data can help legal aid organizations in various ways: measuring progress toward a strategic goal, gaining a better understanding of clients' needs, managing staff more effectively, and answering funder requests more persuasively. Be cautious about adding new variables so as not to further burden your staff. Make sure that the data you seek is something about which you can actually gather good data. Before adding a variable, ask yourself how it will be used, how it will be defined, and what are the distinct answer options. These questions must have clear answers before variables are rolled out to staff.

In addition, think through whether a new variable is a client or a case variable. Client variables are unlikely to change (e.g., race, gender) but case variables may change (e.g., legal problem, income, number of children, marital status, military status). This distinction is important and has the potential to cause data integrity issues. For example, storing military status data in client records that are in turn linked to cases is problematic because military status changes over time. If set up this way and a client record is updated from active duty to veteran, all previous cases in which the client appeared as active duty will now show the client as a veteran. This over-reports your work for veterans and under-reports your work for active duty clients.

Solution: Military status data, and other impermanent variables, should be stored in case records. Store more permanent variables in client records.

Who should gather data and when are additional important considerations when adding new variables. Some data are easily collected during the intake process and other data are best gathered by an attorney after the attorney has gotten to know the client. Questions that are asked of everyone who goes through intake allow for deeper analysis (e.g., if language data is gathered for all intakes, an organization can hypothesize and test questions about the languages of every potential client, those served, and those not served). By contrast, questions that are only asked of a limited number of people provide data that is harder to analyze because of the restrictions applied to the data gathering (e.g., if disability data is only gathered for clients whose cases have been accepted and who are eligible for Title III funding, no conclusions are possible about the number or percentage of potential and/or served or not served clients with disabilities).

Balance is required between what you would like to know about all individuals requesting assistance, the resources available to gather and analyze data, and clients' privacy. Some rejected clients might assume they were denied service based on information gathered during intake so it is important to be very thoughtful about what is gathered, when, and by whom. Examples of data that might be problematic in this regard include whether a client was dishonorably discharged, whether a client has a felony record, or whether a client is disabled.

Standard Data Entry Procedures

Many legal aid organizations are blessed with long-time staff who have immeasurably valuable institutional knowledge. That can be a gift, but it can also lead to a reliance on those staff that is dangerous because of its impermanence and the potential for inconsistency, particularly for legal aid organizations that have decentralized intake. For example, a legal aid organization with long-term intake staff in different offices who have different interpretations about what certain variables mean may gather and enter very different data for the same variable, making it very difficult for the legal aid to conduct organization-wide data analyses. However, standard procedures regarding entering data in case management systems that are written, distributed to all staff, reviewed at regular trainings and every time a new person joins the organization help ensure consistent variable interpretation and data entry, and

allow for organization-wide analyses. Do not discount the extraordinary knowledge of your long-term staff; rather, gather and use it as the basis for your standard procedures.

Standard data entry procedures may be presented in multiple ways. One important format for your data entry procedures is a summary case management system reference guide. A two-sided, colorful, laminated document is an effective format, something each staff member can keep at their desk in a form that makes it easy to find. The most difficult decisions for the summary reference guide revolve around what to include in light of space limitations. Narrow the subjects you include to the data that are most important to consistently collect and/or about which your staff seem most confused. One legal aid organization includes the following reminders on one side of their summary reference guide: case status definitions, closing code definitions, available funding codes, program definitions, reminders about LSC eligibility, instructions regarding the new variable for cases involving domestic violence, outcome measure reminders, reminders about citizenship attestation requirements, and reminders regarding documenting legal work. The flip side includes tips and definitions of matters activities and other supporting activities, in addition to instructions for entering time slips and case notes.

Plan to regularly review and update your data entry procedures and associated guides. Your needs for data will constantly change; thus your data entry procedures will require frequent updating. For that reason, regular training is a must.

Data Entry Training

It is quite common for organizations to train new staff when they start and then never again. For legal aid organizations with evolving data needs and requirements, that does not work. Imagine what a staff person who has been with your organization for ten years or more was trained to do when they started. Now think about all that has changed in the last decade; in the last eighteen months even. If you have not updated their training, they may still be using outdated interpretations, which contributes significantly to your organization's data integrity issues. And it is not the fault of the staff person — they are doing exactly as they were told all those years ago. Thus, start planning your annual (or preferably semi-annual) data trainings now.

Between trainings, managers should stay abreast of all case management system data requirements and ensure that their staff are informed. Consistency in

interpretation among managers is essential so that all staff, regardless of their supervisor, receive the same guidance. One effective method is for managers to include five minutes of data discussion in every meeting. This brief discussion might include something as simple as notice of new variables or something more complex, such as discussions about how to interpret potentially confusing variables. As an example, one manager in a consumer practice group asks her staff to bring questions regarding outcome measure protocols to the weekly practice group meetings during which the group collectively discusses reasons behind the protocols, how they apply in certain cases, and how to deal with unusual cases. The group either reaches consensus on new protocols or exceptions to them or, in some cases, seeks further guidance from the deputy director.

Error Checking

A highly effective and efficient way to improve data integrity is to create regularly recurring (preferably monthly) error checking reports that are distributed to staff and to managers. As with the summary case management system reference guide, there is a limit to the number of items for which you can test, so stick to the ones that are most important to get right and/or the variables about which your staff seem most confused. One model that works well includes a monthly case coding contradiction report and a missing demographics report sent to all staff with errors or omissions. One week after staff receive their reports, managers receive updated copies that show any outstanding errors. Managers follow up with staff to enforce requirements, but also to help clear up any confusion. The process has the added benefit of providing a sort of quasi-training in that it reminds staff on a regular basis about data definitions and expectations.

Examples of the error tests in a case coding contradiction report might include simple tests for issues, such as cases with a Close Date and no Close Code or more complex tests, such as cases classified as LSC eligible for which the Poverty variable is over 200% and the Income Exception variable is blank. Examples of the error tests in a missing demographics report might include missing Race, missing Language, or missing Citizenship.

An additional benefit of error checking reports is that the results can help identify data integrity problems in the case management system. For example, if a variable consistently shows errors, you should review the variable to see if the location is problematic, the variable is ill-defined or structured, it defaults to something other than blank, its answer options are outdated, or

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any other causes of data integrity issues. In this way, error checking reports promote constant data integrity review and improvement.

Take Your First Step

Establish a pattern of continuous improvement. Regularly cycling through a review of organizational goals, a data deep dive, data clean up, adding wish list items, standardizing data entry procedures, data entry training, and error checking is the best way to ensure that your legal aid organization enjoys a high level of data integrity and the increased efficiency and effectiveness that come along with it.

If you do not have the capacity or resources to start the cycle described above, try one or more of these three steps and work your way up to the pattern of continuous improvement:

1. Ask your staff for input about confusing variables. Often, simple corrections clear up confusion immediately and thus improve data integrity right away.
2. Create standardized data entry procedures and begin regular data entry training. Do this even if there are case management system issues because it will improve consistency and data integrity quickly and significantly.
3. Change your thinking about data right away. Stop thinking of data as a burden and start thinking of data as a strategic tool.

Do not delay. Take your first step toward data integrity.

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a mobile responsive website made possible by an LSC grant in partnership with West Tennessee Legal Services and the Tennessee public library system.

MIE: What is it like to direct a non-LSC funded supporting organization with a Board of Directors composed of LSC-funded program executive directors, non-LSC funded program directors, court and bar representatives and EDs of other related organizations?

Pruitt: Having such a diverse group of organizations represented on our board gives me a unique, 360 degree perspective on all the work happening in our state to help people who would otherwise have nowhere to turn. There are naturally going to be challenges reaching consensus when a decision is needed on a particular direction TALS might take and that action is more aligned with the priorities of some organizations represented on our board than others. This occasional tension sparks meaningful discussion and makes our equal justice community stronger.

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Betsy Fedder is the Director of Annual and Major Giving at Pisgah Legal Services where she has been serving donors since 2008. Prior to PLS, she worked in development for a small charter school, a private boy's school and a large conference center. During her time at PLS, the annual campaign has doubled from \$300,000 to \$600,000 and from 500 donors to 1000 donors. Betsy may be reached at betsy@pisgahlegal.org.