

How To Evaluate Your Program

By Sibyl K. Bowie

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Out of the hundreds of applicants vying for the grantmaker's limited financial resources, *your* proposal has been funded. Now that you have the money, how can you make it easier to sustain funding? A planned, integrated approach to outcome evaluation is key to the success of small projects and large multi-site, multi-component programs alike. Here are some of the most asked questions surrounding program evaluation:

What is an outcome evaluation?

Simply put, outcome evaluation—the systematic method for collecting, analyzing and using information to answer basic questions about a program—measures the extent to which a program or strategy is reaching its objective, but does not measure inputs, processes or methods.

Why should I evaluate my program?

Program managers and line staff oftentimes assess their program's effectiveness on an informal basis. But, if it is incorporated into the framework of a program, rather than added on as an afterthought, evaluation can be a valuable tool to help improve program efficiency and the quality of a program.

Evaluations can help program managers and line staff assess the effectiveness of their program to:

- ◆ Measure the impact of the program on individuals, families, communities and/or the target population;
- ◆ Determine program performance;
- ◆ Enable staff to make changes to improve program effectiveness;
- ◆ Document success; and
- ◆ Build your organization's credibility.

Why should my line staff be involved in the evaluation?

Think of the evaluation as a team effort. Line staff are very aware of and involved in the day-to-day issues of the program. They can provide the insight necessary to assist in the development of clear, specific outcomes or program objectives upon which sound evaluation planning is built. In addition, line staff will be less likely to view evaluation as threatening if they are involved with every aspect of the program—from design and implementation to interpretation of findings.

Do I need to hire an outside evaluator to serve as a part of the evaluation team?

Involving experienced, on-staff evaluators or outside consultants early in the proposal writing process can provide you with important technical assistance; help you develop and focus an evaluation plan; and offer a new perspective on program operations. Many proposals mention evaluation, but do not explain the specifics, such as what will be conducted or what will be gained. When writing your grant proposal, consider placing money in the budget for evaluation costs.

All too often, grant proposals are vague. For example, the proposal may mention evaluation, but fail to explain the specifics, such as what will be evaluated, how the evaluation will be conducted, or what will be gained from the evaluation. Another common mistake in writing grant proposals is budgeting money for evaluation costs with the intent of developing the evaluation procedure at a later date.

What if I don't have the money to hire an outside evaluator?

Hiring an outside evaluator to conduct an evaluation can be expensive. On the other hand, channeling staff resources into an evaluation that is not properly designed or correctly implemented can be costly as well. Perhaps you have sufficient staff resources to implement the evaluation, but need the assistance of a consultant to help you with the technical aspects of the evaluation. Conduct a careful analysis of line staff time and costs versus the expenses associated with an outside consultant to help you determine who should be a part of your evaluation team and their roles in the process. Keep in mind, grant funds may be available to help support outside evaluation efforts.

How do I find an outside evaluator?

Consultation and technical assistance resources include:

- ◆ Other organizations that have used outside evaluators;
- ◆ Local colleges and universities;
- ◆ Evaluation divisions or program assessment offices of State or local agencies;
- ◆ Technical assistance programs provided by Federal agencies;
- ◆ Research institutes and consulting firms;
- ◆ National advocacy groups and local foundations;
- ◆ Professional associations; and
- ◆ The public library.



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Any other suggestions?

Here are four easy tips for evaluating:

- ◆ Do it right—first impressions are lasting impressions;
- ◆ Do it early and do it often—so that difficulties detected as a result of the evaluation can be corrected;
- ◆ Use the results—incorporate the strengths and weaknesses found in your evaluation to improve your program; and
- ◆ Share the results with others—program staff as well as interested parties within the appropriate community may benefit from your efforts.

Where can I find more information about outcome evaluations?

These publications may be helpful:

- ◆ *The Program Manager's Guide To Evaluation*, published by the Administration on Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, can be accessed online at <http://www2.acf.dhhs.gov/programs/hsb/core/puborg.asp>
- ◆ *Evaluation: "Maximizing Your Prevention Efforts"* by the National Minority AIDS Council, can be viewed at <http://www.nmac.org/tech/tapub.htm>
- ◆ *Framework For Program Evaluation in Public Health*, by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, U.S. Department of and Human Services, is available by calling the U.S. Government Printing Office at (202) 512-1800. ❖

