

Blog: Using Data to Tell a Story with Soul

Brene Brown, an American author and qualitative researcher described herself as a storyteller reflecting on the possibility that “maybe stories are just data with a soul”. She makes an important point. After all, we often use data to educate others, to inform decision-making, and to monitor program outcomes. But, do we experience the soul behind the data?

The Administration for Community Living’s (ACL) person-centered vision of “advancing independence, integration, and inclusion throughout life” drives program implementation, monitoring, and evaluation. The various ACL programs exist to support people, not systems. A lot of data are collected to measure performance and outcomes. How can we use the data to tell a story with soul - to get at the essence of each program and the people they support?

Let’s think about using Older Americans Act (OAA) data to tell a story. What if the story we are telling is “OAA services add personal value to older Americans”? We know that ACL conducts national surveys of Title III Older Americans Act (OAA) services to identify characteristics of people receiving services and overall quality of those services. ACL recently posted results from the 12th national survey to [Aging Integrated Database \(AGID\)](#). These data tell us that women make up over two thirds of persons using OAA services. While that’s interesting, a more compelling story is possible with the addition of data that reflects that [over 88% of OAA users rate services as good, very good, or excellent](#). So, people like what they receive for the most part, but what is vital or personally valuable about the services? How do we know that OAA services are meaningful and add value to their lives? We can use “referral” data. We know that people are more likely to refer friends to a program if they believe in the program. As a result, you could include another data point in your story on the [over 95% of persons that say they would recommend OAA services to their friends](#). You can also add soul by including non-numerical data such as a personal story – a first person account of the impact of OAA on his/her life.

Don’t get discouraged if the data you have adds soul, but is not positive. Stories with soul are not always positive. For example, the national survey also reflects that only [25% of persons using home-delivered nutrition and 58% of persons using congregate nutrition at a senior center or similar location indicate that their social opportunities increased due to OAA involvement](#). We would hope that a much higher number of persons receiving congregate meals would find greater social opportunities! Right? It is a gathering of people, over food(!) after all.... The point is that regardless what the data tells us, viewing through a soul lens tells us something important. Sometimes, it tells us what we need to change, monitor, and continue to improve.

Overall, seeing the personal value of a program through numerical and non-numerical data adds soul to your story. To get started on your own story, access ACL’s many tools and resources available in the AGing Integrated Database (<https://agid.acl.gov/>). Use the AGID Functionality Fact Sheet to learn how to customize the data to your specific story. Then add the soul.