Remade to Measure: Applying Impact Measurement Theory to Non-Profit Organizations – A Case Study

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Abstract
Non-profit organizations are increasingly called upon by their stakeholders to demonstrate success and impact in the delivery of their mission objectives. Despite sophisticated IT systems in the enterprise, many organizations still struggle to implement processes to meet these demands. This case study examines methodological approaches for data-driven program evaluation and planning based on theoretical frameworks of goal-oriented program planning. We used an iterative approach, combining review of relevant literature and semi-structured interviews with thought-leaders familiar with the challenges of program measurement. Our findings demonstrate that theoretical frameworks, including “Theory of Change,” can provide a roadmap for program evaluation, and can be applied to the redesign and modification of existing IT systems in the enterprise. Findings from this case study may contribute to the efforts of other non-profit organizations in making use of readily available data to better identify short, medium, and long-term goals in the service of their missions.

1. Introduction
Non-profit organizations are increasingly called upon to demonstrate “success.” Funders, community supporters, board members and other stakeholders make increasing demands for accountability that reflect a growing awareness that relevant data to evaluate non-profit performance should be available. However, while organizations are routinely collecting reams of data in the course of their regular activities [1], all too often, non-profit managers fail to effectively utilize that data, and may even lack an awareness of what data they have. Harnessed into coherent form, data collected routinely within the non-profit’s IT enterprise can provide transparency about an organization’s activities to stakeholders, and provide opportunities for programmatic evaluation for the organization’s leaders [2]. Faced with both internal and external demands for data-driven impact measurements, there is a growing demand to apply a theoretical basis to evaluation of the activities and systems of non-profit organizations in a manner that yields responsive reporting on their organizational performance and impact, and the extent to which they are achieving their missions.

The goal of the current study was to investigate these issues of performance evaluation in the non-profit arena, through an in-depth study of one illustrative case. We were guided by two over-arching research questions:

- What are the theoretical bases that can guide non-profit organizations in developing measurement strategies?
- How can those strategies be applied to an organization’s current data collection methods or through direct enhancement of those practices and systems?

By examining these questions in the context of one illustrative case – a non-profit law firm, referred to here by the pseudonym Legal Services Org (LSO) - we sought to provide insight into how a non-profit organization can utilize theoretical frameworks in the design of performance and impact measurement systems. In the following sections we first present a review of the literature related to measuring the impact of advocacy work, and then describe our collective case study method. Next we describe the case organization and present our findings. We close with discussion of recommendations for this organization, and other similar non-profits, for approaches for data-driven program evaluation.
2. Literature Review

Our initial review of literature related to advocacy work confirmed the challenges of locating useful tools for measuring the impact of in this domain, as was strongly asserted in the Blackbaud’s “State of the Nonprofit Industry Survey” [3]. The report demonstrated that “most nonprofits use impact metrics to assess performance, but they do not feel that they have all the impact metrics they need for public reporting and marketing” [3]. However, our contacts with the Blackbaud research department were able to provide us with a number of third party research papers on the subject of developing metrics/measuring impact, significantly work on Theory of Change and the Outcome Approach.

Theory of Change, as articulated by Gienap, Reisman and Stachowiak, [4, 5] and Colby, Stone and Carttar [6] is a powerful framework within which to develop impact assessments for mission-driven organizations, as it emphasizes making robust, guiding linkages between an organization’s mission and its day-to-day work. Other measurement resources are broadly analogous to the activities and processes included in Theory of Change. For example, Penna [7] refers to a system of strategy or outcome definition and related measures as the Outcome Approach, and that system closely resembles Theory of Change. Hatry’s [8] work, produced by the United Way, also deals with the Outcome Approach and summarizes an Outcome as:

“...benefits or changes for individuals or populations during or after participating in program activities. They are influenced by a program’s outputs. Outcomes may relate behavior, skills, attitudes, values, condition, status or other attributes. They are what participants know, think or can do; or how they behave; or what their condition is, that is different following the program.”

Penna [7] and Hatry [8] both define the steps in the Outcome Approach as roughly conforming to a process of defining outcomes based upon the results of organizational inputs (resources), activities (programs) and outputs from those activities. Additionally, both Penna and Hatry offer useful discussions on the history and details of implementing the Outcome Approach while elaborating each step in the process. However, the predominant gap in both resources is the lack of specificity in the application of the processes and activities discussed. Both resources are targeted to non-profit organizations generally and are not concerned with the enormous differences in missions across the landscape of such organizations. As noted in [6], different categories of non-profit organizations need their own mission-specific performance metrics. This highlights a gap in much of the literature reviewed, in that while general strategies and tools for measurement are widely researched and written about, little work has addressed specific areas of the non-profit sector, such as the one in which our case study organization operates (legal advocacy).

However, one organization, the Annie E. Casey foundation, has funded and produced guides for implementing and utilizing Theory of Change specific to those non-profits that work within the realms of advocacy and policy [4] [5]. While these guides do not directly deal with legal advocacy they are an attempt at providing more tailored measures for advocacy organizations. According to Colby, Stone and Carttar [6], “Theory of change explains how the organization’s intended impact will actually happen, the cause-and-effect logic by which organizational and financial resources will be converted into the desired social results.” Both Colby et al. and Gienapp et al. [5] identify high-level components involved in creating a Theory of Change, including Intended Impact. Colby et al. explain:

“Intended impact and theory of change provide a bridge between a non-profit’s mission and its programmatic activities. Intended impact is a statement or series of statements about what the organization is trying to achieve and will hold itself accountable for within some manageable period of time.” [6]

Gienapp et. al [4] place intended impacts within the conceptual model of Theory of Change by associating these impacts with outcomes and then further refining these outcomes into categories delineated by the timeframe—short-term or long-term—within which the organization can expect to see them realized.

Theory of Change shares the emphasis of recognizing and defining the temporal scope of an outcome with the Outcome Approach but the key conceptual difference between the two approaches is that the Outcome Approach eschews vision statements or higher level goals as the object, choosing instead to focus on concrete achievements to be attained within a specific timeframe. Theory of Change, on the other hand, places outcomes in the middle of the conceptual model, linking those outcomes with goal statements that can be very long-term, lofty and potentially unattainable. As an example, Gienapp et. al [5] reference the Theory of Change created by the organization Mother’s Against Drunk Driving (MADD). MADD defined their intended goal as “saving lives.” Although measures can be used to ascertain if the organization is achieving its goal, it’s
unlikely that MADD will ever get to a point where lives need not be saved. In this way, Theory of Change allows an idealistic aim to serve as a functional framework and target for the more attainable outcomes, which themselves are cast as the direct targets of an organization’s activities.

We reviewed other resources that offer practical tools and processes for collecting useful data and measures. In particular, Hatry, Cowan and Hendricks [9] argue that measurement must start at the beginning of any charitable activity rather than waiting for the conclusion of that activity. Hatry et al. also elaborated a specific series of steps an organization might use to record and utilize measurement data as it relates to specific participants in a given charitable enterprise. As a counterpoint to this, Snibbe [10] points out that many organizations do not know how to accurately utilize the data they have and cannot afford to take steps to improve the collection and design of data for measures even if they had the expertise and wherewithal to do so. Snibbe is far from alone in citing the challenge of understanding the data that is present or available to the enterprise. Cunningham and Ricks [11], and Johnson, Rochkind, and Dupont [12] illustrate how many organizations are unprepared to interpret their own data coherently and may not yield successful or coherent outputs even when they try.

Faced with these challenges, we sought to examine from a practical perspective, whether a theoretical framework such as Theory of Change can be utilized by a non-profit to address the demands for more focused performance evaluation and provide ideas for ongoing outcomes measurement strategies.

3. Method

In this study, we followed the broad case study design described by Pickard [13], beginning with “orientation” and proceeding through “focused exploration.” In particular, following Pickard, we identified this approach as a “collective case study,” in which the practices of other organizations were contrasted against those of LSO as a means of suggesting new approaches for LSO. In the orientation phase, we determined the scope of this study, the unit of analysis (LSO) and outlined our sample. In the exploration phase, we gathered information about LSO’s current practices, triangulating that data with other data sources from the literature, and then further narrowed our focus with one-on-one interviews conducted with thought-leaders in the domain of legal advocacy organizations. By employing these focused exploration techniques, we sought to increase the reliability and validity of our findings through corroboration of the literature review with interview data. We utilized content analysis to parse the interview data, and identified gaps and problems with LSO’s current practices. Finally, we conducted follow-up interviews with our subjects in which we shared our findings—derived from the literature review and the interviews as a whole—and brainstormed ideas for implementing evaluative strategies utilizing Theory of Change and related concepts.

3.1 Establishing the baseline practices of LSO

The authors were afforded extensive access to the subject organization of this study through the first author’s employment at the organization. The first author secured permission to examine and share criteria documents used by the organization’s planning bodies. Oral and email conversations with LSO’s Advocacy Director, who has a long history with the organization, yielded historical insights into current practices and some acknowledged shortcomings in the current evaluative model and planning strategies. Informal conversations with other leadership figures yielded additional background about organizational processes.

The first author’s employment role included selecting and supporting much of LSO’s IT infrastructure, and he was able to provide details about the IT enterprise. An additional resource in this area was the system documentation and online manual for the client management system used by LSO.

3.2. Thought leader interviews

Following Pickard’s definition of collective case study work [13], we chose a purposive sample of interview subjects from organizations whose work intersects with, or resembles that of LSO because of the specific nature of their work. Given that a major motivation for developing outcome measures is to provide data for fundraising activities, we determined that within the sample, respondents should be drawn from among those with domain knowledge about funding legal advocacy work. Based on this judgment sampling approach, four interview respondents were ultimately chosen: two from related legal non-profits and two from organizations that are involved in funding such programs. Based on our findings from the literature review, we created guiding questions for each interview subject type—funder and provider. Because it was presumed that the interviewees would be willing and voluble participants, and because we were interested in gaining insights beyond our own thinking, a semi-structured interview approach was chosen, allowing sufficient freedom for the interviewees to be expansive while still focusing on specific subject areas.
All four interview respondents are from organizations associated with the Alliance for Equal Justice (The Alliance). The Alliance is network of legal aid providers working in Washington State, including LSO, who work closely together to make broad decisions about where and what work should be done in the service of overlapping missions and values, and how to allocate the public and semi-public funding that helps support that work. It was assumed that working with closely associated stakeholders would reduce some barriers in establishing rapport, and would elicit a richer data set, while accepting the limitation that more diverse and objective data might be gathered from farther afield. An area for deeper study would be to greatly expand the scope of the inquiry to include subjects working in similar, but more distant realms – such as legal aid providers and funders outside the Alliance network or who are otherwise not so insular to the sponsor’s day-to-day operations.

Respondent A was a senior member of an immigrant rights organization that receives funding from the same primary source as LSO, but also raises funds through direct fundraising and by applying for foundation and government grants. Respondent B was director of an independent agency that distributes funding provided by the legislature for legal aid programs in the state. While LSO does not receive any of this funding because of restrictions on how that funding can be used, the agency does fund other legal aid organizations in the Alliance network, of which LSO is a member. Respondent C was a program advocate for a legal aid organization that represents low-income children. This organization receives some of its funding from the same source as LSO, but also from other sources such as direct fundraising and government grants. Respondent D was the Executive Director of an independent organization that allocates funds derived from semi-public sources controlled by the State Supreme Court to 25 legal aid organizations in Washington. LSO has historically received the majority of its funding from this organization and is currently its largest beneficiary.

4. Case Description and Analysis

Legal Services Org (LSO) is a non-profit law firm that provides legal representation and public advocacy on behalf of low income and impoverished people in Washington State. The organization needs to know how its work impacts the lives of its clients and their communities. LSO also needs information to determine how best to direct its limited resources where the organization can be most effective. Like many non-profits, LSO has very little experience with analyzing data about its work in a sophisticated manner, even while it utilizes more and more IT systems that gather information about the organization’s work in both passive and active ways.

While datasets about this organization’s activities exist, there are significant challenges in interpreting them. One challenge is the nature of the work itself: LSO’s mission is to employ the tools of the legal system to eliminate the root causes of poverty, a goal that Rittel and Webber [14] might have identified as a “wicked problem;” a social problem whose attempted solutions are difficult, if not impossible, to measure and evaluate with certainty. While LSO’s legal work frequently results in concrete outcomes, such as monetary judgments for an identifiable group or individual, many cases or activities result in less tangible “systemic” benefits for a segment of society, including potentially thousands of people not directly represented by LSO. As an example, some of the organization’s work involves legislative advocacy, working for or against the adoption of specific laws. The goal of those activities may include attacking barriers that impede low-income people from gaining employment, housing or healthcare that, if successfully addressed, would likely improve the lives of many people, or at least make their lives less complicated. However, the outcomes may not result in clearly defined financial gains, or calculable recovered jobs or homes, or improved educational opportunities, for example. Measuring these less-than-tangible gains and impacts is not clear-cut, even when something as easily quantifiable as money is involved. Financial gains for individuals or groups may be mitigated by indirect factors, such as local economic issues, conflicting laws, family dynamics, immigration issues, and so on, making it hard to identify what can be articulated as a “successful” outcome.


LSO currently has organizational and planning systems in place to direct its work that provide a basis for medium and long-term strategizing and resource allocation. However, these systems, while comprehensive, are incomplete and lack a solid basis in a prevailing theory of practice. According to LSO’s leadership, one challenge is that much of the current data collection and reporting model is rooted in mission objectives established decades ago when LSO operated quite differently than it does currently. The original goal of the organization was to assist as many individuals as possible with their specific legal issues. Additionally, for most of its existence, LSO has been supported by (and mainly accountable to) one major funder. As a result, most of LSO’s tracking systems are based on fairly straightforward reporting of the number
of cases opened and closed, categorizing cases into broad legal problem areas, and documenting some basic demographic statistics. While the reporting requirements have largely stayed the same, the organization’s focus has shifted over the years into “systemic” work, in which resources are focused on a relatively small number of high-impact cases that can benefit large numbers of people and effect lasting change. LSO is also in the process of transforming its funding model to include a more diverse pool of supporting institutions—many of whom are likely have reporting requirements over and above those of LSO’s primary funder. The change in focus and anticipation of new stakeholder requirements are reflected in the processes used by LSO to determine where to direct its energies.

There are four aspects of LSO’s guiding processes that pertain to our study of the organization: the mission statement, a case acceptance process, a case management system, and a strategic planning process.

LSO’s mission statement articulates the organization’s overarching goals:

"[Legal Services Org] advocates for people living in poverty. We work to reveal and end actions that harm our client populations; we seek social and economic justice for them through systemic change. LSO, directly and in concert with the Alliance For Equal Justice, provides legal assistance in the full array of civil justice forums to enable our clients to assert the rights and exercise the responsibilities inherent in a just society."

The mission statement is clear, yet broad. The goals are lofty and may not be entirely attainable.

A second process is LSO’s case acceptance criteria. The case acceptance criteria articulate a contiguous, multi-step process that requires “champions” for new work activities to justify the work within a framework of specific criteria. The process is linear—answering one question in the criteria moves to a new question and another, through a total of six phases (see Figure 1). Each phase has several sub-options, including some that could be considered rule-exceptions or escapes from the process, such as “the case is pursuant to a grant,” which may trump other considerations that could disqualify the case. The many options and sub-options and escapes make the process flexible enough for the organization to embrace unanticipated opportunities to serve the mission, but leaves it lacking in rigor. As we discuss in the recommendations section, further development of these criteria would provide more guidance to aid the organization in measuring outcomes and linking their work directly to the goals stated in the organization’s mission.

The third process is the IT infrastructure employed by the organization. LSO uses an electronic case management system, LegalServer, which is a web-based case and client database used by LSO as well as several other legal aid organizations in Washington and elsewhere. LegalServer is an end-to-end system that gathers narrative, demographic, statistical and economic data about new clients, tracks case events, and collects data about case outcomes. The system is customizable and provides a comprehensive reporting module that can summarize results from most areas of the database. When making implementation choices during the adoption of LegalServer by the organization, LSO mainly relied on the design standards of the system’s predecessor case management application, which was designed when LSO did not yet have its current “systemic” focus, and was not actively courting more diverse funding sources. The system documentation and design indicate that LegalServer has broad data collection capabilities (easy to add new fields and input methods) and a very flexible reporting component (virtually all fields are reportable). However, the current system was not implemented with any goal other than trying to mimic the data collection and reporting standards of the previous system, and mainly with the reporting requirements of one funder in mind.

A fourth process is a recently completed strategic planning process. In the fall of 2011, LSO launched an aggressive reorganization that subdivided the organization into discreet project groups with individual goals and foci, much like a “horizontal organization” [15] with each group a cross-functional, semi-autonomous unit. The larger organization has struggled to complete the revision of its governance to suit this new design and to provide sufficient direction to these new sub-entities in setting goals and choosing work.

As a result of our examination of these four guiding processes, we were able to identify barriers to successful evaluation of LSO’s performance and impact, as well how Theory of Change might be applied to address these issues, as shown in Table 1. In the discussion section, we show how a Theory of Change framework can be applied to address these gaps and build an effective evaluation process.

4.2 Interviews

Several key concepts that emerged from the literature review were also present in the interview data. Primary among them was Theory of Change. While respondent C’s interview was the only one to
call this concept by name, elements of both Theory of Change and the Outcome Approach were also present in the interview with respondent B. Respondent C distilled the concept by stating that it is “articulating what you are doing on a day to day basis - and how those are leading to longer term goals.” Respondent B’s statements that “the only way to measure impact is to make each case part of the question” and “there should be a strategy to achieve a larger goal that can be articulated and pursued” are consistent with both Theory of Change and Outcome Approach. However, something closer to the Outcome Approach was respondent B’s recommendation that “measuring success starts by defining what success means for each advocacy event and then pursuing those goals, and reporting on them as work progresses.” Further echoing these concepts, respondent B stated that:

“Any organization doing the kind of work LSO does needs to ask at every step of the process of outreach, case development, acceptance, negotiation, litigation, and resolution – what are we doing? Why are we doing it? What do we hope to achieve? How will we know when we’re there? This type of process will yield measurements and also narratives that can be part of strategizing and also marketing.”

Another theme that was present in both the literature review and the interview data was the challenge for non-profits generally, and legal aid organizations specifically, to do meaningful evaluation using any standard rubric. Indeed, Sargeant, as cited by Blackbaud [3], asserts that finding common measures for non-profits is basically impossible. Respondent B echoed this sentiment by stating “there are too many ways of classifying impact” and also in his observation that there is no consensus within the legal aid community about how best to measure outcomes. Sargeant’s perspective suggests funders may be the key motivating stakeholders in driving the types of measures that need to be made. This corresponds with respondent C’s statement that her organization’s evaluations are driven by data required for grant proposals and the reporting requirements of grantors. Additionally, respondent A provided insight into the importance of gathering whatever you can in order to “establish the case for the need”, and respondent C provided some additional motivations including that of influencing legislators and “moving opponents closer to your position.” This suggests that when scientific data isn’t available or is hard to develop, there are still ways to stir emotions with the information you can collect.
Table 1: Theory of Change strategies for overcoming barriers to outcomes measurement

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Current principle</th>
<th>Barrier Identified</th>
<th>Theory of Change Applied</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mission statement</td>
<td>Goals may not be fully attainableGoals are not explicitly linked to the organization’s activities</td>
<td>Articulate short and medium term goals related to the mission tied directly to the organization’s activities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Case acceptance</td>
<td>Acceptance criteria do not provide sufficient guidance to measure outcomes or articulating milestones during case activity.</td>
<td>Articulate short, medium and long term goals and milestones of progress for each case. Regularly revisit goals to evaluate success in meeting them and reassert objectives.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IT systems</td>
<td>Data collection aspects of the software are under-utilizedMissed opportunities for data collection and outcome measurement</td>
<td>Focus on intake and case closure modules for UI modifications that emphasize goal setting and measurement. Data field and report customizations to improve data collection and progress/outcomes reporting.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strategic planning and re-organization</td>
<td>Goal-setting and measurement processes have not evolved to match the new organizational structureCurrent and future planning is hindered by inadequate goal-setting and measurement processes</td>
<td>Engage new project groups in dialog to unpack short, medium and long-term goals. Tie to current/planned activities. Encourage sharing of goals and progress reporting among project groups. Develop evolving standards of measurement and accountability.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Respondent D, from LSO’s primary funder, echoed the sentiments of Cunningham and Ricks [11] and Johnson, Rochkind, and Dupont. [12], stating that organizations who fund legal advocacy work are a long way from identifying how to measure the impact of grantee activities. Furthermore, she indicated ambivalence about applying limited resources in pursuit of impact assessment. Respondent D described her own philosophy as one of asking just enough questions to ensure responsible allocation of a grant and then “just get out of the way.”

An additional observation brought to light by the interviews was the use of the one measurement tool LSO already uses, the case management system, LegalServer. Respondents A and C each cited their use of LegalServer as the single most important measuring tool their organizations owned. Respondent D essentially concurred, stating that the selection of LSO’s case management system (a process the funding organization participated in) was a step in the right direction for gathering and interpreting evaluative data about the organization’s activities.

Indeed, it is among our fundamental findings that LSO has a tool at its disposal that is already collecting data about its work that could be applied to the Theory of Change framework if the data were harnessed and directed at that purpose.

In addition to the extensive commonality revealed between the comments of the interviewees and the concepts of Theory of Change and Intended Impact, we also identified a number of similarities between interviewee comments and the methods recommended by the literature for options for improvements.

7. Discussion

The problem facing LSO is not unique and is not easily addressed. However, non-profit organizations have been grappling with questions of measurement and efficacy for some time and many useful concepts and tools have been generated within the context of this inquiry that LSO can learn from. Our investigation revealed a framework of processes that LSO can use to better understand its work and define its focus, and in this section we discuss recommendations for applying Theory of Change principles, summarized in Table 1, arising out of our review of existing literature and interviews with thought leaders in this area.

The first and key recommendation is that LSO adopt the elements of the Theory of Change framework in its planning and organization, and through that adoption, derive an evolving measurement strategy. This approach would enable LSO to foster an organic set of measures that are specifically appropriate for their organization and that speak to LSO’s goals. Theory of Change instructs organizations to directly connect their activities to outcomes and their outcomes to their overarching goals. LSO has already articulated its primary activities and the organization has established case acceptance criteria (see Figure 1) that provide a process for selecting those activities. The mission document also hints at some desired outcomes, but it stops short of defining specific, achievable results that LSO’s case work should directly address. Furthermore, the organization’s mission statement presents LSO’s overarching goals, but the mission does not serve as a framework within which the organization’s outcomes or intended impact can be weighed. We argue that what are missing are the linkages between these constructs as well as an
accompanying strategy that views activities, outcomes and goals as a continuum: Activities linked directly to concrete and achievable outcomes, and outcomes pointed to specific goals (see Figure 2).

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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activities</th>
<th>Education, Outreach, Litigation</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Short-Term Outcomes</td>
<td>Short-Term Outcomes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intermediate &amp; Long Term Outcomes</td>
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<tr>
<td>Goals</td>
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Figure 2. Theory of Change applied to LSO mission and activities

Our second recommendation is that LSO endeavor to define outcomes in terms of realistic achievability and set a timeframe for completion for each one, using milestones to mark stepwise completion. The work of articulating outcomes and milestones for each case accepted and worked by LSO will both guide and focus the organization’s efforts, and provide a set of indicators that will inform practitioners and supervisors of their progress. The activity of articulating the route connecting case work to mission completion is a crucial element of the work. Theory of Change is not just a set of definitions and pathways, but an ongoing process of creating and recreating organizational self-analysis through dialogue. According to Gienapp et al [4]:

“Although a theory of change results in a concrete product, the process for developing this theory of change is equally valuable as its physical documentation. The process is based on the involvement of selected stakeholders who collaborate in a process of developing agreement about the pathway for achieving their collective vision.”

LSO has recent experience with introspection, having recently completed a strategic planning process, which included creating semi-autonomous project groups. As these new organizational units take shape, there are processes of setting priorities and goals through active discourse that can inform each group’s development, as well as aid in current and future planning for the organization. Now is a perfect time to intervene in the discussions that are taking place in the organization and to direct them within the Theory of Change conceptual framework.

The goal of creating an atmosphere of achievement is a tenable organizational goal, but it requires that LSO gain a deeper understanding of what is happening now. Our third recommendation is that LSO should develop a toolbox of data collection strategies to analyze what it is currently doing, and then analyze those for compliance with the goal-stating activities discussed previously. As the organization further develops its linked activity-to-achievement strategy, it should routinely revisit those tools and refine them. This recommendation is supported by many of the authors cited in the literature review. Notably, Hatry [8] recommended that organizations embed measurement activities in their work, starting with the beginning of an activity, rather than relying on retrospective analysis performed at the conclusion. At least one interviewee (respondent B) echoed this sentiment by suggesting that legal aid organizations articulate and pursue “indicators of success” from the start of a case as a strategy for constraining the work to a defined scope. We believe LSO has the ability to do this without greatly changing its activities using existing systems, as described below.

Our final recommendation is one that seems most immediately attainable. LSO should better leverage the tools it already has, and in particular, the data that is already routinely collected by the IT infrastructure in use at the organization. LSO is most likely underutilizing its case management system, LegalServer. Here is an IT tool that already gathers demographic and progress data about every case and case-related project the organization takes on, and is quite amenable to customization in its data collection and reporting capabilities. With LSO’s advocacy acceptance process serving as a roadmap, LegalServer could be oriented to embody Theory of Change concepts, essentially automating the process of stating goals and evaluating outcomes (see Figure 3).
Our interview subjects, all of whom were familiar with LegalServer, identified two key process areas of the technology that could be used to meet this goal: the intake process and the case closure process. In each of those areas, LegalServer provides opportunities for articulating goals and setting milestones (intake), tracking progress and intermediate achievements (case notes), and for demonstrating how or if the initial goals were achieved and for how many people (case closure). The processes are presented in the user interface as a series of linked forms revealed to the user in a specific order. Administrators can set key fields to be “required” and branch to additional data-collecting forms based on the nature of each case. New data fields and responsive reports can be introduced to meet short and medium-term objectives, and the reporting requirements of new funding institutions. With thoughtful intervention by system administrators—in ongoing conversation with the organization’s leadership—this rubric can provide nearly limitless potential for asking and answering essential questions about how well LSO’s mission is being served and what goals are being attained.

The work of identifying new data-collection and output methods within this system may require additional organizational introspection and/or third-party expertise, but it is clear that LSO can and should leverage this tool to learn more about itself.

8. Conclusion

LSO is not unique among non-profit organizations in its quest for outcome measurement strategies and its frustrations in locating them. Theoretical frameworks, including Theory of Change, provide a conceptual basis for planning and assessment based on connecting program mission with day-to-day work. Applying the principles of these frameworks may require recasting current processes and practices. LSO can leverage its current case management system and harness its potential to articulate clear goals and demonstrate (and document) achievements. By incorporating a theoretical framework that prompts goal-setting dialogue, and yields new methodologies for measuring effectiveness and impact, LSO can make strategic decisions about where to focus its efforts, and also respond better to the information needs of its stakeholders. LSO should routinely revisit its planning processes and its case management system to engage in an evolving process of impact assessment as the organization develops and establishes stronger connections between its activities, outcomes and goals.

9. References