

Integration of Results-Based Accountability Framework into Contract Management

Cindy Guillen, MSW

Social Services Program Manager I

Santa Clara County Social Services Agency

Executive Summary

At a time when Santa Clara County (SCC) faces a projected \$1 billion budget cut and pressure on safety net programs, the question is not simply which services to fund, but how to ensure that every contracted dollar produces measurable, meaningful change in the lives of the people it is meant to serve. The Results-Based Accountability (RBA) framework offers a proven structured model that gives SCC a clear, common language for defining the outcomes that contracted services are meant to achieve and measuring if they are achieving them.

Santa Cruz County Human Services Department (SCCHSD) has already integrated RBA into its contract design, process, and evaluation. Since launching a Process Improvement Onward (PRIMO) initiative, the department has used performance data as a genuine tool to understand whether contracted and community-based partners are making a difference. This report outlines how integrating RBA into contract management can strengthen accountability, improve service delivery, and ensure limited resources are used effectively.

Recommendations for Santa Clara County:

- Create strategic plans for all client services, including contracted services
- Redesign performance measures within logic models, so they are clear and easy to understand
- Establish quarterly review meetings with the Office of Contract Management (OCM) to discuss progress or concerns from the quarterly reports
- Strengthen collaborative corrective action processes with Community-Based Organizations (CBOs)

Background

Santa Clara County's Social Services Agency (SCCSSA) has a powerful mission: To provide resources and opportunities in a culturally responsive manner to enhance the quality of life in our community by protecting, educating, and empowering individuals and families. Foundational is the network of county staff and community-based organizations working in partnership to deliver essential services to residents at their most vulnerable time. Strengthening and sustaining that partnership, especially in the face of fiscal pressure, is a practical necessity.

The implementation of H.R. 1 is reducing federal funding for safety net programs, contributing to Santa Clara County's projected \$1 billion budget cut. SCCSSA manages a substantial portfolio of 186 contracts with community-based organizations, representing approximately 99 million dollars. The fiscal reality requires a thoughtful consideration of existing and future contracted services to ensure maximum impact. Across SCCSSA's contract portfolio, performance measures reflect the range of frameworks available at the time of contract design. Some contracts are organized around clearly defined client outcomes, while others measure activity counts that capture service volume but do not specifically have measures about the impact of services on the client(s). A standardized RBA framework would bring consistency to this work, giving all program monitors and OCM staff the same structure to build from.

Fiscal pressures may prioritize focus on program costs, while the County's obligation is also to its most vulnerable residents. The Transitional Age Youth (TAY) population within Child Welfare faces compounding risks, including housing instability, mental health challenges, and intimate partner violence (Fowler et al., 2017; Katz et al., 2023; Warwick & Sheehan, 2023). While these young people are not solely defined by these challenges, many are navigating early adulthood without a family safety net and doing so with notable resilience. They deserve services that are intentional, measurable, and held to the highest standard of effectiveness. The Department of Family and Children's Services (DFCS) and OCM have made meaningful investments in TAY-serving contracts and continue to strengthen those partnerships. This proposal builds on that foundation by introducing a consistent outcomes framework to support and standardize what dedicated staff are already working to achieve.

SCCSSA could take valuable lessons from Santa Cruz County's (SCCHSD) Process Improvement Onward (PRIMO) initiative, launched in 2018. The PRIMO initiative created documented improvements in contract performance data quality and reduced ambiguity in CBO reporting (Schwanbeck, 2022). SCCHSD's Centralized Contracting Unit (CCU) incorporates the RBA framework to guide contract scope design, and its formal Continuous Process Improvement (CPI) initiative demonstrates that this investment produces measurable operational results

(Schwanbeck, 2022). The following sections will examine the RBA Framework, considering ways that SCCCHSD implemented it, and will make recommendations for SCCSSA.

Results-Based Accountability (RBA) Framework

The RBA framework is a structured, data-driven approach to measuring and improving community impact (Clear Impact, 2026). Within contract management, RBA helps organize performance measures around a central question: are clients better off as a result of the services they received? Rather than designing contracts around activities and then hoping for outcomes, RBA begins with the desired result (i.e., the measurable change in a client's condition) and works backward to build the measures, activities, and accountability structures that will demonstrate progress toward it (Friedman, 2015). Five core components guide this approach.

Clear Definitions of Results

Contracts should identify the population-level results to which the service contributes (e.g., improved stability, safety, or well-being), as well as the specific performance measures required of the contractor. A result is not an activity or an output; it is a measurable condition of wellbeing for a specific population. For TAY involved in Child Welfare, a clearly defined result might be: Transitional Age Youth ages 18-21 achieve stable housing within 90 days of program enrollment. This is distinct from simply stating that a CBO will provide “housing navigation services.” The result defines *what changes for the client*, while the activity describes *what the provider does*. Contracts that lack this distinction often measure effort rather than impact, making it difficult to determine whether services are actually improving outcomes for young people.

Performance Measures that Matter

Once a result is clearly defined, the next challenge is determining how progress toward that result will be tracked. This is where performance measures become essential. RBA organizes measures into three categories, each corresponding to a different level of accountability from volume, to quality, to impact. Applied to a Parenting TAY workshop program, the measures might look like Table 1 (Friedman, 2015).

Table 1: RBA Question and Example Measures

RBA Question	Example Measure
How much did we do?	15 enrolled Parenting TAY attend positive parenting education workshops per quarter.
How well did we do it?	75% of enrolled Parenting TAY complete at least 4 of 6 scheduled workshop sessions.
Is anyone better off?	75% of Parenting TAY who completed at least 4 workshop sessions demonstrate measurable improvements in their parenting skills, as measured by a Casey Life Skills Supplemental Assessment for Parenting Young Children, administered as a pre- and post-assessment at program entry and exit.

Without all three levels of outcomes measurement, a contract report may look successful on paper (i.e., high enrollment numbers) because of high service levels (i.e., high participation numbers). However, we do not know if many or few clients experience services that bring about lasting change. Thus, the third question, *"Is anyone better off?"* is the most critical, yet it is often the least consistently measured. Naming the data collection tool and assessment point in the contract itself ensures improvements can be demonstrated. Among TAY programs, the Casey Life Skill Assessment and THRIVE survey have been used as pre- and post-assessments to measure whether youth are better off after program exit. However, establishing the right measures is only meaningful if those measures are reviewed consistently to course-correct before problems compound.

Ongoing Performance Monitoring

Ongoing monitoring means performance data are reviewed throughout the contract period, instead of only during the renewal period. For example, if a CBO providing independent living workshops reports low attendance at the six-month mark, a mid-year check-in creates the opportunity to investigate the reasons before underperformance compounds. The answer may highlight inadequate outreach and engagement, transportation barriers, or service hours that do not fit the population's schedule. Santa Cruz County's CCU demonstrates this in practice, addressing questions in real time and partnering with CBOs to course-correct together (E. Schwanbeck, personal communication, March 17, 2026).

Data-Driven Decision-Making

Data-driven decision-making requires collecting the *right* data from the start. For TAY services, this means contracts should specify not just that data will be gathered, but which data system will be used, how frequently it will be updated, and who is responsible for entering and reviewing it. Aligning these data sources during the initial contract design prevents discrepancies and ensures that decision-making at renewal is based on accurate, comparable data across all contracted providers. The structural work of aligning data systems only produces results when the organizational culture around data embraces the change.

Continuous Quality Improvement Culture

The RBA framework shifts the contract monitoring relationship from one focused primarily on compliance verification to one centered on shared problem-solving. For CBOs working with TAY, this shift encourages an environment where a CBO feels safe raising a concern early, before it becomes a performance issue.

When RBA is embedded throughout the contracting lifecycle, from the first conversation about a program's purpose to the final renewal decision, outcomes are centered in concrete ways. A young person may be able to secure stable housing because a CBO identified a service gap at month three rather than month twelve. A parenting program curriculum can be improved because the staff (i.e., program monitor) helped a CBO clarify that parenting TAY participants were applying the skills they learned in class, in addition to monitoring the number of clients attending the sessions.

RBA Implementation

The RBA components described above map directly to practical changes SCCSSA can implement within its current structure. The following four recommendations describe what that looks like in practice.

Strategic Plans

SCCSSA builds strategic plans—DFCS completes these annually. The opportunity now is to extend that same discipline to contracted services, so that every CBO partnership is explicitly tied to a County-level goal. Right now, a TAY education contract and a TAY independent living program contract may be operating in parallel without a formal mechanism for coordination. A shared strategic framework changes that, allowing the County to identify gaps, eliminate redundancy, and ensure that the full continuum of services exists and connects to a young person's needs.

Redesign Contract Performance Measures within Logic Models

Once strategic plans establish the overarching direction for contracted services, the next step is ensuring that the performance measures within each contract's logic model are designed to track progress toward those goals in a clear, consistent, and meaningful way. Historically, the Santa Clara County Office of Contract Management (SCCOCM) partnered with the Office of Research and Evaluation (ORE) to support the development of logic models that provided the measurable outcome framework for contracts. The partnership between SCCOCM and ORE provided strong logic model support. Integrating RBA into contract development would provide a shared, systematic framework that program monitors and OCM staff can apply consistently across all contracts, building on existing practice rather than replacing it. Every CBO contract can be evaluated with a clear focus on achieving the outcomes established during contract negotiations.

Exhibit A depicts the current SCCOCM logic model format, which captures the contract goal, populations served, activities, and broad outcomes across seven sections. With targeted modifications to incorporate RBA's outcome orientation, including clearer result definitions, population-specific measures, and named data collection tools, this familiar structure can become a more powerful accountability tool. SCCHSD has a contract performance model (Exhibit B) with approachable language that separates each contract goal into tangible results (Schwanbeck, 2022). Importantly, the SCCHSD model also names the specific data collection tool to be used, a detail currently missing from most SCCSSA contracts but essential for consistent, comparable measurement.

Exhibit A: Santa Clara County Logic Model Outline

Exhibit A: Santa Clara County Logic Model Outline



Exhibit B: Santa Cruz Performance Measure Layout

Exhibit B: Santa Cruz Performance Measure Layout



Exhibit C: Proposed Contract Performance Measure Layout

Exhibit C: Proposed Contract Performance Measure Layout

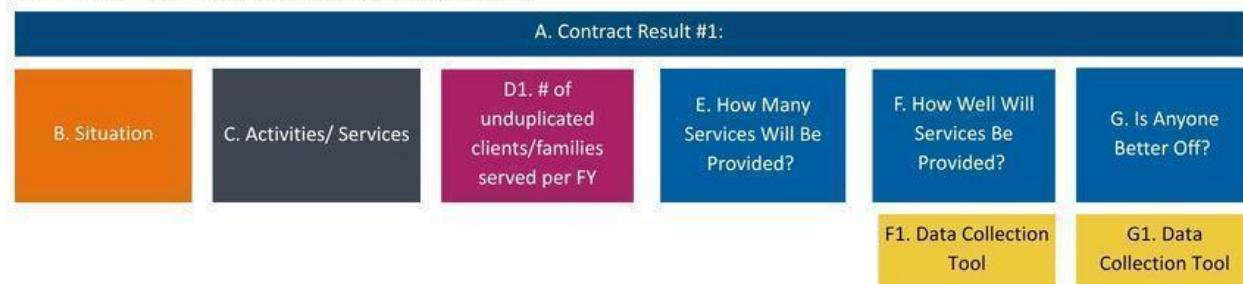


Exhibit C illustrates how RBA principles can be integrated into the existing logic model format. Each contract result (e.g., improving housing stability, financial literacy, or parenting education access among TAY) is given its own structured section, ensuring that goals are specific, measurable, and tailored to the intended population. In sub-populations such as Parenting TAY, section D1 can be made specific so that performance expectations reflect the actual population being served rather than a broad aggregate. Redesigned logic models create the foundation for accountability, but that foundation only holds if the County and its CBO partners are meeting regularly to review progress against the measures they have agreed upon.

Quarterly Review Meetings

For TAY contracts, where service engagement can fluctuate significantly due to the population's mobility and life circumstances, regular check-ins provide an early warning system that annual reporting cannot. Quarterly review meetings between program monitors and the OCM provide a structured opportunity to assess contract performance against agreed-upon measures, identify emerging concerns, and resolve issues before they require a formal corrective action plan. When contracts are not meeting their stated results (e.g., contractors not meeting with clients in person), the gap is identified, and a corrective plan is developed. Where appropriate, needs assessments may be conducted to better understand barriers and limitations.

Considerations for Technology Integration

Without a centralized documentation system, program monitors must reconstruct contract performance narratives from a range of sources at renewal (e.g., emails, individual notes, and quarterly reports). This structural gap can be addressed by hosting contracts on a shared SharePoint platform with built-in quarterly documentation fields that would give everyone involved, OCM, program monitors, and program managers a single accessible record throughout the contract period (J. Kelly, personal communication, March 9, 2026). Contract monitors and program managers can document observations, flag concerns, and record areas for improvement directly within the shared document. Workflow can be improved with automatic

alerts to remind the program monitor to comment on the document periodically. Paired with quarterly OCM meetings, this creates a complete, real-time performance record, so that at renewal, the documentation is already assembled.

Collaborative Corrective Action Process

Approached with transparency and mutual accountability, a corrective action process is not a punitive measure. A corrective action becomes an investment in the CBO's capacity to succeed and a tangible demonstration of the County's commitment to working alongside its partners. In situations that escalate to the point of requiring a corrective action, a standardized process that initiates a structured, solution-focused conversation with each CBO would promote consistency and strengthen the partnership. In SCCHSD, corrective action meetings bring together county representatives and CBO staff to develop a shared improvement plan, structured around the three core RBA questions: *How much did we do? How well did we do it? Is anyone better off?* This framework ensures the conversation is grounded in data rather than perception and focused on solutions rather than blame. Goals are established during a collaborative meeting led by SCCHSD, and a plan is developed with clear benchmarks for measurable improvement (E. Schwanbeck, personal communication, March 17, 2026). A standardized process ensures consistency while remaining anchored to each CBO's original contracted results, giving monitors a clear, contract-specific set of benchmarks.

These four recommendations are designed to build on one another and can be implemented in phases within existing staff capacity. Implementation requires deliberate investment in three areas: staff training, dedicated time, and organizational alignment. Program monitors and OCM staff will need grounding in RBA's core framework. Training that will be applied directly to the contracts they are already managing, rather than delivered as a standalone workshop. This includes writing outcome-focused logic models, facilitating data-driven quarterly reviews, and using the three RBA questions to structure corrective action conversations. A structured pilot phase (i.e., selecting two to three contracts across different program types) allows SCCSSA to test the redesigned logic model and quarterly review format. Based on staff and CBO feedback, the process is refined before scaling. Redesigning existing logic models and establishing a quarterly meeting cadence will require dedicated hours that must be deliberately built into program monitors' workloads. Phasing the pilot alongside natural contract cycles (i.e., annual renewals or upcoming Request for Proposals) allows internal capacity to grow incrementally.

From a technology standpoint, an early assessment of current SharePoint licensing and IT capacity is a critical first step. The assessment will determine whether implementation can begin immediately or requires a budget request before proceeding. Given current fiscal constraints, logic model redesign and quarterly review meetings should be prioritized first, as

both can be implemented within existing budgets and staff capacity. SharePoint integration is after the quarterly review process is established and the IT assessment confirms available capacity. A standardized corrective action process follows once monitoring and documentation practices are in place, completing a sequence that is operationally realistic and built to last beyond the initial implementation.

Conclusion

The recommendations outlined above (strategic planning, logic model redesign, quarterly review meetings, technology integration, and a collaborative corrective action process) collectively represent a structured, achievable pathway toward outcome-focused contract management. SCCSSA faces significant fiscal pressure and growing service demands; this framework ensures that every contracted dollar is directed toward programs that demonstrate measurable benefit to client well-being. For TAY in particular, who age out of eligibility for services quickly, the need for contracts delivering meaningful services is vital.

Santa Cruz County built this infrastructure embedded into its organizational culture and demonstrated what outcome-focused contract management looks like in practice. Santa Clara County has the people, partnerships, and existing foundation to do the same. The result is a contracting system where OCM, program monitors, and CBO partners are all working from the same logic model, performance measures, and shared definition of what it means for a young person to be “better off.”

Building RBA measures into contracted services provides an important opportunity to ensure that both the County and the contracted CBO partner are in strong alignment with their mission and services for the client’s best possible outcomes.

Acknowledgements

I would like to express my sincere thanks to the Santa Cruz County Human Services Department for its warm welcome. Andrew Stewart and Erica Schwanbeck, thank you for your openness and insight. I appreciate your willingness to share your knowledge. This has been an amazing learning opportunity and a transformative experience.

References

- California Evidence-Based Clearinghouse for Child Welfare. (n.d.). *Youth Thrive Survey*.
<https://www.cebc4cw.org/measurement-tools/youth-thrive-survey/>
- Casey Family Programs. (2025, December 19). *Casey Life Skills Toolkit*.
<https://www.casey.org/casey-life-skills/>
- Center for the Study of Social Policy (2018). *Youth Thrive Survey user manual*.
<https://cssp.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/Youth-Thrive-Survey-User-Manual.pdf>
- Clear Impact. (2026, May 8). *Results-based accountability*.
<https://clearimpact.com/results-based-accountability/>
- Fowler, P. J., Marcal, K. E., Zhang, J., Day, O., & Landsverk, J. (2017). Homelessness and aging out of foster care: A national comparison of child welfare-involved adolescents. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 77, 27–33. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2017.03.017>
- Friedman, M. (2015). *Trying hard is not good enough: How to produce measurable improvements for customers and communities*. PARSE Publishing.
- Katz, C. C., Okpych, N. J., Charles, P., Wall, E., & Courtney, M. E. (2023). Prevalence and predictors of intimate partner violence among youth with foster care histories. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, 38(19–20), 10611–10639.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/08862605231175910>
- Schwanbeck, E. (2022). *Transparency in service delivery: How we utilize data and process improvement to measure impact*. Mack Center on Nonprofit & Public Sector Management in the Human Services, University of California, Berkeley.
https://mackcenter.berkeley.edu/sites/default/files/transparency_in_service_delivery-how_we_utilize_data_and_process_improvement_to_measure_impact_eric_schwanbeck_-_2022.pdf
- Warwick, L., & Sheehan, R. (2023). Intimate partner violence and transitional age youth: A systematic review. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, 38(13–14), 8142–8167.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/08862605231175910>