

Finding Help with Evaluation

Monitoring the effectiveness of your programs is essential. Evaluation data can help you determine what worked well and what didn't, and what impact your programs have had. Understanding some basic information about evaluation and the language used is important because it will help you ask questions, participate in the evaluation process, and oversee an evaluator.

Evaluating Your Prevention Efforts

This section provides information on the two common types of evaluation: *process evaluation* and *outcome evaluation*.

Process evaluation documents all aspects of implementing a program or training and shows what worked well and what didn't.

Process evaluation answers the question: *"Did we do what we said we would do?"*

Process evaluation data can help you determine the following:

- Were interventions implemented as planned?
- Who participated and for how long?
- What adaptations were made?
- Were the resources sufficient?
- What obstacles were encountered?

Outcome evaluation measures the effect of a program or training and whether any change occurred as a result. It documents effects achieved after the intervention is implemented, such as short- and long-term changes in a population group's knowledge, attitudes, skills, or behavior as a result of the intervention.

Outcome evaluation answers the question: *"Did our intervention make a difference—did it impact the risk factors and problem we wanted to address?"*

Outcome evaluation data can help you determine the following:

- What changes actually occurred?
- How do these changes compare to what the intervention was expected to achieve?
- How do these changes compare with results for those who were not exposed to the intervention?

It is usually best to conduct both process and outcome evaluations so you can examine the intervention itself and the impact it had.

Where to Look for an Evaluator*

There are many ways to locate qualified evaluators, including the following:

- **Contact programs similar to your own.** Other programs that have implemented and evaluated similar prevention activities may be able to suggest evaluators who will be a good fit.
- **Ask funders.** Funders see many evaluation reports and may know some good candidates in your area. Using an evaluator your funder knows and respects can go a long way in ensuring that the funder will be satisfied with the evaluation report.
- **Inquire at local colleges and universities.** Faculty and researchers in departments of public health, sociology, social work, education, and community psychology, and in university-based research centers often have experience in program evaluation. Some might be willing to work on your evaluation or be able to recommend qualified graduate students.
- **Contact professional associations.** The American Evaluation Association has a tool at <https://www.eval.org/p/cm/ld/fid=%20108> that you can use to find an evaluator by searching its members by keyword and geographic area. The Society for Prevention Research at <http://www.preventionresearch.org/> may be able to provide names of their members in your area. In addition, some states have an evaluation association.
- **Consult state or local agencies.** Ask representatives from state agencies responsible for administering federal suicide prevention, violence prevention, mental health, or substance abuse grants. Most state or local government agencies, such as departments of public health and education, have planning and evaluation departments. They may have or know of epidemiologists or other researchers who can work with you.
- **Ask research institutes and consulting firms.** Private research organizations often employ evaluators.

What to Look for in an Evaluator*

If you are able to hire an evaluator, consider the following skills, experience, abilities, and qualities:

- **Education and experience.** Formal training in program evaluation would be ideal, as well as experience relevant to your specific program (e.g., suicide prevention and/or mental health program evaluation) and evaluating similar target populations. However, if you cannot identify or afford someone with that experience, look for individuals with graduate-level training in social science research methods (e.g., evaluation design, data collection, and statistical analysis).
- **Oral communication skills.** Evaluators need to be able to communicate effectively with a broad range of people, including program staff, clients, and other stakeholders. They should use language that lay people can understand and avoid using scientific and evaluation jargon.

- **Writing skills.** Evaluators must have strong skills in writing evaluation reports. When hiring an evaluator, have candidates bring writing samples, including evaluation reports, articles, and the script or PowerPoint slides for presentations they have developed to share findings.
- **Cultural sensitivity.** Evaluators need to respect the cultures of the communities with which they work. Mutual respect and understanding and acceptance of how others see the world are crucial.
- **Commitment to your agenda.** Researchers may have strong prejudices about the research methods they want to use or what they expect to find. Consider their philosophy and approach, and ensure they fit with your program. Discuss any potential issues up front.
- **Time and access.** Make sure potential candidates have the time to complete the necessary work. Compare the amount of time they will be able to devote to your project with your estimate of the time needed to do the work. Make sure to consider site visits and regular meetings.

If you only have a small amount of funds to pay or if finding an evaluator is proving to be a challenge, consider using a student who will evaluate your program at a lower cost or no cost as a part of their research for course work or a thesis, or just to get the experience. A faculty researcher might also be interested in helping if the data from your project could be useful in their work and potentially lead to a published research paper.

Additional Resources

Acosta, J., Ramchand, R., Becker, A., Felton, A., & Kofner, A. (2013) *RAND suicide prevention program evaluation toolkit*. Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation.
<http://www.rand.org/pubs/tools/TL111.html>

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). (2014). Evaluation: Putting evaluation to work.
<https://vetoviolence.cdc.gov/apps/evaluation/>

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). (2016). CDC approach to evaluation.
<https://www.cdc.gov/eval/approach/index.htm>

National Center for Mental Health Promotion and Youth Violence Prevention, Education Development Center, Inc. (2004). Hiring an evaluator.
http://www.promoteprevent.org/sites/www.promoteprevent.org/files/resources/hiring_evaluator.pdf

Work Group for Community Health and Development, University of Kansas. (2013). Community Tool Box. Chapter 36. Introduction to evaluation, Section 4. Choosing evaluators.
<https://ctb.ku.edu/en/table-of-contents/evaluate/evaluation/choose-evaluators/main>

**This section is adapted from: Hiring an Evaluator (2004). National Center for Mental Health Promotion and Youth Violence Prevention, Education Development Center, Inc.*