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LAYING THE FOUNDATION

Tips for conducting program evaluations

"I don't have time for one more thing."

This is the first in a series of quarterly tip sheets designed for people who already have a full plate. The Minnesota Office of Justice Programs has asked Wilder Research to prepare these tip sheets as one means of technical support for their grantees.

A rigorous evaluation is not a requirement for receiving funding from the Minnesota Office of Justice Programs. However, a well-thought-out evaluation has some major benefits for your program and the people who use your services. It lets you assess the quality and results of your current services, improve specific things that aren't working as well as you want them to, and share the benefit of your experience with others – like policy-makers and professionals.

An evaluation does not have to be time-consuming or expensive in order to be useful. It is important, however, to ensure that the time you spend on it is time well spent. In this series, we will focus on strategies for making your evaluation both useful and reasonable in terms of dollars and time.

If you want more in-depth information about program evaluation, Wilder Research will offer evaluation training in several locations in 2005 and 2006. The Office of Justice Programs will make these sessions available to grantees at no cost. Wilder Research will also provide follow-up technical assistance at no cost to grantees who attend the training. Some technical assistance will also be available from OJP staff. For information about training or technical assistance, please contact Cecilia Miller at the Minnesota Office of Justice Programs (cecilia.miller@state.mn.us, 651-205-4817).

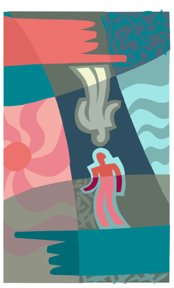
This first tip sheet will lay the foundation for designing and conducting a practical, useful evaluation of your program. Future tip sheets will go into each step in greater detail.

Why should I consider conducting a program evaluation?

- **To better manage and enhance your programming.** One of the most important benefits of a good evaluation is to help staff monitor service delivery, assess the needs of participants or the community, and identify ways to improve service delivery.
- **To promote your services and generate support.** Evaluation results can provide a rationale for funding requests, by illustrating the strengths of a program or identifying a need for enhanced services. Information that is shared with others can be used to build other types of support as well, including recruiting staff or volunteers, engaging potential collaborators, or attracting participants.

- **To fulfill your accountability promise to funders or other stakeholders.** Depending on your funding sources, you may be required to report your program's accomplishments to funders. You may also have a board of directors or others who need to understand the program's results and challenges.
- **To advance the understanding of effective approaches in your field of service.** There is a lot of solid evidence out there about effective and ineffective ways of providing services. Evaluation can play a critical role in this learning process. You can identify helpful approaches, learn why some approaches may not work, and test new models for addressing individual or community concerns. By sharing this information with others, you can strengthen the effectiveness of others who are working toward the same goals.
- **To empower your staff and participants.** People who choose to work in programs like yours are typically motivated by the mission, so it is gratifying for them to see how the work has made a difference. Hearing feedback from participants or seeing evidence of program success can help to maintain the commitment of program staff. At the same time, evaluation can give participants a "safe" forum for passing along their experiences, equipping you to shape the delivery of services that best meet their needs.

Twelve steps to a solid evaluation



Without making the process cumbersome, it is important to take the right steps to ensure that you end up with useful information. (Upcoming tip sheets will go into these steps in greater depth.)

1. **Know your audience.** Before collecting any information, identify the most important "customers" for your evaluation results, such as program staff, current and potential funders, advisory boards, or others. Once you prioritize these groups, think about the specific types of information that would interest them most. Is there information that could help guide program decision-making? Is there information that you want to be able to share with others outside your organization?

2. **Know your resources.** It is important to have an accurate perception of the resources available for evaluation before you start to plan it. You'll want to design a process that can be completed within the budget earmarked for evaluation. If no funding is available for evaluation, explore strategies for capitalizing on other resources (such as volunteer assistance). If current program staff members are not knowledgeable about evaluation, consider options for obtaining evaluation assistance.

3. **Spell out your program's theory.** Most programs are based on certain values and assumptions about how to best help people. A very useful step in the evaluation process is to identify and clarify your program's theory. This theory should

clearly explain the reasons why you provide each specific service and the ways in which these services are expected to benefit participants.

Even if you don't conduct an evaluation, spelling out the program's theory can help to build a shared understanding of the program and to guide program enhancements. Within the evaluation process, a program theory can help to ensure that the most important expected results are covered in the evaluation.

4. Build a logic model. Logic models sound technical, but they are actually greatly appreciated by program staff and funders as a useful tool to visually display a program's underlying theory.

5. Step back and prioritize. Typically, these first few steps yield many ideas, questions, and issues to explore in the evaluation. Before proceeding, take some time to review all of these and prioritize those that are most important to include in the evaluation plan, given the available resources.

6. Decide how to collect information. Once you have selected the key evaluation issues or questions, you can develop a plan for gathering the right information. This might include collecting information directly from participants. Other methods include documenting the services you provide, collecting information from staff or other knowledgeable observers, or monitoring information available outside your organization (such as community crime statistics). All strategies for gathering information have strengths and weaknesses to consider; this helps you choose the most appropriate and reasonable options for your situation.

7. Keep the "ethics lens" focused. From the first planning discussions through the final report, you must consider ethical issues such as: How can we best protect the confidentiality of those who provide information? How do we ensure that people understand their rights to make an informed consent to participate? How can we minimize risk of any potential harm to participants while maximizing the potential benefit of the evaluation?

8. Create the tools for gathering information. These materials could include survey or interview questionnaires, forms or information systems used by program staff, or a wide range of other materials. It is important that the tools are easy to use and collect, and that they provide valid and reliable information.

9. Start gathering information. During this phase, you'll need a way to monitor and ensure that all activities are completed as intended and on schedule. If you are collecting information directly from program participants or other close observers, you need strategies for gathering this feedback appropriately and accurately.

10. Sort out the information. Many programs successfully gather evaluation information, but then struggle with the best ways to organize and understand it. Your evaluation plan needs good strategies to analyze the information in a way that will help you answer your most important evaluation questions.

11. Share the information. What are the best ways to share information with the staff of your program? What other stakeholders should receive the information, and in what format? What needs to happen, who can make it happen, and how can they best gain the information they need?

12. You're not done until you use it. It's easy to feel that your evaluation is complete once the findings have been shared with funders, program staff, or other key people. However, the true value of an evaluation lies in how it is used. Your evaluation plan should include active methods for using the information. This can go beyond enhancing the program's service delivery, to include goals such as public awareness, advocacy, or policy development.

In future tip sheets

Your stakeholders – who are they and what do they want to know?

Determining available resources and finding an evaluator to work with

Developing program theories to explain how your services affect participants

Introduction to logic models – what are they and why might you want one?

Developing a logic model

Prioritizing evaluation questions – what do you most want to learn?

Developing a plan to collect evaluation information

Ethical issues – how do we protect participant rights during the evaluation?

Selecting good evaluation measures

Writing good surveys or interviews

Conducting respectful and useful interviews

Managing/analyzing data – how do you make sense of the information?

Communicating evaluation results – how do you share what you've learned?

Using evaluation results to improve program services

Using evaluation results for advocacy or policy development

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