Local Program Evaluation

"We should be careful to get out of an experience only the wisdom that is in it...the cat that sits down on a hot stove lid will never sit on a hot stove lid again—and that is well; but also she will never sit down on a cold one any more." —Mark Twain

Contents

Background
Determine the Scope
Select Appropriate Methods
Collect & Analyze Information
Report and Use Findings
Summary
References

Related Factsheets

Developing Evaluation Questions
Evaluation Measures
Data Analysis & Presentation

Outcome Evaluation Manual

Evaluating and Reporting Outcomes: a Guide for Respite and Crisis Care Program Managers

Background

While there may be many ways of approaching evaluation, the focus of this factsheet will be on evaluation activities conducted to improve the service system rather than activities with a research focus. With this in mind, the characteristics of program evaluation are:

- it involves the gathering of information about a program's intentions, its activities, and the impact of these activities;
- it is a management or administrative activity;
- it is planned, purposeful and systematic; and,
- it is meant to improve services.

Program evaluation is an activity which summarizes the accomplishments of a program. It can be performed as a separate activity from the ongoing management of the program, or, evaluation can be a management tool which routinely gives information back to the program for the purpose of changing it, improving it, and renewing it. In this form of evaluation, programs are seen as evolving and improving as they get information about their successes and accomplishments.

The following steps need to be accomplished in order to plan, implement and use program evaluation:

**Determine the Scope of the Evaluation**

1. Identify the purpose of the evaluation.

- What issues or key questions about the program are to be addressed by the evaluation?
- Who are the primary users of the evaluation and what are their key concerns?
- Who needs to be involved in discussions about the evaluation: program managers, clients, direct service staff, funders, etc.
- Are some evaluation findings needed to satisfy requirements of an outside agency? Are specific requirements mandated, e.g., use of particular instruments, reports with specific content or format?

2. Assure that there is a good understanding of the program.

- Are there written documents which describe the program, its goals and objectives, and its operations?
What are the existing sources of information about the program's activities, staff, consumers, and outcomes?

- What is the program's philosophy? Are there program implementation directives or guides?
- What is the scope of program activities? How many staff, consumers, and sites exist?
- Who is affected by the program? (Who are the consumers?) How are they supposed to be affected? Describe how the program's activities are expected to result in changes to the consumers, their families, and the community at large.

3. Begin to develop the focus of the evaluation

- The focus of the evaluation may be to clarify program goals; successes or problems with program implementation; consumer satisfaction; the financial feasibility of the services; whether or not the program meets the needs of the community; or, progress on intended outcomes.

Select Appropriate Evaluation Methods

1. Make sure that you are asking the right questions, which focus on key aspects of the program.

- Re-examine the reasons for doing the evaluation. Is it for an external agency (are there any requirements)? If for internal use, what are the concerns or needs which led to the request for an evaluation?
- Make the questions specific enough to focus the assessments, observations, and comparisons to be made. Scrutinize each question to think how to ask it more specifically. For each outcome, try to imagine how you would know when you have achieved it.

2. Determine how to collect the information you want.

- For each question, develop a set of tangible behaviors or events which represent the activity or event under focus. They can be verbal responses to a posed question, or responses on a paper and pencil instrument.
- Check to see if information or data are already available for the measures being developed. Staff and consumer activity may have already been collected. Information about the consumers may have been collected during the initial contact.
- If the information is not readily available, select measures or instruments you may want to use.

3. Determine from whom data will be collected.

- Information about consumers, staff, and activities has probably been collected already (all intake forms, all staff activities, etc.). If not, then it must be determined when information will be collected; from which sites; and which people or groups will be the focus of the data collection.

4. Estimate the cost of the evaluation (revise plans based on the estimate).

Collect and Analyze Information

1. Construct or purchase instruments if the data or information does not exist in program records. (See Factsheet Number 14 on Evaluation Measures for more detailed information.)

2. Set deadlines for data collection.

- For example, start with the deadline for an interim report, or the date on which an important meeting is to take place when the data will be needed. Work back from that date; set deadlines and expectations. Be realistic: activities often take longer to accomplish than expected.
- Determine who will be responsible for each task.
- Determine whether any training will be necessary and schedule it.
- Determine if any additional staffing will be needed for such tasks as data collection, coding, editing and analysis.
3. Set expectations for interpreting the data.

- *Before* starting to collect data, try to talk with the primary users of the evaluation and have them decide how the results will be interpreted. The way in which data are collected, the sources of the data, and the analysis of the data may be affected by the answers to these questions.
- To what extent can the evaluation plan be altered after it has begun? Can it be altered by time, by data collected, or by type of analysis?

4. Check to see that the data collection is implemented as planned.

5. Analyze data with an eye toward program improvement.

If the evaluation has focused on specific program units, it is important to consider the following points:

- The component's implementation, compared to its intentions.
- Consumer's attitudes about the program component in question.
- Consumer's achievement/performance as a result of the program.

**Report and Utilize Findings**

1. Decide how to communicate results.

   - Consider the full range of strategies available and use more than one if appropriate. For example: informal communications (in the hall, over coffee, before and after meetings); less formal meetings (small groups, no minutes); formal meetings; memos; written reports; newsletters; electronic communication; visual presentations (slide show, video show); public meetings; and local media.

2. Meet with program managers or staff to discuss and follow up on findings.

   - This step may take place a number of times. Each time there may need to be a revision in the presentation of the results.
   - The findings, regardless of how they are presented, should discuss some or all of the following: program operations; consumer satisfaction; whether the program is being implemented as planned; the effect of the program on the primary consumers; the strengths and weaknesses of the program; outside factors that are influencing the program; key problems that have occurred or that might be anticipated; adequacy of progress toward program outcomes; and, the differential effectiveness of the program under particular conditions or with particular individuals.
   - Include specific program recommendations with the idea that the original purpose of the evaluation was to change and improve the program.

**Summary**

There are many kinds of program evaluation activities. What characterizes all of them is that they seek to enable us to "know" about programs rather than to guess about them. Therefore, evaluation activities are planned, purposeful, and systematic in the way they ask and answer questions about the program.

**References**


**About the Authors**: David B. Langmeyer, Ph.D., is an Evaluation Consultant. He was Chief of Evaluation and Research in the NC Division of MH/DD/SA Services for 13 years. Gail S. Huntington, Ph.D., is a former Director of Evaluation and Research for ARCH. She is a Research Investigator at the Frank Porter Graham Child Development Center at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.