

case study

# Measuring Impact in Practice:

*A Case Study of The Humane Society  
of the United States*

Beth Rosen Cohen

August 2010



**Center for  
Evaluation Innovation**

[www.evaluationinnovation.org](http://www.evaluationinnovation.org)



# Measuring Impact in Practice:

---

## *A Case Study of The Humane Society of the United States*

Beth Rosen Cohen

**T**he Humane Society of the United States (The HSUS) is the nation's largest animal protection organization.<sup>1</sup> Just like all nonprofits, The HSUS is accountable—to the thousands of animals it helps or protects each year, and to the thousands of individual, corporate, and foundation donors who enable The HSUS to fulfill its mission of celebrating animals and confronting cruelty.

Accountability requires that The HSUS communicate the impact of both its direct service work and its policy and advocacy efforts. In 2006, The HSUS increased its focus on evaluation and began working toward the development of an impact framework for measuring and reporting its results. This is the story of how this large and complex organization moved in a more outcomes-focused direction and created processes to support its data collection and reporting needs.

## Background

---

### The Organization

Founded in 1954, The HSUS serves as a mainstream force against animal cruelty, exploitation, and neglect. It works on behalf of all animals, including wildlife, farm animals, companion animals, and animals used in research. The HSUS's work includes direct services and advocacy efforts. It crafts policy standards and drives positive policy changes at the local, state, and national levels.

In 2004, a visionary CEO took the helm of The HSUS and sought to elevate the organization's focus on achieving concrete results for animals. By 2006, when development of the impact framework began, The HSUS had an operating budget of more than \$125 million, over 10 million constituents, and over 450 staff.

### The Context

The HSUS had for years relied mainly on anecdotal storytelling as a communications and evaluation tool. It told compelling and often emotional stories of how the organization achieved change. This approach was useful in spreading its message to key stakeholders (e.g., its members, Board of Directors, and the media). However, The HSUS lacked a comprehensive, cohesive, and consistent way of defining and measuring its impact.

Prior to 2006, departments were asked to complete monthly reports, but were given few guidelines on what to report. Not every department submitted monthly reports, and reports that were submitted were not consistent with each other. There was no suggested length for the reports or specifications for content. Also, most contained

<sup>1</sup> "Largest" as defined by operating budget and membership base.

lists of activities, without specifying what those activities accomplished. This resulted in many reports being so long that they were never thoroughly reviewed. The reports were primarily useful in helping staff to recount what they had done when they were asked to submit content for the annual report and various reports to the Board, but they were of little use to The HSUS in terms of improving programs or adjusting strategy.

At the time, there was growing pressure in the philanthropic sector to measure not just results, but the “right” results. The HSUS Board of Directors was also looking for a more systematic accounting of the organization’s work. To address these pressures, The HSUS formed a small Office of Planning and Evaluation (with one evaluator) reporting to an organization executive. The Office was charged with developing a structure to help staff better articulate their work and to evaluate how successful staff programs were, given the constraints of time and money. The Office was given broad autonomy to develop and test such a structure and, with executive-level support, implement it across the organization.

## The Challenges

Moving The HSUS in a more outcomes-focused direction involved two main challenges. First, as with most nonprofits, employees of The HSUS prefer to actively help the abused or less fortunate, rather than sit at their desks completing reports. Strategic processes and measurement reports, though integral to the success of great organizations, are often seen as impediments to the real work of the organization. For short-term efforts, evaluation is often seen as difficult, because the work involves very quick responses to external events. For long-term campaigns, evaluation is perceived as daunting, unpredictable, and distracting. For any evaluation effort to succeed, staff needed to accept a new way of thinking about how evaluation could help them.

The second challenge was defining outcomes and impacts for an organization that has animals as its primary beneficiaries. In the case of human service organizations, service recipients can be surveyed and monitored to determine outcomes and impact directly. In the case of The HSUS, its primary service recipients—the animals—obviously cannot speak for themselves. Therefore, attempts to measure impact had to focus on human stakeholders and on the systems developed to advance animal protection, supplemented by data specifically related to the animals where possible. Assessment of outcomes and impact needed to capture the behavior changes of people who were in a position to have a positive or negative effect on animals’ well-being. This way of thinking about the role of The HSUS and its outcomes was new for many within the organization.

## Getting Started With Outcomes Reporting

---

### *Step One: Teaching staff to use logic models*

The evaluator began by asking program staff to articulate their work, not as simply activities, but as activities that led to tangible and meaningful results. To facilitate this way of thinking, staff members were taught the basics of logic modeling which asked them to identify the outputs and outcomes that resulted from their activities.<sup>2</sup> The evaluator held group seminars, met one-on-one with program directors, and supplied written feedback on draft logic models.

At first, department heads were not given any restrictions on their logic models. For example, in the 2006 planning for the 2007 budget process, department heads could submit as many outcomes as they wanted to the budget committee, regardless of budgetary constraints, as long as they supported those outcomes with logical outputs and activities. In most cases, the resulting submissions were either too ambitious for the time and resources available, or not ambitious enough. Department heads wanted to adjust their outcomes when they had to report

<sup>2</sup> The concepts of “inputs” and “impacts” (other common logic model elements) were not introduced until later, to avoid overwhelming staff who already felt that logic modeling was challenging, and because most departments did not have the resources to effect change at the organizational level (impacts are seen as the cumulative results of organizational outcomes). Furthermore, staff seemed more comfortable with short-term outcomes that related directly to their own work, rather than with longer-term changes for the whole organization.

against them—for instance, many heads wanted to reduce the number of their outcomes or reword them to be more tangible.

One drawback of allowing staff to create as many outcomes as they wished was that the evaluator, the budget committee, and the Board were all burdened with reviewing too many outcomes, and in turn too many logic model sequences. The number of outcomes began to shrink as staff became more familiar with the process and understood how to prioritize tangible short-term outcomes within the landscape of long-term outcomes. However, there were still too many outcomes in play, and not enough discussion about joint outcomes between departments. It became clear that, while middle managers were beginning to articulate their work in a logical, outcomes-focused way, senior management needed to provide additional direction, especially concerning outcomes that spread across multiple departments.

Another challenge in this process was adhering to basic logic model practice while recognizing its inadequacies. What was clearly missing in the modeling process was the incorporation of strategy, or the strategic thinking that underscored the outcomes, outputs, and activities chosen. In some cases, staff were impatient with listing activities and preferred to focus on outputs or even outcomes. In other cases, staff could easily list significant activities but could not tie them to tangible outputs. For example, much of HSUS's corporate policy reforms involve a series of meetings between HSUS staff and company representatives. These meetings usually result in the proposed reforms, or the outcomes themselves, rather than specific outputs. This led the evaluator to consider if outputs are always necessary in logic modeling. The articulation of activities and outputs proved essential later in the process when department heads were asked to estimate the time and resources spent on achieving a successful outcome.

### *Step Two: Linking outcomes planning with budget planning*

Integrating outcomes thinking into organizational budgets allows for a prioritizing of outcomes based on resources. It helps organizations to take a realistic look at what it will take to achieve their outcomes. Traditionally, however, nonprofits organize their budgets by department, project, or expense type (e.g., printing fees, office supplies, travel, consultants, etc.), and this had long been the case for The HSUS.

The evaluator, therefore, had some difficulty in persuading department heads to begin to plan their budgets around the outcomes they hoped to achieve and then track their expenses accordingly. Moreover, an outcome was often the result of activities across multiple departments (for example, a federal executive policy change about factory farming would involve the farm animal department, the government affairs department, the litigation department, the public relations department, the online communication department, and the investigations department).

In a large organization, changing the budget process from a focus on departments or functions to a focus on outcomes is a major challenge. In this instance, outcomes were included in the budget process by incorporating departmental logic models into the budget documents submitted to the Board for 2007, 2008, and 2009. Over time, more departments became comfortable with connecting budgets to outcomes.

### *Step Three: Creating a more user-friendly way to report against logic modeling*

For the 2008 calendar year, a Web-based reporting program was developed to give staff a consistent platform to report progress against their outcomes. The Office of Planning and Evaluation, with the help of a computer programmer, created this custom system on a shoestring budget (around \$15,000). The reporting system offered more control over the process, such as ensuring that the outcomes remained unchanged, and limiting the length of certain fields to encourage staff to write only the most critical information. The evaluator could type comments directly into the reports, track a department's progress in completing a report, and produce quarterly or annual reports for all departments. The following is an example of one page of one report.

## Animal Research Issues

4th Quarter 2007      *Completed*

**OUTCOME: Chimp Campaign: Introduction & co-sponsorship of federal legislation.**

**STATUS: Draft of bill submitted to Congress Office of General Counsel, Chimp Act amendments became law.**

OUTPUT	ACTIVITY
3 original sponsors in the House of Representatives	1. Met with sponsors and potential co-sponsors of the bill (secured one more original sponsor).
Finish draft of legislation	1. Finalized the language of the legislation and submitted to Congress Office of General Counsel.
Amend CHIMP Act (signed into public law)	1. Provided input on letter to members of Congress in support of CHIMP Act, communicated with groups working on bill.
Questionnaire/survey for private companies on chimpanzee use	1. Finalized and sent letter to 384 pharmaceutical companies to determine extent of chimpanzee use.
Campaign launch, public action and media coverage	1. Launched online campaign; over 30,000 people took the chimp quiz and 15,000 people contacted Public Health Service. 2. Published press release and web story regarding chimpanzee knowledge survey, picked up by United Press International and Los Angeles radio station. 3. Submitted letter to the <i>NY Times</i> —was published.
Scientist support: total of 279 signatures	1. Contacted scientists via our campaign launch: got 13 additional signatures of support. 2. Secured symposium slot for upcoming International Primatological Society meeting; coordinated seven speakers and their abstract submission. 3. Submitted paper for proceedings of the Sixth World Congress on Alternatives.
Strategy for providing chimpanzees in laboratories with sanctuary	1. Wrote to National Institutes of Health and urged adoption of standards for the national sanctuary system.

**OUTCOME: Chimp Campaign: Decision by Fish & Wildlife Service or courts to list captive chimpanzees as endangered under the Endangered Species Act.**

**STATUS: Petition not filed yet due to external factors; chimpanzee research summaries completed.**

OUTPUT	ACTIVITY
Funding to contribute petition work	1. Provided information for the Lemmon Foundation: helped to secure \$5000. 2. Updated evidence summaries as needed.
Updated evidence summaries	1. Provided input on letter to members of Congress in support of CHIMP Act, communicated with groups working on bill. 2. Finalized and sent letter to 384 pharmaceutical companies.

**OUTCOME: Chimp Campaign: NIH decision to extend its chimp breeding moratorium when it is up for reconsideration in 2007.**

**STATUS: No longer pursuing: sanctuary is temporarily full.**

**OUTCOME: Class B Dealers: 20% drop in # of leading institutions still using random dogs/cats from Class B dealers.**

**STATUS: Outreach to institutions on hold until federal legislative option plays out.**

Departments were required to provide quarterly status updates in the system for each outcome, even if there was no information to report or no work done. This was to remind staff that they were accountable for the outcomes they had submitted.

Report quality varied among departments. Roughly one third of the departments took the process seriously, met with the evaluator multiple times during a quarter, and showed improvement in the correct use of terminology. For example, the evaluator observed instances where staff presented their work in terms of outcomes and outputs at inter-departmental meetings. One department received a six-figure foundation gift, which staff felt was significantly linked to their outcomes work. Several department heads told the evaluator that the process had modified their strategic priorities and helped them to better focus their work; this was evident in their quarterly reports. Another third of HSUS departments submitted their reports, but with minimal effort, frequent misuse of terminology, and minimal detail on what work was actually done. The final third felt threatened by the process, and the evaluator spent a significant amount of time pursuing those departments for data and often completing the reports for them. But by early 2008, all departments had completed reports for the 2007 calendar year, and the organization had sufficient data to start building an impact framework.

## Developing an Organizational Impact Framework

---

The process of logic modeling and outcomes reporting revealed the need for a larger organization-wide impact framework that could unify, prioritize, and simplify outcome measures. The HSUS climate was ripe for the development of such a framework. The organization already sensed the multitude of ways in which it could operate and communicate its work, for example, by mission; by core operating values (e.g., engagement, cooperation, innovation); by the types of animals it seeks to protect; by areas of tactical expertise (e.g., emergency services, litigation, educational training); or by the types of cruelty affecting animals (e.g., factory farming, animal fighting, fur trading, sport hunting). The challenge came in prioritizing and ultimately choosing which approach would form the basis of the framework.

### *Step One: Conducting workshops to start the process*

In the fall of 2007, the CEO agreed to a process for creating an impact framework that could consolidate and effectively communicate organization-wide impacts and outcomes. A consultant was hired to facilitate two half-day workshops to initiate the process.

Prior to the workshops, an outcomes catalog was constructed that organized and consolidated outcomes under several themes: public policy, financial, corporate reform, direct care/services for animals, innovation, education/engagement, visibility/brand awareness, and international. The catalog also indicated where more than one department reported against the same outcome, the type of animal involved per outcome, and where outcome themes tended to overlap. For example, a visibility outcome could overlap with a public policy outcome if the visibility outcome directly influenced a public policy change. This outcomes information, which was discussed during the workshops, became the foundation for the impact framework.

### *Step Two: Developing the overall framework*

Senior leadership was then engaged in discussions about the framework's structure. This resulted in conversations about what strategies the organization should emphasize. For example, organizational capacity became a hot topic with some arguing the framework's focus should be on systematic change affecting animals, while others felt that ensuring the organization's legacy and health was also very important.

After multiple drafts and extensive feedback from senior management and the outside facilitator, the impact framework was completed. In one page, it highlighted the breadth and scope of the organization's intended

results. The impact areas point to how the organization perceives itself and how it planned to engage external stakeholders. The outcomes show the context in which The HSUS seeks to measure its impact.

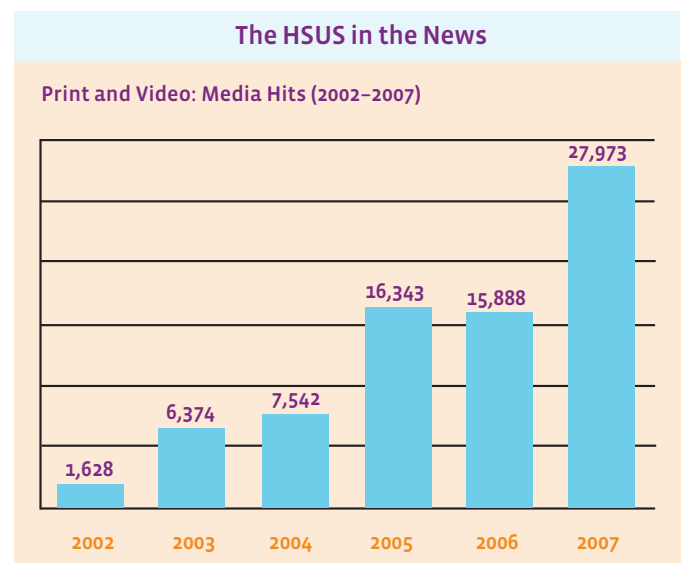
<b>The HSUS Impact Framework</b> <b>Celebrating Animals   Confronting Cruelty</b>				
<b>IMPACT AREAS</b>				
<b>PUBLIC POLICY</b> Increasing the scope and enforcement of animal protection laws and policies	<b>CORPORATE POLICY</b> Initiating and expanding humane corporate policies and products	<b>EDUCATION &amp; ENGAGEMENT</b> Broadening respect, compassion, and professionalism for animals	<b>DIRECT CARE &amp; SERVICE</b> Improving the rescue and care of animals	<b>ORGANIZATIONAL CAPACITY</b> Ensuring the HSUS's ability to make positive change for animals
<b>OUTCOMES</b>				
Broaden and strengthen animal protection statuses and regulations.	Influence corporations to change their policies to improve the treatment of animals.	Mobilize, train, and professionalize the animal protection movement.	Provide care, rescue, and expertise for animals during natural or human-caused emergencies.	Maintain strong financial performance.
Ensure that existing animal protection laws and policies are enforced.	Drive innovation in the marketplace by facilitating the creation of humanely produced goods.	Build partnerships with professionals and movements outside of animal protection.	Provide shelter, care, and expertise for abandoned or injured animals in situations lacking adequate support.	Increase organizational effectiveness and efficiency.
Persuade policy thought leaders to include humane ideas in their agenda and practices.	Persuade consumers to modify their spending habits in favor of humane products.	Heighten the visibility of animal protection issues within the public at large and drive public debate on HSUS priorities.	Professionalize the animal care field by having agencies meet higher standards of practice.	Diversify HSUS support base.
<b>Core Operating Values: Mainstream, Engagement, Effectiveness, Visibility, Cooperation, Innovation</b>				

### Step Three: Identifying progress indicators for the framework

The completion of the impact framework was not the end of getting the organization to describe its progress in terms of outcomes. If an impact framework is the skeleton within a body, the progress indicators are the muscle that gives the body definition and keeps it going.

The framework's launch and the process leading up to it led to discussion on how to develop organization-wide progress indicators that would illustrate the outcomes and provide more precision on The HSUS's progress. One approach was to look at trend data for certain success indicators. For example, the chart at right shows the remarkable progress the organization had made in penetrating the mainstream media.

Rather than focus solely on the total number of media clips, discussion began on how to develop more telling measures that would suggest The HSUS is making genuine progress in its media work. Such measures could include, for example:



Source: The HSUS Annual Report 2007



- The number and type of clips (e.g., print opinion editorials, television appearances, and web stories incorporating HSUS video);
- The number of clips tied to HSUS victories in other impact areas;
- The number of appearances in major media outlets (e.g., The Oprah Winfrey Show, *The New York Times*);
- The amount of dedicated coverage (appearances where HSUS and its work are the focal point); and
- The number of times The HSUS was solicited by the media for expert opinion.

### Step Four: Making sure progress indicators were meaningful

The HSUS tends to focus its reporting on broad numbers. The two examples that follow demonstrate the thinking that occurred around how to make HSUS indicators more meaningful.

**Public Policy Indicators:** The 2008 annual report lists the total number of state and federal laws passed related to HSUS advocacy. This number, on its own, does not show whether the organization broadened the scope of animal protection. Impact is determined by meaningful systemic change; if the legislation is not leading to such change, the numbers carry little meaning. One way to better evaluate the significance of legislation passed—at least at the state level—is by creating a value-based scale such as the one at right.

Scale for Assessing the High, Medium, or Low Impact “Value” of Public Policy Changes	
Preliminary Criteria (meet at least two in relevant category)	
HIGH	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ HSUS is the lead player throughout the process</li> <li>■ Addresses 1+ of the top five HSUS Priority Issue Areas</li> <li>■ Affects greater than 100K animals</li> <li>■ Sets policy precedent</li> </ul>
MEDIUM	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ HSUS is a supporting player in the process</li> <li>■ Addresses 1+ of the top HSUS Priority Issue Areas</li> <li>■ Affects greater than 50K animals</li> </ul>
LOW	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ HSUS is involved but does not have a leadership role</li> </ul>

This scale addresses matters that are important to The HSUS, such as the organization’s engagement during the legislative process and the type of precedents set. Staff were asked to evaluate their legislative victories using the criteria above. The point was to get the organization to look at whether it affected high-impact legislation over time, and if it was directing resources toward high-yield victories.

**Membership Engagement Indicators:** The HSUS tended to treat all members the same, regardless of their level of engagement with the organization. The organization is now moving toward engaging members and advocacy partners in more nuanced ways. Identifying indicators based on engagement level is more significant than looking at the total number of online members, for example, or the total number of donors (regardless of giving amount or frequency of giving). The graphic on the next page shows an example of an engagement scale that might be used with members; it highlights activism and fundraising—two very important components to The HSUS with regard to its online community.

### Step Five: Incorporating the framework into outcomes reporting

Once the CEO unveiled the impact framework to the organization in May 2008, the evaluator added the framework outcomes to the quarterly reporting system. Staff began to catalog their work (outputs and outcomes) within the context of the framework. For the 2009 budget cycle, data were submitted across the organization for the framework’s fifteen outcomes, and the organization began to gain a sense of how much time and money were directed toward each impact and outcome.



## Scale for Assessing the High, Medium, or Low Impact “Value” of Public Policy Changes



## Lessons Learned

The first lesson was that an impact framework was needed to truly unify, prioritize, and simplify outcomes reporting. This meant valuing and building on the work that had already been done, but moving the organization to a more manageable and prescriptive framing of results.

The second lesson was that for a framework to function effectively, a significant majority of staff and departments had to perceive the framework (or at least part of it) as directly relevant to their work. But the framework also needed to include future outcomes, not related to current work. For example, The HSUS directed comparatively little staff time and resources to corporate reform, especially on consumer behavior change. By including this outcome in the framework, the organization pledged to invest more in such work. Though it is not carved in stone, an impact framework must carry an organization several years into the future. Constant modification would damage the credibility of the framework, and even potentially damage the organization’s reputation.

Third, the process of developing and using an impact framework had unexpected benefits. For example, the impact framework improved staff morale, staff identified their work as being part of a larger picture (framework copies were displayed in cubicles and common areas), and departmental silos seemed to break down somewhat. A number of outside visitors specifically asked for copies of the impact framework when they saw it displayed in conference rooms in the headquarters building. There were also unexpected benefits in the form of high-level strategy discussions and decisions. For example, while The HSUS has always been involved in the direct rescue and care of animals, this work was not seen as a priority area within the organization. Since the impact framework was introduced, this has changed and the organization has increased its number of direct care interventions and has acquired one of the nation’s largest wildlife care centers.

Fourth, the process of creating an impact framework at The HSUS required a dramatic shift in organizational culture. It is important to recognize that, as with most cultural shifts, an impact framework will not be sustainable without a loyal following, a strong leadership base, and external pressure validating or driving the shift.

Finally, this process suggested the benefits a large, complex organization could derive from having an executive-level officer devoted to impact. A Chief Impact Officer would have the impetus to mobilize staff and other executive leadership while establishing a new communications approach with donors and other organizations focused on large-scale impact. Until more organizations recognize the merits of such a position, however, internal evaluators must continue to pave the way.

***Beth Rosen Cohen** is an independent consultant based in Washington D.C. She works with foundations and nonprofits to develop performance measurement frameworks and to construct and write performance reports and research articles. She also guides and trains program staff on research and evaluation. Beth worked at The Humane Society of the United States from 2001-2010. For five of those years, she was Director of Planning and Evaluation. Email Beth at [bero6689@gmail.com](mailto:bero6689@gmail.com).*

**The Center for Evaluation Innovation** is a nonprofit effort that is pushing evaluation practice in new directions and into new arenas. The Center specializes in areas that are hard to measure and where fresh thinking and new approaches are required. These areas include advocacy, communications, and systems change. The Center works with other organizations to develop and then share new ideas and solutions to evaluation challenges through research, training development, and convening. [www.evaluationinnovation.org](http://www.evaluationinnovation.org)