

## Evaluation on a shoestring budget

### Tips from the Wilder Research program evaluation workshop series

Evaluation does not have to be time-consuming or expensive to be worthwhile, but it does require some resources to plan it, collect information, and use the results to strengthen your program. When you have a very limited budget, you want to make sure you make the most of it, and these tips can help you.

#### *Achieving maximum impact*

Planning for your evaluation early on will determine the ultimate usefulness of the information you gather. Make sure you set goals that match your budget and prioritize what information is most vital to obtain given your resources, *before* you begin to gather information: Which clients? What aspects of your program? What outcomes?

No matter the size of your budget, these steps will help you get maximum impact out of your investment:

- Identify your most important stakeholders and what are they most interested in knowing, and involve them in the process.
- Spell out your program's theory – why do you provide your service?
- Illustrate how program activities will result in outcomes.
- Design a process that can be ongoing and that matches your budget.
- Consider ethical issues such as protecting client confidentiality.
- Make sure your information collection tools are easy to use and provide you with valid and reliable information.
- Gather information in a systematic way. Monitor and ensure activities get completed correctly.
- Analyze and organize your information to meet the needs of your stakeholders.

#### *Boosting resources*

Sometimes it is possible to augment your evaluation budget. Consider these opportunities:

- Can you get funding specifically for an evaluation? Some funders provide grants for this purpose.
- Does your program collaborate with other partners? Consider conducting a shared evaluation.
- Can you find a graduate student who might provide services free or at a reduced rate in exchange for the opportunity to publish an article or fulfill service requirements?

#### *Improving cost-effectiveness*

Make sure you select the best collection method to get the information you need. If you need to know how many, how frequently, how satisfied, or other quantitative questions, consider a telephone, mail, or web survey.

On the other hand, if you need more in-depth information such as why people behave in a certain way, or how people might react to a program change, consider a more qualitative method such as focus groups or key informant interviews.

To save money, you may want to consider conducting some of an evaluation yourself. Some factors to help you decide the best option for you include:

- Capabilities and availability of your staff.
- The complexity of the process needed to measure the information you require.
- Whether you are starting from scratch, or you already have a system that can provide much of the information you need.

*Continued*

If you do decide to use both an outside evaluator and in-house resources, areas in which you will most likely want outside expertise are:

- Designing evaluation instruments.
- Setting up data entry screens and databases.
- Analyzing and reporting data.
- Conducting focus groups or telephone surveys.

Tasks more easily handled by program staff or volunteers include:

- Entering data.
- Recruiting focus group participants.
- Administering written or web surveys.
- Conducting key informant interviews.

If you decide to use an outside evaluator, start your search with a clear idea of what you want to learn, and what you need the evaluator to do, and look for someone with relevant experience. To get the most value, you will want to:

- Ask about the evaluator's general approach or philosophy.
- Assess the communication skills of potential evaluators.
- If possible, select an evaluator in your geographical area.

### ***More tips for trimming costs***

- Integrate evaluation into your services and programming; what materials or information do you already have that could become part of an evaluation?
- Focus on the "need to know," not the "nice to know."
- Solicit donated goods to use as incentives for study participants.

### ***Free evaluation resources:***

*EvaluATOD (Wilder Research)* —

All aspects of evaluation, with focus on ATOD prevention.  
<http://www.evaluatod.org>

*Logic Model Development Guide (Kellogg Foundation)* —

Developing a logic model and evaluation design.  
<http://www.wkkf.org/Pubs/Tools/Evaluation/Pub3669.pdf>

*Evaluation for the unevaluated (SAMHSA)* —

All aspects of evaluation.  
[http://pathwayscourses.samhsa.gov/eval101/eval101\\_intro\\_pg1.htm](http://pathwayscourses.samhsa.gov/eval101/eval101_intro_pg1.htm)

*The Community Toolbox (University of Kansas)* —

How to evaluate initiatives to promote community health.  
<http://ctb.ku.edu/en/tablecontents/>

This tip sheet is part of a series developed for our evaluation workshops. Others in the series are:

#### **Finding Funds: Sources and tips**

Tips for preparing persuasive proposals

#### **Survey says: The role of surveys**

Tips to ensure accurate data collection and higher response rates.

#### **Program evaluation: Essential steps**

Tips for creating a process that will ensure your evaluation meets your needs.

#### **Don't shelve that evaluation!**

Tips for using your evaluation for policy work, fundraising and marketing.

Find these and more at  
[www.wilder.org/report.html?q=tips2008](http://www.wilder.org/report.html?q=tips2008)

**Wilder  
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