

An Introduction to Program Evaluation

This document is intended to provide users with a basic introduction to Program Evaluation: what it is, what kinds of evaluations are out there, and how to get started.

The information presented here is not intended to replace comprehensive program evaluation tools and guidelines. Instead, it should be used as a starting point to compliment the other external program evaluation resources available through the Skill-Building Resources section on the Parachute website.



What is Program Evaluation?

Program Evaluation can be formally defined as: “The systematic collection and analysis of information about program activities, characteristics, and outcomes to make judgements about the program, improve program effectiveness and/or inform decisions about future programming.”¹

You may be looking to evaluate a program as part of a funding requirement to see if what is being done is worth the cost. Maybe you are looking to address a need in your community, and want to start with a needs assessment for your priority population. Or maybe you have just finished the first year of programming and need to check in and see whether the program has rolled-out in the way you intended. Whatever your reason, evaluation is a powerful strategy for distinguishing programs and strategies that can make a difference. It is a driving force for developing and adapting strategies, improving existing programs, and demonstrating the results of investments.² This is why it’s important to make sure you start your evaluation process armed with the understanding and tools you will need to achieve your evaluation goals.

Types of Evaluation

Below is an overview of the different evaluation types you may encounter in your work, and the points to consider when deciding which type is needed for your situation.³

Needs Assessment

“The process of identifying, analyzing, and prioritizing the needs of a priority population”⁴

Used For: Determining if there is a need for the program, and for planning your program.

Focuses On: Identifying any gaps between actual and desired state, and program needs.

Asks: Who needs the program? What kinds of service to they need? Are services available? If so, are they accessible and are there enough resources to address the need?

Evaluability Assessment

“Determining if the program is ready for evaluation”⁵

Used For: Designing the program, including logic model, description of program objectives and goals.

Focuses On: Program rationale, interventions, and strategies

Asks: What are the program components? What are the goals? Is the program ready for formal evaluation?

Process Evaluation (Formative Evaluation):

“Focuses on internal dynamics and operations of a program in an attempt to understand its strengths and weaknesses”⁵

Used For: Assessing the program implementation and the operations of the program.

Focuses On: Monitoring the program, efficiency of service delivery.

Asks: Is the program being implemented as designed? Who uses the program? What activities are participants involved in?

Outcome Evaluation (Summative Evaluation):

“Judging the overall effectiveness of a program”⁵

Used For: Evaluating the results of the program and any program impacts.

Focuses On: Program results and effectiveness.

Asks: Did the program meet its goals? Is the program effective? Should the program be continued or expanded?

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Questions for Evaluation - Where to Start?

When deciding to undertake an evaluation, here are some questions you may want to explore with your team. These questions can be used as probes to think about your current program status and what information may need to be collected, or if you already have findings you can start to think about what you want to do with that information.

- 1) **What?** What happens in the program? What services and experiences does the program offer? What processes occur? What changes in attitudes, knowledge, skills etc., occur, if any?⁵
- 2) **So what?** So what do the findings mean? What are their implications? What judgement can be made? What ways can the program be considered a success? A failure?⁵
- 3) **Now what?** What recommendations come from the findings? What improvements should be made? Should others adopt or avoid the program? Should funding be continued, expanded or ended?⁵

A Framework for Program Evaluation

The framework described below has been adapted from the CDC's *Introduction to Program Evaluation for Public Health Programs: A Self Study Guide*.⁶ It is a tool that offers a logical order of the important elements in program evaluation, and is intended to be used in many types of evaluations.²

Steps in Evaluation

These six actions are intended to be used in any evaluation. While it will usually make sense to follow these steps in sequence, in practice you may encounter them out of order. That's okay - the steps are meant to be adaptable for your situation and context.



Adapted from CDC⁶

These steps are intended to serve as starting points around which your organization can tailor an evaluation to best meet your needs:

- ◆ Engage stakeholders
- ◆ Describe the program
- ◆ Focus the evaluation design
- ◆ Gather credible evidence
- ◆ Justify conclusions
- ◆ Ensure use and share lessons learned

Standards For "Good" Evaluation

A basic set of standards make up the second part (inner circle) of the framework. These standards are used to assess the quality of evaluation activities. They essentially answer the question "Will this evaluation be a 'good' evaluation?" There are 30 specific standards, organized into the following four groups:

- ◆ Utility
- ◆ Feasibility
- ◆ Propriety
- ◆ Accuracy

They are recommended as the initial criteria by which to judge the quality of the program evaluation efforts.

For more information on the above Framework for Program Evaluation, visit <http://www.cdc.gov/eval/guide/index.htm>

References

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4. McKenzie, J.F., Neiger, B.L., & Thackeray, R. (2009). *Planning, Implementing, & Evaluating Health Promotion Programs* (5th Edition). San Francisco, CA: Pearson Benjamin Cummings.
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