

Responding to Needs, Measuring Results



Growing up in El Paso, Texas, Isaac Castillo wondered why some of his school mates turned to gangs, drugs, and other negative behaviors while he and his friends threw themselves into their studies, joined the debate team, and later went to college and graduate school. “What happened to make some go down a different path? Were they pushed in one direction by their families? Was it the parenting?” Castillo asks. Today as Director of Research and Evaluation at the Latin American Youth Center in Washington, DC, he still asks these questions. The answers he finds help the organization refine, adjust, and add new programs.

IN HIS OWN CASE, CASTILLO BELIEVES THAT IT WAS the support of his parents and finding his passion—debate—that helped him forge his future.

“Debating helped me develop a comfort with public speaking and it was where I felt like intellect was rewarded. I devoted my time to it much the way an athlete trains. I went to debate camps at Baylor University and the University of Michigan which exposed me and opened my eyes to the bigger world,” he says.

It was his ability to persuade as much as his skills as a researcher that enabled Castillo to support LAYC’s long held desire to develop an organizational-wide outcome management system, as well as engage and train all LAYC staff in the development and use of the system. This new capacity has enabled the LAYC to use data consistently to improve services leading to quality results for young people. Five years into this effort, LAYC has received national recognition for its work in outcome management.

For more than 40 years, the Latin American Youth Center has evolved and looked at ways to enhance its own performance so it can be an anchor in the rough seas that have buffeted the lives of multi-cultural youth in the region it serves. Since its founding in 1968, LAYC has offered vulnerable youth living in some of the region’s toughest neighborhoods the opportunity to

escape from the negative influences of gangs, drugs, and neglect.

Over the years, LAYC responded to the changing needs of the communities it serves, growing from a small volunteer-focused effort serving primarily Latino youth to a network of centers and charter schools serving more than 4,800 multilingual youth in Washington, DC and Maryland.

The Challenge

In the early 2000’s LAYC Executive Director Lori Kaplan saw major changes on the demographic horizon and knew that LAYC needed to change as well. While one of LAYC’s greatest strengths is its multi-service delivery model, this method also presented some significant challenges as the organization contemplated expansion beyond its home base of Washington, DC into suburban jurisdictions.

With the development boom in the District in the late 1990s and early 2000’s, low-income families were finding they couldn’t afford to settle or continue to live in the District; they had to move to Maryland and Virginia. Housing in those locations was more affordable but the kinds of services LAYC provided were limited or not available.

“Many of our youth and families were moving to suburban Maryland, while young people and families who originally settled in suburban Maryland were coming to the LAYC seeking

support. As a result in early 2000, the LAYC formed an exploratory committee on their Board of Directors to explore expansion into Maryland and Northern Virginia. These families were living there but coming to DC for services and we knew that things were changing and we had to look at that,” says Lori Kaplan, Executive Director of LAYC.

The organization had dozens of academic, employment, social services, recreational and arts programs. As it was considering expansion there were many questions: Which and how many of the programs would transfer to other jurisdictions? Would new programs need to be created to serve the distinct needs in these new places?

Soon after LAYC’s board planning process began, VPP became aware of the work of LAYC and considered an investment prospect. The timing was ideal for both organizations and in 2003 the two entered into a multi-year investment partnership totaling \$1.8 million in investment capital. The goals of the investment were:

- To support LAYC in its efforts to expand into suburban Maryland with the possibility of using that expansion to eventually move into Northern Virginia;
- To build and create a strong capacity for performance measurement within LAYC to track programs and results for continuous improvement; and

- To enhance and strengthen the leadership and management capacity of the organization which included building out its management team and expanding its Board of Directors.

The Action

A Foundation for Growth: Business Planning

The VPP investment in LAYC began with a business planning process to identify and address key issues. Working with several outside consultants, LAYC and its board examined the issues around expansion as well as the internal capacity they would need to support their growth. The planning process looked at finances, program, and capacity.

“We had never done a strategic plan before. It was a huge leap of faith. [The planning consultants] helped me understand what is involved in a strategic plan. As a multi-service organization, we are complex and go well beyond single outcomes or objectives. In addition to transforming young lives, LAYC is also about long-term community building work with young people and their families. How do you evaluate and determine outcomes and use the data to improve and make your staff stronger? We hadn’t had that level of strategic engagement and comprehensive planning,” recalls Kaplan of the business planning process.

Through the business planning process, integrating programs became an important focus point.

“LAYC had over 50 different programs and needed to have a theory of change. Yes, it was multi-service but the services were not well connected. LAYC needed a process that would help them think through how and if these programs should link together and ultimately what they wanted to effect,” said Shirley Marcus Allen, the VPP Partner who worked closely with LAYC throughout the investment.

The planning process:

- Identified and confirmed locations for expansion into suburban Maryland;
- Identified areas of board development and organization capacity issues;

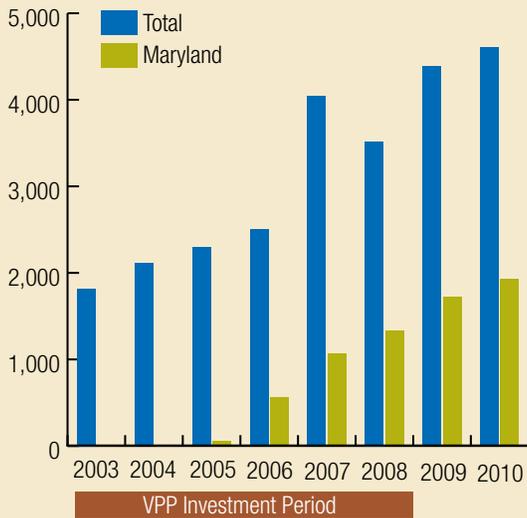
- Brought to the surface the very real need to measure the effectiveness of the programming; and
- identified potential new areas of funding.

“Prior to VPP, the Youth Center had planning underway about going into Maryland for two years. It was very fortunate that the VPP plan came when it did. It gave us the opportunity to think it through and make it stronger. It is not so easy to replicate the youth center.”

Lori Kaplan, Executive Director, LAYC



LAYC Growth in Numbers Served: 2003-2010



Kaplan says that although the youth center had been considering a move to Maryland before the investment, the VPP process provided a structure and pushed them to think in different ways.

“The planning process put the brakes on a little: Let’s look at programing needs and funding sources in the jurisdictions and ask ourselves what the needs in the jurisdictions are? What are other like-minded organizations? Let’s figure out our niche and where we add value and let’s go there,” Kaplan said.

Expansion into Maryland

The VPP investment provided the funding to build LAYC’s presence in suburban Maryland. With that support, the organization was able to hire a director and deputy director in Maryland as well as consultants in the area of development, programming, and infrastructure.

Luisa Montero joined LAYC in 2005 to head up the Maryland Multi-Cultural Youth Center (MMYC), which began in a small office in Prince George’s County and today encompasses three sites—two in Prince George’s County and one in Montgomery County. She brought 20 years of experience

working on a variety of local, national, and international projects including grant development, project management, program design, and development. She had first heard about LAYC through her work in the DC Mayor’s Office on Partnerships and Grants Development, where she linked nonprofits to grants and helped create public/private partnerships.

Montero built upon the work that Kaplan had begun in reaching out to people in Montgomery and Prince George’s Counties.

“You just don’t come out and set up shop. These two counties were very different in how they reacted to LAYC coming out there. There was a lot of message work to do in terms of relationships. We had to communicate that we weren’t there to take over or step on toes or siphon money away from

other nonprofits,” Montero says. She notes that VPP Partner Shirley Marcus Allen, who is well connected to many leaders in the social services sector in Maryland, was helpful in opening doors to people, suggesting groups that Montero should join, and in arranging meetings with people.

Part of the success of the Maryland Center has been Montero’s leadership and connection to the community. Recently she was named to the Maryland State Board of Education where she continues to elevate LAYC’s work. Today the Maryland Multi-Cultural Youth Center has a staff of over 25 people serving both Prince George’s and Montgomery Counties and serves more than 1,000 youth at its three sites.

Creating a Performance Culture – Outcomes Management

Another focus of the VPP partners was building was building the capacity within LAYC to measure and analyze its performance. As the organization was on a growth trajectory, it needed to understand and document the effectiveness of its programming to make informed decisions about whether to keep its services and how to improve them. Kaplan and her board understood the importance of performance measurement. Kaplan had purchased the “Efforts to Outcomes” (ETO) performance tracking software in

2003 and was committed to creating a capacity for tracking outcomes within the organization.

“While LAYC had always been committed to getting the best results and outcomes for our young people, we did not have the capacity to implement our understanding of how data and outcome measurement could be a learning tool leading to better results. This was our challenge. As Executive Director, I did not want our commitment to evaluation to be externally driven. I wanted data collection and outcome measures to be meaningful and relevant to our staff and board of directors,” said Lori Kaplan.

“LAYC could rest assured that they had senior people setting up the program. We were able to focus on getting funding from the county and state to build the program and that was really a load off our mind. Without VPP support, this move would have taken a lot longer and we wouldn’t have reached the capacity to serve as many youth,”

**Luisa Montero, Managing Director,
Maryland Multicultural Youth Center**

The VPP investment supported the hiring of Isaac Castillo in 2005 as Director of Research and Evaluation. Castillo’s new job was to turn the leadership’s vision for effective outcomes management into reality. Castillo realized early on that creating an outcomes management function within LAYC would require a cultural sea change within the organization.

When he arrived at LAYC, Castillo says three challenges confronted him.

■ **A Lack of Good Data on Whom They Were Serving**

The organization did not have accurate numbers of the number of youth served and their demographic characteristics. In addition, when data was available, it was frequently duplicative or inconsistent.

■ **A Lack of Effective Mechanisms to Capture Hard Data on Programs and Effectiveness**

The organization had lots of anecdotal information about the success of programs and discrete program-centered data collection efforts, but had no overarching, center-wide data collection system. It had not been able to capture enough qualitative or quantitative data. No one was using the ETO software purchased for this purpose. The data that was captured was for specific funders but was not driven internally.

■ **Limited Agency-Wide Culture of Data Collection and Management Beyond Funder Requirements**

For the most part LAYC’s data collection was limited to the external demand to satisfy funding sources. LAYC did not have clarity on how to fuse data collection and outcomes management into the fabric of the organization to ultimately lead to deeper and improved outcome results for its young people.

Castillo realized that to address these challenges, he had to start changing the culture. In collaboration with Lori Kaplan and other senior team members, he launched an internal marketing campaign for data collection and evaluation. During his first two months, he met with every staffer involved with direct services. He sought to understand their work and to let them know that he was there to help make their job easier and help them serve youth more effectively. As he was working on the staff level, Kaplan was making sure that the Board of Directors was moving through the same process. In addition, Kaplan brought new board members on with a background in research and data collection methodology.

Those first conversations, he says, did not include discussions about how and what data to collect, focusing instead on the benefits of data collec-

tion for LAYC’s work. He asked them provocative questions: What do you hope to achieve? How do you know what you know about your work and the youth you are serving? What kind of information would be helpful for you to collect to understand the success of your program?

Within six months, he had a small group of staffers who had seen the benefits of evaluation and had become strong advocates for it within the organization. He presented that small group and their use of data collection as models in the organization’s staff meetings. After a year and a half, he hit a tipping point.

“At 18 months, people started to get it. It took that long because we are big—at the time we had 150 employees. It takes a while to get staff to buy into something as big as this. I had created pockets of advocates for outcomes measurement and data collection. I had a cadre of staff advocates saying this is helpful to me and my programs and then it snowballed from there to where 99% of the people were on board,” Castillo recalls.

When Castillo began working at LAYC in 2005, the average logins a month to the ETO system was under 100. As Castillo built up support for outcomes measurements, the logins per month by staff skyrocketed to almost 2,000 in 2008. (See Figure I.) Once he had the support of the staff, he was able to put in place systems that

facilitated their ability to collect data for Castillo to analyze and share with them.

The VPP investment supported training and refinements to the software tracking program to enhance usability. Castillo set up training for the staff. Again he was met with some resistance because staff viewed entering information about their programs into the system as time spent away from providing direct services. But over time they saw the value of tracking the performance of programs and committed to spending an hour a week on entering information into the system.

“We expect [staff] to take time out to [use the ETO system]. It is not extra. It’s now in everyone’s job description that they must use ETO appropriate for their position,” Castillo says.

One of the things that Castillo, the senior team members, and the Board of Directors is most proud of is that LAYC now has accurate and reliable data on who they are serving and they are able to use that data to adjust and modify their programs to better serve youth.

“The VPP investment made it possible for us to bring in Isaac who could bring this [performance tracking] software to life. It brought us the capacity to do what we had laid out in our plan and push us forward” said Kaplan.

“I get calls or emails on a daily basis from other nonprofits, funders, media, and others asking to talk about our outcomes work or seeking advice.”

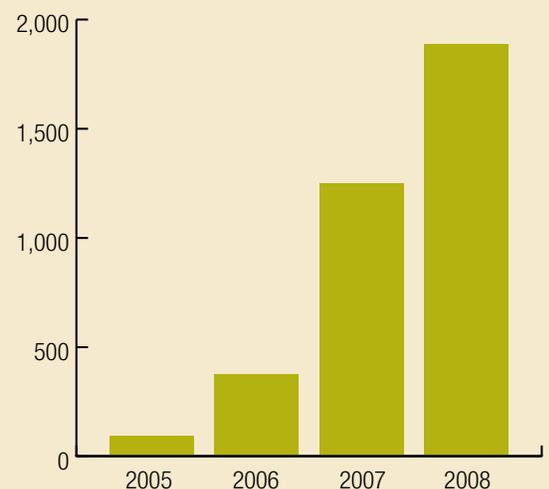
Isaac Castillo, Director of Research and Evaluation, Latin American Youth Center

In addition to exponentially increasing their own capacity for continuous improvement, the LAYC has become a national model for how to implement this work, particularly for multi-service, community based organizations.

Enhancing Leadership and Management

The VPP investment also supported strengthening the leadership and management of LAYC. It allowed the organization to hire key senior level staff like Montero and Castillo and it also

Figure I: Average Number of ETO Logins Per Month



supported the refinement of financial systems and recruitment of new board members. Over the course of the investment, the LAYC board shifted from an Executive Director-centric board to a more professional board holding management accountable, structuring functional committees with oversight of the organization's finances, programming, and talent management.

Board Chair Tony Marquez notes that VPP's approach pushed the organization in ways that do not typically happen with other funding approaches.

"The approach VPP takes, calling it an investment, not just a grant or donation, forced us to look at outcomes. We always had an outcome inclination but this forced a level of discipline that is perhaps higher than before and nudges you along a path that forces you to do things like the financial plan, governance, improve the quality of board members, documenting results and return on investments that perhaps wasn't there before," said Marquez, who is an executive at HSBC.

Kaplan echoes his sentiment, saying that the efforts on board development have been invaluable, particularly connecting LAYC with new board members who brought new skills, contacts, and resources to her organization. "We got several board members through VPP—Tony Marquez is worth his weight

in gold and [VPP Partner] Shirley [Marcus Allen] definitely had connections in Maryland and brought us additional contacts," Kaplan says.

"We did invest in developing internal management systems. We funded senior management positions because we knew that LAYC needed more capacity to support what was going on. And we identified some people for their board like Tony Marquez, David Stupen, and Kim Keating. Since they were now serving 30%+ African Americans, we encouraged them to have the board reflect the diverse population that LAYC was serving," recalls Marcus Allen.

The Results – A Transformed Organization

With the funding and strategic assistance from VPP, LAYC was able to achieve its goals to grow and be a more effective organization, well positioned for the future. Some of the key results:

- By the end of the investment period, LAYC was serving nearly 1,700 more youth, a 93% increase.
- LAYC opened five new sites and eight new co-located sites, including the Maryland Multicultural Youth Center's three sites.

KEY INFORMATION

- > Investment duration:
2003 – 2008
 - > **\$1,824,191** invested
- > **1,698** more children served (93% increase)
 - > Revenue increased from
\$5.3 to \$15 million
during investment period
- > **\$2,049,000** leveraged funding
 - > **5** new sites and
8 new co-locations

"There's no doubt in my mind that the investment was more than just the dollars. We were able to leverage beyond the financial. The VPP investment pushed us in a positive way—a focus on outcomes and accountability. Whether you like it or not at the time when you are going through the process, the end result is an improved organization."

Tony Marquez, Board Chair

- The Maryland Multi-Cultural Youth Center has established itself as a go-to provider for youth services. It was able to scale its operations and assume this position in just four years.
- LAYC's Research and Evaluation function and culture of performance is firmly rooted in the organization. Four hundred staff were trained to track outcomes and service delivery staff participate in tracking and evaluating their work. LAYC has achieved national acclaim for its work in outcomes assessment and is constantly asked by local nonprofits

and many outside the region to provide technical assistance, especially around outcomes management.

- It has strengthened the organization through better financial systems and enhanced its board and its management team.

"We have transformed as an organization and we are so much stronger and better positioned for greater work. Ultimately it's about getting the best outcomes for young people. We are just doing better work now and we have better systems and the whole commitment to evaluation and learning. It's all

about investment in us that keeps us strong and keeps us moving forward," Kaplan said.

The performance management culture envisioned by Kaplan and her board and realized through the efforts of Castillo and his team has not only transformed LAYC and its work, but has become a model and inspiration for other nonprofits. LAYC has not only proved it is possible to create an effective and sustainable research and evaluation system, but that the system can help an organization better deliver programs and services that truly change lives.



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