

RESULTS WITH IMPACT

Tips for conducting program evaluation

In Tip Sheet 15 you learned how evaluation can be used to change and improve programs. But, evaluation can also be a powerful tool to use when working toward broader change and improvement at a policy level, and even in your marketing and fundraising efforts.

Getting more from your results

Broadly speaking, policy development and influence can happen at the agency, local, state or national level. Some organizations are well suited to take their program and evaluation findings to the state or federal legislature in an effort to promote large scale policy development and change. Other organizations are better suited to influence policy within their own organization or constellation of organizations locally.

Recognize the wide variety of audiences that your evaluation could impact. Some evaluations will impact program managers, board members, school board members, city council members, county commissioners, state legislators, lobbyists or advocates, federal legislators, or others. Too often evaluation or research findings are found to be irrelevant, complicated, or uninteresting. By keeping in mind your audience, the way your information is conveyed, and the amount and type of information you share, you can find success as an advocate using data. Your evaluation could be one source of influence for any of these decision makers.

Working with decision makers. Evaluation, as important and influential as it can be, is only one source of information used to make decisions. Many other factors will compete for attention, including funding decisions, staffing, competing interests, the ‘other side’, lack of interest or knowledge about evaluation or research findings, or time constraints. As an advocate using data and evaluation to influence decision making, it is up to you to make that data relevant and interesting to the decision makers. Consider the following tips for making numbers compelling:

- Be brief, to the point and accurate.
- Be polite and reasonable.
- Respect that decision makers may hold different opinions, values, and backgrounds.
- Do not be intimidated. You are the expert! Demonstrate you know what you are talking about and show your passion for the subject.
- Be prepared to answer questions. And if you don’t know the answer, say so but get back to the decision maker with the correct answer.
- Consider using personal stories to capture what the data represent. Often decision makers will be impacted more with a face-to-face representation of the data.



Research → Findings → Implications → Recommendations

What was learned and what it means. Consider what might be of interest to your audience by looking at the various phases of the evaluation process:

RESEARCH	FINDINGS	IMPLICATIONS	RECOMMENDATIONS
What was done?	What was learned?	What does this mean?	Where do we go from here?
Satisfaction survey administered to clients by program staff	20% of clients not satisfied with staff knowledge of resources	Clients may not receive adequate referrals to community resources	Develop training for new and existing staff related to community resources
Review of housing records for clients served by advocate program within past six months	85% of clients with a case advocate maintain housing six months after enrollment in program	Program linking clients with affordable housing through advocates is an effective method of securing housing for majority of clients	Look at expanding model using advocate linkage with other services, for example health care, child care, employment, etc.
Interviews with mentors and clients participating in pilot mentoring program for juvenile offenders	15% reduction in repeat offenses for teens enrolled in mentor program	Teens who participate in mentoring program are less likely to offend than teens not enrolled in program	Consider expanding pilot program within county and promote to surrounding counties

When speaking with decision makers, it is important to note what is relevant to them. Program managers might be more interested in findings and implications, whereas legislators might only want to hear recommendations. It is important to always present your information specifically for the intended audience. This frequently will mean multiple versions of reports of the same data, containing similar information. For example, a report for staff within your organization should differ significantly from a report for a city council person, by length, content, language, form and key points.

Tips for effectively communicating your message:

- Know your audience, what will impact and what might overwhelm.
- Avoid jargon and acronyms, specifically those terms which might be common within your field of interest but might be lost on the general public.

- Use clear and concise writing. Use charts and graphs if appropriate.

Education, Advocacy, Lobbying. It's all the same. Lobbying can be a scary word, one that brings to mind rules and regulations, usually tied to funding. However, lobbying is really just education of decision makers and advocacy on behalf of your issue. Yes, there are rules that must be followed; however, research has shown that most nonprofits are not engaging in lobbying efforts to the extent the law allows. Nonprofits are closest to the ground; you know the issues and often know the solutions. Decision makers need to hear from you. People working together can make a difference.

To familiarize yourself with federal and Minnesota laws concerning lobbying and nonprofits, visit <http://www.mncn.org/lobbylaw.htm>.

Marketing and fundraising. Evaluation results can serve multiple purposes, and one that is often overlooked is marketing and fundraising. Your results can help you to enhance the reputation of your organization, increase visibility in your community, and increase funding opportunities. You can communicate your successes to your stakeholders by including evaluation results in your media campaigns, annual reports, brochures, your web site and one-on-one meetings. Use your findings as an opportunity to talk to potential donors and when reporting to current funders.

When applying for funding, your evaluation results can strengthen your case, and give you a competitive edge. They can also help you determine what grants to apply for, and how to position your request. For example, if your evaluation has pinpointed an area of weakness in your program, you can use that information to apply for funding that will help you address it. Or, if you have positive evaluation results to share from a demonstration project, you may be able to use that information to secure more funding.

Return on Investment. One particularly impactful element of evaluation for fundraising is return on investment (ROI), sometimes referred to as cost-benefit analysis (CBA). ROI can be very useful in demonstrating the value of a program. Often ROI can be done using existing data and evaluation information, or can be the entire focus of an evaluation. ROI analysis looks broadly at the costs incurred with a program and measures that against the potential or actual benefits demonstrated by the program. This type of information can be especially useful and impactful for legislators and other high-ranking decision makers, as it places a financial value on your program.

That being said, ROI involves complex analysis techniques and should only be done by a professional economist or analyst who has specific experience with this type of work. Economists with this level of experience might be found at local universities, nonprofit research organizations, or acting as consultants. Now that you have some evaluation data, if ROI is something you wish to pursue, here are a few key points that will become especially important as you begin this process.

- Be clear about what the effects of your program will be compared to. Are you comparing the effectiveness of your program to no program at all, or an alternative intervention?
- Include all in-kind donations and services when calculating the costs of your program.
- Recognize that a comprehensive ROI might include benefits (outcomes) not included or measured in your evaluation plan. You may have measured graduation rates, but it might be important to include future income as a benefit for a ROI calculation.
- It may be useful to provide a prospective ROI that uses conservative assumptions about unmeasured outcomes to give perspective of a program.

Last in this series. This is the final tip sheet in a series commissioned by The Minnesota Office of Justice Programs. OJP and Wilder Research worked together to prepare these tip sheets as one means of technical support for their grantees serving victims of crime, and others out there, doing good work in various programs.

A well-thought-out evaluation has some major benefits for your program and the



people who use your services. Program evaluation helps advance the understanding of effective service. There is increasing evidence out there about effective and ineffective ways of providing services, including crime victims services. Evaluation is critical in this learning process. You can identify helpful approaches, learn why some approaches may not work, and test new ways of addressing individual or community concerns. By sharing this information, you strengthen the effectiveness of others who are working toward the same goals. People who choose to work in programs like yours are typically motivated by the mission, so it is gratifying for them to see how the

work has made a difference. Hearing feedback from participants or seeing evidence of program success can help to maintain the commitment of program staff. At the same time, evaluation can give participants a “safe” forum for passing along their experiences, allowing you to modify services to better meet their needs. Funders will likely continue to increase the demand for evaluation, to ensure that programs are as effective as they can be. Use evaluation as a means to improve your program, and ensure you are providing the best services to your clients. They are depending on you.

Quick links to more information

Frequently asked questions about the Minnesota State Legislature

<http://www.house.leg.state.mn.us/leg/faqtoc.asp>

W.K. Kellogg Foundation Evaluation Handbook

<http://www.wkkf.org/Pubs/Tools/Evaluation/Pub770.pdf>

The Population Reference Bureau: Creating a Window of Opportunity for Policy Change

<http://www.prb.org/presentations/creating.ppt>

Bureau of Justice Assistance, Center for Program Evaluation: Planning an Evaluation

<http://www.ojp.usdoj.gov/BJA/evaluation/guide/pe2.htm>

Minnesota Council of Nonprofits, Why Lobby? Ten reasons to lobby for your cause.

<http://www.mncn.org/lobbywhy.htm>

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<http://www.wilder.org/298.0.html>

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