PLAN FOR PROGRAM EVALUATION FROM THE START

BY **ALISON BROOKS MARTIN**

Having evaluation in mind when designing a program can help ensure the success of future evaluations.

O ne of the first tasks in gathering evidence about a program's successes and limitations (or failures) is to initiate an evaluation, a systematic assessment of the program's design, activities or outcomes. Evaluations can help funders and program managers make better judgments, improve effectiveness or make programming decisions.[1] Evaluations can describe how a program is operating, show whether it is working as intended, determine whether it has achieved its objectives and identify areas for improvement. (See sidebar, "CrimeSolutions.gov Rates Programs' Effectiveness.")

Having a plan for the evaluation is critical, and having it ready when the program launches is best.

Evaluation Plans

An evaluation plan outlines the evaluation's goals and purpose, the research questions, and information to be gathered. Ideally, program staff and an evaluator should develop the plan before the program starts, using a process that involves all relevant program stakeholders.
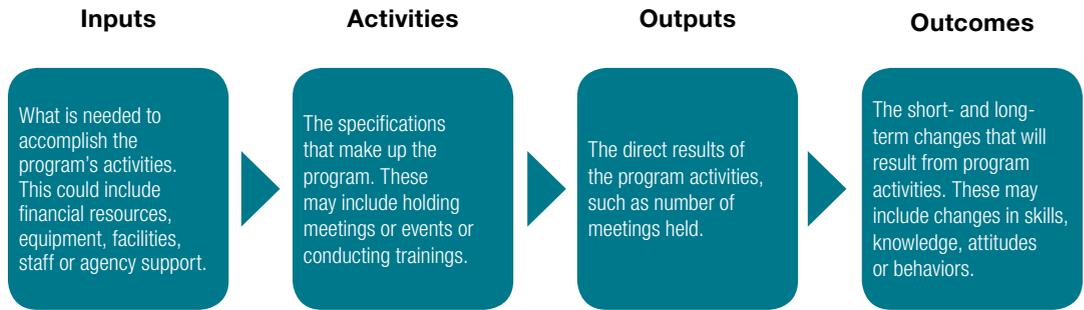
The benefits of an evaluation plan

Having a plan helps ensure that future evaluations are feasible and instructive. Putting the plan in writing helps ensure that the process is transparent and that all stakeholders agree on the goals of both the program and the evaluation. It serves as a reference when questions arise about priorities, supports requests for program and evaluation funding, and informs new staff. An evaluation plan also can help stakeholders develop a realistic timeline for when the program will (or should) be ready for evaluation.

Creating an evaluation plan

Partners and stakeholders use evaluation plans to clarify a program's purpose, goals and objectives and to describe how program activities are linked to their intended effects. To this end, stakeholders should consider developing a logic model. A logic model visually depicts how a program is expected to work and achieve its goals,

Figure 1. Sample Logic Model

Inputs		Activities		Outputs		Outcomes
What is needed to accomplish the program's activities. This could include financial resources, equipment, facilities, staff or agency support.	▶	The specifications that make up the program. These may include holding meetings or events or conducting trainings.	▶	The direct results of the program activities, such as number of meetings held.	▶	The short- and long-term changes that will result from program activities. These may include changes in skills, knowledge, attitudes or behaviors.

specifying the program's inputs, activities, outputs and outcomes (see Figure 1, "Sample Logic Model").

The evaluation plan should develop goals for future evaluations and questions these evaluations should answer. This information will drive decisions on what data will be needed and how to collect them. For example, stakeholders may be interested in the extent to which the program was implemented as planned. Determining that requires documentation on program design, program implementation, problems encountered, the targeted audience and actual participation. Alternatively, stakeholders might want to know the program's impact on participants and whether it achieved its objectives. In this case, program staff should plan to collect data before implementing the program so an evaluator later can assess any changes attributable to the program.

Types of evaluations

A program can benefit from multiple evaluations over the course of its design and implementation.

The type and timing of evaluations are important. Evaluation is more difficult and less meaningful after the program ends, because stakeholders cannot use information gathered from the evaluation to alter the program's implementation or to justify continued funding. Conducting certain evaluations, like outcome evaluations, is difficult when a program is too new because program elements, strategies or procedures often still are being adjusted and finalized. Table 1 shows several common types of evaluations.

Plan for Evaluation From the Start

When designing a program, it is easy to focus only on the immediate decisions that must be made to

Table 1. Common Types of Evaluations

	Formative	Process	Impact or Outcome
Questions the type of evaluation can answer	Is the program's implementation optimized for success? Is the program well developed?	How is the program operating, and in what context does it operate? Has the program been implemented as planned? How can the program's operation be improved?	Did the program reach its objectives? What impact did the program have on target outcomes? What long-term changes can be attributed to the program?
When to use the type of evaluation	During the planning stages or beginning of the program's implementation so revisions can be made before the program starts	In the early stages of the program's implementation to provide initial feedback	At the end of the program's development, when the program is stable and unlikely to change in fundamental ways

implement the program and make it operational. But evaluating a program can be challenging or impossible if stakeholders do not plan for evaluation during initial program development. Having evaluation in mind when designing a program can help ensure the success of future evaluations.

Choose the questions you want to answer and know what information you need to answer them

Stakeholders need to know the questions they want an evaluation to answer and build the capacity to collect data to answer those questions. For example, if stakeholders want to know what changes resulted from the program, baseline data should be collected before the program begins. This is especially important if the evaluation will use surveys or interviews to assess baseline opinions or behaviors, because asking respondents later to recall prior opinions or behavior may produce biased results. By thinking this through in advance, stakeholders can ensure that they conduct any necessary pre-tests before the program begins and establish a method to collect data over the course of the program. Furthermore, planning for a future outcome evaluation — even if the immediate goal is a process evaluation — can be beneficial, because at some point, many stakeholders will want or need to answer the question "Does it work?" Partnering with an experienced evaluator can help stakeholders identify potential evaluation designs and decide how to collect the required data.

Determine the timing and resources needed

Stakeholders should consider the time and cost of an evaluation effort and build them into the evaluation plan. A general rule of thumb is to budget 10 percent of the total program cost for evaluation. Although completing a process evaluation may require only a few months, a large-scale outcome evaluation may require years and a substantial financial outlay. If stakeholders want the evaluation's results to help improve the program or justify continued funding, they need to make sure the evaluation is completed before the program is slated to end. This is particularly critical for programs that rely on grant funding, which are usually active only for a set period of time.

Document critical information

To help ensure that the evaluation is instructive and meaningful, program staff should document the program's design, purpose and objectives so that an evaluator can compare them to the program's actual implementation. Without that documentation, an evaluation is unlikely to produce enough meaningful information to justify its cost and level of effort. Having an evaluation plan in place from the beginning with clear requirements for documentation can help ensure that the needed information is actually collected.

Remain flexible

Despite the best planning, stakeholders cannot anticipate all aspects of a program's operation before implementation, so an evaluation plan should be responsive to program changes and shifting priorities. As they get new information, stakeholders may find some goals unrealistic or some data impossible to collect, access or track. They should revise the evaluation plan as necessary and document each change, justification and decision point.

In turn, stakeholders should be aware that some evaluations, particularly outcome evaluations, might require staff to operate a program differently than usual to rigorously assess the program's effect. For example, evaluators might ask staff to refrain from altering the program's operation during the evaluation period or to select participants in a different manner, perhaps through a randomized process. Partnering with an evaluator in the early stages of program development and implementation can help program staff understand what may be required of them to successfully evaluate the program later.

Special Challenges in Evaluating Multisite Programs

Implementing and evaluating a multisite program can be challenging, especially when sites are given latitude to implement the program in ways that suit their specific needs, because goals and designs will vary by site.

When writing an evaluation plan, stakeholders must consider whether sites will be implementing the program uniformly or will have flexibility in

CrimeSolutions.gov Rates Programs' Effectiveness

CrimeSolutions.gov uses the results of research evaluations to categorize programs and practices as "effective," "promising," or having "no effects." To date, more than 300 programs and practices have been reviewed for their efficacy. Visit CrimeSolutions.gov to learn more.

their design. If each site has a different strategy, stakeholders need to take that diversity into consideration and note it in the evaluation plan. Each site should create its own documentation, including a timeline and list of goals and objectives, and sites may require different evaluation strategies. Addressing differences across sites in the evaluation plan and monitoring their progress over time helps ensure that each site is fully operational and has the necessary data and functionality for future evaluations.

Evaluability Assessments

Programs without evaluation plans in place can experience significant challenges during evaluations. If a program does not have an evaluation plan, an evaluability assessment can help determine whether the program can be evaluated and whether an evaluation will produce useful results. A program with an evaluation plan also can benefit from an evaluability assessment, which can gauge how well the evaluation plan was put into action and its effectiveness in preparing the program for an evaluation.

An evaluability assessment analyzes a program's goals, state of implementation, data capacity and measurable outcomes. It can save valuable time and money if it shows that the program cannot be evaluated, because evaluability assessments cost significantly less than actual evaluations. The evaluability assessment also can provide stakeholders with valuable information on how to alter the program structure to support future evaluations.

Design It So It Can Be Evaluated

The key to developing a program that can be evaluated is to have the goal of future evaluation in mind when designing the program's documentation,

goals and implementation. Stakeholders also must continually monitor the program's progress and verify that relevant data are being captured, particularly if the goal is to conduct an outcome evaluation. Although evaluation is not always easy and can sometimes be an imposition to program operations, having an evaluation plan is invaluable to making such efforts as feasible and successful as possible. Program staff should, whenever possible, partner with a university, an experienced researcher or a sister science agency to help construct the plan. Having an evaluation plan in place will help ensure that future program evaluation is feasible and financially viable and that its results are instructive to program staff and stakeholders.

About the Author

Alison Brooks Martin was a postdoctoral research associate in NIJ's Office of Research and Evaluation from November 2013 until January 2015.

For More Information

Read a chapter by Finn-Aage Esbensen and Kristy N. Matsuda in *Changing Course: Preventing Gang Membership* to learn more about program evaluations and why having a well-designed evaluation is critical to determining a program's effectiveness. Visit NCJRS.gov, keyword: 243475.

Photo source: ©Digital Vision, Thinkstock. Image is used for illustrative purposes only and any person depicted is a model.

Notes

1. Patton, Michael Quinn, *Qualitative Research Evaluation Methods,* Thousand Oaks, California: Sage, 1987; Rossi, Peter H., and Howard E. Freeman, *Evaluation: A Systematic Approach* (5th ed.), Newbury Park, California: Sage, 1993.

NCJ 248779