Integrated Data and Community Voice in Decision Making

At the Community Development Finance Authority (CDFA), data serves as a compass and a guidepost, providing a direction for resource allocation and ensuring that projects produce meaningful outcomes. CDFA's unique data-driven approach enhances project management, measures program impact, informs future programming, and drives effective decision-making, ultimately benefiting communities by ensuring resources are applied where they are needed most.

The Role of Data in Program Management

Data plays a crucial role in CDFA's program management, acting as the backbone for successful project implementation. By collecting and analyzing data throughout the lifecycle of a project, CDFA can track progress, measure impacts, and plan for future initiatives. This approach allows for real-time adjustments, ensuring projects remain on target and resources are used efficiently.

Julius Peel, Community Development Program Administrator, primarily works on projects related to the Community Development Block Grant (CDBG), supporting grantees from the application through the implementation, closeout, and monitoring phases. He highlights that the organization's data collection efforts are essential to assess community impact.

"Whenever a project is finalized, grantees submit their closing documents, which must include the federal required documentation," says Peel. "For example, housing and public facilities projects utilizing CDBG Funds must report the number of low-to-moderate-income (LMI) households served. We then use that data internally to assess the overall statewide impact of our projects, helping us better understand how we're addressing community needs and meeting our goals."

However, community impact extends beyond hard data. Julius Peel noted the importance of selecting the right metrics for evaluating projects. "One could compare a sewer line improvement that serves 100 individuals in a neighborhood to a housing facility that provides a few additional units and conclude that the sewer project has a greater public benefit," explains Peel. "However, if we choose a different metric, like the number of additional housing units provided, the housing facility project may show a greater benefit based on that scale. Choosing metrics that align with our organizational goals helps us drive quality outcomes year over year," he added.

To this, Nate Olson, a Data & Compliance Specialist whose work focuses on supporting CDFA's internal systems, particularly the Grants Management System (GMS), adds that while quantitative data might seem rigid, it often has a qualitative dimension. "Definitions of terms like 'low-to-moderate income' shape the numbers we work with," he explained. "Our goal is to add nuance and context, ensuring that our data tells the full story of a project's impact and prevents people from narrowly comparing one program to another based solely on numbers because that approach doesn't provide meaningful insights or direction," Olson added.

These insights are gathered in CDFA's Annual Report, which reflects the organization's commitment to transparency, accountability, and meaningful impact. This report highlights key projects and initiatives through detailed data analysis, success stories, and financial summaries, showcasing how CDFA leverages state and federal funding to support critical areas such as affordable housing, public facilities, and community services. It also serves as a testament to the collaborative partnerships CDFA builds with local organizations, municipalities, and nonprofits to drive sustainable development and improve quality of life statewide.

Data-Driven Decision-Making

The data collected at CDFA not only tracks project performance but also informs future funding priorities. Nate Olson emphasizes the importance of engaging with current and potential applicants to uncover themes and emerging needs. "The interactions that we have with the community are driving the programs that we fund. The newest example is the family childcare project. We saw that need coming up in the community and found funding to support that work."

Additionally, the organization uses tools like the Community Progress Indicators (CPI) and Core Data Index (CDI) to evaluate community needs. In 2019, CDFA engaged the New Hampshire Fiscal Policy Institute (NHFPI) and a fellow from the Carsey School of Public Policy at the University of New Hampshire to analyze possible data sources. Their recommendations served as the basis for creating a set of 13 Community Progress Indicators (CPIs), including factors like income, health access, and educational attainment, offering a comprehensive view of where resources are most needed around the state. The Community Progress Indicators form the basis of CDFA's Core Data Index, which is one metric to help represent the overall socioeconomic needs of each New Hampshire municipality.

"We score every project based on these indicators," explained Julius Peel. "For instance, if a community has consistently high CPI scores, we know their projects are a priority. That data helps us focus our efforts on communities that need the most support."

The city of Franklin is a prime example of analyzing community needs through the Community Progress Indicators (CPI). Historically, Franklin has had a high score, which generally indicates that the community is facing more challenges. Over the past few years, Franklin's CPI has been improving. This suggests that communities like Franklin, which receive consistent support across multiple projects tend to show improved indicators over time. This improvement contrasts with other regions, particularly in rural and remote areas of New Hampshire, which show disproportionate increases in forms of poverty.

For Julius Peel, "There's real value in understanding this data because it allows us to serve leading communities more efficiently and also targets those that may be struggling." Making this data more accessible to CDFA's staff not only guides outreach efforts but helps the organization identify these geographic disparities, guiding fund allocation and programs to where they are most needed.

Nate Olson emphasizes that CPI and CDI are valuable tools when we're trying to offer targeted support to historically underserved communities in New Hampshire. "These indicators help us take a limited set of resources and direct them in precise ways," he says. "This data can be useful for anyone living in these communities to meet ongoing needs where funding could make a meaningful impact, or reveal if a need is just a one-off occurrence that requires a different solution."

Building Data Capacity

Looking ahead, CDFA envisions a future where its data not only tracks past performance but also inspires proactive community engagement. "We want people to look at our data as an inspiration for future projects to implement in their towns," says Nate Olson. CDFA is actively working on more consistent data collection and user-friendly data visualization maps to help communities see what projects have been completed near them and use that information to inspire new initiatives. By making this data accessible to the public, CDFA hopes to empower communities to define their own goals and encourage them to take advantage of available resources.

CDFA's approach to data and outcomes highlights the organization's commitment to using data to drive meaningful change in New Hampshire's communities. Through careful collection, analysis, and flexibility, CDFA ensures that its work addresses the needs of the people it serves, and reaches those it doesn't serve yet, fostering a more equitable and responsive development process across the state.