



Five Elements to Include in Every Performance Dashboard

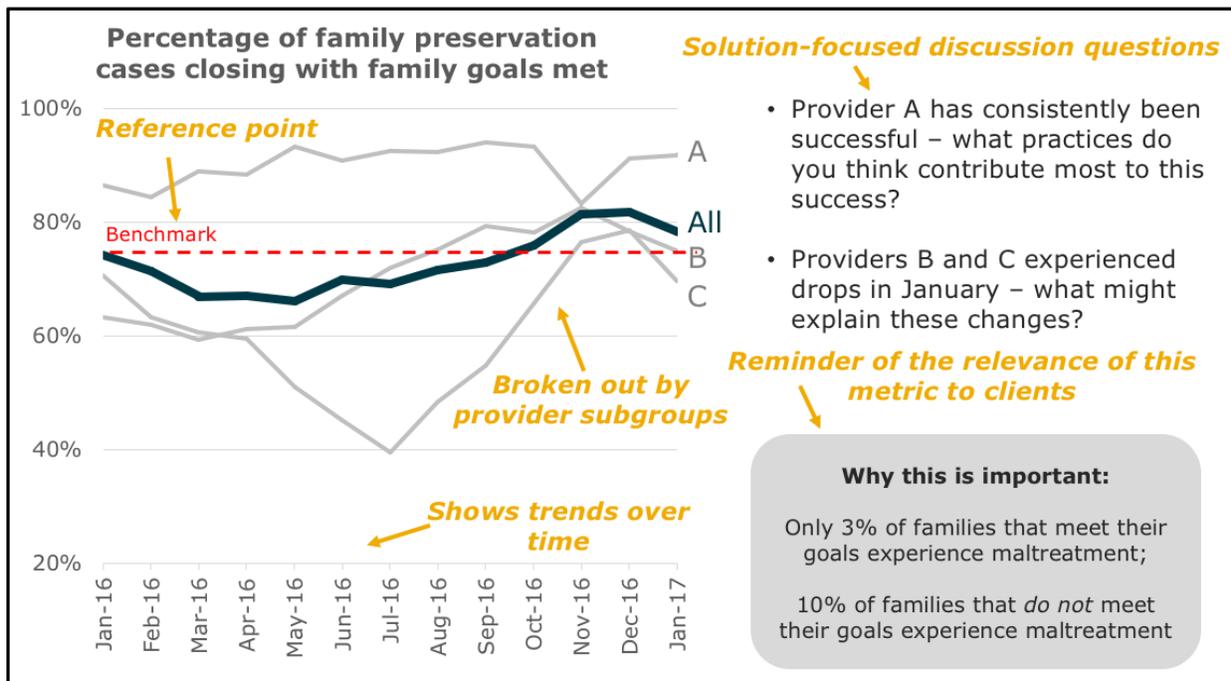
Managers everywhere use performance dashboards as a way to visualize project data and easily track program capacity, efficiency, and outcomes. In government, we have worked with public agencies to develop and use performance dashboards to monitor and improve the performance of internal units and contracted service providers.

Most of the agencies we have worked with have existing performance dashboards that they review with senior leadership. But the way these data are typically presented results in passive meetings that rarely generate new insights about agency operations or facilitate the identification of possible corrective actions.

In our work with dozens of state and local social services agencies, we have observed five design elements that should be integrated into every performance dashboard to enhance the likelihood that the data will lead to improvements in service delivery and outcomes for clients. These features are relevant for dashboards built both for active contract management of agency providers and performance improvement activities that are internally focused:

1. **Time series of the data** that shows trends at monthly intervals over time (ideally, going back at least 2 years). This enables leaders to easily notice when trouble emerges, to quickly assess seasonal drivers, and to monitor if operational changes produce the intended improvements.
2. **A benchmark, target, or reference line** that allows leaders to contextualize performance and determine the urgency of possible reforms.
3. **Disaggregation by operationally-meaningful subunits** (such as individual field offices or service providers), aiding leaders in identifying subunits with stronger practices that can be spread as well as subunits with weaker results (or more challenging clients) that may need additional support.
4. **Discussion questions and guidance for interpreting trends**, which together enable leaders and their teams to swiftly turn their attention to the discussion of possible operational changes. Developing effective questions for discussion often requires substantial pre-analysis by agency staff who have programmatic expertise.
5. **An explanation of how performance on this measure matters for client outcomes**, which facilitates the design of solutions focused on producing better outcomes rather than tighter compliance. It also disciplines agencies to reduce information overload for executives by focusing attention on the metrics that matter most.

Below is an example dashboard used to manage the performance of family preservation services, designed to keep children out of foster care, delivered by three service providers contracted by a public child welfare agency (providers A, B, and C). The dashboard contains the five elements to help drive performance discussions and action during regular [active contract management](#) meetings between agency and provider executives:



First, the example dashboard shows the trend over time so agency staff can easily tell if there have been improvements or drops in the percentage of cases closing with family goals met. Second, it shows this performance relative to a benchmark of 75% of cases closed with family goals met, so that providers and agency staff are able to easily determine whether or not current performance is strong. Third, it breaks down data by provider so that agency staff can easily tell that Provider A is performing strongly relative to the two other providers and look to them for best-practices to spread. Fourth, the dashboard suggests solution-focused discussion questions for a meeting with executives from the public agency and all three providers, such as what best practices can be learned from Provider A, and what may have caused a drop in January performance by Providers B and C. These questions are framed to enable shared learning and collaborative problem solving. Finally, it reminds staff why closing cases with family goals met is important: 10% of families who do not meet their goals experience maltreatment, compared to 3% of families who do meet their goals.

Designing dashboards with these five elements set up agency staff to create meaningful insights, and then actually use those to deliver improved outcomes. Data alone is often necessary but not sufficient to drive performance. Instead, agency and provider staff need to work together to use the data to identify challenges and implement practical solutions. Incorporating these five elements into performance dashboards can set the stage for those critical conversations.

For more guidance, see the GPL’s publication [Six Tools for Implementing Active Contract Management](#), or review an example of [Outcome and Process Metrics Developed for Seattle’s Homeless Services Contracts](#). For more information about active contract management strategies, including additional guidance and examples, visit the GPL’s [Active Contract Management](#) page.