

IDS CASE STUDY: Los Angeles County

Collecting Data Across Los Angeles County:
the Enterprise Linkages Project

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❖ The Evolution of Integrated Data Systems in Los Angeles County

Several years ago, the Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors, the County's governing body, began an extensive conversation about the effectiveness and costs associated with the programs for the County's homeless population. Having relied on anecdotal information from case workers for decades, the Board wanted to conduct a robust analysis of the agencies that served the homeless to understand the magnitude of these social services and to assess the most promising approaches to service delivery. The Board approached the County's Chief Information Office (CIO) and asked if they might be able to provide the data for this study. The CIO told the Board that the agency had these data, but that the data were not organized in a useful way. For years, the CIO had housed these data in agency-specific silos. The Board persisted and asked Manuel Moreno and Halil Toros, two Ph.D. trained policy researchers, to develop an integrated data system to answer their questions about the County's programs serving the homeless.

With start-up funds from the County's Department of Public Social Services (DPSS) and the Chief Executive Office's (CEO) Information Technology Fund (ITF), Moreno and Toros developed a conceptual framework outlining the benefits of an integrated data system and how they might realize their aims of linking data across the County's agencies. In the beginning, many of the agencies were reluctant to participate in a data sharing enterprise of this scope. Initially, Moreno and Toros met with data managers in each of the agencies and created presentations to explain their concept and gauge whether agencies could be persuaded of the advantages of integrated data. They quickly realized that this was a misguided approach. While data managers are critical to government services, they are not necessarily invested in programmatic outcomes and are not in a position to implement an integrated data system.

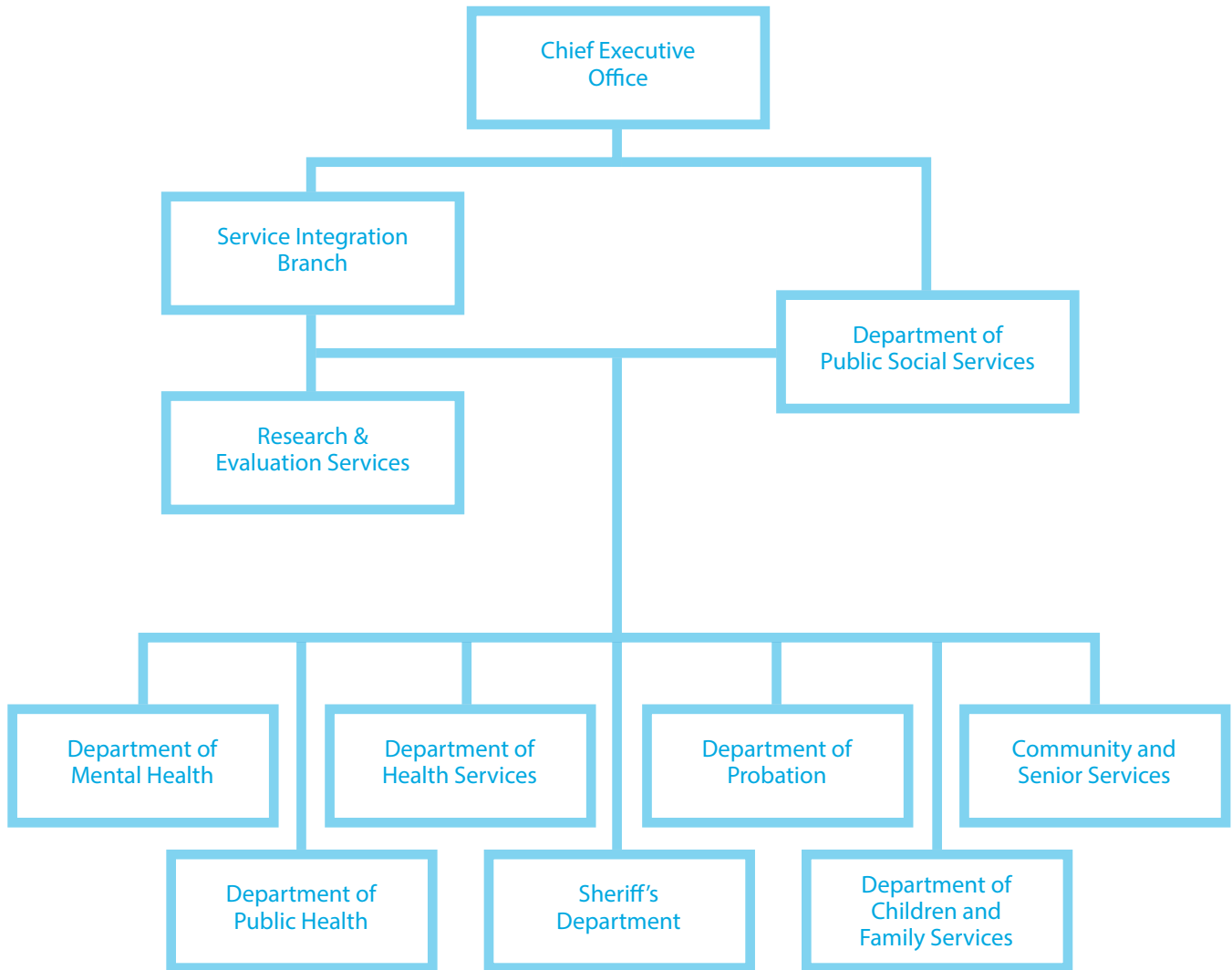
Moreno and Toros decided to approach the agencies' executive staff and hoped that they might be able to garner the upper-level support and create the IDS from the top down rather than from the bottom up. They met with Dr. David Jansen, the County's Chief Executive Officer, and gave him an overview of their ideas. Jansen immediately

understood the value in integrated data and encouraged Moreno and Toros to draft a memorandum to the directors of the agencies whose data they wanted to include. This executive memorandum catalyzed the process, and now they had to secure the funds to realize their goal.

Rather than start big, Moreno and Toros asked the Board of Supervisors for a small grant to create the County's IDS. They wanted to start their initiative small, demonstrate its value with several studies, and grow over time. Within a few months, Moreno and Toros created the first integrated data system in Los Angeles County—the Adult Linkages Project (ALP). Gradually, ALP developed into the Enterprise Linkages Project (ELP), an integrated data system “open to any department that would want to utilize the data...to drive policy on their own programs” (Moreno and Toros, interview, 2/28). Today, ELP consists of two distinct integrated data systems: one that DPSS caseworkers use to manage their client base and another that Research and Evaluation Services (RES) staff members oversee and use for policy-driven research.

During the site visit, I conducted semi-structured interviews with ELP staff. The interviews were based on an interview protocol developed with the University of Pennsylvania's Actionable Intelligence for Social Policy (AISP) team. Using standard qualitative methods, I structured these interviews using four themes—securing and maintaining legal agreements, establishing governance processes, implementing data analytics management and processes, and creating economic and political realities to sustain operations.

FIGURE 1. Los Angeles County’s Organizational Chart and List of Agencies that Contribute Data to ELP



❖ Using ELP Governance to Set a Bold Research Agenda

ELP still resides in the Chief Executive Office under Research and Evaluation Services. Its governing body consists of RES and DPSS staff as well as SAS representatives who coordinate ELP's data analytics programming. RES staff members meet regularly with the agencies that contribute data to discuss agency initiatives, brainstorm potential research studies, and consider additional data sources to enhance policy and programs outcomes. In addition, staff from the different agencies that contribute data to ELP meet regularly with DPSS caseworkers to develop research priorities and questions. As one DPSS staff member said, research priorities come “from the bottom up in terms of ideas. And then, when it comes to aggregation, the executives aggregate these ideas” (DPSS, interview, 2/28). The RES governing body meets annually to move from these ideas to a clear research agenda. Max Stevens, the interim manager of the CEO's Research and Evaluation Services (RES) unit, believes that this process promotes dynamic conversations between RES and DPSS staff. As he says, setting the research agenda is an interactive process that involves DPSS presenting their ideas to RES staff, and then, having RES staff explain how they can provide DPSS “with information and data that will help them move their initiatives forward” (Stevens, interview, 2/27). This collaborative approach ensures that ELP research has practical outcomes for improving service delivery throughout the County.

When it was founded, RES relied on project-specific MOUs that were created for internal and external research projects. Over time, this process became too burdensome. Now, RES uses a standard MOU that outlines data use practices and procedures for each agency and project multiplication forms that stipulate the specific data use policies for each project. The project multiplication forms contain a short description of the proposed research study and a table detailing ELP's data sources. Agencies have an opportunity to review these forms and decide if their data can be used for the proposed research. Nancy Salem, a Program Specialist working in RES, says that this innovative approach allows RES staff to streamline, standardize, and expedite the MOU process while still addressing agency concerns about individual research projects (Salem, interview, 2/27).

❖ Data Use Pipeline: Moving a Proposed Study to Policy-Driven Research

RES relies primarily on their internal research agenda to generate research proposals and conduct studies. Occasionally, however, external researchers will inquire about using ELP data in their own work. These researchers typically contact the RES staff with their initial request. If these studies seem feasible, the staff brings these requests to a research steering committee and County Council for approval. Once the study has been approved, Nancy Salem begins the legal process of finding the necessary MOUs and securing the appropriate project multiplication forms.

RES does not have a traditional institutional review board (IRB) for ELP data use. Instead, they require HIPAA training and certification for anyone who has access to the data to guarantee that they understand HIPAA rules and regulations. ELP data users must sign a confidentiality agreement that outlines their responsibilities as approved data users in the County. Furthermore, individuals who contribute their data to ELP must sign a consent form that stipulates their rights and ELP data use protocols. Some departments have their own internal IRB (e.g., the Department of Public Health and Health Services). In these cases, researchers must submit a formal IRB with the agency staff if they are using the departments' data. External researchers must complete IRB with their institutions and forward these permissions to RES staff.

❖ Preparing Agency-Level Data for Use, Research, and Publication

Duc Doan currently manages the data cleaning and storing process within RES to prepare ELP data for research. Every month, the agencies that contribute to ELP run encryption software, which Toros developed with SAS, on their data and deposit it on a secure server. Doan runs a two-step process to link the data. First, they use first name, last name, social security, and date of birth to match as many of the data as they

can. Then, they troubleshoot problematic data using a variety of analytical programs to increase their match rate. Doan and Toros rely on SAS software and specific applications that they have developed in-house to conduct these linkages. Currently, Doan maintains a data dictionary so that RES staff members understand the variables in each data set and can communicate their extensive data holdings effectively with County staff and external researchers (Doan, interview, 2/27).

When the analysis is complete, the researchers submit an initial draft of the study and its conclusions. RES and the County agencies that contribute data to ELP review the study's methods, data use, specific findings, and policy outcomes. They comment on the draft and return it to the researcher with detailed critiques and editing suggestions. The research team considers these comments and returns a final draft to RES staff. Once RES staff members have a final version, they examine the methods section to verify that the data have been used properly. According to Max Stevens, this process guarantees that RES research studies reflect “our understanding of the data and the department’s understanding of what is in the data” (Stevens, interview, 2/27). RES submits the final report to the Los Angeles Board of Supervisors who publish the study on their publicly accessible website. RES also maintains their own website to disseminate these studies to a wider audience.

❖ Project 50: Using ELP to Analyze the Cost Effectiveness of the Permanent Supportive Housing Model in the Skid Row Section of Los Angeles County

In June 2012, RES published an evaluation of Project 50, a Board of Supervisors demonstration project that provides housing and integrated services to some of the County’s most vulnerable, chronically homeless adults living in the Skid Row section of Los Angeles. Using ELP data, the evaluation demonstrated that between 2008 and 2010 the program not only saved the County money but also provided a surplus. The evaluation also included a qualitative component to gain a deeper understanding of

Project 50's functionality and the effectiveness of homeless prevention methods. The qualitative study included focus groups with participants and program staff. The results showed that Project 50 is a proactive and responsive approach to helping individuals with severe barriers to housing and long histories of homelessness to achieve greater self-sufficiency and stability. The quantitative cost saving analysis and qualitative focus groups suggest the effectiveness and efficiency of Project 50 and provide the Board of Supervisors with evidence to replicate this program in other parts of Los Angeles County (Moreno et al 2012).

In addition to these studies, RES staff used ELP data to improve their understanding of how GR recipients interact with a variety of services through County agencies and departments. This longitudinal study examined cost and extent of County service use among approximately 13,000 General Relief (GR) participants from 2005 until 2007. The study focused on four main areas: describing the characteristics of GR participants; analyzing the cost and extent of service use by GR participants within individual County departments; determining the cost and extent of service use by GR participants across multiple County departments; and quantifying the cost and extent of the multi-department service use of certain sub-group of GR participants. The study revealed the complex needs of the GR population—30 – 40% of GR participants had a disability; many had a treatment history for mental illness; and over half were homeless while receiving GR benefits. In addition, RES staff found that health services and jail stays accounted for 83% of the overall cost of County services used over the 3-year study period. Results suggest that 40% of GR participants received services in two or more County agencies and that the costs for persons with a disability were more than double that of the average GR participant. This study provided DPSS and other agencies with a comprehensive picture of GR participants and their needs and helped these agencies consider different models for service delivery. The findings from this study underscore the importance of integrated data systems for policy-driven research. The project was relatively easy to execute with ELP data, but would have been impossible without it (Byrne et al., 2012, pp. 102–104).

❖ Economic and Political Realities: How to Sustain Los Angeles’s Enterprise Linkage Project

From its founding, DPSS has contributed the majority of RES funds. Currently, DPSS contributes approximately 79% of its funds, and the Board of Supervisors allocates funds for 21% of ELP’s budget. In addition, RES often receives additional funds from foundation and federal research grants to examine their programs and policies. Moreno believes that this combination of funds is critical to ELP’s success and sustainability because it combines internal funding from critical government agencies with external funds from interested researchers to advance policy-driven research to improve policy and program outcomes in Los Angeles County (Moreno, interview, 2/28).

The relationship that RES has forged with DPSS is mutually beneficial. In their interview, DPSS staff members repeatedly stressed the importance of ELP data in their work. There is an increasing amount of pressure from the Board of Supervisors for department heads to understand their data and the trends in their programs. One DPSS staff member noted that “[when] you have those kind of expectations on you, and you have that much at stake, then you will measure, and you will measure, and you will measure.” He continued stating that DPSS’s collaboration with RES has established a level of discipline and engagement around data and has promoted a deeper commitment among agency staff to examine their data on a regular basis and use these data to enhance the programs that they offer. DPSS staff members have relied on the data to determine what they are doing well and what they need to do better. This has led to productive conversations between the department heads and caseworkers and built pride within the agency about the work that they do. In addition, DPSS staff share RES studies with their community partners and advocates and use these studies to generate feedback about the development of policies and the implementation of programs. For example, DPSS distributed the results of the General Relief study to the Welfare Advisory Council to discuss what they had learned from the study and to consider how to use this knowledge to improve programming. Finally, DPSS staff work with RES staff to present these studies to other government agencies and at national conferences in order to promote their work and continue their policy discussions beyond the County (DPSS staff, interview, 2/28).

As they reflect on what they have learned from the development and history of ELP, Moreno and Toros believe that having one key person, who acts as your cheerleader to promote the project and shepherd it through, is critical in the early stages as one develops the components of any integrated data system. Initially, the deputy director of DPSS had questions about their programs and operations and asked Moreno and Toros for their assistance in creating an integrated data system to answer these questions. When they began this work, they mistakenly focused too much on the technology. In the end, Moreno and Toros realized that they did not need a flagship technology program. Rather, the success of ELP depended on relationships built on trust and respect for the work that they were engaged in. From the beginning, Moreno and Toros knew that they wanted to create an integrated data system to evaluate complex programs and policies throughout Los Angeles County. Using the relationships that they cultivated at DPSS and other County agencies, Research and Evaluation Services and the Enterprise Linkages Project serves as a hub for County officials and external researchers who are deeply engaged in policy-driven research today.

❖ About AISP

AISP is an initiative funded by the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation through a grant to University of Pennsylvania Professors Dennis Culhane, School of Social Policy and Practice, and John Fantuzzo, Graduate School of Education. The principal aim of AISP is to improve the quality of education, health and human service agencies' policies and practices through the use of integrated data systems. Quality integrated data systems are designed to help executive leaders in municipal, county, and state government evaluate and establish effective programs for the people they serve.

❖ Works Cited—Data Use and Practices

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