

# Evaluating Programs

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*Evaluating programs' success involves the careful collection of data and information about various aspects of a program's structure, delivery, usage, and results from a variety of reliable sources. There are a number of tools and approaches to program evaluation help you conduct this type of data collection and analysis. Choosing the right one will depend on the purpose of the evaluation, the program's resources for conducting it, and who will be involved.*

*The key consideration is deciding what you want to learn about the program and to focus on the accurate collection of the right information to learn what it is you want to know. For example, the purpose of a program evaluation might be to:*

- Calculate and/or increase the impact of services. These outcome-based evaluations are often required by funders as part of the grant reporting process over the course of a funding cycle.
- Improve delivery of services to be more efficient and cost-effective. Even the best-planned services to meet community needs can prove less efficient and more costly than need be. Evaluation can identify opportunities to improve delivery of services and conserve program resources.
- Validate assumptions for staff, Board members, volunteers, and the community about how you think you're doing. Evaluation can affirm the program operates as planned and envisioned.
- Produce reliable data that can be used for marketing services to the community and to make the case for support to donors and funders.
- Identify the most effective programs for duplication or during budget challenges.

## **LEVELS OF EVALUATION**

*There are four standard levels of evaluation:*

- 1. reactions & feelings (not for determining lasting impact)**
- 2. learning (increase knowledge, skills, and attitudes)**
- 3. change in behavior or performance (applied learning to behavior)**
- 4. effectiveness (enhanced quality of life due to behavior change)**

Often the higher your level of evaluation, the more useful it will become for making program decisions. It can be difficult to gather reliable data and information to measure Level 4. effectiveness, while information about increased and changes in behavior prove more accessible through client survey data and are very useful.

# Measuring Outcomes

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*An outcome-based evaluation asks whether your program is really involved in the best types of activities and delivery that will result in the outcomes needed by your clients.*

*Outcomes are benefits your clients experience or receive as a result of participating in your program. Outcomes can be in terms of client improvement (such as awareness, knowledge, skills gained) or improved conditions for a change in behavior performance (such as increased state of literacy, increased employment, decreased substance abuse, etc.)*

**NOTE:**

**Outcomes must not be confused with “outputs.”** Outputs are simply quantifiable units of service (such as the number of clients who completed a certain program).

*Imagine your program in terms of inputs, process, outputs and outcomes.*

- **Inputs:** Resources needed to run the program. For example: money, facilities, customers, clients, program staff, etc.
- **Process:** How the program is conducted. For example: How are customers served; clients are instructed or counseled; children receive care, etc.
- **Outputs:** Units of service often expressed in numbers. For example: number of customers served, number of clients instructed or counseled, number of children cared for, etc.
- **Outcomes:** Impact and/or benefit to clients receiving services through the program. For example: increased mental health, increased capacity to find employment, increased social behavior among children, etc.

## **STEPS TO OUTCOME-BASED EVALUATION**

1. Identify the outcomes you want to examine.
2. Prioritize your list of outcomes and, if your resources are limited, choose the top three to examine now.
3. Specify for each outcome on your list what observable measures (also called indicators) will show you that outcome is achieved. This is often the most challenging step because you must make the leap from intangible ideas about the impact of your activities to tangible and measurable outcomes. If you get stuck, use an external person who can question your assumptions.
4. Identify a “target” or goal for your clients as to how many and what outcomes they will achieve from those you’ve chosen to examine. Create goal statements for these.
5. Determine exactly what information you will need in order to show the indicators and related outcomes. For example: for a target group of clients that went through a program, how many reliably searched for a found employment?
6. Decide how the information can be most efficiently and reliably collected from extant data (past and existing program documentation, case studies of program failures and successes) and gathered data (observation of program clients, client surveys and interviews).
7. Analyze and report your findings.

The *United Way of America* at [www.unitedway.org/outcomes](http://www.unitedway.org/outcomes) has a valuable overview of outcome-based evaluation. This general overview has been adapted from the information on this site. Additional tools offered there are example tools and reports from outcome-based evaluations, as well as additional suggestions for conducting the process.