



Episode 11: SAA and SAC Partnership in Strategic Planning with Mike Fargen and Kellie Rabenhorst

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- Intro:** Welcome to the NCJA podcast. This podcast series explores promising practices, provides guidance on strategic planning and discusses how the Byrne Justice Assistance Grant program or Byrne JAG, contributes to improving justice systems across the country. We hope you enjoy it.
- Matt Wade:** Greetings and thanks for listening. I'm Matt Wade, a program manager for data and evaluation here at NCJA on the Byrne JAG training and technical assistance team. Today, I'm pleased to be joined by Mike Fargen, data analyst with NCJA's OVC VOCA center and Kellie Rabenhorst, a senior program manager with the OVC VOCA center. Both Mike and Kellie have recently joined NCJA from The Great State of Nebraska, where Mike was the statistical analysis center director and Kellie was the federal grants and program director at the Nebraska crime commission, the state administering agency. So both have a [inaudible 00:01:08] experience to share from different perspectives. And we're going to try to pick their brains today about the importance of data utilization, inter-relationship to Byrne JAG, strategic planning. So with that said, let's jump right into discussion starting with Mike Fargen. Mike, can you please tell me a little bit more about your role at NCJA, as well as your previous experience?
- Mike Fargen:** Sure. Yeah. Well first, thanks for having us today. I've been looking forward to our conversation. So to begin, I'm the data analyst for the OVC VOCA center. You might be asking yourself what does the OVC VOCA center do? We support VOCA administrators, both compensation and assistance in managing and administering their VOCA funding to promote justice and healing for all victims of crime. Along with the director and two senior program managers, four of us provide technical support to administrators by offering opportunities for expert consultation, peer to peer collaboration, problem solving training and of course, innovation. The OVC VOCA center strives to build a strong administrator-led support system, broaden victim services to historically under-served communities and advance promising policies, practices and programs. So you're probably wondering, what's my part? Well, I help gather the data and promote data driven and evidence-based policies and practices for inclusion and outreach and training.
- Mike Fargen:** I then get to analyze and summarize data and create visualizations of inter-related data sets to communicate findings. The work I do involves assisting and planning, developing and assessing victim service initiatives, crime victim



compensation initiatives and conducting analysis for the SAAs and other entities. Prior to coming on board with the OVC VOCA center, I was the statistical analysis center director, otherwise known as the SAC, at the Nebraska Crime Commission. I also oversaw the Nebraska Criminal Justice Information System, otherwise known as NCJIS, as the NCJIS project manager. So I got to oversee both transactional data integration projects and applied data integration projects. I like to point out the difference between the two, so a simple way of thinking about it is transactional data integration is similar to moving a piano and apply data integration is when you get to actually play the piano.

Matt Wade: That's an interesting analogy. Can you tell me more about what the SAC, both the position and the office does and what the relationship between SAAs and SACs looks like?

Mike Fargen: Yeah. Good question. So each state, except for Texas has a SAC. And as the SAC director, my mission was to produce unbiased non-partisan statistics to aid our criminal justice policy decision makers in the state, along with increasing access to public statistics. So I was lucky to work at an agency, had the SAC and the SAA co-located. This allowed us to partner with [SEMMES 00:04:05] internally. Now I would encourage every SAA to get to know their SAC because the SAC is familiar with multiple data sources nationally and probably at the state and local level, which are critical to the strategic planning process. And I want to remind you that every SACs job, there's a focus on increasing data capacity and access. So a partnership will be very useful to both parties.

Matt Wade: Great. Can you say more about how the relationship between the SAA and the SAC can improve the strategic planning process for both the statewide plan in general and for Byrne JAG funding specifically?

Mike Fargen: Sure. In Nebraska's SAC was really becoming a strong partner in the strategic planning process. I was fortunate to also oversee the uniform crime reporting program or UCR. And with that data, the goal would be to use actual data submitted to the UCR program from local law enforcement agencies in the state to better identify and validate the necessity of funding with ultimately the goal being more targeted with the funding.

Matt Wade: Great. And that makes sense to me. Why is data so important when establishing priorities for Byrne JAGs spending?

Mike Fargen: We use the data to measure, and I like to remind people that we measure so that we can improve. In fact, it's really hard to know if you're improving, if you're not collecting or analyzing relevant data. Quite simply, I'd like to think

that everyone's underlying mission is to measure and improve the most important elements of criminal justice system and we need data to do it. Whether it's law enforcement, the court's prevention, community supervision, quantifying the use of programs and their effectiveness is undeniably important.

Matt Wade: Absolutely. So using data is critical, but what are some of the challenges to accessing, interpreting and using data? And what are some potential solutions to these obstacles?

Mike Fargen: Yeah, Matt, that's a really good question. Kind of three-parters so regarding accessing, I'd say it depends on if the reporting party is mandated to report. If that's the case, it becomes an issue of accountability, right? If it isn't mandated and one is looking for data to access, then drafting the data agreement with data provider is key. Regardless of whether it was mandated or not or if the data is transactional or applied data integration as I said before. A data agreement is ideal so both parties know their roles and responsibilities and have a record of how the data's going to be used. You kind of asked about interpreting the data. A good data recipient works with the data provider to understand all the data considerations within the dataset. One of the reasons why some data providers tighten up access is because they've been burned with bad analysis before.

Mike Fargen: Bad measurement practices allow people to behave in opportunistic ways. And no data provider wants to see their data used to misinform others. That's why it's an obligation for data analysts to provide perspective and note all data considerations of what's being reported or displayed regarding using the data. I think it's very important to build a reporting platform with your audience in mind. Right? I do think the days of every agency producing a hundred page report is going the way of the fax machine and more and more reporting parties have begun to deliver interactive point and click dashboards. So today's data audiences want to filter data by specific elements to answer questions or quite simply debunk misinformation and they increasingly expect data to be presented in [inaudible 00:07:37] to understand visual format.

Matt Wade: In fact, you actually oversaw the creation of an online criminal justice data dashboard with visualization functions in Nebraska, didn't you? Can you tell us about that?

Mike Fargen: Yeah, so we partnered with the administrative office of the courts, to utilize a data extract that we used for a sentencing dashboard. The dashboard was then disseminated quarterly, to all the criminal justice partners throughout all branches of state government. Quite simply, the users could point and click by jurisdiction or crime category in demographics and they could examine prison,

probation and jail sentencing at the statute level. The nice thing about it really was that everybody had access to the same figures.

Matt Wade: That's awesome. And it sounds like a great tool. As you know, I'm a big believer in data visualization and I'll talk about that briefly in a bit. But first I want to bring Kellie Rabenhorst into the conversation. As I mentioned, Kellie was formally the SAA's role in Nebraska and is now senior program manager with the OVC VOCA center into JAG. Kellie, can you say a little about your current role and then tell us how you use data as a Nebraska SAA overseeing the strategic planning process?

Kellie Rabenhor...: Sure. Thanks Matt. I'm the senior program manager for VOCA assistance here at the OVC VOCA center. So we provide training and technical assistance to VOCA... assistance and compensation administrators and staff. So prior to joining NCJA in May 2021, I was the director of the federal grants and programs at the Nebraska crime commission. In that position, I oversaw all federal grants received by our agency from the U.S. Department of Justice to include Byrne JAG. So right as the pandemic was starting, we were in the midst of developing our new strategic plan. Data played a significant role in that process and was valuable in validating anecdotally what we were hearing from the criminal justice build across the state. We utilized data from surveys to inform the plan as well as data that was captured and made available through the criminal justice data dashboard that Mike just discussed.

Kellie Rabenhor...: All this data together really helped us understand what the funding priorities should be and what we should be addressing in the first few years of the plan and then what could we address in year four or five, for example. So a few months before I left the crime commission, we went through a grant review process and the research analyst from Mike's division participated in our grant review. It was amazing. He provided such insight into what applicants put in their application versus what the data was showing. So it certainly helped make better informed decisions and improve the feedback we were able to provide to applicants in that regard.

Matt Wade: Great. And Mike mentioned that close working relationships between the SAC and the SAA when it comes to strategic planning. Can you talk a little bit about how that worked because you really need both perspectives, right?

Kellie Rabenhor...: Yeah, absolutely. You do, having both perspectives is valuable. So the SAA has their thumb on the pulse of the criminal justice field in their state, maybe even nationally and they know what funding resources are available and they allowable uses. The SAC, they know the data. They know what types of data is available, what the limitations of the data are, what the data means and can paint the overall picture, which may or may not validate what is being heard in



the field by the SAA. But we know that even if a need that the field is saying exists isn't validated by the data, that doesn't mean it is not a need, it could just be a limitation in the data. So in the strategic planning process, it really takes both the SAA and the SAC to provide as transparent a picture as possible. And along with the team, figure out the best path forward.

Kellie Rabenhor...: I like to think of it like going to the doctor, something I'm sure we all have experience with. The doctor listens to you describe your symptoms and they may do a physical exam to gather more information. And often they order some type of lab or diagnostic testing that is then read by another specialist, such as a radiologist. The doctor, they then take all that information that they gathered to come up with the best diagnosis based on that information and their expertise as a medical professional. So what the SAC and the SAA do for strategic planning and the criminal justice field is very similar.

Matt Wade: Great. And it sounds like that partnership can be really useful. We know that using data and strategic planning should be a circle from setting priorities to funding programs, to using program evaluation and new data in the next round of planning. Can you talk about how as an SAA, you used data in this way and whether there were any challenges to that at any point in the process?

Kellie Rabenhor...: Yeah, for sure. There were definitely challenges for us in using data. When I started with the crime commission, it was about a year and a half before I even learned what the SAC was and that was at a national meeting. So when I got back to the office, and learned that the SAC was in our agency and the person actually sat in the cubicle next to me. So things were operated in silos. So when Mike and I both became division directors, we knew it was important to remove those silos. We began collaborating with each other on projects and trying to have a basic understanding of what each side was doing. I think we were just on the cusp of using data more to inform the work done as a SAA. There are multitude of ways that data from the SAC could be utilized.

Kellie Rabenhor...: One example is if you're funding an initiative to reduce gun violence, using the data from the SAC and the data reported by the program would help evaluate the efficacy of the initiative. There are some challenges that we were able to identify in our state. One was that we have heard from across the criminal justice field, that mental health is the number one need. And anecdotally, we know that law enforcement often responds to calls that are due to mental health or substance use, but that doesn't get reported or tracked because no crime occurred. So we know it is an issue. We know it taxes the law enforcement resources. And how do we prove that? And how do we show if funded that the interventions and initiative are working? So we were having that discussion internally. How can we build that information into the state



criminal justice system to get aggregate data of law enforcement response to mental health and substance use.

Matt Wade: Those issues are very similar to what we hear from other SAAs. So from your experience, do you have any advice or lessons learned about using data and strategic planning that you'd like to share with our audience?

Kellie Rabenhor...: Yeah. If you don't know who your SAC is, get to know them, they're significant resource to the SAA. I learned a lot about data through my conversations with Mike and his team. I may not have always understood the words they were saying, but it really helped me see the importance of data throughout the planning and programming of our grant funds. There is a lot of data that the SAA can access themselves to using planning. But of course, if you're able to partner with the SAC, it's a big help.

Matt Wade: Thanks, Kellie and Mike, it's great to hear your different and complimentary perspectives on using data and strategic planning and beyond. Do you guys have anything else you'd like to add?

Mike Fargen: Hey, Matt, I don't have anything to add, but if you wouldn't mind, I'd like to hear from you about the data visualization project you had mentioned to me earlier.

Matt Wade: Absolutely. Being able to view one's own data through a tool like Power BI, which is the Microsoft data visualization and analysis we are using in the PMT pilot project, allow state administrators to quickly visualize important trends regarding their performance. And that project, NCJA is partnered with RedMane Technology and four states, Arizona, Maryland, Montana, and Tennessee, to visualize Byrne JAG performance management tool or PMT data. Using this PMT data from over three grant years, we have created four dashboards on JAGs spending, trainings delivered on key criminal justice topics, such as use of force and race and ethnic bias, we've looked at the use of task forces and we're also examining an array of services offered such as re-entry and prevention. Each dashboard report allows for the user to drill down to individual sub awardee or direct awardees. So for example, with a few clicks, an SAA can see how JAG dollars were allocated for multiple award years or could determine if progress has been made toward training good officers in de-escalation. We've been so successful utilizing these reports that we'll be expanding to other states in 2022.

Mike Fargen: It sounds pretty amazing. So how will this project help in strategic planning process for the SAAs and their staff?

Matt Wade: Another benefit of visualizing data is that you can track whether JAG expenditures and activities are aligning with your state strategic plan. If they



aren't, you can quickly adjust priorities or policies. In many cases, having visualized data at your fingertips can also eliminate the need for time consuming, manual processes to access and arrange PMT data. We hope that we can further expand the data in our Power BI workspace to include a broad array of types of data so that we can not only measure outputs but also outcomes.

Mike Fargen: If listeners want learn more about project and are interested in getting involved, is there an opportunity for their participation?

Matt Wade: Sure thing, Mike. As of today, we are expanding the PMT pilot project to four states in each quarter of the calendar, year 2022. If a state is interested in participating or like a demonstration of how visualizing PMT data works, they can contact me directly at mwade@ncja.org. With that I'd like to thank you both again for speaking with us today. If any of our listeners would like to hear more about the great work being done at NCJA, they can simply shoot us an email at strategicplanning@ncja.org, and we will connect them with the right people. Thank you again for listening.