

WHAT WILL IT COST? WHO SHOULD DO IT?

Tips for conducting program evaluation

You've decided to evaluate your program. You've established the questions you want to answer. You've considered how to meaningfully involve stakeholders. Now it's time to lineup the resources—primarily funds and people.



How much will it cost?

Evaluation does not need to be expensive, but it does take time and money to plan an evaluation, collect the right information, and use the results to strengthen your program.

One general rule for estimating an evaluation budget is 5 to 10 percent of the total program budget. This includes the value of the time that staff will spend on the evaluation, as well as out-of-pocket costs.

Until you actually start to design your evaluation, your specific resource needs

will be very rough estimates. However, you need to start somewhere. Here are some of the most common evaluation costs:

- Salary and benefits for program staff who will be involved
- Funds to pay an external evaluator
- Travel expenses
- Communication tools (postage, telephone, Internet access, fax machine, etc.)
- Printing of surveys, reports, or other documents
- Supplies and equipment (such as computers or software)

Good ways to trim the cost of an evaluation

- Prioritize your evaluation questions. Focus on the “need to know,” not the “nice to know.”
- A big chunk of many evaluation budgets goes for data collection. Find ways to gather information as inexpensively as possible.
- If your program collaborates with others, consider a shared evaluation.
- If you're using an external evaluator, work with them to identify tasks that can be handled by program staff or volunteers.

If you're really on a shoestring budget

Maybe your current resources don't allow you to use most of the other ideas on these pages. Don't give up until you consider:

- What materials or information do you already have that could become part of an evaluation?
- What resources are available at little or no cost? (Examples: volunteers to help you collect information or donated goods to use as incentives for survey participants.)

(continued)

Shoestring budget ideas, continued:

- Can you get funding specifically for an evaluation? Some funders provide grants for this purpose.
- Can you find an evaluator, perhaps at a college or university, who might provide

services for free or at a reduced rate in exchange for the opportunity to publish a research article or to fulfill service requirements?

Should we hire an evaluator or do it ourselves?

In deciding whether to hire an evaluator to help with some or all aspects of the study, start with these questions:

- Do you, or does someone on your staff, have the expertise to conduct an evaluation that meets your needs?
- Can you devote enough time to it?
- Is it important to you (or to your stakeholders) that you receive external, objective assistance and feedback?

By working with an external evaluator, you generally gain:

- Access to specialized knowledge and experience in program evaluation

- Objective reports on evaluation results and implications
- Increased credibility of the evaluation results

On the other hand, you can also expect:

- Increased out-of-pocket costs
- Preparation time to select an evaluator and to acquaint the evaluator with your program
- Possible skepticism or resistance among program staff if the evaluator is seen as an outsider



How do I find evaluators?

- Ask colleagues about evaluators they have worked with.
- Search online evaluator databases. Two useful databases are maintained by the Minnesota Council of Nonprofits (www.mncn.org/infocentral.htm) and the W.K. Kellogg Foundation (<http://ec.wmich.edu/evaldir/index.html>).
- Contact local colleges and universities, starting with the departments that are the best match for the services you provide. Faculty members or advanced

graduate students sometimes do evaluation work.

- Advertise in the local newspaper or in publications specific to your type of work.
- Contact the Minnesota Evaluation Association. Its web site allows organizations to advertise for evaluators (www.mneval.org).
- Contact local, state, or national organizations focused on your field of service for recommendations.

How do I choose among potential evaluators?

The two most important criteria are an evaluator's ability to do the work well and to partner effectively with your agency.

Start your search with a clear idea of what you need the evaluator to do. For instance, someone who can help you conduct in-person interviews might not also be able to develop a computerized database.

Pay attention to formal education. Although very few people actually have a degree in evaluation, an evaluator should have graduate training (master's or doctoral level) in research methods.

Look for someone with relevant experience. Ideally, you want an evaluator who has worked with organizations or programs similar to yours. However, it is more important that they have solid experience in evaluation work (research design, data collection, statistics).

If the evaluator does not have experience with your type of program, look for a basic understanding of the special issues involved. For instance, an evaluator of a crime victim services program must know how to protect participant safety and confidentiality.

Ask about the evaluator's general approach or philosophy. The strongest evaluators are typically those who take a collaborative approach—combining their expertise with yours to create a credible, useful evaluation.

Assess the communication skills of potential evaluators. They should be able to clearly explain the evaluation process. You will need them to present findings to your staff and other stakeholders.

Questions to ask a potential evaluator

The Centers for Disease Control suggests covering the following topics:

- How do they understand the difference between research and evaluation?
- How do they understand your program?
- What would be their general approach to the evaluation?
- Can they conduct the evaluation with the available funding?
- How do they handle supervision by the program director or evaluation committee?
- What is their prior evaluation experience?
- Will their current commitments conflict with your project?

Whenever possible, select an evaluator in your geographical area. When this is not possible, make sure that the evaluator is available to travel to your site when needed.

Ask for examples of their best evaluation reports. Are the reports clear, readable, well organized, and useful?

Ask candidates to provide references for similar organizations or projects. When you contact the references, ask:

- Did the evaluation approach match the needs and priorities of your organization?
- Was the evaluation done on time?
- Did the costs stay within your budget?
- Was the evaluation report useful?
- Would you hire the evaluator again?

Ask your top candidates to submit a proposal. This proposal should detail their work plan, timeline, and budget for completing your evaluation.

And finally, pay attention to your general reaction to potential evaluators. You will need to work together effectively and efficiently.

Working well with an external evaluator

Develop a formal contract that spells out the responsibilities of the evaluator, the products that they are to deliver, and the timetable. Specify how and when the evaluator will bill for services. It is not uncommon for evaluation clients to withhold some of the fee (20 to 30 percent) until a final report has been accepted. The contract should also specify the program's responsibilities in the evaluation – to provide timely and appropriate guidance, to review and approve materials, and to assist in problem-solving.

Work closely with the evaluator throughout the entire project. You should have regular

meetings. In addition, invite them to program events and activities. The better they understand your project, the more effective they are likely to be.

Learn as much as you can about evaluation—this will help you to be an effective partner with your evaluator.

Formally or informally, you should periodically assess the evaluation process itself. Consider how the evaluation is progressing, what could be done differently, and how you might improve the process.

Quick links to more information

W.K. Kellogg Foundation Evaluation Toolkit

Includes worksheets on developing an evaluation budget and working with an evaluator

www.wkkf.org/Programming/Overview.aspx?CID=281

Bureau of Justice Assistance, Center for Program Evaluation

Links to tips for working with an evaluator

www.ojp.usdoj.gov/BJA/evaluation/guide/pe2.htm



In future tip sheets

- Developing a program theory
- What a logic model can do for you
- Building a logic model
- Prioritizing evaluation questions

Find previous tip sheets on the web: www.ojp.state.mn.us/grants/index.htm or www.wilderresearch.org

July 2005

Author: Cheryl Hosley
Wilder Research
www.wilderresearch.org

For more information or additional copies, contact:
Cecilia Miller
Minnesota Office of Justice Programs
cecilia.miller@state.mn.us
651-205-4817

