

Understanding Our Clients— Using a Qualitative Approach

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Executive Summary

Since the quantitative outcome instruments reflect only a small dimension of the complex lives of Bridge Project clients, face-to-face interview protocols were implemented by the evaluation team to capture a different perspective of the program's clientele. The primary goal for utilizing the interview process was to document client experiences regarding program impact from a subjective perspective. ■ **Methods:** Utilizing a semi-structured interview protocol, clients were asked about their background, quality of life prior to and following program entry, feedback regarding program services, and direct program impact. Three different client cohorts were interviewed annually: successful completions, dropouts and current clients. ■ **Implications:** Through these client interviews, the evaluation team hoped to compile profiles of clients, examine any possible trends contributing to the dropping out and/or completion of the program, and to generate feedback to enhance program components. Interviews with current clients allowed for input regarding active program components.

Background

The Bridge Project of Lutheran Social Services is located in the Tenderloin district of San Francisco. The program is intended to serve people who have a long history of instability and who have either been unable to access, or are alienated by, existing service systems. The Bridge Project offers a transitional program that provides rental assistance and integrated services for up to 24 months in a residential hotel setting. Staff from collaborating agencies function as a multidisciplinary team, and are available onsite at the hotels to provide a range of services which includes: primary care, home nursing, mental health, substance-use management counseling, case management, benefits advocacy, nutrition counseling, support groups and essential services.

Methodology

A 20 percent subset of clients was randomly selected from each cohort of dropout and current clients in June 1998, 1999 and 2000. Attempts were also made to interview all graduates who had successfully completed the program for at least three months. Upon completion of the interview, clients from the dropout and successful completion cohorts received a \$15 cash incentive; current clients received a \$10 cash incentive.

Interviews generally averaged 20 minutes in duration with clients recruited in collaboration with program staff efforts.

The Sample

■ **Graduates:** Two primary criterion were used to define graduate clients, (1) achievement of stable housing or (2) release into a stable housing arrangement with SSI upon discharge from the Bridge Project. As of June 2000, there were a total of 32 graduates. Of these 32 clients, twelve were excluded for various reasons. All of the remaining **20 interview candidates were successfully located and interviewed.**

■ **Dropouts:** During June 1998, a client discharge list was generated to identify unduplicated dropout clients who would be eligible for random selection for client interviews. As a result, a total of 15 unduplicated drop-out clients were identified. For clients not included on this list, exclusion criteria included: graduate and readmitted client status, active program participation of less than one month (due to insufficient length of time to assess program impact), client decline of interview, and client termination from program due to violence. As a result of time constraints and difficulties with locating clients, the recruitment strategy was revised so that all dropout clients were contacted until a 20% client subset was interviewed. Among the 15 identified drop-out clients, three (20%) were interviewed during the fiscal year 1998-1999. To date, a total of **seven drop-out clients have been interviewed.**

■ **Current clients:** Annually, a roster for unduplicated current clients in the Bridge Project is generated to assist with identifying potential interviewees. As of July 2000, the roster yielded a list of 61 unduplicated current clients for fiscal year 2000-2001. These 61 clients were then randomly ordered and interviews were conducted with the first 18 (30 percent) clients. To date, **31 current clients have been interviewed.**

Demographics (Sample Size)

	Graduates n=20	Dropouts n=7	Current n=31	Total N=58
Gender				
Male	17	6	26	49
Females	1	0	3	4
Transgender	2	1	2	5
Ethnicity				
African American	5	4	7	16
Caucasian	8	2	19	29
Hispanic	5	1	2	8
Other	2	0	3	5
Age (years)				
Range	31-55	31-55	32-56	31-56
Average	38.55	38.29	39.9	39.91
Program Retention (days)				
Range	39-859	22-364	n/a	22-859
Average length	386	211	n/a	342
Standard deviation	251.21	122.02	n/a	236.60

Summary of Results

A variety of dimensions were captured through qualitative interviews. However, this summary should only be regarded as preliminary, due to the small sample size of each group of clients and the need for a more detailed examination of the completed interviews.

Upon initial review of the completed interviews, certain overall key characteristics were evident relating specifically to each cohort:

Graduates:

- Regarded their futures and experiences with the program positively.
- Often maintained ties with the program staff beyond discharge.
- More motivated to change lifestyle prior to program entry.

Dropouts:

- Characterized by varying levels of instability and transition related to lifestyle situations, service linkages/accessibility and feelings regarding their futures.

Current clients:

- A positive immediate impact due to program services reported by a majority of interviewees.

Common themes appeared across the three interview groups. The genuine empathy of the program staff, usefulness of money management and housing services, and the importance of housing stability were some principle elements highlighted by all interviewees. Regardless of category, a majority of all interviewed clients also reported their interactions with the Bridge Project to be a positive experience.

Client recommendations:

- Increased hours of availability for nursing services including on-site services at the hotels.
- Daily, identified on-call staff member, especially after-hours.
- A client appointment schedule instead of drop-in hours.
- Availability of separate housing options for clients attempting to maintain a clean and sober lifestyle.
- Assignment of staff as key contact person for each hotel to resolve hotel-specific issues more quickly.
- Increased availability of vouchers for clothing, groceries and laundry.
- Availability of socialization programs to facilitate interaction with others
- Availability of aftercare services, such as a mentorship program linking clients with identified community members after departure from the Bridge Project.

These interview summaries have provided a glimpse into the complex, and often difficult, lives of the clientele served by the Bridge Project. While the information generated from the qualitative interviews still needs to be examined in conjunction with the quantitative outcome data, preliminary review of the data has indicated that the Bridge Project staff and services can serve as a positive support resource and regular service linkage for many clients not previously able to consistently access services and/or support.