

## **GUIDED EXAMPLE: PROJECT SUPERWOMEN**

# Theory of Change

brought to you by **ActKnowledge**  
and the **Aspen Institute Roundtable on**  
**Community Change**

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## Introduction

In this example, we will walk you through “Project Superwomen”, a real program that we worked on as evaluators. Special thanks to the Project Superwomen founders and staff for their generous permission to use their project as an example on [www.theoryofchange.org](http://www.theoryofchange.org).

This example consists of five steps:

1. Identifying goals and assumptions
2. Backwards mapping and connecting outcomes
3. Developing indicators
4. Identifying interventions
5. Writing a narrative

Before beginning the TOC process, participants think carefully about (1) their ultimate goal for the initiative; (2) their goal for how they want to use their theory (e.g. internal decision-making, on-going check-in, evaluation, reporting to donors, presentations to Board members, constituents and/or partners; (3) their resources and capabilities; (4) who should be at the table. Any or all of these may change once the process begins, but its good to think about these things at the outset.

## Background

Project Superwomen is a real program that started as a collaboration between a social service provider, a non-profit employment training center and a domestic violence shelter to help female abuse survivors to create long-term, livable wage employment opportunities for women who had been victims of domestic violence. The three organizations began their program with two basic assumptions (which are integral to their theory of change):

1. Non-traditional jobs, such as electrical, plumbing, carpentry, building management provide better wages and more opportunities for upward mobility and are more likely to have unions. Therefore, job stability and good wages are more likely if women are trained in these areas.
2. Women who have been through domestic abuse need more than job training to move to economic stability. They need to develop coping skills, workplace behaviors, and have child care available. They also need to be able to manage crises in their lives and such events as court appearances and dealing with the foster care system. If these aspects of their lives are not taken into account, any job training will not likely lead to permanent employment.

The collaboration subsequently brought in ActKnowledge to evaluate the program and its design. New Destiny Housing Corporation, the lead agency for Project Superwomen, has graciously allowed ActKnowledge to use their program as an example for this website.

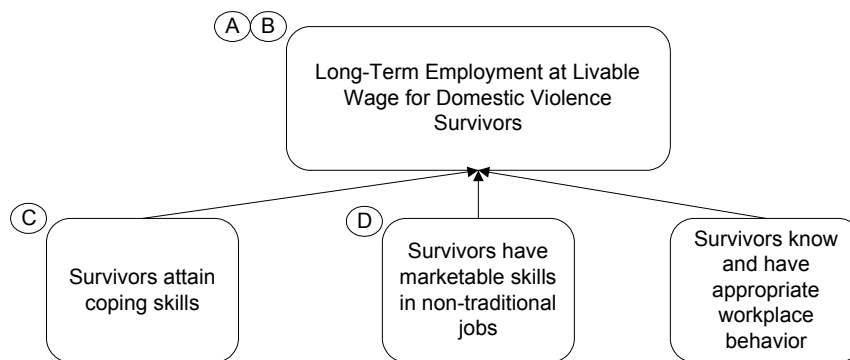
*Note: Project Superwomen is a program. Theories of change are often used for single programs like this. However, a strength of the theory of change approach is that it can be used for initiatives that may comprise many programs and partners. For the purposes of a tutorial to convey the basic processes and concepts, we will stick with a single program.*

## Stage 1: Identifying Outcomes and assumptions

In the first stage of theory development, TOC participants discuss, agree on, and get specific about, the long-term goal or goals. This can be done in a variety of ways, (see our facilitator's guide), but the important thing is to set a good, clear outcome. The quality of the rest of the theory hinges on doing this right!

Then, TOC participants start to design a simple map of the preconditions required to bring about the long-term goal. Beginning the mapping process helps stakeholders to visualize and prioritize their goals as well as specify what they expect to change and for which outcomes they want to be held accountable.

### Stage 1: Identifying Goals and Outcomes



#### Commentary

For this example, the long-term outcome is the long-term employment of domestic violence survivors at a livable wage. To achieve that goal, the program designers<sup>1</sup> identify three preconditions: survivors attain coping skills, survivors have marketable skills in non-traditional jobs and survivors know and have appropriate workplace behavior. The program designers identified these preconditions from their experience and from research. To illustrate the logical importance of the three preconditions, we use solid, arrowed lines to show that the preconditions **MUST** come before the final long-term outcome.

#### Assumptions and Justifications

As previously discussed, the program designers realized that the program could only effectively work with women who had already begun to stabilize their lives. Any initiative is only as sound as its assumptions. Unfortunately, these assumptions are too often unvoiced or presumed frequently leading to confusion and misunderstanding in the operation and evaluation of the initiative. To address that problem, TOC documents assumptions to ensure agreement for planning and posterity.

<sup>1</sup> In this example, we call those creating the TOC the program designers. It signifies that staff from the three collaborating agencies are responsible in this case for the program plan. Often, however, other stakeholders are included in the TOC process, such as people who will be served by the initiative, or people knowledgeable in some area (e.g. employment training or domestic violence) that can bring a needed perspective to the table. When not referring to this example specifically, we call anyone involved in creating the TOC, "the TOC participants".

**For the long-term outcome: “Long-term employment at livable wages for domestic violence survivors”, these assumptions must be met for the outcome to be achievable:**

A. There are jobs available in non-traditional skills for women.

B. Jobs in non-traditional areas of work for women, such as electrical, plumbing, carpentry and building management are more likely to pay livable wages and are more likely to be unionized and provide job security. Some of these jobs also provide a ladder of upward mobility, from apprenticeship to master, giving entry-level employees a career future.

These two assumptions make explicit why the participants believe this program can work: there are jobs in non-traditional work and that those jobs can offer better financial and professional

**For the outcome: “Survivors attain coping skills”, (which is also a precondition of the long-term outcome): the assumption is:**

Women who have been abused need more than just skills, they need to be emotionally ready for work as well.

Again, this assumption clarifies why and how this program is different from traditional job-training programs, i.e., the special psychological supports needed for the initiative’s clients.

**For the outcome: “Survivors have marketable skills in non-traditional jobs”, it is assumed that:**

D. Women can learn non-traditional skills and compete in the marketplace.

This assumption is an article of faith that women can compete and succeed in this new labor market.

Documenting assumptions and justifications is a continuous process. As outcomes are added and moved on the framework, it remains necessary to question and explain *how and why* they are necessary.

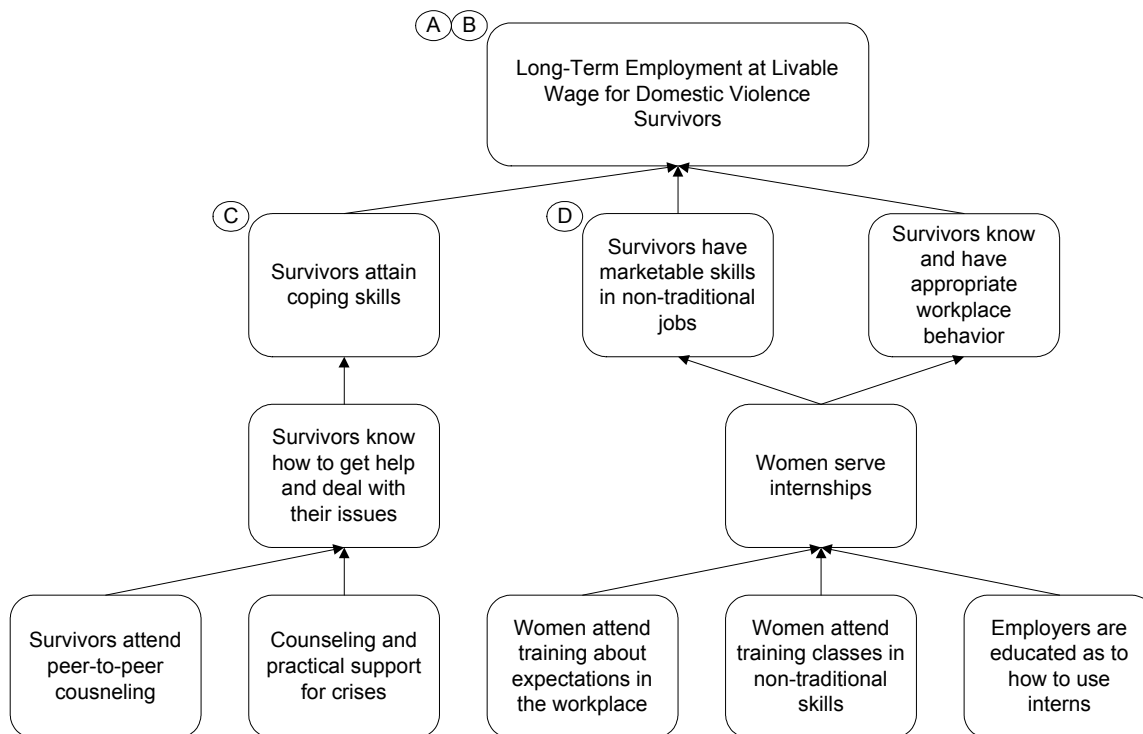
Next, Stage 2: Backwards mapping and drawing connections

## Stage 2: Backwards Mapping and Connecting Outcomes

After the first step of laying out the initial expectations and a simple change framework, comes a more detailed stage of the mapping process. Building upon the initial framework, we continue to map backwards until we have a framework that tells the story we think is appropriate for the purposes of planning. Sometimes, this will require much more detail because stakeholders want to identify the “root” causes of the problem they hope to resolve. In other cases, the map will illustrate three or four levels of change, which display a reasonable set of early and intermediate steps toward the long term goal. (For further information, please see the article in the library, under “advanced topics” on “scope”.)

Because this work is challenging and most social change programs or broader initiatives have a lot of moving parts, change frameworks usually go through many revisions. Outcomes are added, moved and deleted until a map eventually emerges that tells a story the group can agree on. For the users, the debate is often the most valuable component of TOC because they are now jointly defining the expectations, assumptions and features of the change process. TOC participants are required to make explicit, and agree upon, the underlying logic of the initiative improving which improves the productivity and accountability.

### Stage 2, A



### Commentary

For the Project Superwomen example, program designers asked themselves what women would need if they were going to have long-term employment. Specifically, how would the project’s participants achieve the three identified preconditions (coping skills, marketable skills, and appropriate workplace behavior) to the ultimate outcome? That required

identifying what it would take for women to achieve coping skills, job skills and knowledge of workplace behavior.

## *Drawing Connections*

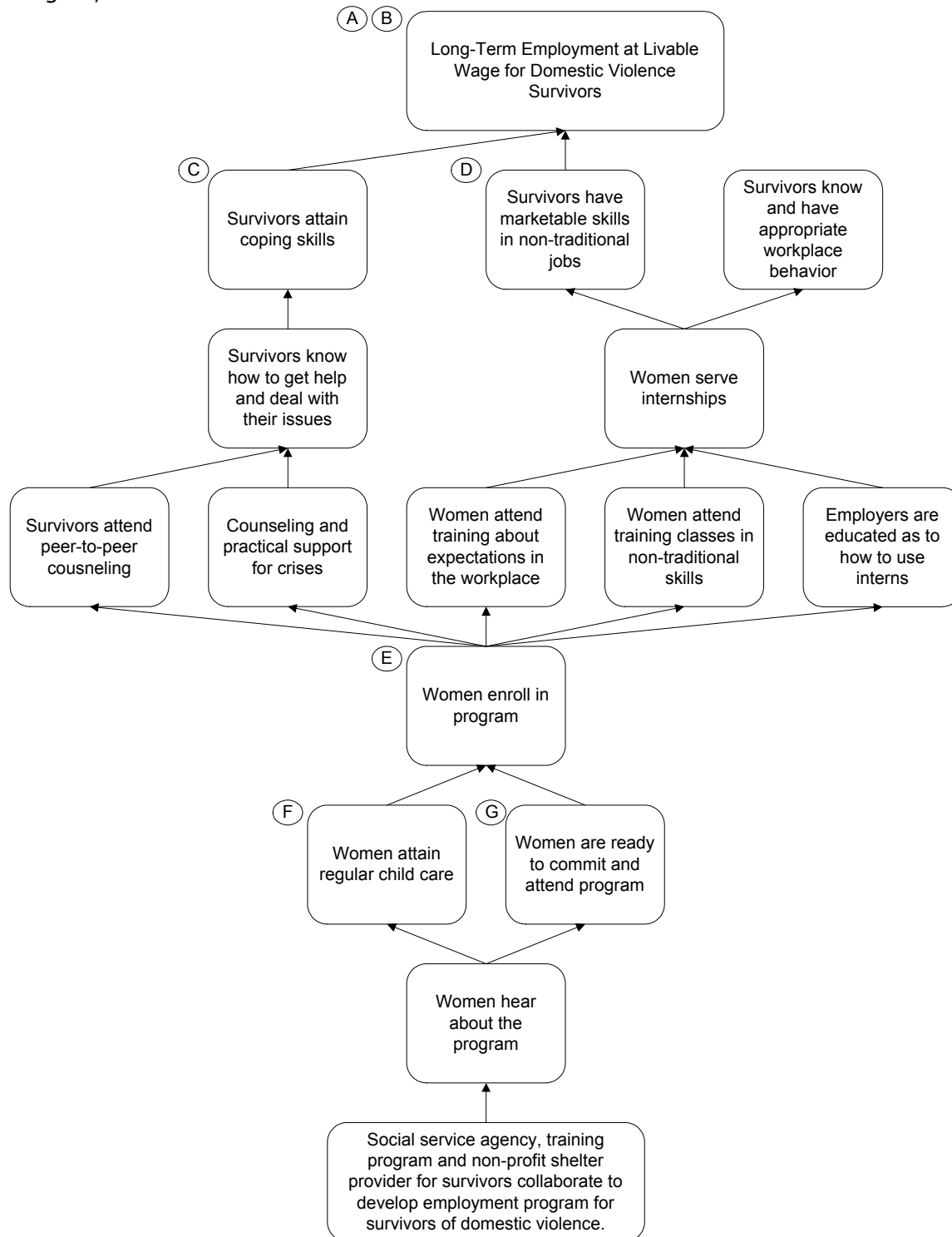
In stage 2, we continue illustrating how the long-term outcomes are linked to the intermediate ones. In stage 1, we connected the final long-term outcome of employment at a livable wage to the three intermediate outcomes with solid, arrowed lines, indicating that they are preconditions. This process holds for the intermediate outcomes as well. For “Survivors know how to get help and deal with their issues” we use arrowed lines to show that the two outcomes below it are direct preconditions of it.

Illustrating connections helps to spot-check the initiative’s logic as well as identifying where the initiative should intervene. Following the logical path from outcome to proposed precondition often points out inconsistencies. TOC participants are able to readjust their frameworks and drop or add outcomes as necessary. They also understand when these outcomes will take place on their own or require an intervention by the initiative to make it happen, such as a program activity.

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## Stage 2, B



## Commentary

This framework continues from where the Step 1 left off, fleshing the framework all the way back to the initial condition—a coalition of organizations working to develop employment

programs for domestic violence survivors. Again explaining preconditions remains important, hence for “Women enroll in program” the assumption:

E. The program cannot help all women and so entry into the program must include screening so that women who have sufficient literacy and math skills to take the training, and lives stable enough to attend classes are admitted. The program does not have the resources to handle providing basic skills or major social services.

Early on in the planning process, the group realized that they only had the resources to provide assistance to women who had already begun to stabilize their own lives. The program could take care of the temporary issues, such as emergency housing but not something more permanent or serious, such as substance abuse.

Because of the relative simplicity of this framework, it seems as if the connections are all givens. At this stage, you might think: “If it’s below another outcome, then it must be a precondition. Why all the arrowed lines?” While in this example, it is not difficult to organize preconditions, in more complex frameworks, boxes can be near each other without a direct relationship, connections can be made across the framework, etc. For the clarity of the framework, connections are irreplaceable.

## Stage 3: Indicators

The Indicators stage is when details are added to the change framework. This stage focuses on how to measure the implementation and effectiveness of the initiative. By collecting data on each outcome, the initiative can identify what it is or isn't happening and find out why.

Each indicator has four parts: population, target, threshold and timeline. But you can forget the jargon. Simply put, for each indicator you want to ask:

Who is changing? (women enrolled in the program)

How many do we expect will succeed? (perhaps 90% of the enrolled women)

How much is good enough? (a \$12 per hour job for at least six months?)

By when does this outcome need to happen? (perhaps within two months of graduation)

- Indicator is the actual variable being measured, such as average test scores or proficiency in a particular skill.
- Population is the group that you are measuring, such as a program's clients.
- Threshold represents the minimum for the outcome to be successfully achieved. (E.g., the threshold for a successful election between two candidates is 51% of the vote; if there were three or more candidates, the threshold would be lower, because only a majority of the votes would be required to be successful.)

Here are some sample indicators for Project Superwomen:

Outcome 1: Long-term employment at a livable wage for domestic violence survivors

Indicator: Employment

Population: Program graduates

Threshold: Remain in job at least 6 months and earn at least \$12 per hour

Outcome 2: Survivors have marketable skills in non-traditional jobs

Indicator: Skill in electrical, plumbing carpentry or building maintenance

Population: Program participants

Threshold: Successfully complete internship

Outcome 2: Survivors have marketable skills in non-traditional jobs

Indicator: Program graduation

Population: Program participants

Threshold: Do graduate (yes/no)

Outcome 3: Women attend training classes in non-traditional skills

Indicator: Attendance

Population: Program participants

Threshold: Women miss no more than three classes

## Stage 4: Identifying interventions

After laying out the near complete change framework, we now focus on the role of interventions (those things that the program (or initiative) must do to bring about outcomes).

### *Interventions*

At this stage, note that some arrows have solid lines while others are dashed. The solid lines represent connections that will occur without the need for intervention. As long as the prior preconditions are met, these outcomes will be met. We represent interventions, an initiative's program activities, as arrows with dashed lines for three reasons:

1. We believe the outcomes those arrows lead to *will not* occur at a sufficient level without an intervention.
2. They represent *actions* by the initiative and thus something that the initiative is responsible for
3. Because these outcomes are control variables, they need to be measured to evaluate the interventions' effectiveness.

By identifying interventions, the stakeholders explain how their work is going to change the community. Until this point, the change framework has been like a gumbo recipe without directions, a literal listing of intermediate ingredients—roux, shrimp, onions, okra, etc. But until this point our "recipe" hasn't explained explain how these components are used and put together, i.e., how to make roux by browning flour in hot oil; when to add the shrimp (previously peeled and cleaned), etc. The interventions explain what the stakeholders are going to do to achieve their desired outcomes. Hence the first intervention (1), an outreach campaign, is of course necessary to publicize the program. While this example seems obvious, the point is again to be clear about what the stakeholders expect the initiative to do—something that is often taken for granted, but never clearly or consistently expressed.

We also identify each intervention with boxed numbers. Often a dashed interventions arrow will have multiple boxes because the outcome requires multiple activities for it to happen.

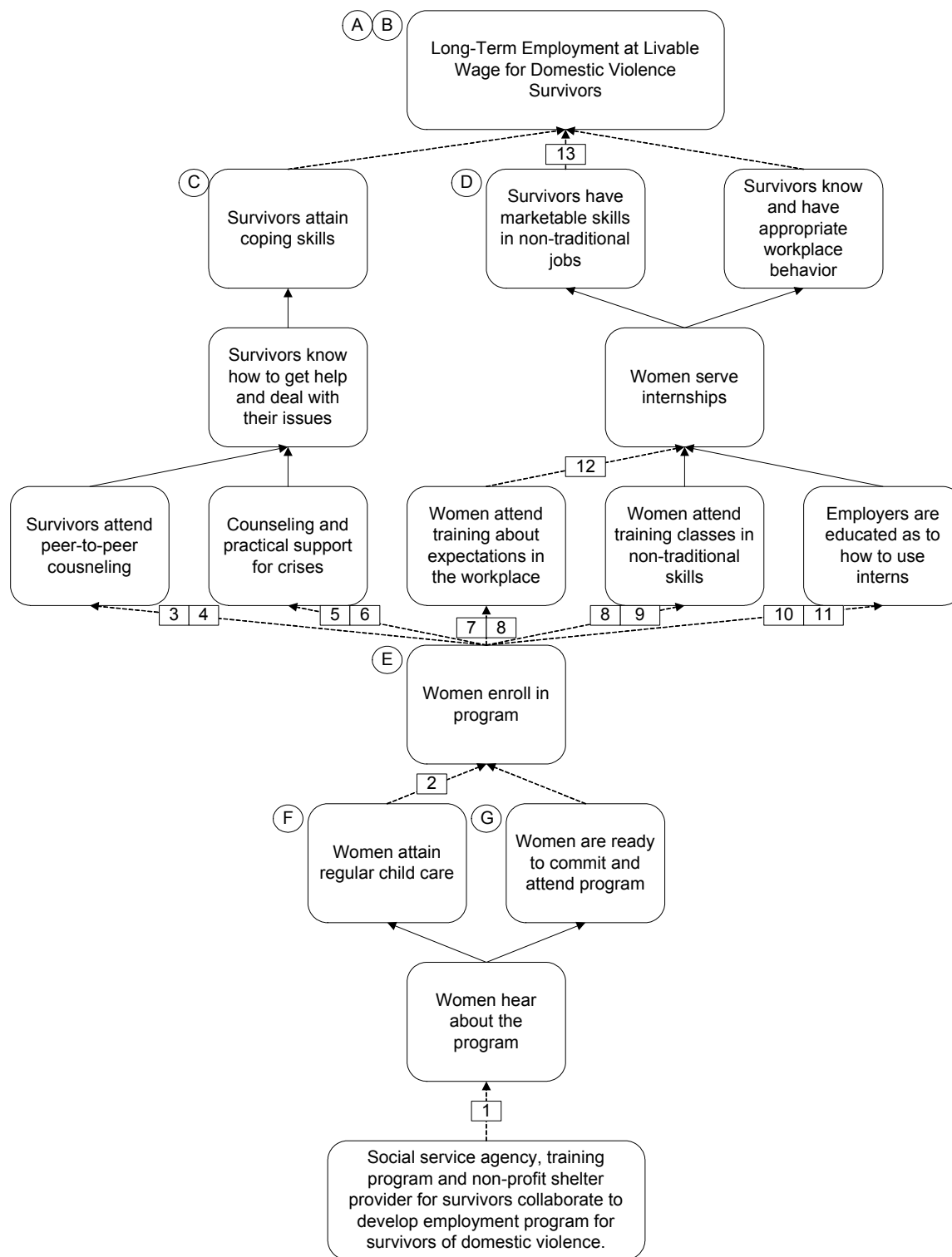
### *Spot Checking*

At every stage of the TOC process, there is a need for stakeholders to question whether new revelations reveal an inconsistency in their logic: Does specifying interventions highlight an important gap in the outcomes framework? Do any of the assumptions suggest an additional change pathway (with additional early and intermediate outcomes)? Stakeholders should ask themselves if what they are creating "makes sense" by thinking about whether their map reflects a plausible theory, and whether the set of interventions are actually feasible for them to implement, given the resources they have at their disposal.

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## Stage 4: Interventions



## Commentary

Boxed numbers represents the interventions 1-14. Clearly, this initiative plans many interventions to serve its potential clients and popularize the program.

### Interventions

1. Outreach campaign
2. Screening
3. Set up counseling sessions
4. Lead group sessions
5. Help provide for short-term crises, such as housing evictions or court appearances
6. Provide one-on-one counseling
7. Develop curricular in electrical, plumbing, carpentry and building maintenance
8. Conduct classes
9. Curricula and experiential learning situations developed
10. Identify potential employers
11. Create employer database
12. Match women to internships
13. Help women secure permanent jobs

Referring to the criteria we established earlier, we can see how they apply to Project Superwomen's interventions:

### Intervention 1: Outreach Campaign

1. We believe the outcomes those arrows lead to *will not* occur at a sufficient level without an intervention.

Clearly, without an outreach campaign, Project Superwomen would have little chance of achieving the next outcome "Women hear about the program". No matter how great the program might be, if there were no outreach, utilization would probably be low.

2. They represent *actions* by the initiative and thus something that the initiative is responsible for.

The outreach campaign is to be performed/led by the Project Superwomen staff so they are definitely responsible for how well it is designed and implemented.

3. Since these outcomes are control variables, they need to be measured to evaluate the interventions' effectiveness.

To achieve its long-term goal for its clients, employment at a livable wage, the staff of the collaborating organizations will want to ensure that they are doing the job right. What clients, funders, and program staff want and need are results. If Project Superwomen is to work then information about the program has to reach these women in need.

## Stage 5: Writing the Narrative

We're almost done! After completing the indicators and the framework, including assumptions, justifications, and interventions, the participants have to wrap it all up. We have found that writing a narrative—a meta-description of the program—is an excellent final step. The users are forced to take a step back from the intellectual abstraction of boxes, arrows and numbers and translate their initiative into normal language. For TOC users, this provides both a final spot-check as well as another tool to intuitively understand the initiative. After capturing an initiative's multiple levels of change, it can be difficult to describe it again in normal language. The narrative helps to bridge that gap by emphasizing the most important components and pathways, so that the users can again see how the initiative creates their desired change.

The narrative also helps stakeholders explain their program to outsiders. Backed up by the change framework, the narrative can give stakeholders confidence in the logical underpinnings of the program. Writing the narrative makes it possible to coherently explain how the sequence and interventions make change possible.

### *Components of a Narrative*

A good narrative sums up the initiative's story. The narrative typically starts from the beginning with the background and goals explaining why they are important and how the initiative's work achieves the goals. Required elements of a narrative include:

A narrative typically includes:

- Background: What is the context and the need
- Long-term goal: The ultimate desired outcome
- Intermediate goals: What and how these goals are important for themselves as well as for the ultimate goal.
- Assumptions and Justifications: The facts or reasons behind the initiative's features
- Interventions: The initiative's activities and programs
- Program Logic: The understanding that guides every step of the initiative

A well-written narrative includes enough detail to clearly capture the program's goals, but only enough to emphasize the unity of logic and action.

### *Final Narrative*

Project Superwomen was founded as a collaboration of a social service provider, a non-profit employment-training center, and a non-profit shelter provider for female domestic violence victims. The group's goal was to help women obtain a type of employment that would keep them out of poverty, off public assistance while providing stability and upward mobility. The group chose jobs in electrical, plumbing, carpentry and building maintenance because they provided entry-level positions, possible union membership, and opportunities for advancement at livable wages.

Based on the assumptions that women can learn non-traditional skills and that employers could be identified that would hire them, the project's goal was to provide both the training and support needed by this population in order to enter and remain in the workforce. The group believed that most of the women they could train would be single mothers, coming from abusive situations and would need psycho-emotional counseling, especially regarding low self-esteem and impaired coping skills. They also recognized that even women whose

lives are fairly stable might face crises from time to time requiring practical help or psychological support. For some of the women who had not worked before, the group included training in non-traditional skills, training in workplace expectations and intensive psychological supports.

Based on their resources, the group decided that they could provide assistance with some crises, such as housing evictions or court appearances, but could not be responsible for completely stabilizing the lives of their clients. This dictated their screening process ensuring that new women entering the program had already settled major issues, such as housing, substance abuse, or foster care.

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ActKnowledge is an action research organization dedicated to working with community organizations, not-for-profits, foundations and governmental agencies to transform traditional institutions and environments for social change. We work with these organizations as partners in a process aimed at creating transformative knowledge through the interplay of learning and action.

## **The Aspen Institute Roundtable on Community Change**

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The Aspen Institute Roundtable on Community Change was established in 1992 as a forum for people who are engaged in the field of comprehensive community initiatives. Roundtable participants from foundations, program agencies, technical assistance providers, evaluators and public sector officials meet to discuss the lessons from initiatives across the country and to work on the common problems that they face. The Roundtable's work on Theory of Change has been generously supported by a number of foundations, including the Annie E. Casey Foundation.