

MIG-RATS
BENEFITS COUNSELING OUTCOMES WORKGROUP
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Participants: Karen Health (AK), Julie Robison (CT), Jennifer Sullivan Sulewski (MA), Marsha Ellison (MA), Beth O’Connell (MA), Anita Boucher (MN), Liz Hartmann (MN), Barry Delin (WI), Krista Harrison (MPR), Anne Reither (MIG-RATS), Amy Porter (MIG-RATS)

Structural Model:

We have made great progress on the structural model for benefits counseling outcomes evaluation. However, there has been some discussion about breaking the model into smaller components.

Pros:

- Smaller sub-models might make it possible for states to identify specific research questions and get a sense of where they fit into the larger model.
- These sub-models might also allow states to identify opportunities for multi-state research.

Cons:

- There is no easy way to specify every potential path.
- Breaking the model down into sub-models might over-simplify the evaluation needs

The group felt that it would be helpful to identify a few specific sub-models, and pair those with the data sources necessary to support the evaluation. These sub-models will be developed and shared with the group prior to the next meeting.

Examples of sub-models might include the following:

#1 Benefits counseling → Demographic Variables → #4a Use of Work Incentives
#4b Employment

#1 Benefits counseling → #4a Use of Work Incentives → #5a Health Coverage

We also are interested in following up on some of the discussions from New Orleans. Su Liu from MPR sent us the list of required data elements for WIPA programs (from the original RFP). They haven't changed since the original solicitation, but hopefully will give us a starting point. We are hoping to have a discussion about the following: 1) What data systems/ elements do WIPA (SSA) and MIG (CMS) grantees need from each other? 2) To answer what research questions?

WIPA/MIG Data Sharing Issues

CMS and SSA have both expressed their understanding of the need to share data at a state level. In exploring the data sharing issues on benefits counseling, both CMS and SSA are asking us to articulate the types of data that the MIGs are interested in receiving, and the research questions that will be answered with the data.

As a starting point, the workgroup reviewed the research questions that were generated by this group last year. The questions (adopted in May, 2007) included the following:

- Does benefits counseling affect earnings and employment?
- Does BC plus supportive employment services have greater impact than supportive employment alone?
- For whom does BC work? What does it depend on?
- Does BC affect other long-term outcomes?

States agree the research questions should be restructured to reflect the model, and then the model be broken apart for testing smaller pieces with the data they have available.

Potential new research questions include:

- What is the relationship between benefits counseling and employment outcomes, earnings, and health outcomes?
- How does the duration of benefits counseling affect these outcomes?
- What are the long-term effects of benefits counseling vs. short-term ?

In terms of WIPA Data, states are most interested in the green and blue outcomes from the model, which include:

- Use of Work Incentives
- Employment
- Health Coverage
- Cash Benefit Program Participation
- Earnings
- Total Disposable Income

There was discussion about the standardization of data. If access to WIPA data is granted, states will need information on the data collection methods and extent of standardization. If data are collected at irregular periods, or a non-standardized number of times at non-standardized intervals, for each beneficiary, then the data is weaker and more difficult to work with.

As no data dictionary or standardized database has yet been issued by SSA to WIPAs, we expect the data to be non-standard. Much enthusiasm for data sharing was demonstrated in New Orleans; MIGRATS will work with CMS and SSA to encourage the development of data sharing agreements for WIPA and MIG data.

Next steps:

- Notify MIGRATS if your state is ready to do benefits counseling outcomes research but cannot due to access issues with the BPAO/WIPA data; they will notify CMS and SSA in the data sharing meetings.
- Anne, Amy, and Barry will work on revising the research questions, breaking down the models accordingly, and illustrating with examples. These sub-models will be shared with the group prior to the next meeting
- Next meeting: early/mid-June. 3:30-5 timeframe seems to work fine.