



# Measuring Systems Change: A Brief Guide

**Administration for Community Living  
Office of Performance and Evaluation**

**ACL Data Council**



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# Purpose

Many programs funded by the Administration for Community Living (ACL) focus on improving the systems that serve older adults and individuals with disabilities. This brief is intended as a resource for ACL staff who oversee such programs. It provides an introduction to measuring systems change, including how systems and systems change are defined and how they can be operationalized, as well as how to approach their evaluation. The brief also includes selected examples from ACL evaluations that have focused on systems change and that can provide additional guidance to ACL staff.

# Systems Change: A Brief

ACL plays a critical role in helping create systems that “maximize the independence, well-being, and health of older adults, people with disabilities across the lifespan, and their families and caregivers” (ACL, n.d.). Thus, its funding and programs are intended to affect networks, programs, and services, as well as individuals. As part of this effort, ACL collects data to measure the impact and effectiveness of the initiatives and programs it funds.

In addition to measuring the impact of ACL’s services on individuals, it is important that ACL determine the extent to which its efforts lead to improvements at the system level. Since systems and systems change can be difficult to define and operationalize, measuring systems change may seem daunting. However, understanding and considering some basic concepts of systems will enable evaluators to operationalize systems change and measure changes in incremental steps.

## What Do We Mean by System?

A system is a group of subsystems or entities that are interconnected or interrelated and function for a common purpose to form a complex and unified whole (Coffman, 2007). In the context of ACL, systems consist of multiple actors, programs, policies, agencies, or institutions at the national, state, and local levels with the common goal of achieving better outcomes for older adults and persons with disabilities.

## EXAMPLES OF SYSTEM CHANGE EFFORTS AT ACL

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- University Centers for Excellence in Developmental Disabilities Education, Research, and Service are a nationwide network of independent but interlinked centers, representing an expansive national resource for addressing issues, finding solutions, and advancing research related to the needs of individuals with developmental disabilities and their families.
- The No Wrong Door System initiative is a collaborative effort of ACL, the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services, and the Veterans Health Administration that promotes and assists state efforts to streamline access to long-term services and support options for older adults and individuals with disabilities.
- State Grants to Enhance Adult Protective Services are demonstration grants to enable states to enhance Adult Protective Services systems statewide and include innovations and improvements in practice, services, data collection, and reporting.
- The Alzheimer's Disease Programs Initiative is a competitive grants program open to states and community-based organization. It assists states to develop/expand the dementia capability of their home- and community-based services (HCBS) system, and it helps community-based organizations operating within an existing dementia-capable system to expand the capability of the system within which they operate.

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- State Councils on Developmental Disabilities (DD Councils) work to address identified needs by conducting advocacy, systems change, and capacity building efforts that promote self-determination, integration, and inclusion. Key activities include conducting outreach, providing training and technical assistance, removing barriers, developing coalitions, encouraging citizen participation, and keeping policymakers informed about disability issues. DD Councils are mandated by the Developmental Disabilities Act (DD Act) to engage in systems change. According to the DD Act, “systems change activities” means a sustainable, transferable, and replicable change in some aspect of service or support availability, design or delivery that promotes positive or meaningful outcomes for individuals with developmental disabilities and their families. For additional details on DD Council systems change activities, see Appendix A.

## What Do We Mean by Systems Change?

Systems change occurs when there are fundamental and sustained changes in policies, processes, relationships, and power structures, as well as deeply held values and norms. Positive changes in these elements can be thought of in terms of two key concepts: more effective pathways and more conducive institutional structures.

The **capacity of pathways** increases with improvements in the scale, quality, and comprehensiveness of programs and services. Effectiveness in these areas is defined as follows:

- **Scale:** Sufficient program supply and effective accessibility and outreach/recruitment to meet the needs of the target population
- **Quality:** Programs, services, staffing, and supports in the system that meet quality standards and are adequately tailored for the purpose of meeting client needs
- **Responsiveness:** Systems providing the right mix of programs, services, and supports to meet the diverse needs of clients

The **connections (or relationships) of pathways** improve with positive changes in linkage, alignment, and cross-system coordination. Effectiveness in these areas is defined as follows:

- **Linkage:** Clients able to access and successfully transition from one program or service to another

- **Alignment:** Steps or services building on one another and/or having complementary purposes
- **Cross-system coordination:** Stakeholders within a system able to pursue linkages and alignment that support the system goals

*Institutional structures* represent the structural context in which pathways are constructed or maintained. They become more conducive as new sets of incentives, constraints, and opportunities are created (e.g., through new policies, knowledge, or additional resource allocations) that allow and encourage stakeholders to build and maintain more effective pathways.

- **Incentives:** Potential benefits for taking a particular action
- **Constraints:** Rules or limits that prevent a particular action or make an action difficult
- **Opportunities:** Conditions that enable a particular action, such as pursuing a goal in a new way (i.e., innovation)

## How Can We Measure Systems Change Incrementally?

Conceptualizing systems as pathways and structures and understanding the elements that define them, then, provide the opportunity to define and measure change along those elements. Ideally, assessments should focus on determining whether systems have changed for the positive—specifically, whether pathways have moved from being less effective to being more effective, and whether structures have moved from potentially posing barriers to providing conducive structures. Table 1 below presents some of the questions that may be posed to determine whether positive systems change has occurred.



**Table 1. Sample Evaluation Questions for Assessing Positive Systems Change**

<b>Capacity of Pathways</b>	
<b>Elements of Systems Change</b>	<b>Sample Evaluation Questions</b>
Increased scale	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Has the number of program slots increased?</li> <li>• Have providers been added to the system?</li> <li>• Does the program/service supply match the needs of clients?</li> <li>• Has the accessibility to programs/services improved?</li> <li>• Has the ability to provide transportation to access programs/services improved?</li> <li>• Are providers doing a better job of spreading awareness about their programs and attracting clients to them?</li> </ul>
Improved quality	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Are more providers within the system systematically adhering to program quality standards?</li> <li>• Are more providers within the system engaging in continuous quality improvement efforts?</li> <li>• Are more providers within the system implementing and improving their fidelity to evidence-based programs and practices?</li> <li>• Are more providers working to tailor their services and supports to the needs of their clients?</li> </ul>

Elements of Systems Change	Sample Evaluation Questions
Improved responsiveness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Have service gaps been identified?</li> <li>• Have changes been made to address service gaps?</li> <li>• Is there a sufficient supply of programs/services tailored to the different needs of the clients?</li> </ul>

### Connections of Pathways

Elements of Systems Change	Sample Evaluation Questions
Improved linkage	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Has the level of effort needed to enroll in a program/service decreased?</li> <li>• Can clients easily transition from one program/service to another?</li> <li>• Has coordination among providers improved?</li> <li>• Have new linkages been created, or have existing linkages been improved (e.g., institutionalized warm handoffs, data sharing among providers)?</li> <li>• Are fewer clients “falling through the cracks”?</li> </ul>
Improved alignment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Are outcomes between programs/providers aligned to ensure they contribute to the same ultimate goals?</li> <li>• Are programs/providers doing a better job of coordinating?</li> </ul>

Elements of Systems Change	Sample Evaluation Questions
Improved cross-system coordination	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Have system leaders identified shared goals as well as ways that programs and services can link and align to contribute to shared goals?</li> <li>• Is there better integration across the system components or entities?</li> <li>• Has duplication of effort been reduced?</li> </ul>

### Institutional Structures

Elements of Systems Change	Sample Evaluation Questions
Improved institutional structures	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Is there access to additional or new sources of funding for evidence-based practices that have not been used in the past or for innovative programming?</li> <li>• Are there less restrictive policies or more supporting policies to encourage programs/providers to engage in joint planning or cross-training?</li> <li>• Have effective services and processes been institutionalized?</li> </ul>

## What Evaluation Methods Are Effective to Use for Assessing Systems Change?

Systems tend to be complex and in a state of continuous development and adaptation (Preskill, Gopal, Mack, & Cook, 2014). As a result, change within systems may be unpredictable and nonlinear. Thus, traditional evaluation approaches such as summative evaluations that are based on a defined sequence of steps and linear chains of cause and effect in static environments may not be very effective for assessing systems change. Instead, evaluation approaches or frameworks that can account for dynamic and unpredictable environments and that allow for flexibility may be more effective.

**Developmental evaluation** is one approach that can be effective for complex dynamic environments, such as systems, as it is intended to support innovation within a context of uncertainty. In this approach, the evaluator is not a third-party, objective observer but rather becomes part of the team that is working to bring about systems change (Hargreaves, 2010). The developmental evaluator's primary

*Developmental evaluation facilitates assessments of where things are and reveals how things are unfolding; helps to discern which directions hold promise and which ought to be abandoned; and suggests what new experiments should be tried.*

Gamble, 2017, p. 18

role is to bring evaluative thinking into the process of development and intentional change and to work with strategic decision makers to interpret data and identify implications.

The main goal in developmental evaluation is to create intentional learning and iterative and adaptive processes. This will facilitate simultaneous questioning and learning. Developmental evaluators can use an array of data collection methods, such as interviews, focus groups, surveys, and observation. These methods can be used to describe how pathways and structures differ across time points (e.g., from baseline to follow-up) and to explore how specific strategies have contributed to identified changes.

For additional details and tools for applying a developmental evaluation approach, see the resources listed in the reference list. Developmental evaluation represents but one strategy, and other evaluation approaches or frameworks that can be adopted for assessing system change also exist. For other approaches, see the examples listed below.

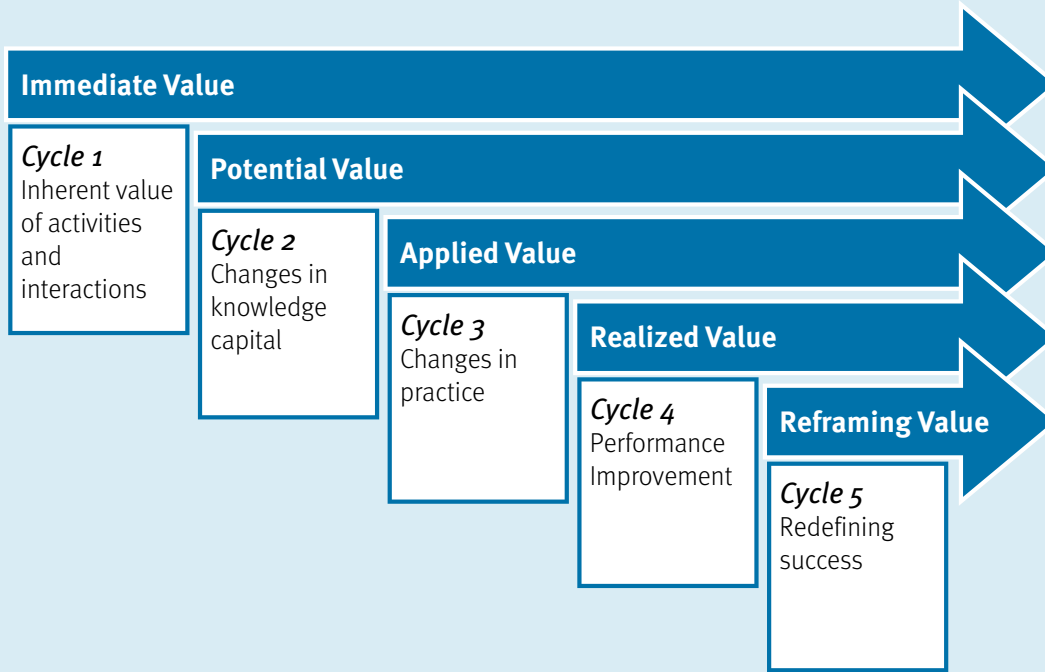
# Systems Change Evaluations: Examples From ACL

## NATIONAL COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE FOR SUPPORTING FAMILIES EVALUATION

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The Community of Practice (CoP) for Supporting Families of Individuals with Intellectual & Developmental Disabilities was designed to help states build capacity to create policies, practices, and systems to better assist and support families that include a member with intellectual or developmental disabilities across the lifespan. Outcomes reported in the annual project reports (National Community of Practice, n.d.) and a national evaluation (ACL, 2019) show that, since the inception of the program, CoP participating states have succeeded in building capacity and making changes to their systems. As part of the national evaluation, the evaluation team adopted a framework developed by Wenger et al. (2011) to examine the link between system activities and outcomes through the creation of value in communities and networks. Applying the framework, the evaluation team examined activities and outcomes for five cycles of value creation: immediate value, potential value, applied value, realized value, and reframing value. Qualitative data were collected through a reporting tool, telephone interviews, and site visits.

**Figure 1. Cycles of Value Creation Adopted for the CoP Evaluation.**






MODEL APPROACHES FOR LIVING WELL CROSS-SITE EVALUATION

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Living Well grants are intended to develop and test model approaches for enhancing the quality, effectiveness, and monitoring of HCBS for people with developmental disabilities. To achieve this goal, Model Approaches for Living Well grants focused primarily on building the capacity of HCBS systems and enhancing community monitoring to prevent abuse, neglect, and exploitation. The cross-site evaluation examined whether grantees were successful in increasing coordination and capacity in their states to effectively implement comprehensive, high-quality HCBS. For this effort, the evaluation team focused on three key features of systems change:

partnerships, engagement with self-advocates and families, and building competencies of direct service professionals (DSPs) and HCBS providers. Qualitative and quantitative data were collected through an annual reporting tool, interviews, and site visits. To access the multiyear evaluation products, see <https://acl.gov/programs/program-evaluations-and-reports> (ACL, 2020).

**Figure 2. Capacity Evaluation Framework for the Living Well Cross-Site Evaluation.**

		Key Feature	Activity
Capacity Building	<b>Partnership</b> 		Engage new state partners
			Engage specialized partners
	<b>Engagement with self-advocates and families</b> 		Reach marginalized populations
			Improve supports for individuals with dual diagnoses and other disability types
			Develop and implement trainings for self-advocates and families
	<b>Building competencies of DSPs and HCBS providers</b> 		Design and implement DSP trainings
			Use technology and social media
			Improve DSP recruitment and retention
			Make improvement based on DSP and provider feedback



As noted, developmental evaluation and the frameworks applied for the CoP and Living Well program evaluations present some examples for how systems change evaluations may be approached. Regardless of which strategy is used, evaluators may want to consider examining changes in the elements that make up the pathways and institutional structures of a system to allow an opportunity to assess changes in incremental steps before long-term outcomes can be realized.

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# Appendix A. DD Council Systems Change Activities

Systems change activities taken on by DD Councils generally involve collaboration among many different agencies or within one agency. However, the activities must involve the community and stakeholders. In addition, the activities should result in laws, regulations, policies, practices or organizational changes that are person centered and directed or family-centered and directed and increase access to needed services and supports. The table below presents the areas DD Councils may target when working toward systems change and the specific activities that may be associated with changes in these areas.

Areas of Change	Description	Activities
<b>Policy and programs</b>	Policies that affect organizations (for example, state or provider agencies) and operations. Procedures that guide the everyday work of people working in a system and/or parts of a system or community.	This may include changes to: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Laws</li> <li>• Regulations</li> <li>• Policies</li> <li>• Procedures</li> </ul>
<b>Service design and delivery</b>	Processes that guide program content and formal communication. The way people working in systems (e.g., teachers, support professionals, etc.) think about interacting with, and providing services for people with intellectual disabilities (ID)/DD.	This may include changes to: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Design delivery</li> <li>• Capacity</li> <li>• Outreach</li> <li>• Advertising</li> <li>• How services are organized to meet needs</li> <li>• How services meet the expected outcomes of people with ID/DD and their families</li> </ul>

Areas of Change	Description	Activities
<b>Infrastructure</b>	The basic framework of a system or organization. In other words, resource distribution and organizational structure.	This may include changes to: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Funding</li> <li>• Personnel</li> <li>• Equipment</li> <li>• Space (where a system operates)</li> <li>• Partnerships and collaborations</li> <li>• Number of services</li> <li>• Amount of money to provide the services</li> <li>• Number of services used by people with ID/DD and their families</li> <li>• How services and supports are organized, prioritized, and used</li> </ul>
<b>Attitudes, experiences, and expectations of people with ID/DD</b>	The expected outcomes and experiences of people with ID/DD who use services and providers.	This may include changes to: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• People with ID/DD and their families being active participants in the effort</li> <li>• Active learning, or assistance in sharing expectations</li> <li>• Documented integrated, sustainable changes in the expectations of people with ID/DD and their families</li> </ul>

Areas of Change	Description	Activities
<p><b>Engagement and support of people with ID/DD and their families</b></p>	<p>Active, meaningful participation in decision-making.</p>	<p>This may include changes to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• People with ID/DD and families serving in elected, appointed, or other official capacities</li> <li>• People with ID/DD participating on advisory and planning boards</li> <li>• People with ID/DD and families participating in leadership development activities</li> </ul>

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