



Vol. 8, No. 3, 2002

## AFM Develops Groundbreaking Evaluation Framework: The Continuum of Care Approach

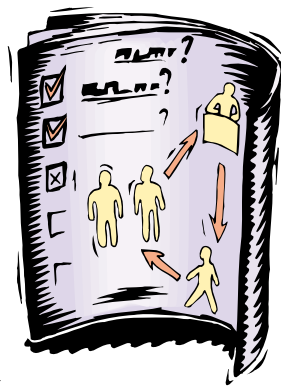
Agencies that strive to assist individuals with addiction problems have traditionally faced one significant barrier when it comes to evaluating the effectiveness of their programs: an inability to specifically attribute a client's success or failure to a program's activities.

For example, let's say an alcohol rehabilitation client completes the Addictions Foundation of Manitoba's (AFM) intensive residential program and is discharged home. Six months later, a follow-up interview determines that the client is abstinent, working steadily at his full-time job and enjoying a healthy, alcohol-free life with his wife and two children.

Can AFM take credit for this client's success? Not exactly. While it is likely that the agency's program assisted the client in his recovery, the reality is that many other factors may have influenced him during the six months since discharge. These could include positive encouragement from family members, attendance at AA meetings, counselling sessions with a private psychologist and membership at an athletic club.

Dr. David Brown recognized the challenge of effectively evaluating AFM's programs during his tenure as Director of Research and Quality Monitoring at AFM, a position he held for about two years. Brown, who recently accepted a position at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, felt it was necessary to search for a solution to the issue so that the agency could be accountable for the outcomes of its programs.

"Our first task was to undertake a literature review to see how similar agencies evaluate outcomes," explains Curt Pankratz, Research Analyst and Acting Continuous Improvement Coordinator at AFM. "We hoped to find a precedent, but there wasn't one in the area of substance abuse and gambling. Other agencies call up their clients several months after the program and ask them how they are doing. With this method, it's impossible to fully attribute change – good or bad – to the agency."



### IDENTIFYING SHORT-TERM OBJECTIVES

Thus armed only with their own expertise, Pankratz, Brown and David Patton, another AFM Research Analyst, thoroughly analyzed methods of evaluation used at AFM and concluded that an important link was missing. "In AFM programs, activities were clearly identified and the long-term goal was in place, and that is to reduce harm from alcohol, other drug use and gambling," says Pankratz.

"However, there was a lack of specified short-term objectives that could be used to hold the programs accountable."

The researchers knew that if attainable and measurable short-term objectives could be put in place for each program, and if the short-term objectives had a logical, literature-based link to the long-term goal of living life free from harm related to substance abuse or gambling, then AFM would be able to measure their clients' success in the short term.

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For example, the literature shows that involvement in self-help groups helps clients to remain abstinent from their drug of choice. So, a short-term objective of an AFM alcohol rehabilitation program could be to introduce clients to Alcoholics Anonymous by encouraging attendance once a week during their participation in the AFM program. This is a specific objective that is measurable and attainable, and it is likely to have a positive influence on the clients' future success. Six months later when the client reports abstinence, AFM can say with certainty that its program introduced the client to AA - a factor in the client's success.

### NEW FRAMEWORK FOR EVALUATION

The AFM researchers call their new framework the Continuum of Care Approach for Program Evaluation and Development. This reflects the fact that all programs exist within a continuum of formal and informal supports for clients. Over the past year, the researchers have worked closely with counsellors in various AFM programs to identify short-term objectives. Currently, models are in place for many programs, with the remainder to be completed in the next year or so.

"We work by identifying the long-term goal first, then the short-term objectives that the clients will demonstrate while they are with us, and finally the program activities that will assist the clients in meeting the short-term objectives," says Pankratz. He calls it the Model of Program Accountability (see below).



Laura Goossen, Supervisor of Youth Community Based Services at AFM, and her staff have worked with the researchers to develop short-term objectives for several of her programs. "It's a new way of thinking about program evaluation," she says. "By measuring short-term objectives, we will be able to find out if our activities are appropriate or if our short-term goals are achievable."

She says the framework makes practical sense. "We now don't feel overwhelmed trying to measure long-term goals. We

### BENEFITS OF THE NEW APPROACH TO AFM

Curt Pankratz, Research Analyst, says that besides making AFM programs accountable for their successes, the new framework for evaluation using short-term objectives will also benefit AFM in other ways. For example:

- Staff job descriptions will be easier to write because skills can be linked more closely to the program activities, which are specifically chosen to help clients meet the program's short-term objectives.
- When short-term objectives for each program are concisely written, program planning can be fine tuned. Therefore, similar programs can each be shown to serve an identifiable and unique purpose.
- AFM staff will be able to identify any gaps in the agency's program continuum. It will be clear if services do not exist for a particular need or if a service is being duplicated.
- Client referral will be aided, as outside agencies that refer clients to AFM can be made aware of each program's specific objectives and activities.
- Program models can be used as tools by counsellors and AFM clients when discussing which specific programs are appropriate for the clients' needs.

are saying that we are accountable for our short-term objectives, and we are doing our job if our short-term goals are linked to our long-term goals."

With the Continuum of Care Approach for Program Evaluation and Development in place, AFM can interview a client six months down the road. If the client is doing well, the agency can say, for example, that its program introduced the client to AA, helped the client to develop communication skills to use with family and friends, and provided information about psychologists in the client's community. While AFM is not the only source of support impacting on the client's longer term situation, the agency will be able to demonstrate that its programs have made a short-term contribution, and that the contribution likely had a positive effect.