Program Evaluation 101: A Reference Guide for CONNECTED

The purpose of this guide is to provide everyone involved in CONNECTED with basic information about program evaluation, including major steps in the process. The guide includes definitions for terms and concepts we will use as we work through planning and implementing your local evaluation together. Over the course of the project, we will revisit these concepts and have time to learn and practice them more in-depth. If you have questions or feedback about this guide, or the CONNECTED evaluation, please get contact our team at: CONNECTED@mphi.org.

What is evaluation?

Evaluation is a process for understanding how programs work and what has changed because of them. Evaluation is:
- ✓ Asking questions about a program
- ✓ Collecting information to answer those questions
- ✓ Learning about what things changed for people, groups, and communities because of the program, and
- ✓ Using what we learn to take action to make the program better in the future

Why evaluate?

To evaluate something means to look at something (for example, a program) and judge its quality or value. An agency might evaluate individual employees, its programs, and/or the agency as a whole. When you evaluate a program, you want to know how far the program went toward achieving its goals. When you evaluate an agency or community group, you ask how well it operates to achieve its mission. Evaluation involves collecting information that helps you make these judgments fairly and accurately.

Evaluation allows you to:

- ✓ Improve your program
  - o Identify strengths and weaknesses
- ✓ Build capacity
  - o Improve your ability to plan and complete activities
  - o Document progress towards your goals
- ✓ Inform and improve community change efforts
  - o Identify unmet needs and assess impact of change efforts
- ✓ Provide evidence for accomplishments
  - o Report to others about how well the program worked

Step 1: Identify and Describe the Program

Before you develop a plan for your evaluation, it is important to think about your program's mission and goals. The first step in setting up your evaluation is to think about how well your mission and goals represent your change effort. Your activities and outcomes should link back to your mission and goals. You can use evaluation planning processes to help everyone involved understand how your work is connected to your mission and goals.

One major key to successful evaluation planning is to create a *logic model*. Logic models help programs understand and explain how the purpose of their work is linked to what they aim to accomplish.

What is a Logic Model?

A logic model is a visual diagram of your program's activities and expected changes. Logic models specify the activities and events that ultimately lead to your desired goals. With good logic models, you can see the connections between what you have, what you will do, and what will happen because of your effort.

Logic models can help you:

- ✓ bring details to big goals, including planning, evaluation, implementation, and communications
- ✓ help clear up assumptions

- ✓ build understanding and promote shared agreement about what the program is and how it will work
- ✓ build commitment and promote teamwork, and
- ✓ help clearly show what makes sense to evaluate—and when—so that evaluation resources are used wisely.

There is no single starting or ending point for a logic model. A logic model is dynamic. It will need to change as the program changes over time. Much of the value of a program logic model is in the process of creating it, checking it, and updating it while working together on creating shared understanding of what the program is and what it will do.

Basic elements of a logic model

Inputs are the resources needed to support a community change effort. Inputs are everything that gets committed to the effort. They include things such as time, money, paid staff, volunteers, materials, facilities, and equipment. They include all kinds of resources in support of the project, whether human, material, or financial.

Outputs are the actions of the group that are seen as being highly important for making community change happen. These actions are usually done for or with a particular audience. Outputs can include things such as media campaigns, camps, retreats, recreation programs, workshops, seminars, and many other community learning or awareness opportunities. They also include products or services provided to other groups by the community change team. What each team chooses to do depends on what goals it hopes to accomplish.

Outcomes are new conditions, situations, or ways of living produced by a community change effort. Many people view outcomes as being the same thing as results. Outcomes can be short term (changes in a year or less), mid-term (changes in 1 to 3 years), and long term (changes after 3 years or longer). Outcomes can be large or small. Outcomes are things such as change in a person's symptoms or health; youth participation in community events; referrals made by a school district for youth to get support services; shorter waiting periods for families in need to start getting services.
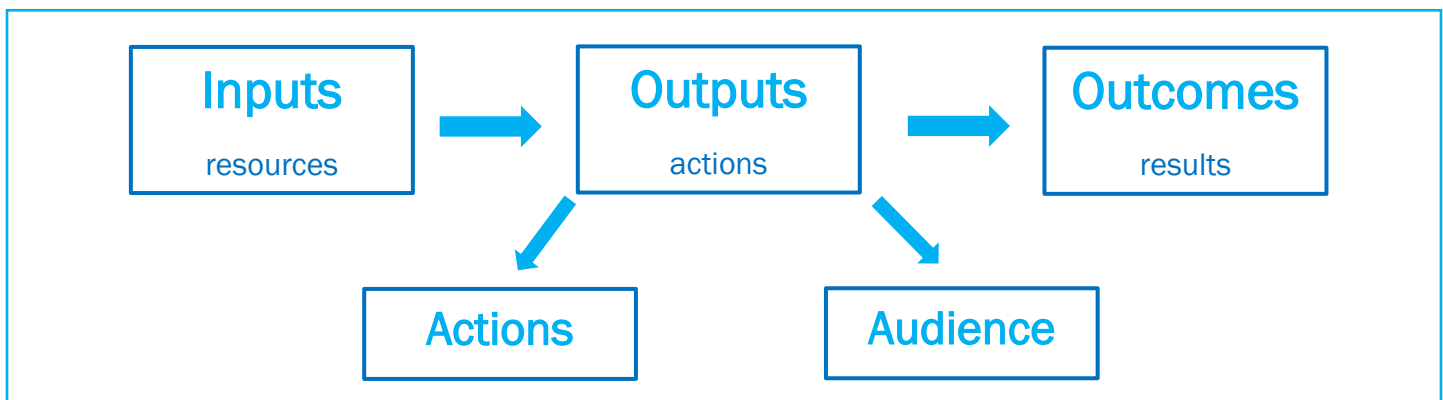
Step 2: Focus the Evaluation

Write evaluation goals

Before deciding on evaluation methods, questions, or anything related to data, it is important to focus your evaluation by setting specific goals or a purpose for the evaluation itself— and that reflect your agency or group's values and goals.

Common evaluation goals may include:

- ✓ testing a program's effectiveness (ability to reach its goals)
- ✓ making a case for changing practices
- ✓ arguing for continued funding
- ✓ documenting community change efforts for future learning

Evaluation goals can also be divided into different levels to match your program goals:

- ✓ Youth or program participant level
- ✓ Family level
- ✓ Agency level
- ✓ Community level

Once evaluation goals have been set, they will help you form questions that will be asked and answered by doing the evaluation itself. For example, if one evaluation goal is to "determine the effectiveness of our youth leadership program," an evaluation question may be, "To what extent did our youth leadership program meet our goal of increasing youth participation in community councils, committees, and advisory groups?"
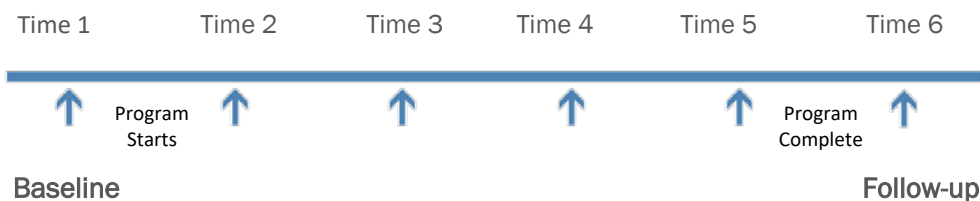
Choose indicators

Families across the country sit down together regularly to eat a meal. The person responsible for preparing the meal most likely planned the recipes, the ingredients and the cooking methods. This person measured, mixed, and cooked the ingredients to prepare each dish, and then had to decide how they would determine when the meal is ready to eat. For example, if cooking meat, this person had to decide on which *indicators* of 'doneness' they will use to know when it's time to stop cooking the meat and serve the meal to their family. For meat, an *indicator* of doneness could be the internal temperature of the meat, the color of the juices, or the tender feel of the meat when you cut into it.

Indicators are the specific things that we measure and examine in order to come up with answers to our evaluation questions.

Indicators tell us what to look at for the answers to our evaluation questions, but they don't tell us what level or value must be met for the indicator in order to decide whether we can consider the program a success. As we choose indicators, we also have to set standards (a benchmark or finish line) for each one that signals to us when success has been achieved. If you don't set standards at the beginning, it is difficult to be confident in the answers to your evaluation questions once you have the data in front of you.

Developing an Evaluation Timeline

Deciding when to collect data is an important part of planning an evaluation. If you don't plan for data collection early enough, you may miss important opportunities to gather data. For example, once you begin offering services through your program, you may no longer have the chance to measure your starting point (baseline) with data that shows what existed in the community at the very beginning. Simply, evaluation data can be collected at three phases of a program—before the program, during the program, and after it has been completed. Data can be collected at multiple time points during each of these phases in order to measure what was accomplished over time.

Time 1	Time 2	Time 3	Time 4	Time 5	Time 6
↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑
Baseline Program Starts				Program Complete	**Follow-up**

There are many types of evaluation designs and each has a timeline for the specific program it is evaluating. The example above is a *time-series design*. This evaluation timeline collects data to measure indicators at multiple points in time through each phase. This design helps identify trends that may be brought about by the program as it evolves over time.

Step 3: Collect and Analyze Data

Tips for Involving Youth as Partners

Young people may have a number of fresh ideas for gathering evaluation data. Be open to their ideas and suggestions. Their ideas frequently result in more user-friendly evaluation tools and methods for young people and, thus, better data. Don't be afraid to try new methods!

Quantitative Data

Quantitative data is the analysis of numbers. Quantitative data are best displayed in graphs and charts. Sources of quantitative data include things like surveys, sign-in sheets, checklists, intercept interviews, app tools; census questionnaires; and financial data.

Quantitative data analysis can consist of simple calculations of numeric information measuring attendance, usage, changes in performance, or changes in knowledge or attitudes (e.g., pre- and posttests). Program staff can do this analysis with the help of spreadsheet software (such as MS Excel).

Qualitative Data

Qualitative data is the analysis of words and pictures. Qualitative data are best presented as "word stories" or "video stories." Sources of qualitative data include things like personal observation notes, records, document review, digital stories, content analysis (e.g., of videos or youth media), personal interviews, and focus groups.

Qualitative data analysis can include identifying themes in the data (a process called *coding*). Themes can be explored and summarized specifically looking to answer each of your evaluation questions. Or, new ideas and concepts may keep showing up in the data and decided to be an important theme for the results. This analysis can also include creating a story from data with rich details about what was experienced or observed. Qualitative data summaries often include quotes the capture the ideas or themes very well.

Existing Information and Data Collection

Data can also be existing information collected or used as part of your regular program activities. Although usually collected for reasons other than evaluation, existing program information can be very important at the start of evaluating programs. For example, a community may choose to address its rising rate of homelessness because of data reported by local law enforcement agencies.

To use existing information, begin by gathering all available information that relates to your program goals. Members of your team, and other agencies you work with, may know of existing information sources that are relevant to your project that didn't know existed. The Internet is a powerful tool for gathering existing information.

Step 4: Analyze and Interpret Data

When you prepare your findings, be sure to include both positive and unexpected or negative results:

- ✓ Positive results tell you where your program's strengths exist, motivate staff and other program participants, and identify areas that might be expanded.
- ✓ Unexpected or negative results help you come up with recommendations for improving programs and practices. They can also be part of your story or explanation for why funding or additional programming (e.g., increases in staffing or expansion of facilities) is needed to reach your goals.

Data Analysis

When planning your data analysis, think about your program goals and how you will be using the data to answer your questions. Make a plan for data analysis that addresses these issues:

- ✓ Are the goals for data analysis realistic, with your budget and staff commitments?
- ✓ Are all important data sources being looked at in order to develop accurate findings?
- ✓ Is there an effort to share program weaknesses and program strengths?
- ✓ Have efforts been made to involve program participants in meaningful ways?
- ✓ Are findings and recommendations shared in a way that they can be useful for program improvement?

Data Interpretation

Once your data has been analyzed and results produced, it is time to interpret what your results mean for your program and for everyone impacted by it. The process of interpreting results should be done with input from those affected by the program, and considering the following issues:

- ✓ Are the results reasonable?
- ✓ How can the results be explained?
- ✓ What is surprising about the results?
- ✓ What is missing from the results?
- ✓ What implications do the results have for identifying how the program can improve?

Step 5: Present Your Data – Share Your Results and Learnings

The final phase of the evaluation process involves putting what you learned into the hands of those affected by the program. Think about sharing your results in three basic steps:

1. Review the list of participants and other persons involved. Which groups need or expect to see the results?
2. Decide which pieces of evaluation data would be of greatest interest to each group of people.
3. Decide on the format of the results to be shared with each group. Consider giving presentations, printed reports, brief summaries, newspaper articles, and stories. Include charts, graphs, photographs, and other graphics if appropriate.


Tips for Involving Youth as Partners

Young people and adults can be involved in the presentation of evaluation results. Consider appointing a team of youth and adults who can present the evaluation results to other organizations, community groups, and leaders. Presentations by young people often captivate an audience of adults more than presentations by other adults do.

Using software like Microsoft Excel is straightforward for simple statistics. Just enter your data into a spreadsheet and select the columns you would like to chart. Then, press the "Chart Wizard" icon on the toolbar. The Chart Wizard will ask you questions about what type of chart you would like to create. Choices for chart types include column, bar, pie, line, scatter, and area, among others. You will probably find column, bar, pie, and line charts to be most useful. Here are some examples:
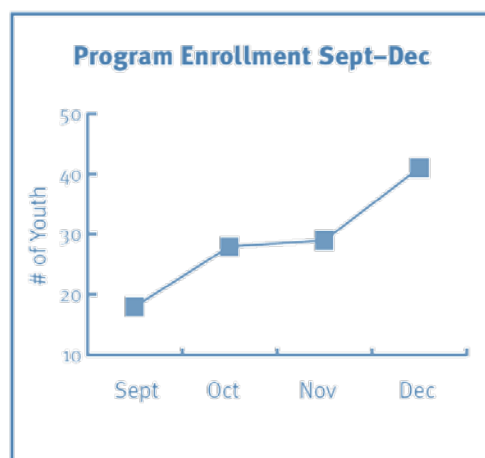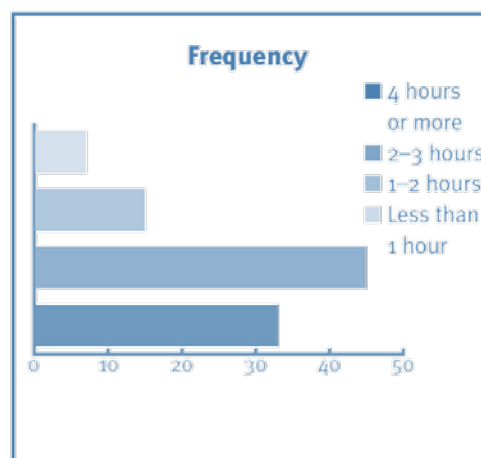
Column Chart
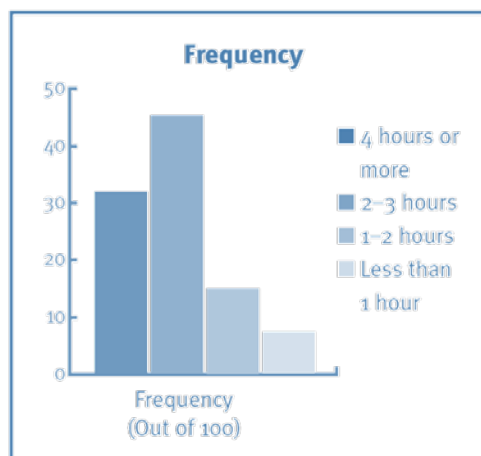
Pie Chart
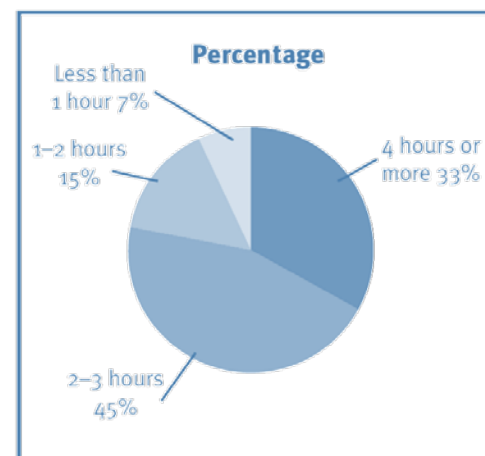
Line Chart

Bar Chart

Once you create your chart, you can edit fonts, colors, arrangement, and labels. You can copy and paste charts from Excel straight into Word or Google documents for your reports. Choose the best way to show your data, keeping in mind which chart type will highlight the finding for each data set. Also, be selective about what you decide to show in a chart versus using words. Only chart the data that you think will be *most useful* for people to see.

Glossary of Program Evaluation Terms

Baseline Data: Information that is collected at the beginning of a program activity to determine where youth and participants started in their skills, knowledge, or capabilities. Once this information is gathered, it is possible to identify how youth and participants advanced in those areas over the course of the program.

Case Study: A detailed description of a representative individual, event, or program.

Coding: The process of condensing and categorizing qualitative data through the identification of common themes.

Data: Information collected in evaluation; it can consist of stories, numbers, words, pictures, or other elements.

Document Review: Use of documents as a source of data. Document reviews often use meeting notes, plans, budgets, attendance lists, program logs, tally sheets, and minutes from community meetings.

Findings: Knowledge provided by evaluations that summarizes the effectiveness of programs, services, and activities. Findings offer a detailed look at how a program works.

Focus Group: A moderated group discussion on a particular issue or topic.

Frequency: The number of times that a given response or behavior occurs.

Indicators: Observable, measurable markers of the changes and benefits of program participation.

Interview: Oral collection of data through specific, mostly open-ended questions. Interviews can occur in person or over the phone.

Logic Model/Theory of Change: A summary of how a program works; it includes information on how activities will lead to expected short-term and long-term outcomes.

Observation Guide: A checklist or structured format for observation.

Observation: A structured format for describing behavior, interactions, events, or activities. Observations include anecdotes (i.e., stories) that describe observed behaviors or attitudes in individual people.

Outcome Evaluation: Measurement of the impact of a program in relation to stated short-term and long-term goals. Outcome evaluation may measure changes in knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors of youth and community and often uses a quantitative approach.

Outcome (or Impact): Benefits or changes in individuals and communities as the result of a program.

Participatory Evaluation: An evaluation approach that involves stakeholders throughout the evaluation process.

Pretest–Posttest: A written or oral test that measures specific knowledge, behaviors, or skills that the program is seeking to measure; the test is given before and after participants engage in program activities.

Process Evaluation: Documentation of how well a program has been implemented and how well it is functioning. May examine aspects such as program operations, the types and quality of services, who provides services, what type of youth served, and so on. Identifies program strengths and weaknesses.

Qualitative Data Analysis: Analysis of words, pictures, or descriptions of behaviors. Best presented as "word stories" or "video stories."

Qualitative Data: A record of thoughts, observations, opinions, stories, and words.

Qualitative Methods: Research methods that obtain non-numeric information, such as words, pictures, and descriptions of behaviors. Qualitative data describe how a project functions and what it may mean to the people

involved. Examples of qualitative methods include open-ended interviews, focus groups, observations, and documents.

Quantitative Data Analysis: Analysis of numbers, including survey responses that are assigned numbers in the form of a "scale." Best presented in the form of charts and graphs.

Quantitative Data: Numeric information, such as population, demographic, and income statistics. Includes attitudinal and behavioral data gathered from surveys.

Quantitative Methods: Research methods that obtain information that can be counted or measured. Examples include analysis of survey data that tracks the number of people involved in project activity, the number of products or services provided, or the number of community residents living below the poverty line.

Respondent: A person responding to questions in a survey or interview. Respondents in youth programs are likely to be staff, youth participants, community members, or parents.

Sample: A subset of a population (e.g., individuals, records, communities) that represents key characteristics of the general population.

Stakeholders: Those who care about and will be affected by what is learned from evaluation.

Storytelling: Use of quotations and detailed descriptions to capture the "story," or essence, of a program or event.

Survey: A written or oral series of clearly defined questions for a specific audience or survey population. Questions are often close-ended (i.e., "forced choice"), providing a set of answer choices to ensure easy analysis.

Validity: The strength of evaluation conclusions, inferences, or propositions. It is the degree to which an instrument or evaluation approach measures what it is supposed to be measuring.