

Tips for Evaluating a Program

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You know more about evaluation than you think.

You evaluate things every day. What works? What doesn't? Formal evaluation is just more systematic, with more data points. You go to a new restaurant and don't have the best experience, so you have to make a decision about whether or not to go back. Based on that one visit, you might choose not to return, but maybe more visits and ordering different things on the menu would give you a different perspective and help you make a better-informed decision. Program evaluation is really about systematizing data collection and analysis.

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Different types of evaluation all have a place.

The trick is making sure that you match what you want and need to know with the approach.

Descriptive Evaluation—Provides a description of program elements (e.g., How much did you spend? How many individuals were served? What are the characteristics of who was served and how does that compare to your target population?) Data in this category often come from program intake and assessment forms.

Process Evaluation—Documents the process of implementing the program/service and examines whether—and how—the different elements and processes were implemented as planned and according to scheduled timeline. For example, how long did it take to deliver a service from the first time the person called the agency? Process evaluation can identify challenges and barriers to implementation, success stories, and lessons learned throughout implementation. Data can be collected through a review of records, interviews and/or focus groups with program participants and individuals who are responsible for program management and implementation. Data collection could also include direct observations of program offerings or service provision. In order to determine whether a program has met its goals and expected outcomes, it's important to know how the program/service was implemented.

Outcome Evaluation—Determines whether the program/service achieved the expected outcomes (e.g., reducing caregiver stress, helping an individual remain in their own home for a longer period of time, increasing quality of life for person with care needs or the caregiver.) There are a number of ways to conduct outcome evaluations—following a sample of participants over time; having a comparison group to compare results of those receiving the intervention to those not receiving the intervention. Such data can come from surveys with participants or records data from existing sources.

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There are organizational evaluation responsibilities to consider.

All evaluation efforts require organizations to:

- Identify evaluation measures
 - Determine a time frame for implementation and evaluation
 - Select a data collection strategy (Who will collect data and how will they collect it?)
 - Establish a data management system to store and track evaluation data
 - Develop a mechanism to examine and use data on an ongoing basis to improve program quality
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Determining internal vs. external evaluation strategies

Many organizations can conduct descriptive and process evaluation efforts with internal resources, but need assistance for outcomes evaluation. Some organizations hire external evaluators, while others establish partnerships with local universities or research centers. Partnerships can be an option. Partnerships can be a great option and may also help you identify external funds to support an evaluation effort.
