

Getting Started: A Self-Administered Guide to Theory of Change Development and Advocacy Evaluation Planning

**Developed by Organizational Research Services (ORS)
On behalf of the Annie E. Casey Foundation**

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BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

ORS has been providing ongoing evaluation consultation to the Annie E. Casey Foundation KIDS COUNT initiative since 2007. The focus of evaluation support has been individualized capacity-building and guidance for developing a theory of change, identifying interim outcomes, developing data collection processes and tools, and using data to strengthen advocacy efforts.

Much of this work has been based on ***A Guide to Measuring Advocacy and Policy*** which ORS developed for the Foundation in 2007—in collaboration with the Tom Kelly, Director of Evaluation and Don Crary, Director of KIDS COUNT.¹ The intent of this individualized capacity building has been a multi-way learning enterprise—to both test the ideas described in the Guide in real-life advocacy settings as well as to fine-tune these lessons. A number of these lessons are captured in a recently published ORS brief (2009)²

Going forward, ORS and Casey are attempting to find ways to advance the knowledge and application of advocacy evaluation approaches in broader and more accessible ways—including the use of webinars, trainings, and resource materials. The ***Getting Started*** resource guide is part of this approach.

PURPOSE AND FORMAT OF THE GUIDE

Getting Started offers methods and tools that can help KIDS COUNT grantees and other advocacy organizations who are interested in charting a theory of change to enhance communication and to serve as a framework for evaluation planning. This guide provides a template for advocates to walk through development of a theory of change outcome map.

A THEORY OF

CHANGE clearly expresses the relationships between actions and hoped-for results. It provides an explanation of belief systems (e.g., assumptions, “best practices,” experiences) that make positive change in the lives of individuals and the community.

A theory of change can be articulated as a visual diagram such as an

OUTCOME MAP that depicts the sequential relationships between initiatives, strategies and intended outcomes and goals.

¹ *A Guide for Evaluation of Advocacy and Policy*. (2007) Organizational Research Services on behalf of the Annie E. Casey Foundation. Available at: www.organizationalresearch.com and www.aecf.org.

² *Ten Considerations for Advocacy Evaluation Planning: Lessons Learned from KIDS COUNT Grantee Experiences* (2009). Organizational Research Services on behalf of the Annie E. Casey Foundation. Available at: www.organizationalresearch.com and www.aecf.org.

Getting Started is intended to be an easy-to-use resource for advocacy organizations that seek to develop and use a theory of change to simply articulate and effectively communicate their work to a variety of audiences – e.g. Board members, staff, funders, constituents, donors, partners, and other stakeholders - and to help them think about how and what to evaluate. In addition, we expect that this guide will offer a multi-way learning opportunity regarding how theory of change is developed and used in advocacy settings. ORS will continue to make adjustments and fine tune the methods and tools described here based on lessons learned from those who try this guide initially.

One way that to express a theory of change is via an Outcome Map; we have found this visual product to be particularly useful for advocacy organizations. Simply put, an Outcome Map is a roadmap or a blueprint for articulating strategies and their relationship to outcomes. It provides a focused view of the landscape for advocacy activities, as well as the progression of outcomes that describe how you get from “here” to “there.” In the context of advocacy, this roadmap is especially important. While the focus of advocacy work is often on policy wins and improved conditions for populations and the environment, much of the progress occurs in the landscape along the way. We characterize advocacy outcomes as the interim **structural change outcomes** on the one hand and the **policy change outcomes** on the other hand. Both are essential to advocacy and policy change work but the former has been under-emphasized and the latter over-emphasized in planning, funding and evaluation of advocacy efforts. Changes in public will, political will, base of support, capacity of advocacy organizations, and strengthened alliances are the crucial structural changes that must happen on the way to policy wins. These interim changes are equally crucial for “holding the line” and defending bedrock legislation. An Outcome Map lifts up the importance of advocacy’s “interim outcomes” at the same time that it sharpens the focus on the type of policy changes of greatest interest and relevance. (Several examples of Outcome Maps are included in the Exercises that accompany this guide.)

Defining Strategies, Outcomes and Goals

While these terms are often used differently by different groups or fields, ORS defines Strategies, Outcomes and Goals as follows:

Strategies: A related set of activities, e.g. those connected with implementation of a program, a campaign or a collaborative effort.

Outcomes: Short, intermediate or long term changes that can occur among individuals, families, communities, organizations or systems. Individual, family and community outcomes can include changes in knowledge, attitudes, skills, behaviors, health or conditions. Organizational and system outcomes can include changes in institutional structures, capacity, service delivery systems, regulations, service practices, issue visibility, norms, partnerships, public will and policies.

Goals: Sizeable, lasting, positive long-term changes.

Advocacy organizations that have worked to develop a theory of change Outcome Map have found both the process and the product to be useful. The process allows advocates and their partners to clarify thinking and build consensus about how strategies are expected to lead to desired outcomes. The Outcome Map product is a useful tool to help advocates communicate about their efforts.

“Development of a theory of change (Outcome Map) has moved our work forward significantly. The process of defining our strategies, outcomes and goals gave our team a framework for discussing the values and direction of our organization in the coming years. We are better positioned to advocate for a system that effectively serves children.”

—Director of Policy and Research, Action for Children, NC

“We worked to develop an organizational theory of change (Outcome Map) and so far, the payoff has been wonderful. Not knowing that we would be facing a major state budget crisis this year, it was absolutely the right and most timely thing we could have done! We are able to clearly show, describe and defend our work with our funders, the legislature, our partners and our board. People say ‘Oh, now I really get it. I see what you do.’”

—Executive Director, Georgia Family Connection Partnership

ORS experience working with KIDS COUNT grantees and other advocates shows that there is not a neat, “one size fits all” set of steps that results in a completed a theory of change. To help advocates work through theory of change development, **Getting Started** outlines a basic method through guiding questions that support Outcome Map development, as well as accompanying Exercises and tools to support documentation of decisions and the specific components of an outcome map. (See: **Developing an Outcome Map: Exercises.**) Movement through the guide’s steps and questions - which relate to three main elements of Outcome Map development - will help grantees better articulate their strategies and relationships to outcomes through an Outcome Map which will ultimately help advocates enhance communication and engage in evaluation planning to document results of their work.

CHECKPOINTS

It is not uncommon that development of an Outcome Map can surface issues related to consensus, compatibility and capacity. While these issues can be challenging at times, further exploration can result in enhanced clarity and agreement about what an advocacy organization is seeking to accomplish, as well as what might be realistically required to get there. As advocates work through each of the three elements of outcome map development and related steps and questions described below, it may help to periodically consider the following question as “checkpoints.”

1. To what degree is there consensus among key stakeholders regarding beliefs and assumptions, models of change, strategies and key outcome areas?
2. To what degree is the emerging picture of change compatible with the organization’s beliefs, approaches and overall culture? (e.g., need for confidentiality, beliefs about how change happens, timeframe represented, implied roles and relationships)?
3. To what degree does the emerging theory of change have implications for organizational capacity, role and resources dedicated to advancing the theory of change? (e.g., does the organization have adequate capacity to fully implement key strategies)?

DEVELOPING AN OUTCOME MAP - ELEMENT ONE: IDENTIFY NEEDS, PURPOSES AND FRAMES FOR COMMUNICATION AND EVALUATION

Step 1. Brainstorm relevant audiences for a theory of change Outcome Map.

Answer the Question: Who are the main audiences with whom you will communicate via an Outcome Map?

- Possible Groups include: Funders, Board, Staff, Constituents, Partners and Donors. Identifying the main audiences and their interests regarding your work can help you determine how best to communicate about your work, what areas to emphasize, and how you may approach documentation and evaluation of your work.

Some audiences have especially important interests and needs that your organization will need to respond to. These audiences could be considered your **target**.

Answer the Question: Who is your target audience?

Step 2. Prioritize relevant strategies and outcome areas to highlight in your outcome map.

Thinking about what your target audience(s) cares most about can help you determine what needs to be clear or prominent in your theory of change. Some audiences may care most about certain types of **activities** – e.g. media advocacy/communications, lobbying, community education and outreach, data and research. Some audiences may care most about certain **outcomes** – e.g. increased organizational capacity to do good media advocacy, policy wins, health/well-being of a particular population.

Think about audiences' interests in a slightly different way, some audiences' interests may be more related to your organization's **operations** (e.g. actions and the quantity/breadth of actions). Some audiences' interests may be more related to **program effectiveness** (e.g. the quality, results or outcomes of your actions). And, some audiences may have **strategic** interests (e.g. how your organization's efforts contribute to broad outcome areas or goals). Program effectiveness and strategic interests are particularly important to consider and reflect as part of your outcome map. Often, operational interests fit better into a work plan.

***Answer the Question:** What activities or outcomes does your target audience(s) care most about?*

Step 3 Identify the breadth of your efforts and your model for change.

Three types of change models include³:

Social change: Ultimate desired results are large-scale societal changes. Includes policy change and advocacy, but strategies and activities are more broadly focused on social change.

Policy change: Targets change in the policy arena, including policy development and implementation. Results of strategies and activities may include policy development, new or revised policy, policy adoption, adequate policy implementation, policy enforcement or the like. Ultimate results are most likely to occur through change in structural and normative context of communities and institutions. Policy change is fundamental to changes in social/physical conditions, but does not stand for social change itself.

Advocacy: A tactic for achieving social or policy change, advocacy includes issue framing, developing alliances, and gathering and disseminating data. Advocacy provides essential infrastructure (capacity) that may lead to policy change and,

³ Source: *The Challenge of Assessing Policy and Advocacy Activities: Strategies for a Prospective Evaluation Approach*. Blueprint Research & Design, Inc. (2005) Prepared for The California Endowment.

ultimately, social change. Results of advocacy are likely to be strategic alliances, public awareness, public will and political will.

Answer the Question: What is your change model?

Step 4. Determine the length of time between strategy implementation and outcome achievement that will be depicted in theory of change – e.g. 1-2 years, 3-5 years, or 5-10 years. The length of time identified will suggest the types of outcomes that will likely make up “the middle” of the theory of change (see Element Three).

Answer the Question: How long will it take to achieve the full range of desired outcomes and goals?

Step 5. Determine vantage point(s) for depicting a theory of change Outcome Map.

Thinking about the priority strategies and outcomes that you want to make clear and prominent, it will be helpful to determine the vantage point for an Outcome Map which can best communicate your theory of change.

- *50,000 foot vantage point.* A theory of change Outcome Map from this high-level vantage point is a “zoomed out” view showing the broad landscape of what is being done to advance towards and achieve a long-term policy-change goal and/or change in population or environmental condition. This view would include multiple efforts of different partners that contribute towards the long-term goal. This vantage point makes most sense when work is happening in a long-term time frame; multiple partners are implementing a broad set of efforts directed at different areas leading to change for a population (e.g. health/well being of all children birth to 18).
- *30,000 foot vantage point.* An Outcome Map from this vantage point would encompass the breadth of work of one organization (e.g. CAHS). This vantage point makes most sense if an organization is seeking to define its particular role or contribution within a broad effort (i.e. the organization’s home territory within a broad landscape, or if an organization wishes to express how its own strategies and outcomes are related and connected).
- *10,000 foot vantage point.* An Outcome Map from this vantage point would illustrate the activities and intended results connected with a singular strategy. This vantage point is a “closer to the ground view” and makes most sense if an organization is involved in evaluation planning, or trying to get a picture of what is like to happen/change in a distinct time period (e.g. next 1-2 years)
- Another option is to create several “nested” theories of change that show views of strategies within a multi-faceted campaign or broad effort (CFFO, Georgia). This option makes most sense if...have time, appetite, leadership for doing this work

Answer the Question: *What vantage point(s) will allow you to best communicate your work and intended results?*

When selecting a vantage point for your Outcome Map, consider that there is no single right answer. Answering this question for your organization will involve thinking about what is important to your target audiences, your particular change model and what your organization ultimately hopes to achieve, and the degree to which your work happens in the context of collaboration and partnership with others who share similar goals.

DEVELOPING AN OUTCOME MAP - ELEMENT TWO: IDENTIFY A PROCESS FOR DEVELOPING A THEORY OF CHANGE OUTCOME MAP

Step 1. Determine stakeholders in the theory of change design process –e.g. staff only, staff and others (e.g. board), broader partner/stakeholder input and feedback, designated work group.

Considerations:

- “Appetite” for planning among staff and stakeholders. Much advocacy work occurs through partnerships across different organizations, sectors and sometimes—in the cases of unlikely allies—across political or other lines. While involving partners in planning or theory of change development processes can lead to the creation of a more complete picture of how desired goals may be achieved, it may be prohibitive or difficult to involve all partners aligned around one campaign or strategy in broader planning efforts. Instead, it may be best to consult partners as interim outcomes and/or priority measures are identified. This could be especially important if support or cooperation from partners is needed to implement strategies that are directed at certain outcomes, or if there is a need to rely on partners to help with documentation about outcome achievement.
- Time available. Advocates operate in a fast-paced, dynamic environment with intense periods of hectic activity. This can make finding regular time to meet and plan challenging. Taking steps to conceptualize a theory of change is more than a one day “event.” It can be challenging, but advocacy organizations need to determine how they can dedicate the needed time and bandwidth to this activity. Also, it is important to consider that if an organization is about to develop, revise or revisit its strategic plan, or do other significant planning work, or if advocates are heading into the busiest times of the year (e.g. legislative session) it may be best to put theory of change development on hold.

- Leadership. Because development of a theory of change Outcome Map will typically be done “out of hide” – that is, in addition to all other efforts and without any additional resources – it will be best accomplished if there is leadership to keep the process moving.

Answer the Question: Who will lead/contribute to the process of developing your theory of change outcome map?

Step 2. Carry out development of a theory of change Outcome Map.

While the purpose of a theory of change Outcome Map is similar for most advocacy groups – to define and communicates how strategies will lead to expected changes - ORS’ experience shows that the process for building an Outcome Map will vary across groups. Variations are partly due to differences in the contexts, timing, organizational culture and leadership present across organizations. However, even with variations, there are two basic processes that ORS has seen work well; these are described in the Element Two Template. One process will work best if an organization is developing its Outcome Map in a 3-6 month timeframe. This is a likely process if there is a limited appetite for planning, and the preferred approach involves having a few key representatives do most of the work, with vetting and review by a broader group of stakeholders. The second process described is likely to be effective in a 6-12 month Outcome Map development process. This is the likely process when it is determined that an Outcome Map must be created based on the direct input of many stakeholders and partners.

DEVELOPING AN OUTCOME MAP - ELEMENT THREE: DESIGN A USEFUL THEORY OF CHANGE OUTCOME MAP

Advocacy organizations are generally clear on their strategies and tactics and their end goals. End goals are often expressed as policy changes, or changes in population or environmental conditions. Developing meaningful evaluation of advocacy and policy efforts requires definition of the “middle”: what happens between the implementation of strategies and tactics and the ultimate policy impact?

Step 1 Start at the END: Clarify goals.

Identify the ultimate change you want to achieve. This ultimate change will generally be a policy-related change or an impact statement. The distinction among impact statements is the level of focus and particular population, i.e. children, families, neighborhoods or communities. For example:

- Children in our state are healthy
- All families are strong and self-sufficient
- Communities are prosperous

***Answer the Question:** What is the ultimate goal of your work? Or if you are working with partners, what is your overall common-common goal? Where is there mission congruence?*

Step 2. Identify the main strategies that your organization/partnership will implement towards the goal or mission.

Consider specific strategies that address your ultimate goal. Strategies are related sets of activities and can include public awareness efforts, capacity-building efforts, or community mobilization efforts. Strategies can describe programs, campaigns, initiatives, or collaborations.

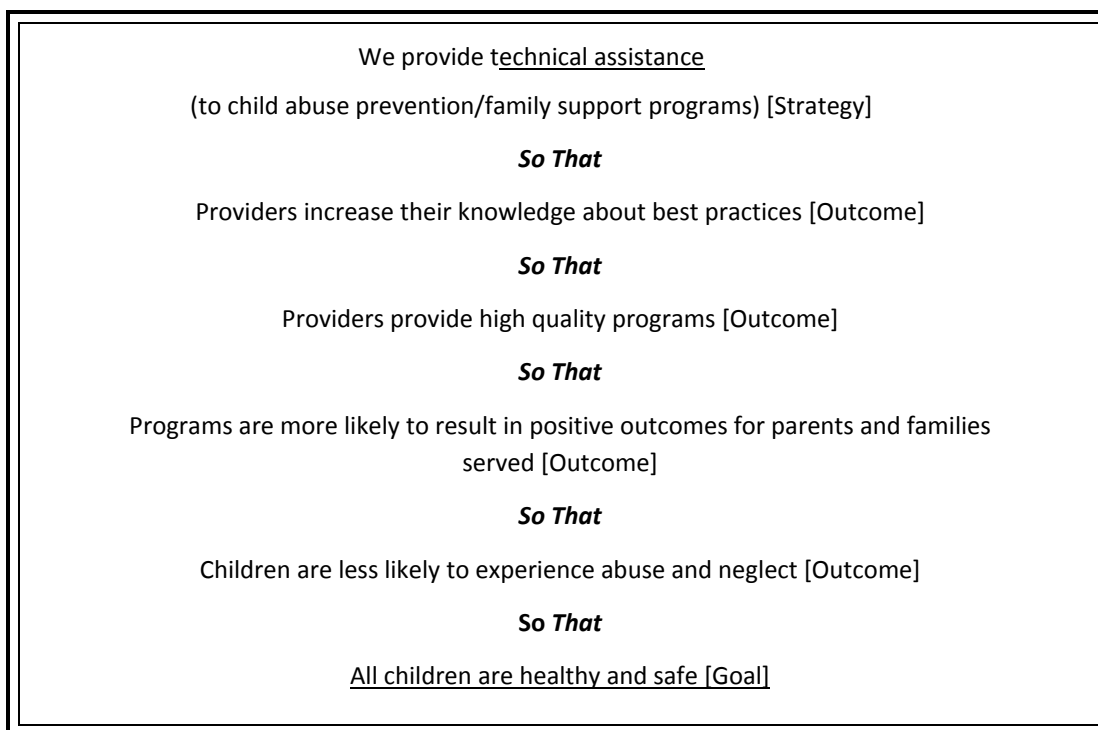
***Answer the Question:** What work will we do to reach our ultimate goal?*

Step 3. Begin filling in “the middle.” Identify meaningful interim outcomes that are likely to occur on the way to the goal/mission.

One very effective approach is to develop “So That” Chains. So-That chains help connect strategies to the ultimate goal through a series of logical, sequential changes. Creating So-That chains for each strategy can allow for effective articulation and communication of expected changes resulting from each strategy, and how the strategies together contribute to ultimate goals. In developing an Outcome Map, however, it is important to note that multiple strategies are also likely to lead to common intermediate outcomes on the pathway to ultimate goals.

***Fill in the Statement:** We do _____ [Strategy] SO THAT
_____ [Outcome/Change] results.*

Example:



Notice that this chain of statements moved from knowledge to behavior of providers and from health status of children in programs to health status of children in the community. Each link is a logical sequence of events showing how implementation of a specific strategy contributes to broad changes.

For ideas about interim outcomes, see the table included with Element Three Exercises. This table describes several outcome areas likely to be related to advocacy. Consider that you will likely need to characterize both the **structural changes** that happen on the way to the **policy changes** which you are seeking.

TIP: It is helpful to create So-That chains and begin assembling the picture of your theory of change Outcome Map on a large wall. You can use colored half sheets of paper to write strategies and outcomes, and these sheets can be arranged sequentially on the wall to reflect the connection between strategies and outcomes, as well as the flow of outcomes towards the ultimate goal.

Step 4 Prioritize the interim outcomes that are most relevant to and reflective of your advocacy work.

Once So-That chains are completed and a draft Outcome Map has been created, it is a good idea to test logic and relevance.

Answer the Questions: *Are there logical linkages between strategies, outcomes and the goal? Are the most relevant outcomes included (i.e. those that are of highest interest/importance to target audiences)?*

Prioritize outcomes and/or refine the Outcome Map to show strategy- outcome and short term-intermediate term-long-term outcome linkages that are most important, logical and relevant.

Step 5 Prepare to share, refine and/or adopt your theory of change Outcome Map.