Evidence to Action Summary

Lessons from Mission Australia's Evidence to Action process aimed at supporting staff to implement service changes informed by monitoring and evaluation insights.

Mission Australia is committed to using evidence and insights, including rich data from our services, experiences of our practitioners and the voices of people with a lived experience, to find out what is working well and where our services may need to improve. Ultimately, we want to ensure we are delivering the best possible services to the people and communities we serve.

Over the last few years, we have established an integrated approach to evidence and insights. This has included trying, testing and learning how we can effectively and efficiently scale an Evidence to Action process as part of our organisational Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning system.

This summary provides an overview of Mission Australia's Evidence to Action process and our key learnings. Based on these insights we are now in the process of scaling and embedding regular reflection, learning and action cycles as part of our business-as-usual approach to service delivery and continuous improvement.

Mission Australia is a national non-denominational Christian organization, with more than 160 years' experience in stand together with Australians in need on their journey to independence. We are a large and diverse organization with over 450 services across Australia serving around 150,000 people annually. Our strategic goal is to end homelessness and ensure that people and communities in need can thrive.

Key insights

A collaborative learning culture is imperative for driving positive social change in Australia and achieving better outcomes for people and communities in need.

Mission Australia is committed to learning and continuous improvement. A culture of evidence-informed practice and decision making is a key enabler of our strategic goals. We believe our approach to evidence is only successful if insights are used to inform service delivery, policy, advocacy and systems change.

Evidence to Action is the process of facilitating regular reflection, learning and action cycles. The process supports frontline staff, program managers and leaders to review data, identify program changes, monitor changes using data and share best practice across the organisation and the broader sector.

The Evidence to Action process demonstrates that collaborative learning empowers front-line staff to make informed decisions, enhances the quality of services and improves outcomes.

Critical success factors include prioritising time for reflection and learning, regular opportunities to access data, an ongoing focus on data literacy, nurturing a multidisciplinary approach and gathering leadership support.

Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning

Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning (MEL) is an essential part of Mission Australia's services. It provides a systematic way for us to monitor, evaluate and learn about our work to ensure we are delivering the best possible services to the people and communities we serve.

We use MEL at Mission Australia to:

- **Measure our impact** by supporting services to collect outcomes data through our organisational Impact Measurement program and use the insights to strengthen practice.
- **Drive excellence** through Monitoring and Reporting Frameworks and rapid program reviews to identify critical success factors and ways to improve operational efficiency and effectiveness.
- **Build an evidence base** through rigorous periodic evaluations that support strategic decisions and drive investment where we can have the biggest impact.
- **Spark action** by sharing evidence across the organisation, through near time access to data and documented Evidence to Action cycles and supporting our social policy and advocacy efforts.

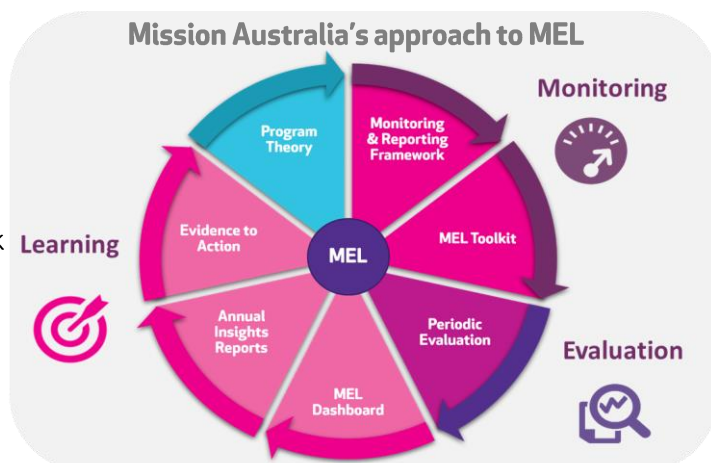## Mission Australia's approach to MEL

Our approach to learning

Mission Australia is committed to learning - we believe this is the most important part of the MEL cycle. Our approach to evidence is only successful if insights are used to inform service delivery, policy, advocacy and systems change.

In 2021, we commenced an **Evidence to Action pilot** which aimed to:

- Investigate ways to use data and insights widely through regular reflection, learning and action cycles.
- Support front-line staff, program managers and leadership to identify program changes, areas for improvements or opportunities to scale.
- Systematically document and monitor changes using data.
- Share learnings and best practice across the organisation and the broader sector through Evidence to Action Case Studies.

The pilot involved the Family Preservation Program in New South Wales and the Youth Accommodation Support Service in Western Australia. The approach was then further tested and refined through the Homelessness and Stable Housing Support MEL cycle which involved 23 services.

Centre for Evidence and Insights

Driving a culture of evidence-informed practice and decision making is a key enabler of Mission Australia's ability to achieve our strategic priorities to end homelessness and ensure people and communities in need can thrive.

In late 2020, Mission Australia established the Centre for Evidence and Insights with the aim to inspire curiosity for evidence that leads to learning and action to increase the impact and effectiveness of our work.

The Centre brings together reporting, systems, analytics, business intelligence, impact measurement, evaluation and research into a centralised multi-disciplinary team.

A critical function of the Centre is to establish an integrated and sustainable organisational MEL system that empowers learning and action. This has involved investment in technology platforms and the skills, culture, and professional development of our people.

Evidence to Action Process

Evidence to Action is the process of facilitating reflection, learning and action cycles to identify specific service delivery improvements in response to data. The process involves:

- Providing regular access to data in engaging, useful and usable formats (i.e. data packs, reports and interactive dashboards).
- Supporting services to review insights, unpack contextual factors, identify and document priority actions through an Evidence to Action plan.
- Implement actions over 12 months and monitor changes using data to share learnings.

The following Evidence to Action Case Studies showcase how the process worked in practice and the impact for our services.

Celebrating small wins and planning for the future

The Youth Accommodation Support Service (YASS) supports young people living in Perth who are homeless or at risk of homelessness, by providing crisis accommodation for 15-18 year olds, and transitional accommodation to young people aged 16-25 years for up to 12 months.

The service supports young people to develop independent living skills, provides emotional support and informal counselling for mental health, alcohol and other drug use, and connects young people to education and employment opportunities.

An Evidence to Action workshop was facilitated with the YASS team, involving Program Managers and front-line staff, to review their Impact Measurement data, share practice and identify areas for action.

Positive outcomes included improvements in personal wellbeing, young people's participation in education and employment and feelings of stability, safety and security.

However, young people rated their satisfaction with achievement in life lower at exit compared to entry. Future security also remained the lowest rated wellbeing domain at service entry and exit.

In response to these insights, the YASS team developed an Evidence to Action plan and committed to a series of practice changes. Actions undertaken included an increased focus on celebrating the achievements of young people during their stay and an increased focus on exit planning, such as providing exit packs with more information about service and community linkages.

Following these changes, young people's satisfaction with their achievement in life and future security increased from entry to exit across both domains.

These changes highlight the importance of person-centred and strengths-based support, for example setting short, medium and long term goals and celebrating progress along a young person's journey.

Enriching practice and embedding change to engage families

The Family Preservation Program (FPP) provides interventions to strengthen and keep families safely together by reducing risks so they can experience healthy and positive development. Mission Australia delivers FPP across six locations in NSW: Orana; Far West; Tablelands; Shoalhaven; Mid North Coast; and Riverina.

In early 2022 the Centre of Evidence and Insights undertook a rapid program review to assess the extent that our FPP services aligned to the vision for the future state of family preservation in NSW.

Positive outcomes included reaching priority families, the delivery of FPP's core service components and the responsiveness of services to the needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families.

However, on average families were engaged with the program for less than the expected 12-18 months and families who exited early were more likely to be high needs and/or families experiencing Domestic Or Family Violence (DFV). This was an important insight as families who were engaged for longer were more likely to achieve their goals.

In response to the review FPP undertook a phased Evidence to Action process. This included data presentations and workshops with FPP leadership teams and frontline staff to share practice and identify key actions at a programmatic level. Service-level workshops were also facilitated to develop local action plans.

A range of initiatives and actions were identified and implemented to increase the engagement of families.

Programmatic examples included:
- Employment of a Program Specialist to build the confidence and capacity of FPP teams.
- Increasing the classification of case management roles to match more intensive service delivery.
- Development of a range of Practice Resources, training and coaching to provide services with a common evidence-based approach to working with families.

Each service also implemented local Evidence to Action plans informed by local data trends and context. Some service examples included:

- Upskilling staff to ensure that evidence-based parenting programs are delivered to increase parenting skills.
- Increasing referrals to mental health services to link families to therapeutic supports.
- Celebrating small and big achievements with families through individualised support plans.
- Linking men to male staff from other services to provide more support to families experiencing DFV.

After 18 months we can see the measurable impact of these changes in the data. Families on average are now engaged in the program for longer and a higher proportion have achieved their case plan goals. The largest improvements across all key change indicators were for high needs families and families experiencing DFV. Families also reported improvements across all personal wellbeing domains comparing entry to exit ratings.

We are using each of these learning to scale and embed the Evidence to Action process as part of our organisational MEL system and our business-as-usual approach to service delivery and sustainable continuous improvement.

What have we learnt?

- **Prioritise time for learning**. For services to make use of evidence they need intentional resources and time to reflect on their practice. While we are embedding a formal annual Evidence to Action process as part of our MEL cycles, we also enable regular learning discussions guided by program managers using interactive data dashboards.
- **Provide regular opportunities to access and discuss data.** Through the pilot staff provided positive feedback on using engaging ways to present data, for example client journeys, infographics and interactive data dashboards. Providing regular access to data in multiple formats supports staff to not only become familiar with the insights but also to see the value, relevance and benefit to their practice.
- **Focus on data literacy.** During the pilot there were varied levels of data literacy. We are now providing ongoing professional development and capacity building opportunities at different levels of the organisation to embed and sustain the reflection, learning and action cycles.
- **Nurture a multidisciplinary approach.** The pilot was a collaboration between community services, impact measurement and evaluation, service design and practice quality. This was particularly useful to guide meaningful discussions around data and practice. Opportunities for collaboration will continue to be a focus as we scale the process.
- **Gather leadership support.** Leadership support is foundational to the establishment and sustainability of MEL. Some ways we have gathered leadership support is through strong links to our organisational strategy, continuous communication, building strong relationships and accountability mechanisms.

Why is Evidence to Action important?

A collaborative learning culture is imperative for driving positive social change in Australia and achieving better outcomes for people and communities in need.

The integration of evidence into service delivery contributes to a culture of learning and innovation and supports community organisations to demonstrate accountability, transparency, effectiveness, efficiency and adaptability to emerging needs.

Despite the importance of evidence-informed decisions community organisations face significant challenges using data to inform service delivery. Challenges include limited resources, lack of funding to establish technology platforms, difficulties in translating insights into accessible formats for frontline staff, resistance to change and strategic leadership support.

It is important as a sector that we address these challenges and share what is and isn't working to greater our collective impact.

Mission Australia's Evidence to Action process provides an example of how investment in collaborative learning can empower practitioners to make informed decisions, enhance the quality of services and improve outcomes.

For further information about this summary please contact the Centre for Evidence and Insights, Mission Australia: evidenceandinsights@missionaustralia.com.au

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