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Conference highlights measuring program effectiveness

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Using data analysis to show how well human service programs are performing is not as simple as it appears, United Way of Greater Rochester Inc. senior vice president Dawn Borgeest told the nearly 250 attendants at a conference Tuesday for non-profit organizations.

The conference, sponsored by the Center for Governmental Research Inc., included panel discussions on what qualifies as evidence, the challenges of measuring impact and what kind of information funders seek out.

Borgeest's message, like that of many other presenters, was that while it is accepted that organizations will need to be able to demonstrate outcomes to fight for dwindling funding sources, it is not always a clear cut proposition.

"It's deceptive because people seem to think evidence-based means simple, plug and play, find it and fix it," Borgeest said.

Scott Benjamin, president and CEO of Charles Settlement House, said an evaluation is only as strong as the data selected. For instance, in its mission of building trust among the teenagers in its programs there is little applicable data. Susan Aiello, executive director of Mercy Residential Services, said her organization works with the pregnant teenagers in its shelters to craft individual goals—but these do not always meet the expectations funders have for the program outcomes.

But regardless of how well a service lends itself to data, organizations must make efforts to measure what they can to show potential funders the program's efficacy, said John Urban, president and CEO of the Greater Rochester Health Foundation.

"As important as qualitative analysis is, if you can't quantify what you're doing, your ability to improve based on customer needs is diminished," Urban said.

He and other funding organizations noted there is greater pressure on groups seeking money to show that they are properly stewarding whatever public dollars they receive. Much of the analysis can center on what they can do to improve, he noted.

"Our interest is increasingly becoming what are they doing today that will help them get better tomorrow," Urban said.

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