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Evaluation of the Multijurisdictional Task Forces (MJTFs), Phase II

PROJECT SUMMARY

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I. Executive Summary

On behalf of the Bureau of Justice Assistance (BJA), the National Institute of Justice (NIJ) contracted Abt Associates to conduct a two-phase project intended to produce evidence-based guidance on monitoring and evaluating multijurisdictional drug task forces (MJTFs). The project included a retrospective element, in which we gathered from MJTFs and state administrative agencies (SAAs) a limited set of secondary data spanning seven years, and field tested methods of measuring and monitoring task force performance. The project also had a prospective element, in which we developed a template for states to use in developing performance measures to support future efforts to monitor and evaluate MJTFs. This document summarizes the activities, findings, and products of Phase II of this project. Project activities included:

1. Producing draft and final project designs, in collaboration with BJA, NIJ, and SAAs in Colorado, Georgia, Illinois, and Tennessee, and vetting those designs at two cluster conferences.
2. Gathering and analyzing seven years of retrospective data.
3. Collaborating with BJA and our four partner SAAs to produce a draft performance measurement tool.
4. Conducting a focus group of Massachusetts SAA and MJTF staff and fielding a usability survey across MJTFs in the four states to refine the prospective tool.
5. Drafting a performance monitoring guide, based upon the knowledge gained in our Phase I surveys of MJTFs and SAAs, and our Phase II retrospective analysis and usability survey and focus group.

The primary product of the Phase II project is the Guide, which presents the template we developed for BJA and walks the intended primary audience for the Guide (BJA and the SAAs that oversee MJTFs) through using logic models and the BJA template to measure task force performance, as well as how to analyze the data to monitor performance over time.

II. Introduction

BJA has supported multi-jurisdictional drug task forces since Congress enacted the Anti-Drug Abuse Act of 1988 (42USC3766(a)(2)), which authorized the Edward Byrne State and Local Law Enforcement Assistance Program (Byrne Program). Through this program, BJA was able to provide federal grant funds to public and private organizations to combat drug-related crime, violent crime, and serious offenders. These grants have been distributed in two primary ways. The first, and largest, is a formula grant program where funds are awarded to individual states, which then make sub-grants to state and local units of government. In addition, BJA has a smaller discretionary grant program that provides grants directly to state and local organizations.

Under the formula grant program, the states were given limited discretion about how to use the Federal grant assistance, consistent with the legislative goals of the 1988 Act. Sub-grant funding of multi-jurisdictional task forces (MJTFs) has been the most popular

use of Byrne funding. Early research estimated that over 1000 MJTFs were created or enhanced with Byrne funding (Dunworth, 1997). Abt Associates' survey of SAAs under this project found over 700 task forces supported by Byrne. This pattern continued as the program has evolved under the Justice Assistance Grant (JAG) program.

While there have been significant investments in MJTFs over the past decade by the federal government, little is known about the results of this investment. Research to date has primarily focused on descriptions of the activities and outputs of MJTFs, as well as implementation processes. MJTFs have evolved significantly over this time period and a consensus has emerged (albeit with minimal support from empirical evaluations) on what constitutes successful management and institutionalization of MJTFs. However, with few outcome assessments and evaluations, there is no similar consensus on the impacts of MJTFs, nor is there similar agreement about how impacts should be measured.

Recognizing this significant gap, NIJ and BJA issued a collaborative solicitation in 1998 to develop and field test MJTF evaluation methodologies. This project was designed to be completed in two phases. Phase I was for the development of methodologies, and Phase II was for field tests and preparation of MJTF evaluation tools ready for dissemination.

III. Phase One

The first phase of the project was primarily focused on data availability. The work began with a review of the MJTF evaluation literature to identify research questions, measures, and methodologies. The results of the literature review were used to design a survey of state administrative agencies and BJA-funded task forces. The survey of SAAs was designed to collect information on the specific data elements regularly collected from task forces by SAAs as part of its grant monitoring, as well as its experience evaluating MJTFs. The survey of BJA-funded task forces was designed to collect data on the organization and management of the task forces, the type of operational and crime information maintained at the task force level, as well as detailed information on task force evaluation activity. The two surveys were fielded in 1999. There were two important survey findings that played a role in shaping the subsequent phase of this project. The first was that SAAs in most states were requiring task forces to regularly report information on inputs (expenditures, staffing) and outputs (arrests, drug seizures, convictions), but lesser proportions required reporting on changes in local drug markets or other outcome related information. This indicated that SAAs were likely to have historical information on some measures of task force performance, with some states better equipped to participate in an evaluation than others. The second important finding was that task forces per se had little interest in evaluation and bearing the costs associated with an evaluation.

To further explore the quality of the data that would be available for evaluation purposes, six states were identified for a follow-up site visit. The states (Colorado, Illinois, Georgia, Florida, Mississippi, and Oregon) were identified from an analysis of survey responses to identify SAAs that required collection of a comprehensive set of performance data. The purpose of the site visit was to explore the specific data that had been collected on task

force performance, paying particular attention to the format and quality of the data. Another purpose was to collect information on task forces operating in each state in preparation for selecting states to participate in a field test of an evaluation methodology.

The site visits provided information that was used to develop generic research questions, measures, and designs that could be used to evaluate task forces, as well as more specific plans for the three states deemed most suitable for testing an evaluation design (Colorado, Georgia, and Illinois). This information was presented in a Phase II conceptual design and work plan.

IV. Phase II

The completion of Phase I activities provided a framework for refining the goals of the second phase of the project. Although the fact that SAAs have been collecting performance data supported the plan to test evaluation designs using historical performance data, the fact that SAAs were more interested than were MJTFs in evaluation guidance shifted the focus of the guidance document to BJA and the SAAs. The refined goal for Phase II was to test an evaluation design using historical data then to apply the lessons learned in the development of an evaluation guidance document for BJA and SAAs. The first stage involved the identification of historical data that was consistently available from multijurisdictional drug task forces in Colorado, Georgia, and Illinois. A fourth state, Tennessee, was included in the study based upon the recommendation of NIJ. Data from these four states were selected to be used in a retrospective evaluation of task forces in each state. The second stage involved the development of a template for performance measurement that would be introduced as part of a user-friendly guide developed for BJA and SAA's interested in aligning task force progress reports with performance monitoring and evaluation goals.

Stage One: Retrospective Evaluation

The first step taken was to submit to NIJ and BJA for approval a preliminary research design. Upon approval, the first cluster meeting with the four states participating in the evaluation was scheduled. The goal of the meeting, which took place in January 2006, was to brief the state representatives on the preliminary evaluation plan and clarify the interest and involvement by the states. After all states agreed to participate in the evaluation, Abt researchers began working with representatives in each state to learn how task forces operate in each state, focusing on task force goals and the resources and activities engaged in to support these goals. Researchers also investigated existing efforts to measure task force performance and the sources for that information. The results of this exercise were used to develop logic models depicting the inputs, activities, outputs, and outcomes for the task forces in each state and the relationships between them. The logic models provided the framework for deciding which data elements would be informative with respect to testing the relationships depicted in the logic model. After using the logic models to identify the data of interest, the research team worked closely with SAA representatives in each state to identify which variables had been collected, by whom, and for what time period. What we learned was that there was significant

variation in the quality of the data collected within each state over time, as well as significant variation across the four states in what information was collected.

After completing the above tasks, the second cluster meeting was scheduled for December 2006. The goal of this meeting was to discuss the final evaluation design, including which data would be used, from what time period, and how it would be used in a cross-section time-series design. The meeting included a discussion of what became a key finding from the data collection effort; that is, data about task force resources, organizations, and activities are inconsistently available and/or of inconsistent quality. The group also discussed the consequence of this, which is that any evaluation effort would be significantly hampered by the fact that some task forces failed to report crucial evaluation data or the reports are incomplete. What this meant was that any evaluation would need to supplement extant data provided by the SAA with data collected retrospectively at the task force level. Therefore, for it to be successful, the number of variables of interest and the time period of interest needed to be narrowed down to a key set of data.

The meeting closed with agreement on the nine variables that would be collected for each task force for the previous seven years. These variables included information on the task force jurisdiction, partners, FTEs, operating budget, investigation activity, arrests, eradications, and seizures. The data collected would be used to examine trends in task force performance over time, as well as relationships between inputs and outcomes in each state. Each SAA received a spreadsheet to use to collect the evaluation data, with a strong suggestion to reach out to individual task forces for any missing information.

All of the states were able to provide most of the information for the previous seven years, however, there were some missing information in all four states. In most cases, information was missing for specific task forces that were not able to provide historical data for specific variables. However, in GA, the SAA was not able to provide any information for 2001, 2002, and 2004 and did not collect information on methamphetamine eradications until 2004. None of the four states was able to report on all of the individual data elements for the full seven years. For example, Colorado could not report on the amounts of methamphetamine seized in 2000 and 2001 because meth seizures were included along with cocaine seizures and the separate amount cannot be separate prior to 2002. Illinois did not have data on task-force cases referred for prosecution prior to 2004. All four of the states had missing data for individual task forces for some variables and reporting periods.

As expected, there was also some variations in the apparent quality of information that was provided, for example, whether budget information reflected the task force's full budget or was limited to grant funds, and whether FTEs reflected grant-funded positions or all sworn positions. Data for each of the states was analyzed to examine how modifications in task forces over time (primarily in inputs) affected outputs and outcomes over time.

Stage Two: Performance Monitoring Guidance Document

The conceptualization of the product that was to be developed during this stage began with discussions with representatives from Bureau of Justice Assistance and the National Institute of Justice. After discussing BJA's performance monitoring goals for all of its task force grantees, it became apparent that the desired guidance should be focused on the development of a comprehensive performance monitoring system that would provide data essential to supporting sound evaluation. It was felt that providing guidance focusing on evaluation would incorrectly assume that the states have sufficient data to support an evaluation.

It was also decided that our grant activity would begin with the development of a performance monitoring data collection tool, based on both a logic model of key elements of multijurisdictional drug task forces and performance indicators important to BJA representatives. The template would be introduced in the guide as a prototype from which SAAs could tailor their own data collection efforts from task forces in their state.

Project staff worked closely with BJA representatives to develop a data collection tool that was field tested in two ways. The instrument was first reviewed by a cross section of task force and SAA representatives from the state of Massachusetts (12 people total) during a focus group at Abt Associates offices in Cambridge, MA. Focus group participants provided feedback on the clarity of the questions and ability to provide the requested data. The feedback from the focus group was used to refine the tool to increase clarity. The revised instrument was then field tested by drug task forces in the four states that participated in the retrospective evaluation. Field test participants had the option of responding to an on-line or paper survey asking them to review each section of the instrument and provide feedback on the clarity of the information request and the burden associated with providing the requested information. Overall, 52% or 45 out of the 87 active task forces in the four states participated. Across the four states, the response rates varied, with 65%, 32%, 70%, 42% of the active task forces in TN, GA, IL, and CO responding, retrospectively.

In general, the results from the field test were positive, confirming that the tool was clear and covered information already being collected at the task force level. As a result, minimal changes were made to the instrument. The changes that were made were focused on improving the clarity of the questions and corresponding definitions. Although there were some comments indicating that some information (i.e., the value of in-kind contributions, submissions to intelligence databases, referrals to other agencies, and information on the convictions and sentencing of defendants arrested by the task force) was not currently being collected by task forces and may involve some burden to collect, it was decided to keep these items with the assumption that each SAA would weigh the burden of including these items against the importance of the information to their future evaluation efforts.

The final data collection template was incorporated into a document guiding SAAs on the development of comprehensive performance monitoring systems that could later support

rigorous evaluations of the task forces in their state. The guide walks users through the linkage between performance measurement data and evaluation using a logic model, offering a prototype model to be used by SAAs to build a logic model(s) for its own state. The guide also introduces the data collection template, again as a prototype from which to critically review existing performance monitoring systems or to develop new systems. Readers are introduced to how performance data may be used for program development and policy analysis, as well as to support evaluation activity, drawing on the results from the retrospective evaluation for examples.

V. Next Steps

Although the guide was written in a user-friendly format, we feel it could benefit from some further automation. Developing an automated performance monitoring system would be valuable to SAAs who are not currently collecting information from task forces electronically. For this type of project, we suggest developing a secure website that may be accessed by all task forces in a state. The website would provide an on-line performance monitoring system, which includes automated reminders to ensure task force commanders are compliant. The back-end of the on-line system (used by BJA and the SAAs) would include a spreadsheet of all data, as well as a number of auto-generated tables and charts that can be updated regularly by BJA and the SAAs with the click of a button. There are two advantages to this approach, one is to reduce the reporting burden for individual task forces and the other is to help states build a comprehensive performance monitoring system that would support rigorous evaluation.