The Responsible Data Life Cycle Tip Sheet

As we experience rapid changes in technology, responsible data management is more important than ever. Deciding when and how to collect data and manage related risks is an evolving process. It requires data collectors to consider how to treat data respectfully and uphold the rights of those whose data is collected. Data collectors must constantly explore new ways to be responsive, maintain accountability, and represent the interests of children and families.

The Responsible Data Life Cycle graphic provides a framework for exploring these issues and highlights overarching principles that guide responsible data management. Consider these stages and benchmarks as you implement your data management plan.

1. Plan How to Obtain, Keep, and Use the Data

Be clear about the purpose of collecting the data. Is it for compliance purposes, to evaluate child and family outcomes, or simply because you have always collected it? Do you really need it? Two important questions to ask are:

- What are we using it for currently?
- Could we use it for an additional or better purpose?

Personal data is highly sensitive and additional steps for safeguarding it may be necessary in some situations. For instance, you may need to mask identities when using personally identifiable information (PII).

Part of our planning always involves obtaining informed consent from program participants for the data and information we collect.

2. Inventory and Assess the Data

A good inventory tells us how much data we have, how we use it, who collects it, where and how it is stored, when it should be purged, and whether it contains any PII. Taking a thorough inventory of the data we collect also helps highlight which information is most important for identifying program strengths and areas of need. The Digital Data Inventory is one tool for conducting a data inventory and assessment. Periodic use of the inventory will help programs identify the scope of their data collection and determine the usefulness of particular types of data.

3. Collect the Data

In the collection phase of the Responsible Data Life Cycle, we assess our risk for security and confidentiality and ensure we have a plan for orienting and training our data collectors. Do we have a plan to make sure staff who collect data are clear about their responsibilities and understand the importance of managing data safely and securely? Again, before you begin collecting data, always make sure families are informed about what data you will be collecting and how you will use and store it.

4. Administer the Data: Transfer, Access, and Store

The devices we store and transfer data on need encryption when appropriate, and systems for wiping data from them when it is no longer needed. Determine which staff need access to which data, and limit access accordingly. Set up access rights with passwords for those who use the data. Carefully research data security, cloud storage, and database options. Ensure staff understand and follow procedures regarding availability, usability, integrity, and security of data as outlined in the Head Start Program Performance Standards.

5. Do Something with the Data

Perhaps the most important stage of the Responsible Data Life Cycle concerns what we do with the data. Are we using the data to inform our program self-assessment? How about for strategic planning? Are we using data to tell our story to stakeholders and policymakers? There are innumerable ways that we can and should use the data and information we collect to support the work we do.

6. Share, Report, and Tell Your Story

As we consider the many ways we use data, perhaps one of the most basic uses is to complete reports for funders, governing bodies, and other stakeholders. In addition to the required reports, consider the message and story of our work. How do we tell our story effectively to inspire action? Continuous improvement requires that we tell our story with as little bias as possible. Our challenges can tell us as much about where we need to go as our successes. Improved communications and data-sharing are characteristic of high-performing organizations.

7. Retain, Dispose, and Archive the Data

Always plan for how long you need to keep data. The Digital Data Inventory tool mentioned in Step 2 will help you reflect on the data life cycle and decide when data loses its relevance or needs to be purged. Deleting a digital document is not the same as shredding paper documents. Know where data is located and have a plan for purging data in devices and systems when necessary.

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