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Understanding the potential for Multidisciplinary Threat Assessment and Management Teams to prevent terrorism: Conducting a formative evaluation of the MassBay Threat Assessment Team

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Summary of the Project

Major Goals and Objectives

The overall **purpose** of this grant was to identify a model for how a community-based Multidisciplinary Threat Assessment Teams (MTAMTs), inclusive of a collaborative governance network of community agencies and providers, can operate in the service of identifying and engaging individuals at-risk for Radicalization to Violence (RV) in needed supports, e.g. mental health care. The **primary goal** of this grant was to conduct a formative evaluation and evaluability assessment of an FBI-convened team in Massachusetts, the MassBayTAT, and its associated multidisciplinary collaborative governance network. A **secondary goal** was to identify, describe and learn from diverse MTAMTs using environmental scan methods; we then used this information to iteratively enhance and evaluate short-term outcomes of MassBayTAT operations, thereby building the evidence base for effective prevention of terrorism. To achieve these goals we used descriptive (simple and comparative) and qualitative research designs. Specific aims, objectives and planned methods used to accomplish our primary and secondary goals are outlined below:

Specific Aim 1: To conduct descriptive research of existing MTAMTs currently in operation

Objective 1. To identify and comparatively analyze the operations and essential functions of MTAMTs across the United States.

Specific Aim 2: To conduct a formative evaluation of the MassBayTAT

Objective 1. To develop an implementation guide, logic model, and approach to fidelity monitoring for the MassBayTAT in preparation for formative evaluation

Objective 2. To conduct a formative evaluation of the MassBayTAT and to assess its evaluability for a future outcomes evaluation.

Project Design and Implementation

Approach to Accomplishing Specific Aim 1

Aim 1, Objective 1: To identify and comparatively analyze the operations and essential functions of community-based MTAMTs across the United States.

Research Questions. Specifically, we sought to answer the following research questions: What is required (i.e., the key inputs) to run an MTAMT? How are these inputs contributing to program functioning? What are the essential functions or key activities of a MTAMT that are integral to fidelity? How does each MTAMT define success? What are the indicators (i.e., clearly defined practitioner behaviors and activities used to guide assessment of fidelity to the program) and associated data collection processes that MTAMTs use to track program effectiveness accordingly? In what ways do MTAMTs across the country operate similarly? In what ways do they diverge from one another? Are there universal challenges to MTAMT implementation? What strategies are used for building trust within teams? What are the components of a MTAMT that require region- or context-specific adaptations?

Methods. Data to accomplish Aim 1, Objective 1 was collected through an environmental scan, which included qualitative interviews with key informants. The present environmental scan included: (1) a list of existing community-based MTAMTs in the United States with relevance for terrorism prevention; (2) when available, obtaining documents and written material that describe the goals, composition, and/or operations of each MTAMT; and (3) identifying prospective key informants for interviews.

Identification of MTAMTs and Document Review. These teams were identified through an online search and consultation with key informants/collaborators (e.g., Dr. Fein, Dr. Schouten, SSA LeBlanc, U.S. Attorney's Office). Documents and written material were obtained

through both an online search (e.g., scan of website content, newspaper media, academic literature, and other resources available in the public domain) and direct contact with MTAMT members. Written material included both published and unpublished documents such as program manuals, working papers, reports, white papers, and evaluations.

Key Informant Interviews. The research team conducted qualitative interviews with key informants with MTAMT experience. Key informants with MTAMT experience were identified and recruited using snowball sampling. These interviews included qualitative questions to examine group operations and processes for assessing, responding to, and tracking risk for RV in addition to successes and challenges to implementation. The development of an interview guide was guided by themes that emerged from analysis of written material collected through the environmental scan, as well as a priori questions brought by our team. Qualitative interviews were conducted through a HIPAA compliant, web-based video conferencing platform of the participant's choice. With participant permission, interviews were audio recorded to facilitate transcription. Consent forms did not have participant names but included Study IDs, which were linked to participant names in a linkage key. This linkage key was housed in a separate password protected folder than the interview data on a secure virtual BCH storage space.

During the interview, interviewees were not allowed to share any identifying information about a case; similarly, no questions were asked about specific cases. When possible, multiple members of an MTAMT were interviewed to evaluate the presence of similarities and differences in perspectives by service sector involvement or by designated role (e.g., convener/leadership vs. collaborative partner).

Data Analytic Approach. Material was analyzed using inductive qualitative content analysis, a research method that is a “systematic and objective means of describing and

quantifying phenomena” (Elo & Kyngas, 2007). This inductive analytic process was used to extract themes from teams’ written materials and qualitative interview transcripts. Specifically, all written material collected as part of the environmental scan were organized for inductive qualitative content analysis. Through this process, we used established coding methods and criteria to characterize important themes shared by all groups and the relative importance of these themes in subgroups. First, codes were attached to segments of text, through which a provisional coding schema was created. Each coder coded a subset of documents and presented the analysis to other members of the research team. The themes and issues were compared, and the list of codes were constructed through a consensus process among the research team members. This scheme was then applied to each document and revised as needed by the group, to create more focused codes and to allow for an iterative process which helps to assure that the identified themes would assist in answering the research questions of interest (Charmaz, 2006). The codebook as well as any notes or memos by project staff taken in the initial review of the data was entered along with background information on each MTAMT to allow for a comparison between teams.

Qualitative data analysis was iterative, first using single codes and examining each MTAMT separately. Searches will also be performed to look at multiple codes and categories (e.g., patterns across MTAMTs). A final analytic step moved beyond classification of the data and evaluated whether or not linkages exist between/among particular categories. Findings pertaining to the operations and essential functions of community-based MTAMTs were included in the developed logic model and brief (Aim 2, Objective 1).

———***Step 3: Comparative Analysis of Programs and Development of Overarching MTAMT Logic Model.*** Pulling on all data and analyses gathered through the environmental scan, our team

developed a summary table of critical resources (i.e., the inputs included in a logic model) and essential functions (i.e., the program activities/implementation strategies in a logic model) of a community-based MTAMT; each MTAMT included in the environmental scan was compared based on the presence/absence of these inputs and activities. This summary table, along with additional thematic analyses, informed the development of an overarching logic model including resources, activities, and outputs for community-based MTAMTs. This general model was used to inform the development of the MassBayTAT logic model (Aim 2, Objective 1).

To further address Aim 1 Objective 1, we conducted additional qualitative analyses to provide a general evaluation of team functioning and effectiveness. The developed thematic codes were modeled using recommendations reflected in Wooten (2014). These codes were adapted iteratively, such that team members coded each interview independently using identified codes. Coders then presented analysis to the group and codes were adjusted based on results. After codes were finalized, all members of the team coded one team's transcript and a met to ensure consistency. Following, all teams' materials (i.e., transcripts and notes from all interviews and written material) were coded by at least one coder. In line with Wooten (2014), scores were developed to indicate the level to which teams reflected the codes ranging from 0 "not present" to 3 "high." Teams were scored based on these anchors and provided a number for each evaluation factor (i.e., outcome evaluation and process evaluation). Scores for the outcome evaluation factor reflect the level to which teams demonstrate effectiveness as defined by demonstrating a threat assessment approach, program growth, and violence interruption. The scores for the process evaluation factor reflect the level to which programs are developed, as defined by identified multidisciplinary team vision, charter, and goals, demonstration of

established meeting structure, management, and coordination, and external communication and collaboration.

Approach to Accomplishing Specific Aim 2, Objective 1

Aim 2, Objective 1. The proposed aim 2 objective 1 included developing an implementation guide, logic model, and approach to fidelity monitoring for the MassBayTAT in preparation for formative evaluation. However, MassBayTAT is a team that continues to develop and improve throughout the evaluation process. As such, it was determined to be premature to develop an implementation guide or fidelity monitoring at this time.

Research Questions to Inform Implementation Guide, Logic Model and Fidelity

Monitoring. We sought to answer the following research questions: What are MassBayTAT's procedures and processes for identifying individuals at risk for RV and preventing subsequent violence? Are the roles of different team members well understood? Do additional team members need to be added in order to support terrorism prevention efforts? If so, how is motivation for participation generated? Are activities required to facilitate trust between different team members? How does each service sector participate in the development of a mitigation strategy? Are referral criteria well operationalized and understood? Are effective organizational supports in place (e.g., effective scheduling/management of team members, leadership monitoring of program activities, etc.)? To what degree do the key inputs and activities identified through quantitative and qualitative analysis (Aim 1) inform development of MassBayTAT's logic model? What additional inputs and activities need to be present for MassBayTAT to be implemented with fidelity? And what data collection processes need to be in place in order to monitor fidelity?

Methods. Aim 2, Objective 1 was accomplished through a combination of document review, qualitative interviews, and usability testing, described further below.

MassBayTAT Document Review. Notes from attended meetings past agendas, and post-meeting interviews with the MassBayTAT coordinator de-identified mitigation strategies were from previously triaged cases were collected and analyzed in order to improve our understanding of how the MassBayTAT team functions, requirements for and consistency of participation, necessary organizational supports, and the protocol for mitigation of an identified threat. From August 2021 until September 2022, a team member attended consultation meetings and took notes using a notes template developed by the research team. The note template included information about the meeting process (e.g., meeting attendees, participation during the meeting) and identified mitigation strategies. No direct or confidential information about the case was collected during this meeting.

Findings from the MassBayTAT document review, meeting notes, and coordinator interviews review were compared and contrasted with findings from the environmental scan of community-based MTAMTs across the country (Aim 1, Objective 1) with a focus on the degree to which key inputs and activities identified through the environmental scan should inform development of MassBayTAT's logic model.

Qualitative Interviews. Members of the MassBayTAT for qualitative interviews (N = 9). These individuals ranged in educational backgrounds, expertise, and role within the MassBayTAT. The project team developed a qualitative interview guide informed by results of the MassBayTAT document review and findings from Aim 1, Objective 1. The interview guide

was developed to better understand: (1) how motivation for participation is generated; (2) strategies for building trust within the team; (3) procedures and processes for identifying and responding to individuals at risk for RV; and (4) team members' perceived role in carrying out a mitigation strategy. Interviews included themes or areas of interest that emerge from analysis of the documents. Qualitative interviews were administered to 9 consenting members of the MassBayTAT, and were audio recorded to facilitate transcription. Interviewees were not allowed to share any identifying information about a case.

Interview transcripts were analyzed using deductive qualitative content analysis. We coded MassBayTAT interview transcripts using a coding scheme established based on the environmental scan/key informant interviews conducted under Aim 1. We used the previously established coding scheme to attach codes and categories to segments of text. Emergent themes that did not fit within the established coding scheme were discussed. Upon unanimous agreement, the coding scheme was iteratively adjusted and new codes were added to the codebook. Searches were also performed to look at multiple codes and categories, providing the research team with counts of and quotes from each code and category of interest. These analyses complemented and interacted with findings from the document review to inform development of an implementation guide, fidelity monitoring tool, and a preliminary logic model for usability testing.

Usability Testing. Usability testing aimed to clarify the following: Are program components (inputs, activities, and outputs), as defined in the preliminary logic model being carried out and achieved? If not, why not? What could be changed in order to achieve success?

Do program components need to be revised? In partnership with the MassBayTAT, we defined research questions for usability testing, which involved selecting key inputs, activities, and outputs from the preliminary logic model and testing these components to ensure they are operating as intended. Testing program components under real-world conditions reveals whether they function as planned and identifies issues. It also facilitates data-driven decision making and continuous quality improvement, which guide the finalization of a logic model.

Approach to Accomplishing Specific Aim 2, Objective 2

***Aim 2, Objective 2:** To conduct a formative evaluation of the MassBayTAT and to assess its evaluability for a future outcomes evaluation.*

Proposed Methods. Given that the MassBayTAT continues to refine operations and is continuously updating their manual as they iteratively improve, it was premature to develop a fidelity tool and conduct a formative evaluation. The logic model serves as a foundation for identifying aspects of fidelity should they be ready to conduct a summative evaluation in the future.

Expected applicability

Aim 1, Objective 1. Findings from aim 1 were used to inform aim 2.. Further, findings and outputs (as reviewed in the accomplishments section) can be utilized to inform the development of threat assessment teams as well as informed valuation of established community-based threat assessment teams.

Aim 2, Objective 1. Findings from aim 2 (as reviewed in the accomplishments section) can be used as a guide to inform future evaluation of the MassBayTAT as well as serve as a resource to inform the development of fidelity monitoring tools for threat assessment teams in the future.

Participants and other collaborating organizations

Specific Aim 1

The environmental scan resulted in the identification of 12 community-based threat assessment teams. Of these teams, 25 members consented to be interviewed for this study over the course of 1 year ; Eight teams provided documents and written materials that described the goals, composition, and/or operations of each MTAMT.

Specific Aim 2

This phase of the project included interviewing a total of 9 MassBay TAT members with a range of different professional backgrounds. Further, we continued to collaborate with the full MassBayTAT team to collect data to inform the development of the logic model. This team is run by the Boston FBI.

Changes in Approach from Original Design

Specific Aim 1

Data collection, including the environmental scan and informant interviews were conducted in line with the proposal. There were a few changes in the approach of analyzing the written material and interview transcripts. Specifically, the team did not use NVivo but rather engaged in manual coding and scoring for all qualitative data. In addition, inductive qualitative content analysis was used to analyze written material and interview transcripts concurrently; it was not used to inform development of the interview guide itself.

Specific Aim 2

Regarding data collection, the approach was consistent with proposed processes; however, due to barriers including lower than expected interest in participating in interviews as

well as institutional limitations around employees participating in research, 9 members of MassBayTAT were interviewed rather than 15-20. Regarding analysis, the team engaged in manual coding and scoring for all qualitative data. Further, the usability testing highlighted that the MassBayTAT is currently in a development phase in which they are refining operations and updating their manual as they iteratively improve. The logic model serves as a foundation for identifying aspects of fidelity should they be ready to conduct a summative evaluation in the future.

Outcomes

Aim 1

Results and Findings. The outcomes from described methods led to the development of the following *accomplishments*:

- 1) 1-page research brief summarizing key common elements and operations of MTAMT (Artifact 1)
- 2) An overarching logic model for MTAMTs (Figure 1)
- 3) A manuscript to be submitted for peer review that reviews current state of MTAMT field and its relevance for terrorism prevention (In progress)

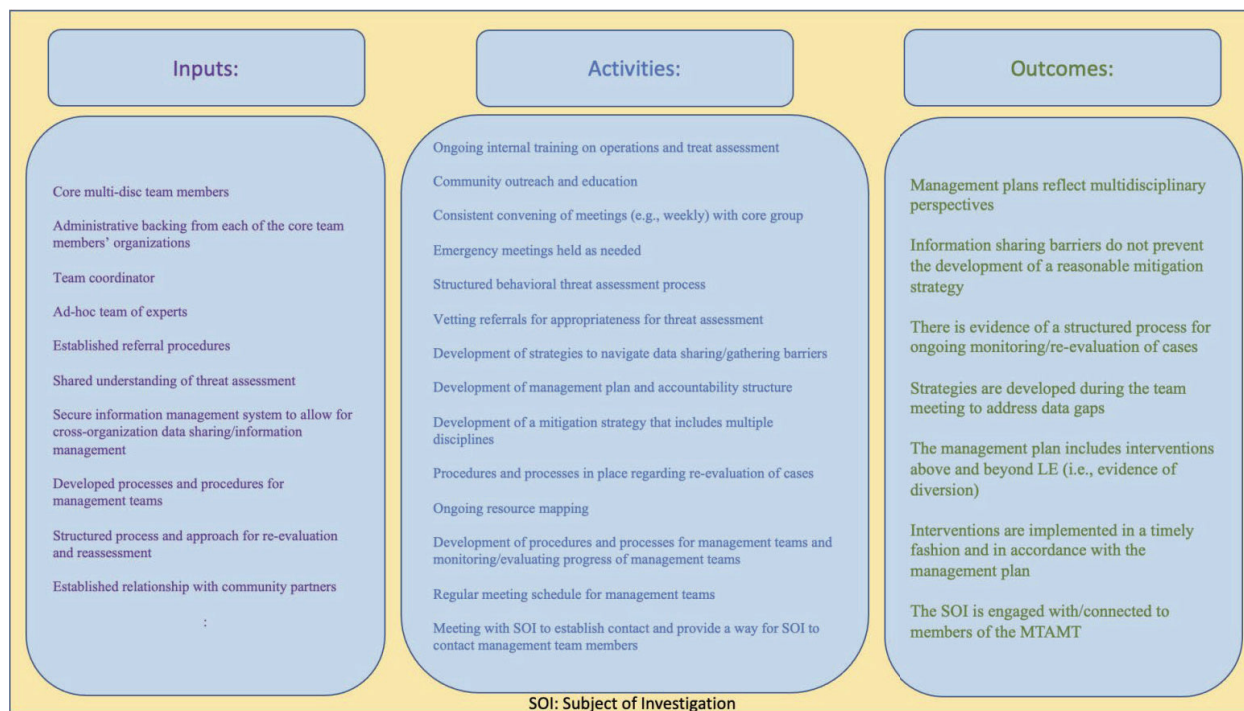


Figure 1. Logic Model for MTAMTs (Aim 1 Objective 1)

Aim 2

Results and Findings. The outcomes from the described methods led to the development of the following accomplishments:

- 1) Logic model specific to MassBay TAT (Figure 2)
- 2) 1-page brief describing overall model/program of MassBayTAT (Artifact 2)

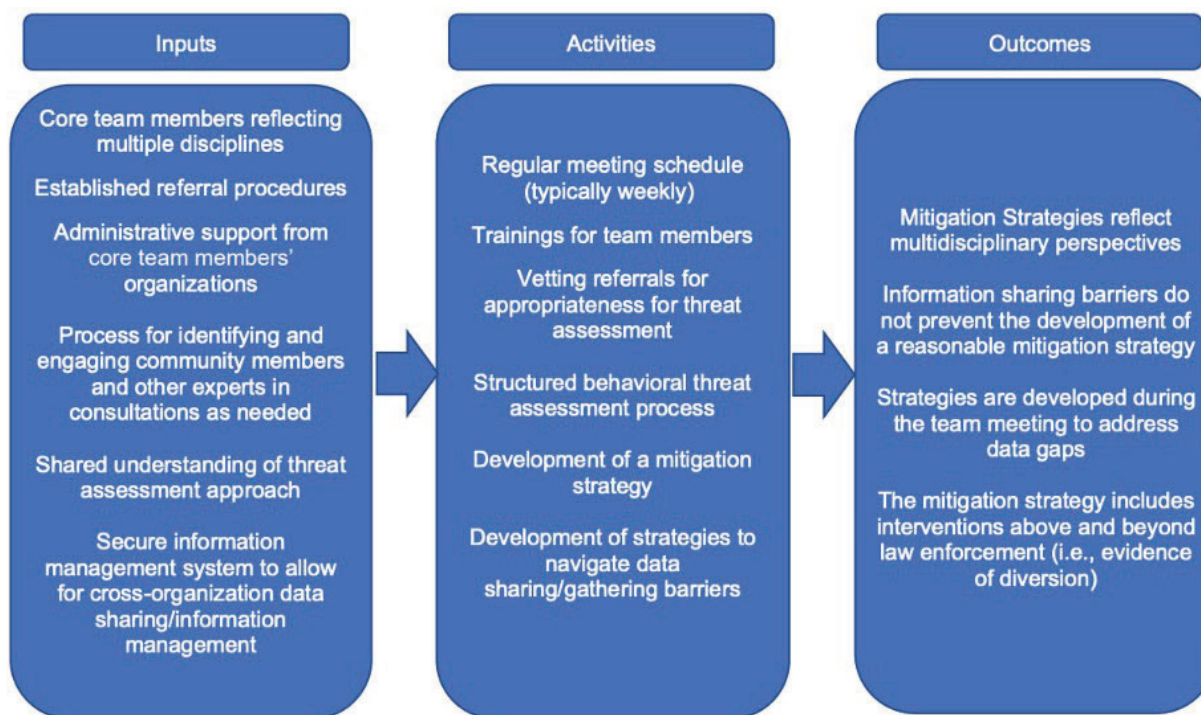


Figure 2. Logic Model for MBTAT (Aim 2)

Limitations

Despite the strengths of the current study which include the comprehensive qualitative analysis of MDTATs across the United States as well as conducting usability testing on a developing MDTAT in the Boston area, findings should be considered with identified limitations. Participants for interviews were conducted using snowball sampling. Further, only one or two members of MDTATs were interviewed. This may have led to some bias in responses and, as such, there may be some important components of the developed logic models that are missing. Of note, when we conducted a comprehensive review of one TAT, we did identify differences in experiences and informed the perspectives of needed activities and measures of success. As such, it is important to consider these limitations when applying the developed logic model to inform the development of MDTATs.

Artifacts

List of Products

1. 1-page research brief summarizing key common elements and operations of MTAMT
2. 1-page brief describing overall model/program of MassBayTAT

Datasets Generated

1. Qualitative dataset including themes team functioning for all MDTATs

Dissemination Activities

1. Briefs will be disseminated to local law enforcement, policymakers, and threat assessment teams across the country.