First 5 LA’s Revised Accountability and Learning Framework

Overview - What Revisions Have We Made?

- Included parameters for defining and measuring success
- Incorporated Countywide Augmentation Projects (Countywide Investments)
- Expanded our data dashboards and dissemination activities
- Revised Best Start evaluation plans based on feedback from the Research Advisory Committee
- Expanded our extant data development activities
- Added an annual accountability and learning report for our stakeholders
- Developed a preliminary feedback loop to share research and evaluation findings
- Organized our research and evaluation activities into four broad categories
- Created thematic clusters within the program evaluation category
- Better articulated the goals and functions of the Research and Evaluation Department

What is the Accountability and Learning Framework and what is its purpose?

The First 5 LA Accountability and Learning Framework describes how we will hold ourselves accountable to our stakeholders through a process of setting expectations, monitoring the performance of our investments, reporting on both progress and outcomes, and using data to improve our effectiveness and efficiency. The Framework describes how we will measure our success in achieving results, how we will structure the major components of our work (evaluations, data projects, and research), and how we will disseminate our findings and lessons learned. A critical foundation for the success of The Accountability and Learning framework is a focus on planning for results that are measureable, achievable, and meaningful.

Our current Accountability and Learning Framework

First 5 LA’s 2009-2015 Strategic Plan represents a comprehensive and far-reaching approach to achieving our goal of enhancing the lives of expectant parents, children
prenatal through five, and the families of those young children. In its first twelve years of working in L.A. County, First 5 LA has funded a wide array of direct services programs and has supported efforts to build the capacity of our partners. Our intent has been not only to develop, implement and improve grant making programs, but also to sustain the positive changes our grantees are making in the lives of the children and families they serve.

One major component of the 2009-2015 Strategic Plan focuses on **place-based strategies** that target investments in some of the most high-need communities in L.A. County (Best Start Communities) combined with **countywide strategies** that support and expand those investments beyond the Best Start communities. The approved 2009-2015 Strategic Plan therefore reflected the Commission’s decision to move to an integrated place-based and countywide funding approach to more intentionally focus on impacting the well-being of families and children by improving communities. Likewise, the accountability and learning framework for the 2009-2015 strategic plan needed to make a shift away from focusing on each programmatic initiative separately, an approach that had not enabled us to demonstrate the collective impact of our investments, to an approach that placed an emphasis on place-based evaluation and understanding how we are improving outcomes countywide. The major Accountability and Learning Framework activities included in the current framework include: a) a longitudinal study; b) place-based and strategic evaluations; c) research projects; d) dissemination activities; e) a research advisory committee (RAC); and f) the learning and improvement process.

### Why we are revising the Accountability and Learning Framework

The impetus to revise and update the current Accountability and Learning framework is based on 3 important considerations:

**Countywide Augmentation Projects**

During the February 10th board meeting in 2010, the Commissioners approved revising the 2009-2015 Strategic Plan’s countywide activities to include direct services, public education and policy efforts. These new projects are not included in the current Accountability and Learning Framework.

**Research and Advisory Committee Recommendations**

Research and Evaluation staff has met with the Research Advisory Committee on two occasions in 2011. The primary focus of both meetings was obtaining feedback on our plans for evaluating the Best Start communities’ investment. Based on advice from the committee we are making a number of methodological revisions to existing evaluation plans, scaling back primary data collection efforts within the Best Start communities and looking to use more extant data in our overall evaluation approach. This important shift will allow us to implement more cost effective evaluations within our framework and also to build and expand upon available administrative and secondary data sources and to forge
data sharing relationships to increase the breadth of available data and improve data quality. In addition, reflective of advice from the Research Advisory Committee and our desire to be transparent and accountable, we are implementing a policy which will require that all First 5 investments are developed to include clearly defined outcomes and measurable outcome targets. These outcomes and targets will be approved by the Board of Commissioners.

Harvey M. Rose & Associates Audit Findings
The October 2011 findings from the Harvey M. Rose & Associates audit gave rise to a number of important recommendations for the Research and Evaluation department which require a revision to the Accountability and Learning framework. We have developed a policy to ensure that a standardized approach exists for the development and approval of evaluation projects, to include the mechanism by which Commissioners may provide feedback on our evaluation plans prior to formal board approval. Within the policy, every evaluation project proposal will include the purpose, expected learning outcomes, list of specific activities, and timelines for each activity or phase of the project, prior to approval. In addition we are introducing an Annual Accountability and Learning Report that will give stakeholders a comprehensive picture of our yearly accomplishments. We are also expanding our data dashboards and data systems integration efforts.

The Revised Accountability and Learning Framework
First 5 LA’s approach to Accountability and Learning must be thorough, far-reaching and comprehensive. We must have the data and analytical tools in place to know not only what works, but why it works and how it can be improved upon. To achieve this, the Research and Evaluation department has a number of important and ongoing goals, including the development of data sources, building the evaluation capacity of our colleagues and partners, and promoting and highlighting the work of the Commission. Central to these goals are the following working objectives:

- **Evaluate**: design and conduct appropriately rigorous evaluations of all First 5 LA programs, investments and strategies.
- **Share**: provide high quality and timely findings to commissioners, grantees, staff and external audiences. Promote the use of findings for program planning and improvement, policy development and acquisition of content knowledge.
- **Build Capacity**: build the capacity of First 5 LA staff, commissioners, grantees, and research partners to understand, generate, and effectively use data.
- **Develop Data**: support and improve upon existing data infrastructures and data sources. Promote data sharing, and development of data sharing policies for population-based and extant data relevant to the 0-5 population.
- **Develop Expertise**: conduct original research on commission relevant issues and regularly consult with experts in the field. Cultivate our own expertise on research
findings and outcomes relevant to First 5 LA investments and the 0-5 population in L.A. County.

Defining Success
A critical part of being transparent and holding ourselves accountable is defining success. The initial task is to develop a process for defining success at all levels of our work. The following parameters will guide this process:

- Every investment that is approved by the Commission will include outcomes and outcome targets
- Each grantee and contractor will be held accountable to an approved set of measurable performance metrics that are aligned with the outcomes and outcome targets
- The Commission will hold itself accountable to the goals set out in the FY 2009-2015 Strategic Plan
- The Research and Evaluation Department will:
  - Conduct evaluations that help to identify best practices and lessons learned
  - Develop systems to collect data to determine progress toward goals
  - Share our progress by utilizing dissemination tools such as our dashboards and Annual Accountability and Learning report

The structure of our work
This Revised Accountability and Learning Framework reflects our approach to evaluating the effectiveness of First 5 LA’s work. It outlines the major types of activities we will engage in over the course of the Strategic Plan and the role of the Research and Evaluation Department in implementing those activities. Our goal is to provide the most thorough, useful and relevant information to our many internal and external stakeholders.

Our work is structured around the following four broad categories:

I. Program evaluations
II. Data and research projects
III. Dissemination of findings
IV. Learning and improvement
• Conduct individual evaluations of every First 5 LA Program
• Identify and report on common research questions and common outcomes within thematic clusters of programs
• Provide evaluation technical assistance to grantees

• Integrate administrative and program data systems
• Establish data partnerships and collaborations
• Improve access to extant data sources

• Create and maintain data dashboards
• Share findings and reports on the First 5 LA website and the SCALAR data repository
• Create Research Briefs and Annual Evaluation Reports

• Incorporate feedback from Research Advisory Committees
• Hold regular briefings with Commissioners, grantees, contractors and partners
  • Establish Brown Bag Series
I. Program Evaluations

In order to give the Commission up-to-date information on all of First 5 LA’s projects, the Research and Evaluation department will conduct individual evaluations of each First 5 LA program. These evaluations will be designed in cooperation with staff from other departments to determine the focus and appropriate depth of the evaluation. We will also collaborate with staff in other departments to determine the appropriate timing for intermediate reports to inform the Commission of each program’s on-going progress.

To facilitate the sharing of overall themes to both the Commission and public, the Research and Evaluation department has clustered the portfolio of First 5 LA investments into eight thematic clusters:

- Community Evaluations
- Perinatal Support
- Parenting Support and Child Safety
- Physical and Mental Health
- School Readiness
- Workforce Development
- Countywide Systems Improvement

Each individual program within a cluster will have its own evaluation. In addition, the individual program evaluations included in a cluster will look at similar outcomes and use similar methodologies, where possible, so that the findings from each program can be combined into overall statements about First 5 LA’s progress in each thematic cluster. Through this method, staff can discover synergies between programs and seek to address overarching research questions.

II. Data and Research Projects

The goals and objectives described within the Revised Accountability and Learning Framework will require an improvement in our ability to access and develop data relating to our programs and more broadly, to children and families in L.A. County. To accomplish this we will work within First 5 LA to integrate data systems currently used by First 5 LA staff, improve partnerships and collaborations with research and data partners, and improve access to extant data sources.

Data Systems Integration

First 5 LA is currently conducting a series of internal changes that will improve the data systems used for contracts and grants management, financial management, program planning and development, and recording program data collected by grantees. The findings from the recent technology assessment conducted by Confluence are being utilized to develop a comprehensive information and technology plan which will address the use of
administrative data systems, program data systems, our web presence and social marketing, and the organizational environment. The Research and Evaluation Department is working in partnership with the Information Technology Department to implement the technology plan. Some of the key goals of the data integration efforts include improving integration among legacy data systems, such as GIFTS (our grants management software), Blackbaud (our accounting software) and ECM (our electronic content management software) and improvements to existing practices and data collection and reporting systems.

**Data Partnerships with Funders**

The Research and Evaluation department is engaged in an inter-agency partnership with research and technology experts who support children and families. This partnership will develop a rapid response team to identify topical questions regarding early childhood research and to identify opportunities to work together to address research needs, to decrease duplication of research investments and to allow for leveraging of resources. The partnership will also develop a repository to house data related to the 0-5 population which will serve as a unified source of information for research and planning in L.A. County.

In addition, the Connecting Risk and Perinatal Service Systems being developed through a separate project will create data relationships through the promotion of policies that allow for data sharing among local agencies such as the Los Angeles County Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS), the Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD), and women’s shelters that encounter at-risk women and children. Through the connection of this data, agencies working with at-risk populations will have more complete information to address the needs of their clients and have the ability to refer and track other agencies’ contacts with families.

**Administrative and Population Data**

The Research and Evaluation department has a long history of developing relationships for the purpose of data development. Our current work with the Los Angeles County Department of Public Health (DPH) for the continual development of the Los Angeles County Health Survey (LACHS) and Los Angeles Mother and Baby Survey (LAMBS) are key examples of our efforts to create population-based measures that will lead to an enhanced understanding of behavior and practices of parents and children within L.A. County. We continue to cultivate these existing partnerships and will disseminate relevant data and project findings through research briefs, presentations, and research colloquiums. We also continue to foster our data partnership with PHFE-WIC to collect and disseminate administrative and survey-based data collected through the local partnership of WIC agencies. In partnership with the Advancement Project’s Healthy City data platform we continue to develop increased accessibility of data and information. We will also devote time and effort to cultivating relationships with other local, county and state organizations to tap into further extant data sources that can be used in our evaluation efforts. We hope that by forging additional data sharing agreements we can leverage hospital, education and
other 0-5 related data we don’t currently have access to and where possible, work with agencies to build capacity to improve and increase the robustness of data sources.

### III. Dissemination

A major goal of the Research and Evaluation department is the timely dissemination of findings to community partners, First 5 LA staff, Commissioners and the general public. The department employs a variety of mechanisms to better reach a wide audience including: a data dashboard, the First 5 LA website, research briefs, the State Annual Report and participation on the First 5 Southern California Alliance for Learning and Results.

#### Data Dashboard

The data dashboard offers a simple view of the data from First 5 LA investments and tracks progress toward making change in our priority measures. The data dashboard will include the amount of funding distributed by First 5 LA, the number of children served directly, and the number of grantees receiving funding. This data will be generated in part from the State Annual Report that is compiled by the Research & Evaluation department.

The dashboard will also promote internal learning and improvement by monitoring changes in key indicators at the county level. These data will be provided through First 5 LA research partnerships with the Los Angeles County Healthy Survey, the Los Angeles Mommy and Baby Survey and the PHFE-WIC Data Mining Project.

#### Website

The Research and Evaluation section of the First 5 LA website entitled *Community Change* provides real-time updates on both current and past program evaluations and our research partnerships through which we enrich the early childhood body of knowledge. There are three main pages in the Research section of the website: *Change in our Best Start Communities, Program Evaluation* and *Research Partners*. Within each of those pages further detail about individual project evaluations, partnerships and studies are available including relevant documents, contractor information and links to other sections of the First 5 LA website with related information. The website will also serve as a repository for our many evaluation findings, reports and presentations.

#### Research Briefs

The Research and Evaluation department develops quarterly research briefs detailing findings around salient childhood issues. The briefs are developed in partnership with the First 5 LA Public Affairs department to coincide when possible with public education campaigns and are distributed via the First 5 LA website and to our grantees and stakeholders via the Monday Morning Report.
State Annual Report
In accordance with First 5 State Commission requirements, First 5 LA produces an Annual Evaluation Report. Each year staff prepares two versions of the Annual Report: 1) a report to the State Commission that provides fiscal and programmatic information in response to a Commission-designated template, and 2) a “user-friendly” report that is distributed to all First 5 LA stakeholders and includes the Commission’s annual financial report, as well as significant activities and accomplishments for the year. The Research and Evaluation Department compiles the data required for the State Annual Report.

First 5 Southern California Alliance for Learning and Results (SCALAR)
The Southern California Association for Learning and Results is a regional association of the Southern California First 5 county commissions. The goal of the Association is to find ways to combine data and coordinate activities to increase the effectiveness of the participating First 5 Commissions, particularly around research and messaging.

First 5 LA currently houses and administers the SCALAR repository of all the funded projects and evaluations conducted by its members. SCALAR will use the information contained in the repository to create regional briefs.

IV. Learning and Improvement
In addition to holding First 5 LA and our grantees accountable for developing, implementing and monitoring effective programs, the First 5 LA Research and Evaluation department is committed to supporting continuous learning and improvement both within First 5 LA and externally. The Research and Evaluation department will facilitate this learning and improvement, and through this process seeks to be responsive, engaged, and transparent so that First 5 LA research and evaluation products are relevant to the needs of First 5 LA staff and partners, and are actively disseminated in a non-technical manner to those who may be interested in our findings. Various strategies and vehicles will be used to promote learning and improvement.

InteRACt
The Research and Evaluation department will convene an Internal Research Advisory Committee (InteRACt), comprised of staff from each of the First 5 LA departments. The InteRACt’s objectives will include 1) reporting on research being conducted at First 5 LA, and 2) discussing implications of research and evaluation findings and how to modify processes and plans taking into account these implications. As an interdepartmental team, the InteRACt will engage in discussions about how to make our evaluation findings more useful and applicable to the organization’s work and mission.

Research Advisory Committee (RAC)
The Research Advisory Committee is a group of experts who provide First 5 LA Research and Evaluation staff with technical input, guidance, and advice on our various projects. By utilizing both locally and nationally recognized early childhood experts, the RAC provides
essential technical knowledge to our work as well as increases the visibility and prominence of First 5 LA’s research and evaluation efforts. The RAC meets between one and three times per year for day-long meetings in Los Angeles, with the possibility of additional topical workgroup conference calls. First 5 LA’s Research and Evaluation staff sets the meeting agenda and dates on an annual basis. Thus far, the RAC has provided technical input and guidance in two meetings in 2011. Their input has been instrumental in conceptualizing several of our evaluation projects and considering different methods and/or data sources.

**Briefings with Commissioners**
The Learning and Improvement Team will facilitate ongoing briefings with First 5 LA Commissioners on both findings from our evaluations, past and present, and on other issues of relevance in the various topics in which we are engaged. The Research and Evaluation department understands that it is critically important to keep Commissioners up to date and informed about the work of First 5 LA as well as areas of interest within the child development, early education, and other relevant fields. To that end, we will work with Commissioners to determine a structure and process whereby regular, ongoing briefings can be instituted.

**Briefings with grantees, contractors, partners**
Equally important to briefings with Commissioners are briefings with other primary users and stakeholders for our evaluations. The Research and Evaluation department will commence regular and ongoing briefings with grantees, contractors, and partners when appropriate in order to share findings from our evaluations and to provide actionable recommendations for work moving forward.

**Brown Bag Series**
As a resource to the entire organization, the Research and Evaluation department has designed and conducted targeted trainings to staff in other departments in order to build their capacity and enable them to improve their own research practice. Training topics include but are not limited to:

- How can program officers find research on topics or programs that are relevant to and/or similar to the ones they are managing?
- How can program officers critically consume and then disseminate this research to grantees?
- What technical assistance is needed for building program logic models?
- How can program officers translate research findings into practice?

**Annual Accountability and Learning Report**
In an effort to be informative and transparent, we will compile an annual Accountability and Learning Report. The audience for this report will be the First 5 LA Commission and staff, grantees, and external stakeholders. Its primary purpose will be to report on Research and Evaluation activities for the year and summarize our key findings from all of
our evaluations in an easy to access format. This report will be more comprehensive and in-depth compared to the State Annual Report required by the First 5 State Commission. As this is a new dissemination product we will work with Commissioners to determine the most appropriate structure and layout for this annual report.