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An Evaluative Approach to the Examination of Program Operations and Service Delivery

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AN EVALUATIVE APPROACH TO THE EXAMINATION OF PROGRAM OPERATIONS AND SERVICE DELIVERY: PODSE

FOREWORD

This paper describes an evaluative approach that is currently being developed at the U.S. General Accounting Office and that we call the Program Operations and Delivery of Services Examination (PODSE). Designed to provide timely, descriptive information about public programs, the approach may be used to address congressional interest in one or more of the following topics:

--the way public programs operate in general, including their objectives, organization, activities, and procedures for addressing problems such as fraud and abuse;

--how service sites operate for programs that deliver services to individuals, including what services are delivered, how they are delivered, and who provides the services;

--the views of people associated with public programs -- program staff at the Federal, State, and local levels, clients, and others -- regarding program operations and service delivery;

--information about whether actual operational activities, program services, and participant characteristics match legislative requirements; and

--the identification of any issues requiring congressional consideration.

The PODSE approach has had one field test to date. It was used to examine the Runaway and Homeless Youth Program in the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS). The entire field test, from the congressional request in October 1981 to the delivery of testimony in May 1982, took 7 months. Additional tests will be conducted in order to ensure that the method can be successfully applied across programs with different objectives, organizations, settings, etc.

The purpose of this paper is to describe the PODSE approach as it currently stands after the experience of its first application. An overall goal of our work is to increase the capacity of evaluators to respond with rigorously collected data to requests from policymakers and administrators for information: information which can only be developed through the application of the design and measurement techniques that have emerged from the work of evaluation researchers over many years. Through the application of these techniques, combined with the careful negotiation of research questions, we hope not only to deliver sound descriptive information which meets the tests of rigor and reliability characterizing traditional evaluation research but also to deliver it within the short timeframes often needed if that information is to play any role in decisionmaking.

The immediate objective of PODSE, then, is to provide, within a short timeframe, evaluative information that is needed across a variety of types of programs and that is replicable by other evaluators. The evaluative approach outlined here is not definitive, however. It reflects the experience of only one field test. There are parts of the method that are not described with the specificity which may be desirable. It is still too early in our experience to be able to do this. We will, however, be reviewing and revising the approach as we receive reactions and suggestions from people in the evaluative and policymaking communities who respond to this exposure draft and as we conduct additional tests. Reactions from readers are therefore both needed and sought.

The paper will serve as a guideline for ourselves, both to aid those staff members who have not yet conducted a PODSE and to allow us to see what changes we need to make in developing the approach further as we apply it to different topical areas and different program universes. Thus, the document serves as a standard but also as a point of departure. For example, we are now developing a test of the PODSE approach involving both complex services and a highly diverse client population.

We wish to acknowledge those reviewers of this paper who have already contributed their time and expertise in commenting on the first draft. Their reviews were invaluable to the paper's authors.

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INTRODUCTION

The Congress frequently requests current operational or service delivery information about programs that receive Federal funds or about activities in which there is potentially a Federal role. Requests for timely, descriptive information typically arise during the legislative, budget, or oversight processes when legislation is authorized or reauthorized, program funds are increased or decreased, and questions are raised, for example, as to staffs', clients,' and others' experiences with the program or about the existence of fraud and abuse problems.

Although many valuable methods exist for evaluating public programs, most are time-consuming and expensive. Equally important, these methods are not developed specifically for the purpose of describing program operations and service delivery nor for systematically obtaining the views of program staff, clients, and others regarding these matters. For example, some management evaluations are developed to look only at the adequacy of internal management controls, including management information systems and performance measurement systems; impact evaluations, on the other hand, seek instead to establish the effects of a program. Often these studies lack the intent and resources to also examine, in any rigorous way, how the program has been implemented. Impact or effectiveness evaluations often place little priority on documenting whether the program under review has been implemented as planned and whether those associated with it are satisfied with its operations. In sum, while impact and management evaluations satisfy certain information priorities, there are other priorities that are not met. The requests of elected officials in the Congress and of officials in the executive branch for rapidly developed, current, descriptive information about program operations and service delivery can thus rarely be satisfied either by impact or management evaluations or by evaluations that look at other program elements.

To provide an evaluative approach for providing timely information on a variety of topics to members of the Congress and others, the U.S. General Accounting Office's Institute for Program Evaluation (IPE) is developing the Program Operations and Delivery of Services Examination (PODSE). Applicable to a broad spectrum of public programs, the types of questions a PODSE may answer fall into four main descriptive categories:

(1) program operations,

(2) service delivery,

(3) satisfaction with the program, and

(4) problems in program operations and service delivery.

Questions related to general program operations include, for example, what activities are performed, how they are organized, and who performs them; questions appropriate specifically to service delivery programs include what services are delivered, how they are delivered, and who participates; questions related to program satisfaction include, for example, what the perceptions about program strengths and weaknesses are; and questions about problems in program operations and service delivery include, for example, what the problems with the program's objectives are, and what program components are vulnerable to fraud and abuse.

To answer questions of interest, a PODSE typically collects information, always using carefully prepared data collection instruments, from a wide variety of people associated with the selected program, including, for example, program staff, staff from related programs, and interest group members. When applied to a service delivery program, a PODSE may also collect information from clients (e.g., current clients, former clients, their relatives, and other interested parties). Information about clients is particularly important when their opinions are relevant to program success (e.g., Vietnam veterans in the Readjustment Counseling Program or participants in the Crime Victim Assistance Program).

In addition to describing a program and the reactions of those familiar with it, a PODSE provides information on whether program features -- activities, services, participants, setting -- match legislative requirements. Lastly, a PODSE seeks to identify issues requiring congressional consideration.

The PODSE approach is indicated when

--a program is new and not much is known about how it operates,

--major conflicts in program goals or the absence of appropriate measures make an effectiveness evaluation difficult, or

--client satisfaction is a critical program element.

The PODSE approach as described in this paper draws on techniques from different disciplines. These techniques include sampling, questionnaire design, interviewing, etc. As a result, PODSE reports contain rigorously collected and replicable descriptive information for a well-defined set of questions.

IPE recently completed the first field test of the PODSE approach, using the National Runaway and Homeless Youth Program (title III of the Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention Act of 1974, as amended). The Subcommittee on Human Resources of the House Education and Labor Committee had asked IPE to answer the following program operations and service delivery questions:

--Who participates in the program?

--What are the services it offers?

--What is the center environment?

--What do participants, service providers, and community service people think about its services and operations?

Administered by the Department of Health and Human Services, the National Runaway and Homeless Youth Program had annual appropriations of $11 million from 1978 through 1981. In fiscal year 1981, 45,000 youths were sheltered or served by 169 funded centers, 133,000 youths were one-time drop-in clients, and 200,000 youths and their families were assisted by the national 24-hour hotline.

Application of the PODSE approach in the first test case included

--visiting a small sample of local service sites, large enough to contain examples of the diversity which existed but not intended to provide program generalizations,

--obtaining information from a planned sample of different types of people involved in providing and receiving services,

--identifying trends and commonalities across sites regarding program operations, services, and clients as well as providing descriptions of program operations within a site, and

--employing methods of data collection and analysis that would allow both the PODSE and its findings to be replicated at the same sites by other evaluators.

Seven months after IPE received the congressional request, the PODSE findings were presented in a hearing before the requesting Subcommittee. Frequent discussions with congressional staff ensured that the PODSE questions matched congressional priorities and expectations and that the completion of work matched the congressional timelines.

In sum, the PODSE approach has three main attributes. The first is timeliness. PODSE meets congressional needs for current, descriptive information on program implementation, needs which are often given little priority in traditional evaluative procedures.

The second attribute of the PODSE approach is flexibility. A PODSE has the capacity to be tailored to a variety of

descriptive questions about program operations and service delivery. In addition, it appears to be applicable to a broad spectrum of public programs. (This assertion will be tested through further applications.)

The third attribute of the PODSE approach is replicability. As described in more detail below, a PODSE employs systematic data collection, data analysis, and reporting, thereby allowing both the evaluation and its findings to be replicated at the same sites by other evaluators. Other, less structured approaches may be unable to ensure replicability.

The remainder of this paper describes the PODSE approach and our experiences from the first field test. The following topics are discussed: (1) historical perspective, (2) conducting a Program Operations and Delivery of Services Examination, (3) strengths, and (4) limitations.

HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

One of GAO's primary missions is to ensure that the Congress receives timely, accurate, and relevant information. IPE has established several lines of effort to meet that goal, including one which has the creation of methods as an option where none exists. The Congress has had little access to timely and accurate empirical information with regard to service delivery and program operations. Individual case studies have been the primary source. In order to improve this situation, the PODSE development work was initiated. At the early stages of this development process, we reviewed a method of collecting and reporting data developed at the Department of Health and Human Services which was entitled "Service Delivery Assessment" (SDA).

Staff at HHS developed SDA to meet the needs of the Secretary and Undersecretary for site- and client-oriented service delivery information. Each SDA is a relatively inexpensive, short-term study (5-7 months) which uses structured and unstructured interviews and observation at local service sites. Giving data collectors wide latitude to explore issues and follow leads as they arise, the SDA method is closely akin to investigative reporting. Maintaining flexibility and redirecting the study as it goes along are important elements of the SDA approach. Though data analysis includes reviewing interview answers, emphasis is placed on debriefing sessions in which the perceptions of site visitors are given great weight in developing findings. The SDA typically ends with a 15-page report and an hour briefing with the Secretary. HHS has issued more than 30 SDA reports. The Department of Education has adopted the SDA method.

The PODSE approach has some of the elements of SDA. For example, PODSE also seeks to provide information rapidly to

policymakers; tailors evaluative questions to the specific needs of GAO's primary audience, the Congress; obtains the views of different types of people associated with program operations and service delivery; and concisely presents its findings as a briefing or report or in testimony. But PODSE differs from SDA in its emphasis on collecting comparable data across sites and on using data collection and analysis procedures that allow both the evaluation and its findings to be replicated at the same sites by other evaluators.

CONDUCTING A PODSE (PROGRAM OPERATIONS AND DELIVERY OF SERVICES EXAMINATION)

As is any GAO audit or evaluation, a PODSE is conducted in two phases, a scoping and planning phase and an implementation phase. During the scoping and planning phase, the evaluation team reviews the relevant literature, interviews congressional and agency officials, examines and characterizes program objectives and activities, and formulates the evaluation issues. The team also identifies respondent groups and respondent selection procedures, develops data collection instruments, devises and implements procedures for selecting sample sites, visits exploratory sites, obtains information from different types of people associated with the program, and plans site visits. During implementation, the evaluation team participates in staff training, collects and analyzes data, and reports the findings.

The first PODSE field test, from the congressional request in October 1981 to the delivery of testimony in May 1982, took 7 months. Assignment milestones and actual elapsed time (in weeks and months) are presented on the next page.

For purposes of discussion, conducting a PODSE will be described in terms of (1) questions to be addressed, (2) considerations in selecting sample sites and sample respondents, (3) data gathering, (4) data analysis, and (5) presentation of the findings.

Questions to Be Addressed

It is clear from the discussion above that the PODSE approach is not designed to answer all possible questions a policymaker or administrator might have about a program. Rather, as mentioned earlier, the types of questions a PODSE can answer fall into four main categories: (1) program operations, (2) service delivery, (3) satisfaction with the program, and (4) problems in program operations and service delivery. Service delivery questions are distinguished from program operations questions in that the former pertain specifically to service delivery programs, a subset of the programs to which a PODSE can be applied.

The actual questions selected for a PODSE depend upon the program under review and the particular interests of congressional customers. Examples of the types of questions appropriate for a PODSE follow. Since time and cost constraints often force the PODSE user to rely on a relatively small, non-probability sample of sites, the phrasing of the questions reflects the assumption that program generalizations are not sought.

Table 1

Timeline for First PODSE Test

Milestone	Elapsed Time (Months and Weeks)							
	Oct.	Nov.	Dec.	Jan.	Feb.	Mar.	Apr.	May
	.----.	----.	----.	----.	----.	----.	----.	----.
Congressional concern and negotiation of research questions	- -							
Literature review	--	--						
Congressional/agency interviews		- -						
Exploratory visits to sites		---						
Characterization of program objectives/activities		-						
Formulation of evaluation issues	-	--						
Obtaining information and selecting sample sites		---	-					
Identification of respondent groups and selection procedures	-		-					
Development of data collection instruments			----	-				
Planning site visits			---					
Centralized training for staff				-				
Data collection				---	---			
Data analysis					--	----	-	
Drafting testimony							---	
Delivery of testimony								X

Selected Questions and Subquestions Appropriate for a PODSE

Program operations

1. What are the program's objectives?
   - What objectives are stated in the legislation, the legislative history, and the program regulations?
   - What are the objectives emphasized by program staff?

2. What program activities are performed?
   - How are program activities organized?
   - What are the characteristics and qualifications of the staff?
   - How many grantees and subgrantees are funded?

3. How does the program address the problem of fraud and abuse?
   - What types of internal controls and sanctions are written into program legislation and regulations?
   - What accountability mechanisms exist?
   - How is data confidentiality protected?
   - What personnel provisions exist for the maintenance of service delivery and program integrity?
   - What enforcement mechanisms or sanctions are in place?

Service delivery

1. What services are delivered?
   - What is the range of service offerings across sample sites?
   - What factors (e.g., client characteristics; funding level; Federal, State, local restrictions) seem to influence service offerings?

2. How are services delivered?
   - How do operating procedures of sample sites reflect the client characteristics (e.g., cultural, economic, health)?
   - Are services provided at a central location or are visits to more than one location required?

3. Who participates in the program?
   - What are the eligibility requirements for participation?
   - What is the range of recipient characteristics across sample sites?
   - How many clients are served?

4. Who provides program services?
   - What is the range of staff characteristics across sample sites?
   - How do staff qualifications and characteristics seem to affect the ability of service providers to provide services?

5. How does the program relate to other programs at the site?
   - How are program services tied to related services and community organizations at sample sites?
   - How does the level of coordination seem to affect the ease or difficulty clients experience in learning about program services?

Satisfaction with the program

1. Are staff and others associated with the program satisfied with program operations and service delivery at sample sites?
   - What are the perceptions about program strengths and weaknesses?
   - Do service offerings match perceptions about client needs?

2. Are clients at sample sites satisfied with service delivery?
   - Are clients satisfied with the choice of service offerings and service site locations?
   - Do the particular service offerings and points of view of service providers channel the resolution of client needs in acceptable or unacceptable ways?

Program operations and service delivery problems

1. Are there problems with the program's objectives?
   - Do national objectives match sample site objectives?

2. Are there problems in the structure of the program?
   - Are program activities consistent with program objectives?

3. Are there problems implementing the program as intended at sample sites?
   - Are program assumptions realistic in terms of site constraints?
   - Are program guidelines received and understood by program administrators and providers?
   - What difficulties do service sites experience in meeting the service requirements of the client population?

4. What are the characteristics of fraud and abuse problems?
   - Are clients getting the services for which grantees claim reimbursement?
   - What opportunities are there for employee fraud?
   - What program components (e.g., eligibility requirements) are vulnerable to fraud and abuse?

A PODSE is not appropriate for answering program effectiveness questions since it does not establish a comparison base. Data are collected at only one point in time. Also, if probability sampling is not used, program generalizations cannot be made.

The PODSE on the Runaway and Homeless Youth Program addressed questions in all four areas -- operations, service delivery, satisfaction with the program, and program operations

and service delivery problems. For example, under the question of how services are delivered, subquestions included: What are the physical and geographic characteristics of the centers? What procedures and activities do clients engage in during their center stay? How is the client's family involved in center activities? In another example, under the question of whether staff, clients, and others are satisfied with program operations and service delivery, subquestions included: Are staff perceived to be competent? What are the perceptions about the location and operational procedures of the center? What suggestions are there for program improvement?

In addition to providing descriptive information, a PODSE sheds light on whether program features match legislative requirements at the sites visited. In the first PODSE test, the evaluation team reviewed appropriate legislation, hearings, and other studies and identified intended characteristics of the target population, service offerings, staff qualifications, program settings, relationships with other programs, etc. Items on these characteristics were included in the data collection. With this information, the following types of questions were addressed:

--Did clients seem to have the characteristics envisioned by the Congress?

--Were clients receiving the services specified in the legislation?

--Did service providers, clients, and others think the program was important and functioning satisfactorily?

Considerations in Selecting Sample Sites and Sample Respondents

After the evaluation team identifies the evaluative questions, attention is turned to selection of sites and respondents. Carefully planned and executed sampling plans are as crucial to the success of a PODSE as they are to the successful completion of any empirical study. Although PODSE samples will often not be randomly drawn from populations, the sampled units must represent some of the diversity of the populations and must not be composed of unusual or extreme cases. Attention to diversity and avoidance of extreme cases lessens the chance that PODSE findings will be grossly uncharacteristic of the program as a whole.

Site Selection

Site selection occurs at two points in a PODSE. During the scoping and planning phase, the evaluation team interviews people at a small number of sites to confirm the importance of tentative evaluative issues, generate new issues if appropriate, develop and field test data collection instruments (e.g., questionnaires,

interview and observation guides), and determine realistic data collection procedures. Selecting a small number of exploratory sites with various characteristics is essential since what is learned from these sites has a major role in determining the final study plan. For example, during the scoping and planning phase of the PODSE test, the evaluation team visited and interviewed people at three runaway and homeless youth centers. In addition, the first site visited during the implementation phase was used to field test the data collection instruments, the procedures to be followed on site, and the time required to conduct the full complement of interviews.

During the implementation phase of a PODSE, a larger sample of sites is needed in order to approximate the diversity that exists in the program under review. The credibility of the sample is based on the procedures used to choose the sample sites. At the first step, the evaluation team identifies relevant stratification variables (e.g., program size, location, State, regional or local differences). The team then collects information about program sites in order to determine how they differ on the stratification variables. This information is then used to draw a sample of sites which takes into account the evaluative questions under study as well as time and cost constraints.

Two important considerations in determining the size of the sample include the likely variation among program sites and the size of the operating unit. Focusing on medical facilities where service offerings are highly prescribed, for example, may require fewer sites than focusing on one where service offerings are highly variable. Also, focusing on programs with small operating units (i.e., small numbers of providers, clients) may require a larger number of sites in order to obtain the viewpoints of a reasonably sized sample of staff, clients, and others.

In the PODSE test case, the evaluation team identified such relevant stratification variables as geographic location, amount of funding, and years of operation and then used information from program files and agency officials to draw a sample of 17 runaway and homeless youth centers in 13 states. The resulting sample contained a mix of large and small programs, urban and rural programs, sites with different types of facilities, etc. Because of time and cost constraints, and the fact that the Subcommittee which requested the PODSE did not seek information that needed to be generalized to the program as a whole, the evaluation team used a non-probability sample of program sites.

Respondent Selection

Selecting respondents is another PODSE task. One goal of a PODSE is to obtain information from various groups of respondents so that evaluative questions are addressed from a broad perspective. The relative mix of respondents (e.g., staff, clients,

others) included in the sample depends upon the evaluative questions to be addressed and the appropriate sources of the needed information.

Typically, public programs have a wide variety of people associated with them. The different types of people may include (1) program operators (e.g., administrators, managers, and other staff), (2) service providers (e.g., professionals and paraprofessionals), (3) clients (e.g., current, former, and eligible non-clients), and (4) others (e.g., State and regional administrators within whose jurisdiction the program falls, staff from related programs, interest group members).

One of the essential tasks during the scoping and planning phase of a PODSE is to identify relevant respondent groups. All appropriate levels and positions are identified and included in the review. Information from the exploratory sites and careful questioning of sample site administrators prior to data collection help ensure that appropriate, comparable sources of information are identified across sites. This means, for example, that in a shelter and counseling program such as the Runaway and Homeless Youth Program distinctions between counseling staff (e.g., non-resident paid and volunteer counselors, resident house parents, part-time group counselors, head counselors) had to be understood in order to allow the team to match the various information needs to the appropriate sources.

In this first PODSE test, the evaluation team identified 10 respondent groups as potential sources of relevant information. They included center directors, head counselors, volunteers, members of the center Board of Directors, clients, parents of former clients, school personnel, police, and referral and placement sources.

After targeting respondent groups, the evaluation team develops respondent selection procedures. Relatively informal procedures may be used at exploratory sites during the scoping and planning phase since its goals are to identify respondent groups and field test instruments and procedures rather than to collect comparable data across sites. More systematic procedures are developed and used at sample sites. Ideally, random sampling is employed, although time and cost constraints mean that random sampling of all respondent groups at every site is generally not possible.

The respondent selection procedures used at each of the runaway and homeless youth centers in the sample for the first PODSE test were relatively simple. For example, there was only one member of the center director and head counselor respondent groups at each of the centers. Also, meeting the quota of 4 counselors and 6 clients per center typically meant that all, or almost all, members of those groups were also selected. Less than ideal procedures were used for other respondent groups, however. For example, the evaluation team relied on the center

directors to identify service providers who worked closely with their programs. Although asking these people, in turn, to recommend other relevant respondents might have eliminated some of the potential bias, the risk of including less knowledgeable sources would have increased. The use of this expedient, with its corresponding threat to internal validity, meant that in the reporting of findings, the inclusion of appropriate caveats was essential.

Data Gathering

The PODSE approach is not characterized by any one data gathering technique. Rather, any available techniques may be selected that are appropriate to the evaluative questions to be addressed and to the time and cost constraints of the review. For example, in the first PODSE test, the evaluation team employed face-to-face and telephone interviews, observation of site operations and facilities, and a mail questionnaire for basic statistical information. Over a six-week period, nine GAO evaluators collected data from each of the 17 runaway and homeless youth centers in the sample, visiting each site for two-days and interviewing a total of 353 people.

An important attribute of a PODSE is replicability -- that is, employing methods of data collection and analysis which allow findings to be replicated. This means that the data collection and analysis procedures must be standard enough so that other evaluators would produce the same findings if they collected data at the same sites.

In the first PODSE test, instrument development and staff training were designed to ensure the replicability of the evaluation. Each interview guide contained the specific questions and follow-up probes that data collectors were to ask. Centralized staff training was used to teach data collectors the procedures to be followed while on site.

To guard against the receipt of inaccurate or incomplete interview information during the first PODSE test, the evaluation team used the following procedures. One was to offer a pledge of confidentiality so that respondents were not afraid to tell the truth. A second way was to elicit the same information from more than one member of different respondent groups in order to minimize the biases of any one group (e.g., administrators, counselors, clients). A third way was to report factual information that had been cross-validated by respondents at the same site and report discrepancies when they were found. Cross-validation was not essential for respondent opinions although widely divergent opinions at a site would have been a signal that follow-up work was required.

Data Analysis

The types of data analyses that are used in any particular PODSE depend upon the data collected and the questions to be addressed. In order to provide information as rapidly as possible, however, PODSE data analysis must be relatively simple and quick.

In the first PODSE test, many of the data collection items asked for easily codable, specific information. Development of a classification system for the types of open-ended questions used was also not difficult. For example, asking for program strengths and weaknesses elicited easily codable responses.

Analysis steps for the first PODSE test consisted of the following: (1) categorizing the responses to each data collection item, using the completed data collection forms or separately recorded notes, (2) tabulating frequencies of response categories per site and per respondent group within a site, and (3) summarizing the information across sites or across respondents as appropriate. Collecting the same information from the same set of respondent groups at each sample site ensured a minimum of missing data for the analysis stage of the field test.

In the first PODSE test, the choice of sites or respondents as the unit of analysis depended upon the nature of the data collection items. For information on operational features, center policies, and procedures (e.g., number of counseling sessions per week), a site level analysis was typically conducted. Relevant responses were analyzed to determine the consensus at a site and then summarized in terms of the proportion of sample sites evidencing the particular operating feature, procedure, or policy.

For opinions on program operations and service delivery, the respondent was typically the unit of analysis. In this case, relevant responses were summarized across sites and commonalities were identified. Idiosyncratic views, though potentially useful, were typically ignored because of time constraints.

Presentation of the Findings

PODSE findings describe commonalities and trends across sample sites. In addition, they may present brief case studies of one or more sites, and describe headquarters operations. In the PODSE test, the team presented the findings in terms of commonalities among sites and respondent groups. Although these findings could not be generalized to the program as a whole since a non-probability sample was used, they did indicate how the Runaway and Homeless Youth Program operated at a set of local

sites which had been carefully chosen to contain examples of the diversity within the program. We also drew conclusions about whether operating features at sample sites matched legislative requirements and identified several policy issues believed to be of congressional concern.

PODSE findings may be presented in congressional and agency briefings and testimony and in a written report. Since a strength of PODSE is to present information that is current, briefings and testimony are used whenever possible. Inclusion of appropriate caveats that reflect the balance of study strengths and weaknesses is an important element in the presentation of PODSE findings. In addition to preparing testimony, the evaluation team for the test case briefed the staff director of the requesting Subcommittee and agency officials. A report is in progress.

STRENGTHS

The PODSE approach for providing information to the Congress has a number of strengths. Relevance and timeliness are two of the most important. During the legislative, budget, and oversight processes, members of the Congress often need current program operations and service delivery information about projects either receiving Federal funds or for which there is potentially a Federal role. PODSE has been designed to meet the need for rapidly developed and relevant descriptive information.

In addition to relevance and timeliness, flexibility and replicability are important strengths of the PODSE approach. A PODSE has the capacity to be tailored to a variety of public programs as well as a variety of program operations and service delivery questions. Lastly, a PODSE employs methods of data collection, analysis, and reporting that allow both the evaluation and its findings to be replicated at the same sites by other evaluators. Obtaining the views of the program staff, participants, and others in a methodologically sound manner is valuable to members of the Congress because the information obtained should be more credible than anecdotal information acquired in less systematic ways (e.g., at oversight hearings).

LIMITATIONS

The main limitations of the PODSE approach stem from possible misunderstandings as to its objectives and from its emphasis on producing information rapidly. A PODSE is designed to provide descriptive information on program operations and service delivery; it is not designed to address effectiveness questions. Also, because of tight time constraints, a PODSE may not employ certain time-consuming techniques (e.g., repeated measures). A PODSE will typically use a non-probability sample of sites and thus findings cannot be generalized to the program

as a whole. This limitation is not a problem if the PODSE approach is used only in instances in which program generalizations are not sought.

Regarding the first application of PODSE to the Runaway and Homeless Youth Program, we judge this test to be a success given the scope of questions asked, their appropriateness to the PODSE approach, and the use planned for the findings. The primary limitation of this test concerns the nature of the Runaway and Homeless Youth Program. This program consists of a small universe of grantees and fairly well-defined operations and services. A larger, more complex program, in terms of the definitions of both clients and services, might uncover weaknesses in the approach. Thus, further tests of PODSE are needed and are now being planned.