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Monitoring Contracted Provider Service Delivery in the Hollow state: Understanding Barriers Preventing Proper Use of Service Monitoring Tools

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Managing Contracts/Contractors

Monitoring Contracted Service Delivery in the Hollow State: Understanding Barriers to Proper Use of Service Monitoring Tools

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Contracting out is gradually resulting in the role of government shifting from service deliverer to contract manager. But all too often, government lacks the capacity to adequately monitor contracted providers themselves. As a consequence, government frequently ends up monitoring contracted provider service delivery using data collected by contracted providers.

This poses a vexing conundrum faced by many contract managers: situations in which the government is monitoring contracted providers based at least in part on information that contracted providers are collecting. In this article, a service monitoring tool refers to any source of information used by a government agency to monitor service inputs, outputs, and/or outcomes that a contracted provider is required to give to a government agency as a condition of a government contract.

A contracted provider is properly using a service monitoring tool when the contracted provider reports the data collected by this tool in a timely manner and when the data are both accurate and complete. Three different barriers may prevent contracted providers from properly using service monitoring tools:

• A motivation barrier exists when the contracted provider is unwilling to use the tool properly;

• An ability barrier exists when the contracted provider lacks the resources or skills to properly use the tool; and

• An understanding barrier exists when there is a good faith misunderstanding between the contracted provider and government about what the contracted provider needs to do in order to properly use the tool.

In order to examine different barriers to proper tool use, the findings from seven case studies on early childhood programs in three communities in Upstate New York are used. The case studies specifically focused on the reporting forms that the early childhood programs were required by government agencies to complete. In total, 52 semi-structured interviews were conducted for this project: seven with government agency employees and 45 with contracted provider employees.

Motivation as a Barrier to Proper Tool Use
Contracted providers consistently reported in all seven case studies that motivation was not a barrier to proper tool use. In all 45 contracted provider interviews, employees identified one or more reasons why they were motivated to properly complete the reporting forms. In addition, motivation was cited as a barrier to proper form completion in only one of the 45 interviews with contracted providers.

Ability as a Barrier to Proper Tool Use
Contracted provider employees were more likely to perceive lack of ability as a barrier to proper tool use compared to lack of motivation. Employees in more than a quarter of the contracted provider interviews reported that their ability prevented them from properly completing the forms at least one time.

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Inadequate staffing was a key ability barrier cited by contracted providers. In order to adhere to state requirements regarding child-to-staff ratios for early childhood programs, contracted providers reported that other job responsibilities sometimes had to take precedence over filling out the reporting forms. In the words of one contracted provider employee: "Childcare is extremely busy, and children come first. So if we need to take care of the kids, this [filling out the reporting forms] is going to wait. That's essentially what it is."

Consistent with the finding that inadequate staffing was a barrier, numerous contracted provider employees commented that completing the reporting forms took a great deal of time. Representative of comments made by several contracted providers, one contracted provider complained: "It's [filling out the reporting forms is] not complicated. It's just time consuming." A few contracted providers indicated they were worried that the reporting requirements were compromising service quality.

The other major ability barrier cited by several contracted provider employees was difficulty coordinating with the government in order to obtain information needed to properly fill out the reporting forms. On the other hand, contracted provider employees reported that neither lack of training nor financial resources hindered their ability to properly fill out the reporting forms.

Understanding as a Barrier to Proper Tool Use
Also examined, was the prevalence of understanding barriers preventing proper form completion. Findings indicate that problems relating to differing understandings appear to be a moderate barrier.

In nearly half of the contracted provider interviews, employees reported some understanding problem regarding form completion. Understanding problems tended to be more pervasive in the programs with weaker technical assistance systems for the reporting forms compared to the programs with stronger technical assistance systems.

The government's organization of ongoing meetings on the reporting forms between the government and contracted provider employees seems to be especially important in minimizing understanding problems. The government organized ongoing meetings on the reporting forms with contracted providers in four of the five case studies with minimal or moderate understanding problems. In contrast, the technical assistance that contracted providers received in the programs with widespread understanding problems tended to be reactive rather than proactive.

Implications for Public Management
There are a variety of ways that government can minimize barriers to proper tool use. Government should try to be realistic about the reporting requirements it imposes on contracted providers in order to reduce the likelihood that inadequate staffing will be a barrier to proper tool use.

As the time contracted providers need to devote to satisfying accountability requirements increases, the time they have to focus on service delivery decreases. As a result, excessive reporting requirements may actually undermine service delivery goals. Government employees should also focus on ensuring that there is good communication between government and contracted provider employees particularly when proper tool usage necessitates coordination between the two entities.

Finally, investing in technical assistance systems for service monitoring tools may ultimately result in the more efficient use of public resources. By making these up-front investments, public administrators will have to spend less time in the long run resolving misunderstandings about proper tool use and will have more time to devote to other job responsibilities.

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