GATHERING INFORMATION

Tips for conducting program evaluation

Once you have selected the key evaluation issues or questions, it's time to develop your data collection plan

You have selected the list of issues to explore through your evaluation and prioritized the outcomes you want to measure. You may also have identified a few process issues to examine and decided whether to assess satisfaction of any core stakeholder groups. Now you are ready to develop a measurement plan and a strategy to collect information.

How will you measure each issue?

The first step in developing your data collection plan is to decide how you will measure each issue. You may have several options. Often, your program participants can provide you with evaluation information. For example, participants could tell you whether they followed up on referrals received during crisis counseling, entered transitional housing after leaving a shelter, experienced repeated incidents of domestic violence, or found the services helpful. There may also be people other than your participants who could provide useful information. For instance, you could ask your own program staff or staff at other community agencies to document the type or amount of service provided.

Before collecting information specifically for your evaluation, consider whether existing information is available. Agency service data, employment or school records, crime reports, community assessments, or other information may already be collected. If this information answers important evaluation questions, it may save you time and money. Using existing information can also present challenges, however. For example, if you are seeking information about specific program participants, you may need to get their permission in advance. In some cases, it is difficult to obtain the information from other agencies. You may need to negotiate a data sharing agreement if the information that you are interested in is not readily available.

Collecting new information

What do you do if existing information is not already available? In that case, you need to develop a plan for collecting the necessary data to answer your evaluation questions. When collecting new information, it is important that you select an approach that is manageable and that will provide you with accurate information.

There isn't one ideal way to gather information. Each approach has advantages and disadvantages. It is important that you select one best suited to your program. The following table defines some of the most common methods, along with the potential advantages and disadvantages of each option.

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Interviews – collecting information verbally from informants, using a question and answer format. Interviews can be conducted in different ways, such as in person or over the phone. Interviews can be fairly unstructured, allowing you to be flexible in deciding what questions to ask or how to best ask the question, or can be tightly scripted, requiring you to ask questions the same way across respondents.

Advantages
Chance to establish rapport and help respondents feel comfortable.
Opportunity to see and react as needed to respondents' emotions and body language.
Often yields a high response rate.
Flexibility in deciding what questions to ask and how to ask them.
Opportunity to explore topics in more depth than you can with a survey.
Chance to explain or clarify questions, increasing the likelihood of useful responses.

Disadvantages
Can be expensive and time-consuming (especially if done in-person).
Needs highly trained interviewers to make sure that interviews are done well.
Possibility of respondents changing their answers to please the interviewer or avoid embarrassment.
Inconsistent questions across respondents, making it difficult to compare their experiences.
Too much information to easily transcribe and summarize results.

Surveys or questionnaires – collecting information from respondents without direct contact. Paper versions of a survey may be handed out or mailed. You might also ask people to complete surveys electronically via email or internet.

Advantages
Relatively easy and inexpensive to conduct.
Can collect responses from more people than is possible with interviews.

Disadvantages
Less successful with respondents with limited literacy or motivation to respond.
Low response rates, requiring multiple attempts to obtain information.
Less useful if seeking open-ended information (works better for structured, closed-ended questions).

Focus groups – conducting group interviews with a small group of participants or other informants at the same time.

Advantages
Same advantages as interviews, plus opportunity to generate insights that would be unlikely to emerge with one individual.

Disadvantages
Can usually only include a small number of respondents.
Difficult to transcribe and summarize results.
Requires trained facilitator.

Observation – recording what actually happens during a situation or event.

Advantages
Firsthand data, rather than relying on other people's accounts of an event.
Opportunity to see what really happens in natural settings.

Disadvantages
Can be expensive and time-consuming.
Requires well-qualified, highly trained observers to make sure that information is recorded consistently and accurately.
Changes in behavior if people know that they are being observed.

Creating your data collection plan

Once you have selected a general approach for collecting information, how will you carry out the data collection? To develop your data collection plan, first make a list of all of the outcome, process, and satisfaction issues that you want to measure in your evaluation. For each, identify the data collection strategy that you will use, the people who will provide the information, and your plan for collecting the information. When you develop your plan, identify the procedure that will be used, the time frame for the data collection, and the person that is responsible.

Sample data collection plan

Information to be collected	Data collection strategy	Data source	Data collection procedures	Person responsible
Outcome: Do children remain in the home for at least one year following an incident of child abuse?	Existing data	County out-of-home placement records	On a semi-annual basis (December and June), the county will provide records of out-of-home placements for each participant	Executive director
Outcome: Do people maintain stable housing and employment after leaving a shelter?	Interviews	Program participants	Trained interviewers will conduct telephone interviews with participants six months after they leave the shelter	Evaluation consultant
Process: After receiving training, do volunteer advocates feel prepared to support victims during a crisis?	Survey and interview	Volunteer advocates	Volunteers will complete a brief survey at the conclusion of their training; the coordinator will conduct a brief interview by phone following the first two crisis interventions provided by each volunteer	Volunteer coordinator
Satisfaction: Are participants satisfied with the services received?	Survey	Program participants	Surveys will be mailed to participants following discharge from the program	Administrative assistant

Quick links to more information

Bureau of Justice Assistance, Center for Program Evaluation – Bibliography of resources for selecting, adapting, and developing data collection procedures
http://www.ojp.usdoj.gov/BJA/evaluation/bibliography/
selecting_and_adapting_procedures.htm

W.F. Kellogg Foundation Evaluation Toolkit, The Evaluation Plan
http://www.wkkf.org/Default.aspx?
tabid=90&CID=281&ItemID=2810015&NID=2820015&LanguageID=0

Prevention by Design: Community prevention planning program data collection methods tip sheet.
http://socrates.berkeley.edu/~pbd/pdfs/Evaluation_Methods.pdf#search=%
22evaluation%20data%20collection%20methods%22

In future tip sheets

Selecting good evaluation measures

Writing surveys

Interviewing people appropriately

Find previous tip sheets on the web: www.ojp.state.mn.us/grants/index.htm or www.wilderresearch.org.