Supporting Evidence-based Decision Making among Social Sector Child Welfare Agencies

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Today's session

- **Building agency capacity** for evidence-based decision making: Real-world examples from child welfare

- Chapin Hall: nonprofit research and policy center, focused on a mission of improving the well-being of children and youth, families, and their communities.

- Offer definitions of **evidence** and **evidence-based decision making** in the context of Continuous Quality Improvement

- Support from the Alliance for Strong Families and Communities

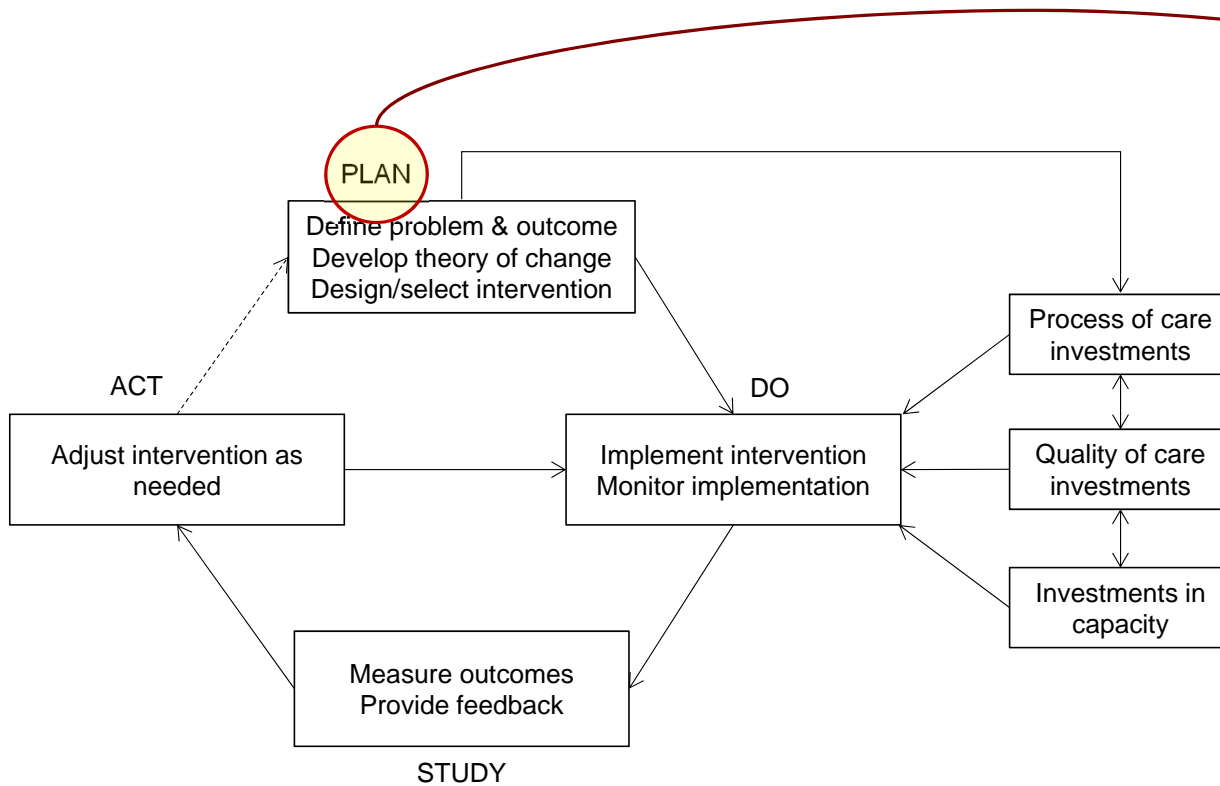Vision: A Healthy and Equitable Society

Alliance for Strong Families and Communities

is a strategic action network of thousands of committed social sector leaders driving to achieve our vision of a healthy and equitable society through the excellence, distinction, and influence of our network.

Population Health and Well-Being	Education Success
Economic Opportunity	Safety and Security

Our Network

Accelerate

Aggregate

Incubate

Evidence-based decision-making in a Continuous Quality Improvement context

Evidence-based decision making

PLAN

Define problem & outcome
Develop theory of change
Design/select intervention

ACT

Adjust intervention as needed

DO

Implement intervention
Monitor implementation

Process of care investments

Quality of care investments

Investments in capacity

Measure outcomes
Provide feedback

STUDY

I observe [**some outcome that I want to improve**].

I think it's because [**of this reason**].

So I plan to [**implement this intervention**],

which I think will result in [**an improved outcome**].

Evidence-based decision making

Evidence is information that is used to support an observation, claim, hypothesis, or decision. In other words, evidence provides an answer to the question: **How do you know?**

Evidence can be **quantitative** or **qualitative**.

Evidence must be **reliable**, **valid**, and **representative** (free of bias).

Evidence can be **found** in or **derived** from a number of places (e.g., administrative data archives, case record review, stakeholder feedback, social science literature).

Building capacity for evidence-based decision making

Capacity for evidence use: Organizational resources, processes, structures, and functions that facilitate and hold people accountable for evidence-based decisions and investments.

Performance measurement

What tools does an agency need to measure performance, identify opportunities for improvement, and track change over time?

Implementing theoretically sound interventions

What can an agency do to ensure that the services it provides are aligned with a strong theory of change?

Education and training

How can an agency build its staff's evidence-based decision making skills?

Performance Measurement

Necco Background

- Chapin Hall has been working closely with Necco—a private family owned child welfare company—since 2012.

- Founded in 1996.
- Operating in Ohio, Kentucky, West Virginia, and Georgia.
- Serves more than 2,000 children every year.

- Multiple services including foster care, independent living, residential, outpatient behavioral health, and in home services.

Necco's Commitment to Performance

- Necco has a deliberate problem solving culture to "measure what counts"

- Measure outcomes correctly
- Observe variation—over time, by jurisdiction, child characteristics
- Identify opportunities for improvement

- Evidence to define outcomes in need of improvement (*I observe that…*)

> **"Our work with Chapin Hall reflects our determination to change the face of child welfare through social entrepreneurship. We use insights from data to improve our services and find the best opportunities to maximize our social impact."**
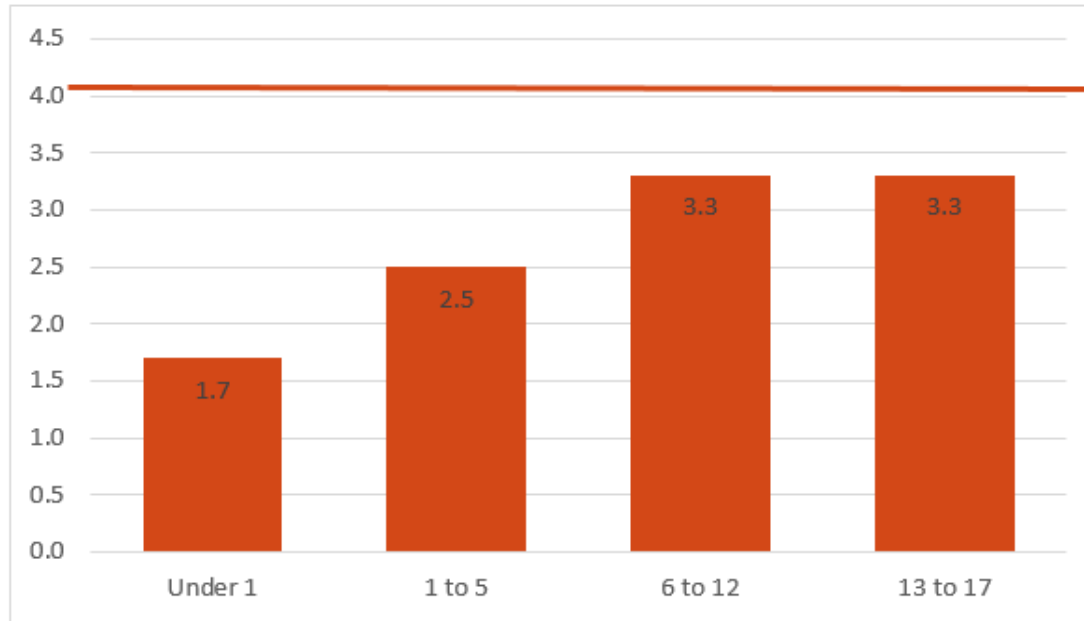>
> — Beau Necco, CEO

Scope of work

- Develop analytic "child spells" that summarize events between placement and exit, updated every 6 months
  - Events = admissions, moves, exits, etc.

- Identify core goals of each program → produce regular measures of outcomes for children and youth
  - Understand how effective they are with clients and overall organizational mission

- Priority was to use best practices in measurement—reliable, valid, and representative (i.e., uses the correct population/risk set/denominator)

Foster Care Performance Metrics

Metric	Numerator (N) and Denominator (D)
Improved functioning	Question: How effective is Necco at meeting the treatment plan goals for children placed in foster care? D: All youth who enter foster care, by managing office. N: Every child who stayed through their first treatment plan review whose treatment goals had been met.
Length of stay/time to permanency	Question: What is the likelihood that children served in the foster program will exit to permanency within 1 year? Within 5 years? D: All youth who enter foster care, by entry cohort and jurisdiction. N: Cumulative exits by exit type within 1 and 5 years
Placement stability	Question: Typically, how often do children placed in foster care disrupt? D: Number of entries, by managing office and age at entry. N: Number of moves during placement spell.
Reunification /permanency	Question: What are the exit outcomes for children placed in foster care? D: Number of entries by managing office. N: Number of exits by exit reason.

Example of Program Profile Report

Among children who entered foster care during the year, what was the average number of placement moves per 1,000 care days used? Does placement stability vary by child age at entry? (CFSR3)
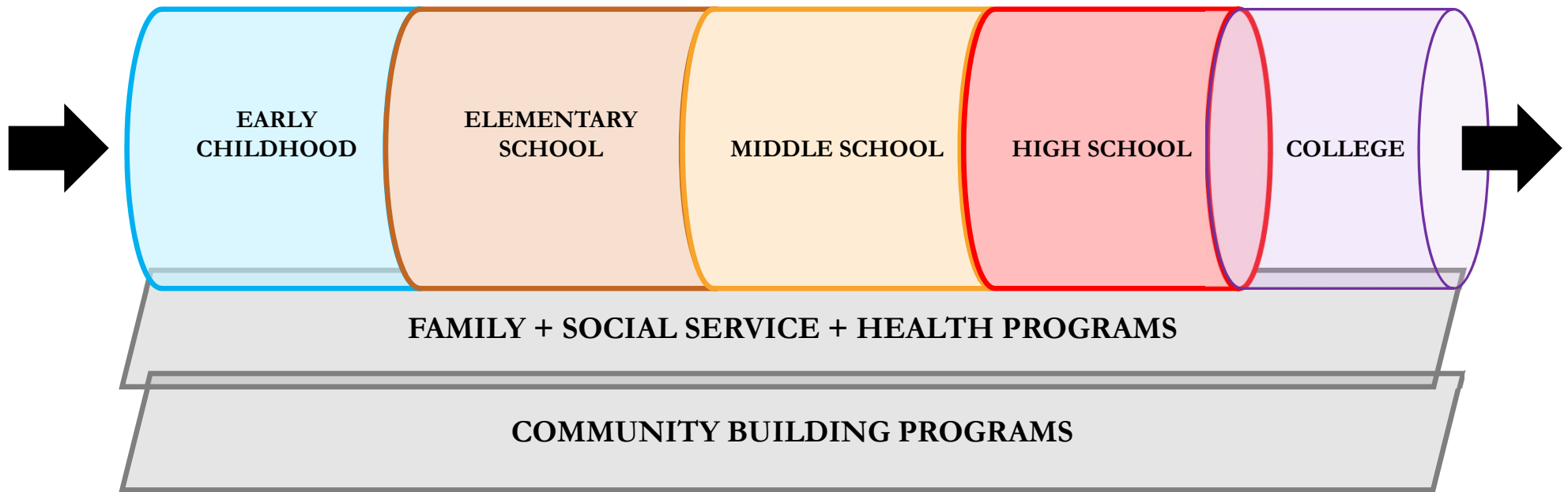

Figure 3 Movement Rate per 1000 days of care for clients entering from January-December 2016 by age at entry, observed through December 2016

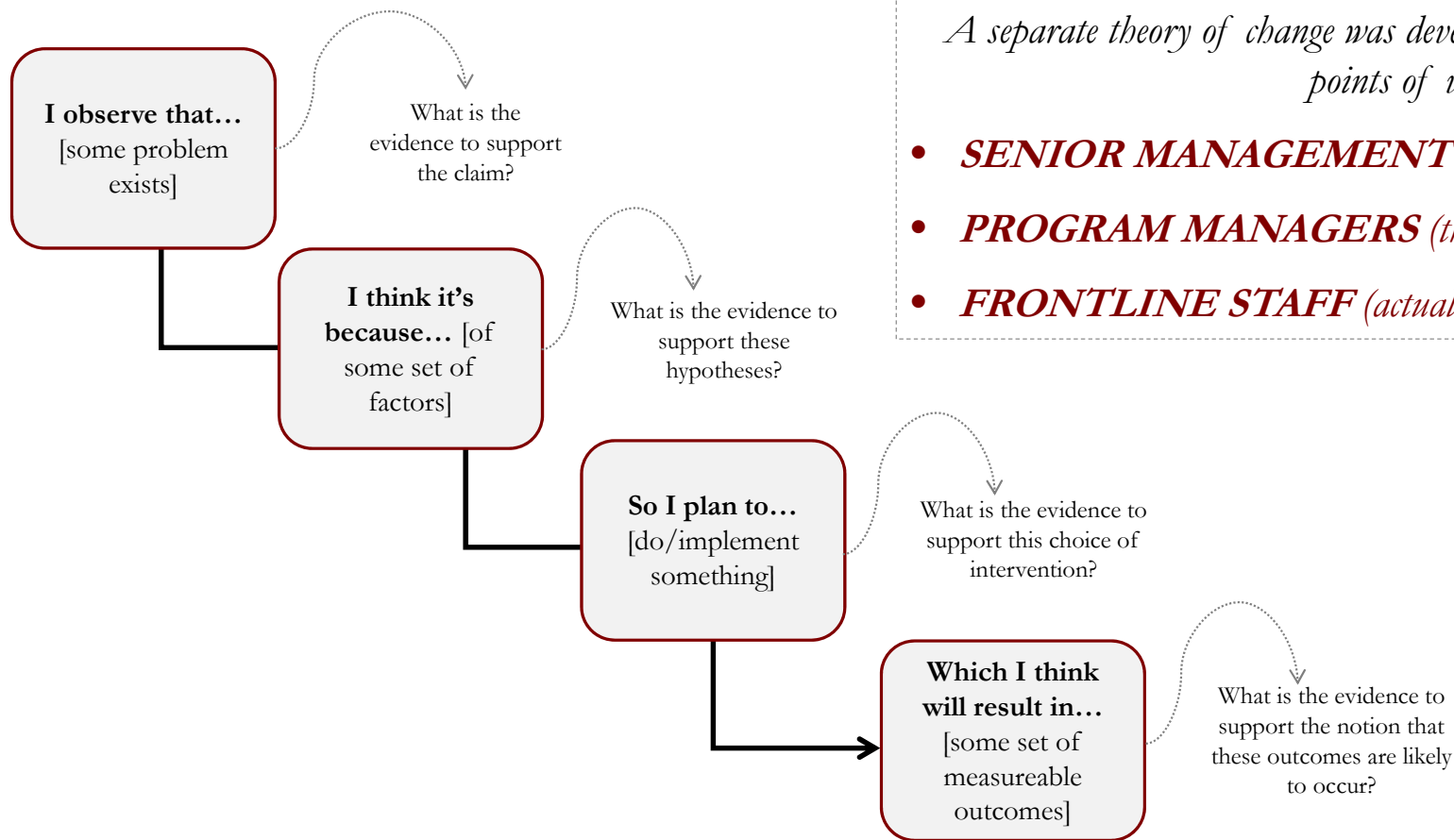# Opportunities for Evidence Use and Ongoing Performance Measurement

- **Acquiring evidence**: Update analytic files every 6 months
  - Update performance metrics tables and program profile reports
  - Chapin Hall shares full analytic event and spell files allowing Necco to conduct additional ad hoc analysis in Tableau

- **Processing evidence**: Making meaning of changes in child and youth outcomes over time
  - Impact of program changes
  - Variation in managing office performance

- **Applying evidence**: Use evidence to make decisions about improvement efforts
  - Informs where to target investments for training and services
  - Raises questions about what to do next—implications, what else do they want to know

Implementing theoretically sound interventions

Chapin Hall was asked to help "codify" HCZ's pipeline programs. A central question: What are the *essential elements* of these programs, the *active ingredients*?
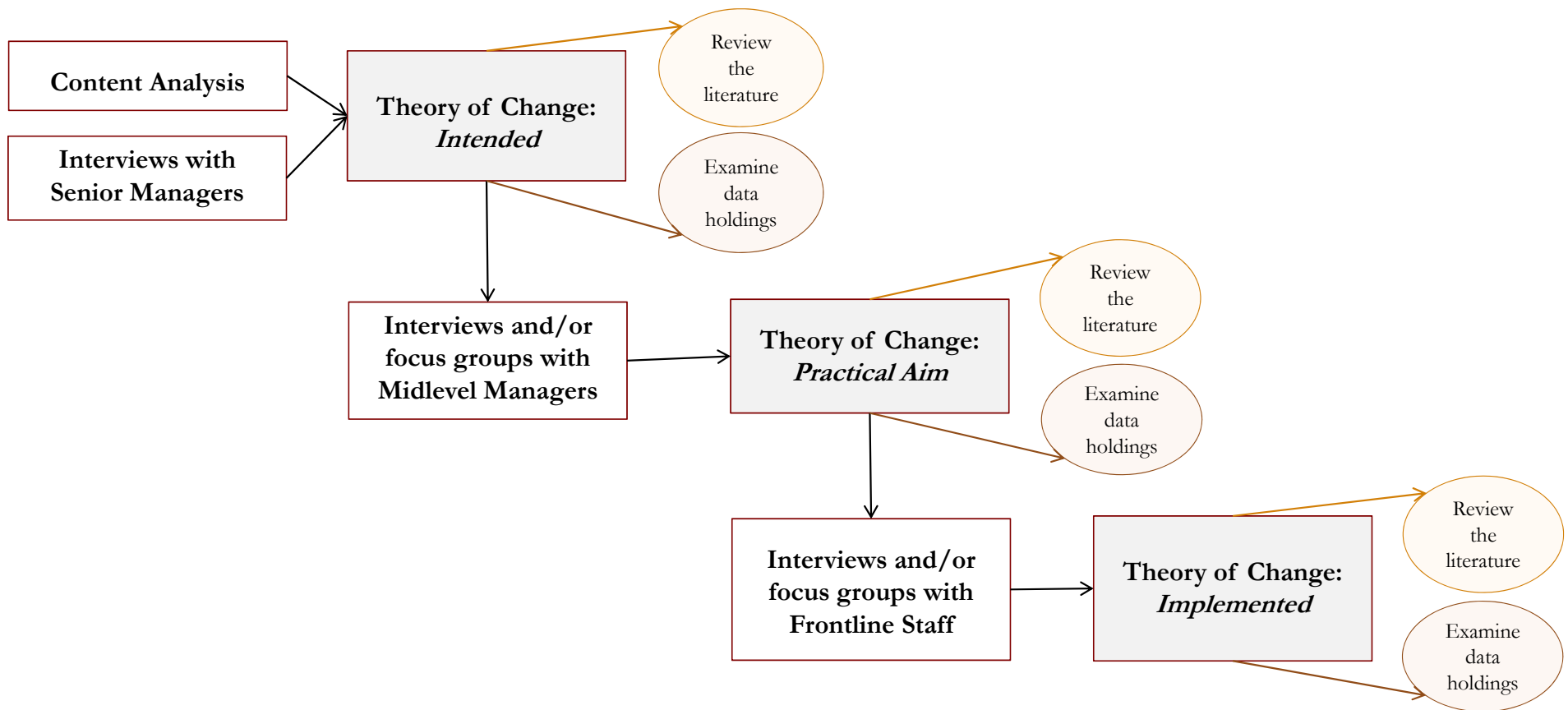
Establish the **theory of change** for each program under examination.
Support the theory of change with **evidence.**

I observe that… [some problem exists]

What is the evidence to support the claim?

I think it's because… [of some set of factors]

What is the evidence to support these hypotheses?

So I plan to… [do/implement something]

What is the evidence to support this choice of intervention?

Which I think will result in… [some set of measureable outcomes]

What is the evidence to support the notion that these outcomes are likely to occur?

A separate theory of change was developed to address three different points of view:
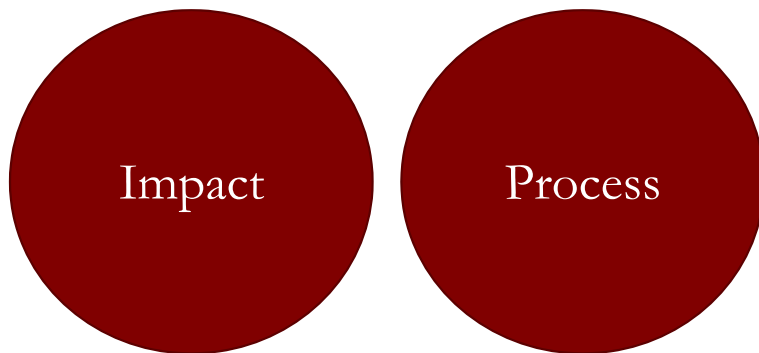
- **SENIOR MANAGEMENT** *(the intention of the program)*

- **PROGRAM MANAGERS** *(the practical aims of the program)*

- **FRONTLINE STAFF** *(actual implementation)*

An iterative analytic process leveraged a range of methods to understand the extent to which the various elements of each theory of change were supported by evidence and were being monitored by HCZ.

Content Analysis

Interviews with Senior Managers

Theory of Change: *Intended*

Review the literature

Examine data holdings

Interviews and/or focus groups with Midlevel Managers

Theory of Change: *Practical Aim*

Review the literature

Examine data holdings

Interviews and/or focus groups with Frontline Staff

Theory of Change: *Implemented*

Review the literature
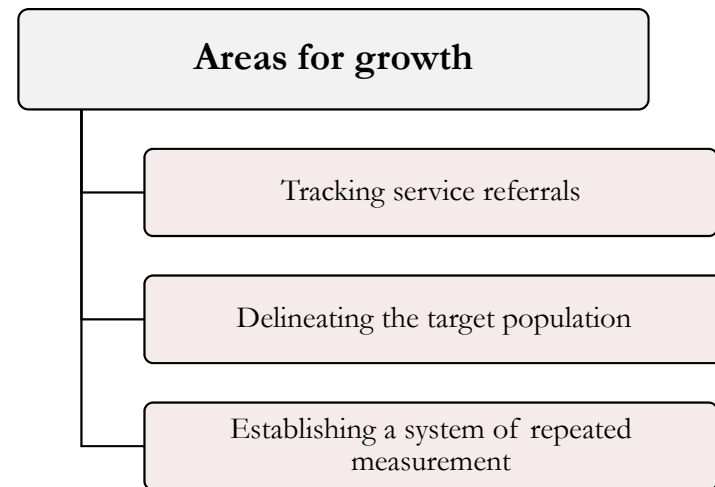
Examine data holdings

HCZ's laudable commitment to data-informed decision making is deeply ingrained in the organization. However, there remain opportunities to better understand the implementation and functioning of programs.

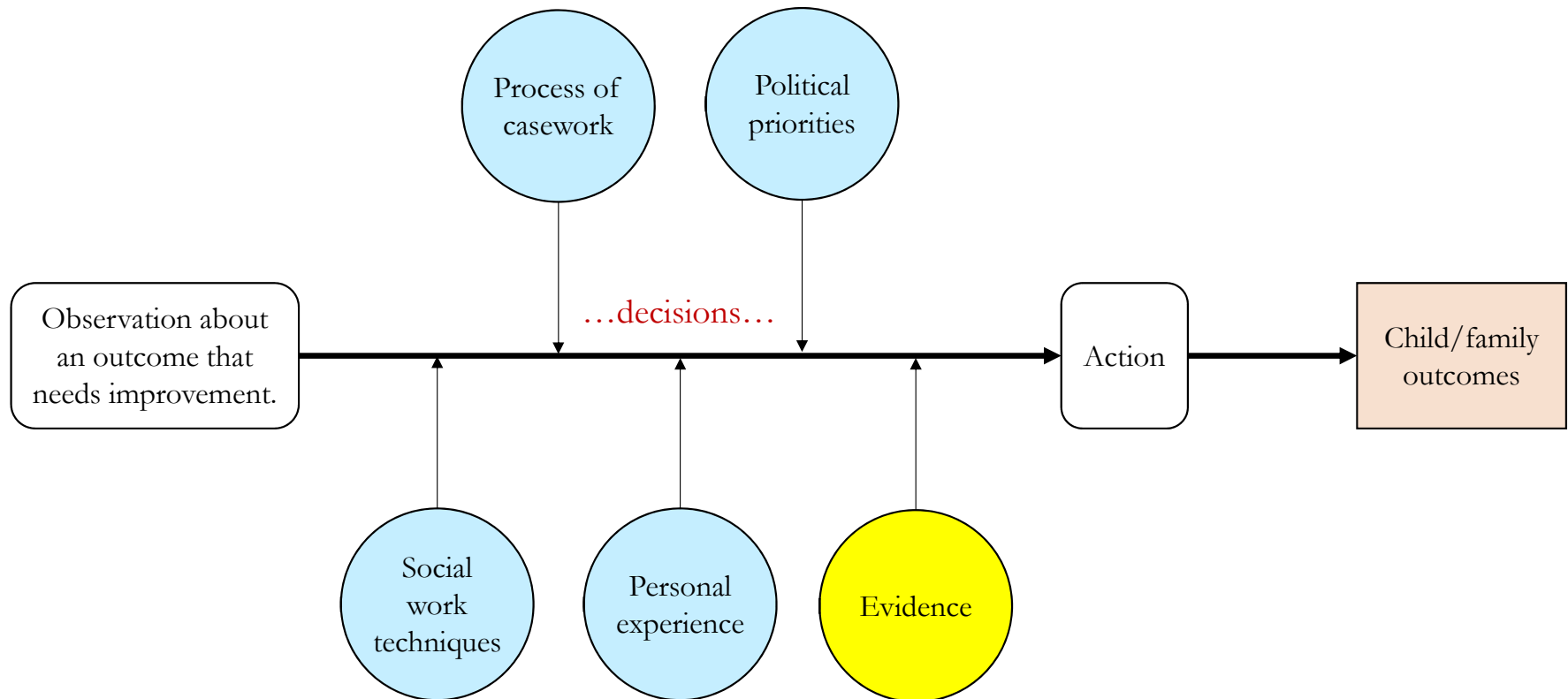Most program outcomes are consistently measured. There was much less consistency in measures of process outcomes.

Yet, there may be areas of data collection requiring more attention.

Impact

Process

Areas for growth

Tracking service referrals

Delineating the target population

Establishing a system of repeated measurement

Ultimately, ensuring that all elements of the theories of change are measured positions the pipeline programs to be evaluated.
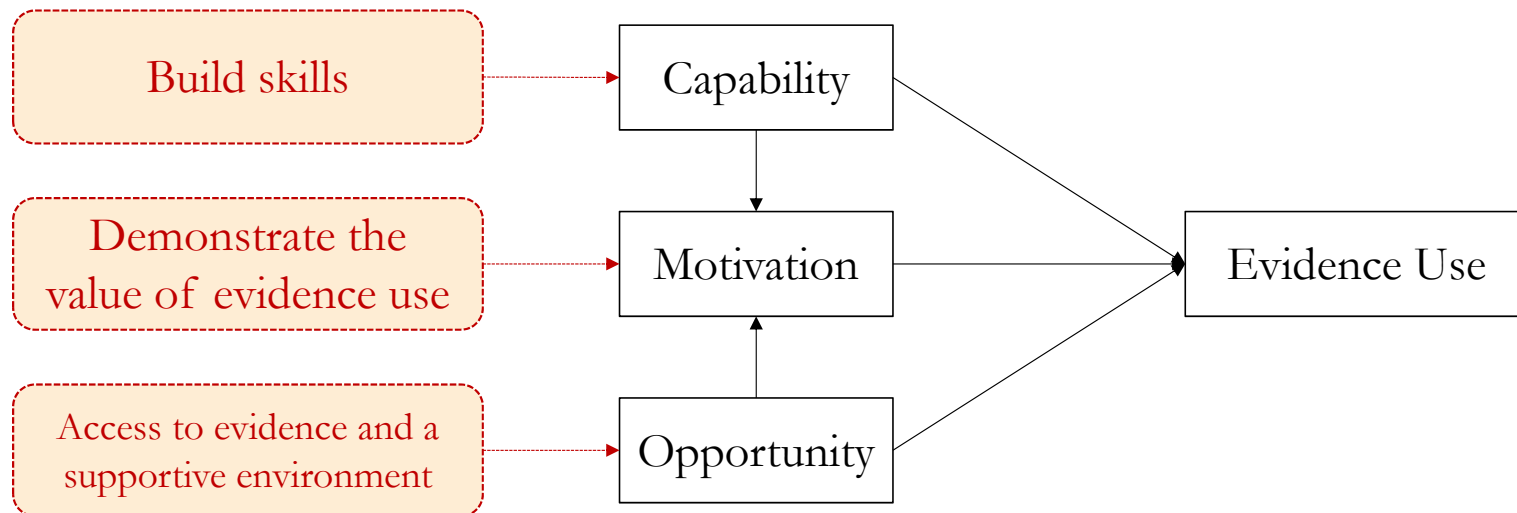
Education and training

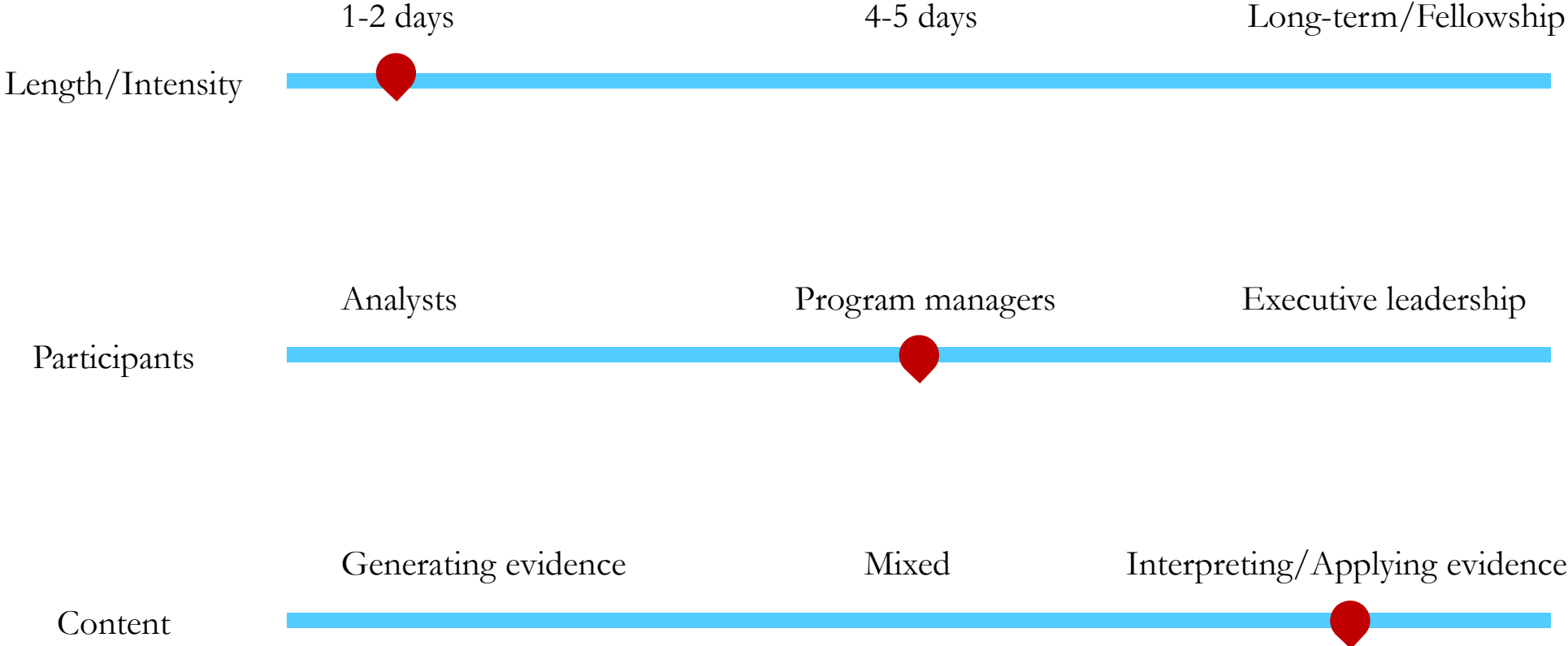Incorporating evidence into working knowledge

Improving evidence use is a behavioral challenge

Evidence use is a **behavior.** Education and training should support and encourage staff to do that behavior **well** and **at the right time**…

Michie, S., Van Stralen, M. M., & West, R. (2011). The behaviour change wheel: a new method for characterising and designing behaviour change interventions. *Implementation science*, *6*(1), 42.

Role-specific training

Length/Intensity

1-2 days   4-5 days   Long-term/Fellowship

Participants

Analysts   Program managers   Executive leadership

Content

Generating evidence   Mixed   Interpreting/Applying evidence

EDGE: Evidence Driven Goals and Excellence

- Child welfare agency leaders and managers
- Learn the techniques for asking and answering questions about system performance
- Apply those skills to a student-directed problem solving project

Classroom learning

- Lectures
- Hands-on assignments using agency-specific data
- Interactive exercises
- Homework assignments

Group projects

- Student-directed problem solving
- Use skills to defend a theory of change with evidence
- Coaching from instructors

Graduation

- Final presentations to agency leadership and colleagues
- Graduation ceremony

Months 1-3   Months 4-7   Month 8

EDGE: Evidence Driven Goals and Excellence

"Before, I definitely used experience… you know, you have this case or we've had this court experience, things like that, as sort of a directive for my thinking… But like I said in that "light bulb" moment, some of those things after we started digging down weren't as accurate as we thought they were. And so I definitely am motivated in the sense that I want to be able to use data or evidence **to show why I believe that something happened or to show that it isn't exactly happening how we thought it was."**

"Coming out of EDGE – **learning the proper way to fashion the question and learning the proper way to go about finding the answer**… I'm in a better position to say, "The way you're looking at [this measure] is incorrect because the individuals you're looking at should be excluded from or included in the population." **We often make an assumption that we would have captured everyone** who would have played a part in [the outcome we care about], and in EDGE we learned that we don't always do that. **It did help me better defend a course of action or say,** 'these are all the people we should be looking at.'"

For more information

Chapin Hall's Center for State Child Welfare Data: https://fcda.chapinhall.org

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Questions?