Purpose

Intelligence for Social Policy (ISP) is an initiative funded by the Catherine T. and John D. MacArthur Foundation in 2009 through a three-year 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 the ISP is to improve the quality of human service agencies' policies and practices through the use of integrated data systems (IDS). Quality integrated data systems are designed to help executive leaders in municipal or state government evaluate and establish effective human services for the people they serve.

ISP will accomplish this through three main thrusts: promoting a professional network, establishing standards of practice, and demonstrating research and analytic capacities that IDS enable. ISP's activities will build support for the efforts of state, county and municipal health, education, and human service agencies to improve their use of data for policy research and development. Dr. Philip Hawkins will lead the initiative's implementation.

Background

In 2008, the MacArthur Foundation commissioned Drs. Culhane and Fantuzzo to write a paper describing the qualities of functioning IDS. This involved a survey of state and county human service agencies that had in place data systems that integrated individual client records across agencies for research and evaluation purposes. They identified eight exemplary integrated data systems and drafted a paper regarding commonalities and differences of these systems and recommendations for promoting IDS. The MacArthur Foundation followed by convening a special meeting to consider their finding and recommendations.

The report of the 2008 survey and meeting noted that current information technology has the capacity to successfully integrate disparate human service databases for policy research and development. Researchers using these integrated data would be able to answer “what were” and “what if” questions in a cost-effective manner that have stymied public agencies' past efforts to improve health, education, and social services policies. However, the report also pointed out that public agencies and researchers must address strategic issues dealing with individuals' rights to privacy, research ethics, technology, scientific standards of data quality, and benefit/cost considerations. MacArthur Foundation accepted these recommendations and awarded a grant to enable ISP to directly address these issues.

Objectives and Activities

The following objectives and activities outline the main thrusts of the ISP.

Expert Network

Objective 1.

Develop and support an expanding Network composed of individuals from established and promising IDS sites who have extensive successful experience in addressing tactical integrated data systems implementation and use issues.

The 2008 report identified key individuals in agencies who have had success and whose experience and knowledge would assist others who are undertaking or are considering undertaking the integration of their human services data systems. Following through on the report, these individuals will form the core of the IDS Knowledge Network. The initiative will establish and maintain communication channels to facilitate access by public agencies and other stakeholders to the network as well as interaction among network members.

Objective 2.

Conduct six semi-annual meetings and conferences to facilitate communication and information sharing among the Network’s members and stakeholders with vested interests in the use of integrated data systems to improve policy and practice in health, education, and social services.

The Network will be formally launched at the June 2010 IDS Network meeting. The Network’s mission and the mechanics of communication and interaction will be under development and testing beginning at the first convening of Network members in January 2010.

Objective 3.

Acquire technical assistance materials from Network members and papers commissioned from experts that address the implementation issues of individuals’ rights to privacy, research ethics, technology, scientific standards of data quality, and benefit/cost considerations.

An effort will begin in January 2010 with Network members and other stakeholders to identify crucial topics within the implementation issue areas. White papers will be commissioned on select topics in April 2010 with presentation of the papers expected at the January 2011 Network meeting.

Practice Standards

Objective 4.

Establish professional practice and data quality standards for building and using integrated data systems for public policy research and development.

An issue also noted in the 2008 report is the lack of national standards and guidance that state and county agencies can turn to as they initiate and manage their integrated data systems projects. The study found differences among programs, states, and counties that preclude single solutions, but suggest that guidelines and templates could be developed that would be valuable re-
About the Authors

Dr. Culhane has used integrated data systems to understand the dynamics and costs of homelessness, as well as the cost offsets associated with various housing interventions for people who are formerly homeless. He has extended this analytic model to the study of other adults with special needs, and to at-risk youth.

Dr. Fantuzzo has conducted major, pre-k to 3rd grade population-based, longitudinal studies in Philadelphia using KIDS to investigate the relations between publicly monitored risk factors and children’s academic proficiency and social adjustment to school. Additionally, he has created an assessment that has been incorporated into use by the School District. This assessment has been used in conjunction with KIDS to study the protective contributions of early childhood education experiences to kindergarten school readiness and early school success. These studies have produced key policy changes in the School District and City public service agencies to enhance the well-being of children involved in multiple service systems.

Philip Hawkins is the Executive Director of ISP. Previously Dr. Hawkins served as Senior Vice President of Karchner-Hawkins Associates. He specialized in improving the development and delivery of educational programs and services by nonprofit and public organizations. He has enabled national, regional, state, and local organizations, private foundations, and public, charter, and private schools to successfully address their strategic service and delivery objectives in executive, management and consultant capacities.