

Working With an Evaluator: Keeping the Spark Alive

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Acknowledgements

This toolkit was created for the Northeast and Caribbean Prevention Technology Transfer Center (NeC-PTTC0), adapted from the online *course Locating, Hiring, and Managing an Evaluator*, originally developed by Education Development Center and Social Science Research and Evaluation. Citation of the source is appreciated.

Introduction

Evaluation is one area where it often makes sense to bring in outside expertise. It will save you considerable time and effort, as well as increase your probability of success. In fact, the assistance of an evaluator attuned to and practiced in the art and science of theory-based evaluation is often the key to getting evaluation results that are useful and credible.

This toolkit is designed to help you select an evaluator whose skills match your programmatic needs—assuming, of course, that you don't already have an evaluator on

staff. It includes the following tools:

Reasons to Involve an Evaluator Early On

It's never too soon to bring an evaluator on board. Early involvement in the prevention planning process provides time and opportunity for evaluators to do the following:

- **Gain a thorough understanding of your prevention initiative.** Evaluators who are involved in initiative planning have a better understanding of the project's design and intent, how each component is supposed to work, and how the different components connect.
- **Conduct an evaluability assessment.** Evaluability assessments determine whether (1) an initiative or practice is mature enough to evaluate, (2) an initiative or practice is functioning as intended, and (3) initiative or practice outcomes or impacts can be measured. This type of assessment can reveal potential problems and prevent premature evaluations that waste valuable time and resources.
- **Design the evaluation.** It takes time to develop and agree on an evaluation design that is appropriate for your initiative. Rushing through this phase can result in a flawed design that does not adequately assess initiative activities.
- **Select the appropriate measures and develop instruments.** Evaluation measures should be relevant to your initiative's objectives and goals and appropriate for participants. Selecting the right measures takes time. Once chosen, measures need to be organized into a questionnaire (or other data collection instruments), then pilot tested. If the instruments need to be translated into another language, the translation process could take several weeks. Ideally, all of this work should be completed before the initiative begins.
- **Complete the Institutional Review Board's (IRB) review process.** In many cases, you will not be able to collect data until your procedures for protecting the participants have been reviewed and approved by an IRB. The IRB review

process cannot begin until all instruments and participant protection procedures have been developed. It often takes a month or two to complete an IRB review.

- **Develop rapport with initiative staff.** Initiative staff tend to be suspicious of evaluators. Developing trust and good communication patterns usually takes time.

Waiting to get an evaluator on board until after your initiative has been fully implemented can be a costly mistake. It often takes three to six months of evaluation planning and preparation before data collection can begin. If you wait too long, your evaluator may not have sufficient time to help you collect the data you need to answer your research questions.

Internal vs. External Evaluators: The Pros and Cons of Each

The first step in selecting an evaluator is deciding whether to work with an in-house evaluator (someone employed by your organization) or an external consultant. If you have the flexibility to choose, the following chart, which compares internal and external evaluators according to a variety of criteria, can help you with your decision.

	Internal Evaluator	External Evaluator
Objectivity	May be perceived as <i>less</i> objective because closely connected to and invested in the initiative	May be perceived as <i>more</i> objective because not directly connected with the initiative
Credibility	May be perceived as having less evaluation expertise and, therefore <i>less</i> credibility	May be perceived as <i>more</i> credible, provided they take sufficient time to understand initiative functioning
Skills	Is skilled and knowledgeable about initiative functioning	Is skilled and knowledgeable about evaluation

Usefulness	May be <i>more</i> useful because more familiar with initiative	May be <i>less</i> useful because less familiar with initiative
Success	May be <i>more</i> successful in getting support from other initiative staff	May be <i>less</i> successful in getting support from other initiative staff
Cost	Probably <i>less</i> expensive	Probably <i>more</i> expensive

It's important to note that some of the information in this table assumes that (1) the internal evaluator is not an evaluation expert, and (2) the external evaluator is taking a traditional, rather than participatory, approach. You can increase the likelihood that your evaluation will be successful by working with either a highly skilled internal evaluator or an external evaluator committed to a truly collaborative approach. You might also decide to combine both options by having an internal staff person conduct the evaluation and an external consultant assist with the technical aspects and help gather specialized information. With this combination, the evaluation can provide an external viewpoint without losing the benefit of the internal evaluator's first-hand knowledge of the initiative.

Places to Find Expert Evaluators

There are many ways and places to locate qualified evaluators. Here are some ideas:

- **Prevention initiatives like your own.** Contact other prevention coalitions that have implemented and evaluated initiatives and policies like your own. They may be able to suggest local evaluators who will be a good fit for your community. Be sure to ask whether there is anyone with whom they were dissatisfied.
- **Evaluation literature.** In the library or on the Internet, look up published evaluation studies on initiatives like your own. If the authors are local, contact them to discuss your initiative. If the authors are not local, call and ask if they

know of qualified evaluators in your area. By reading these articles, you will also learn a lot about how evaluation studies of initiatives like yours are conducted.

- **Funders.** Ask your funder to help you identify a suitable evaluator. Funders see many evaluation reports and may know some good candidates in your area. Furthermore, it makes sense to choose an evaluator whom your funder knows and respects.
- **State or local agencies.** Most state or local government agencies (e.g., departments of public health and education) have planning and evaluation departments. You may be able to use individuals from these sections or they may be able to direct you to other local organizations or individuals who could work with you.
- **Research institutes and consulting firms.** Professional service firms and research organizations often employ experienced evaluators who can contract with you to conduct an evaluation. A quick online search should generate a good working list.
- **Local colleges and universities.** Faculty in departments of sociology, social work, education, community psychology, and public health, and in university-based research centers often have training and experience in program evaluation. Some of these professors do work outside their institutions and might be willing to work on your evaluation.
- **Professional associations.** Associations such as the American Evaluation Association and the Society for Prevention Research may be able to provide names of local members who conduct program evaluations.
- **Conference presentations.** Look through agendas of conferences that focus on substance misuse prevention. Contact local researchers to discuss your initiative or ask researchers in other areas for local contacts. You may also want to request copies of the conference papers that they presented.

Are They a Good Fit? Assessing Evaluator Qualifications

If you haven't looked for an evaluator before, the prospect of doing so may feel overwhelming. In fact, many people, eager to end the search process as quickly as possible, hire the first evaluator they contact. Resist the temptation! Not all evaluators have the skills you need and, like all hiring processes, hiring an evaluator should be competitive.

- Before scheduling your first interview, sit down with your planning team and talk through what you're looking for. Should the evaluator be flexible? Cheap? Articulate? How important is cost relative to flexibility? And are there certain traits that are particularly important, given your project? For example, if you're working with a largely Latino population, is it important that your evaluator speak Spanish? If working as a team is a priority, is it important to find someone who is skilled at managing groups? If your initiative is highly visible, might you want someone with particularly strong public speaking and presentation skills?
- Below are some important areas to discuss with potential evaluator candidates. Feel free to adapt this list given the needs and priorities of your coalition.
 - **Evaluation philosophy.** Consider the evaluation philosophy or approach that you find most comfortable and appealing. If you envision using a participatory approach, it's important that your evaluator be comfortable with this level of collaboration. Ask candidates if they have used this approach before and about their experiences doing so.
 - **Education and experience.** If you can't identify a candidate with formal training in program evaluation, look for individuals with graduate-level training in social science research methods. They should also have professional experience in the areas of evaluation design, data collection, and statistical analysis. Ideally, candidates should have additional experience that is relevant to your specific initiative or practice. Ask candidates if they've evaluated similar initiatives with similar target populations. If they have, then they probably have knowledge and resources (e.g., appropriate data collection instruments) that

can save you both time and money. To get a clear sense of their work, ask to see evaluation reports they've prepared.

- **Communication skills (verbal).** Evaluators must be able to communicate effectively with a broad range of audiences (e.g., policymakers, first responders, educators, other evaluators, the media). They should avoid jargon; someone who cannot clearly explain evaluation concepts is not a good candidate. To gather accurate information, an evaluator needs to be able to connect comfortably with initiative staff and participants. She should be personable and engaging, as well as capable of making evaluation results both compelling and accessible.
- **Communication skills (written).** You also want to make sure that the evaluator you hire has strong writing skills. Check this by having candidates bring samples of past reports they have written (including the executive summaries), articles, and presentations that they have developed to share their findings. Ideally, you should also ask candidates to prepare a written proposal for your evaluation—though you might want to reserve this request for your pool of finalists.
- **Cultural sensitivity.** An evaluator needs to respect the cultures of the communities with which he or she works. Mutual respect and some understanding and acceptance of how others see the world is crucial. Genuine sensitivity to the culture and community will help increase the comfort level of initiative staff, participants, and other stakeholders. It will also ensure that data collection tools are appropriate and relevant, thus increasing the accuracy of the findings.
- **Budget and cost.** Ask for a detailed budget that distinguishes between direct costs, such as labor, and indirect costs, such as overhead. Overhead rates vary widely. It is not unusual to see overhead costs of 100 percent or more, meaning that for every dollar that goes toward conducting the study, another dollar goes toward running the organization responsible for the study. Sometimes you can

get an organization to reduce its indirect costs. This saves you money without compromising the quality of your study.

- **Time and access.** Make sure candidates have the time to complete the necessary work. Ask them about their current work commitments and how much time they will be able to devote to your project. Compare their responses to your estimate of the time needed to do the work. Factor in frequent site visits and regular meetings. The more contact your evaluator has with your initiative, the better he or she will understand how it works and the more opportunities he or she will have to monitor data collection activities. Regular meetings also let you monitor the evaluator's performance. If the evaluator is not local, travel expenses may increase the cost of your evaluation.
- **Commitment to your agenda.** Researchers, particularly those attached to universities, may have their own reasons for embarking on an evaluation. It may fit into a doctoral dissertation, a book that a professor is writing, or a piece of long-term research that will eventually be published. Researchers may also have strong prejudices about the kind of research methods they want to use or what they expect to find. You may want to discuss these possibilities up front and specify in your contract that the evaluator will make your initiative's needs a priority. Keep in mind, however, that an evaluator with a strong agenda of his or her own may prove to be more dedicated to your study and/or work for less money. Just make sure that your agendas, if not the same, are complementary.
- **Data ownership and control.** People almost never discuss this issue when they hire an evaluator and often regret the oversight. Insist that the evaluator obtain your prior approval for all public dissemination of results. If you don't, your evaluator has license to write articles about your initiative or make conference presentations on the data without your knowledge or approval.
- **Chain of command.** It is important to establish that the evaluator will be working for you, not the funder. This means that you will be apprised of all communication that occurs between the evaluator and funder; have the opportunity to review, in advance, all evaluation reports and presentations; and

be involved in communicating the findings. Just imagine if your evaluation results turn out to be negative: Wouldn't you want to have the opportunity to explain why this might have happened or how you intend to improve your initiative?

- **References.** Make sure to ask for references and check them. People almost always do this when they hire staff, but sometimes forget when looking to hire a potential evaluator.

Finally, keep in mind that an important part of an evaluator's job is to assist in building the skills, knowledge, and abilities of other staff and stakeholders. It is therefore critical that all invested parties will be able to work well together. Make sure to invite finalists to meet project staff and others with whom they will be working closely to see who best fits with individual styles and your organizational culture. If the fit is good, your evaluation is off to a great start!

Working Well with Your Evaluator

Assessing the work of an evaluator can be difficult—especially if you don't have experience working with evaluators or understand evaluation methods. Below are some steps you can take to help monitor and assess your evaluator's work.

- **Come to an agreement on the scope of work.** Prepare a list of tasks and subtasks, including all deliverables (e.g., reports, meeting presentations, or other products) associated with each task. Use the drafted evaluation plan that your evaluator submitted during the hiring process as the basis for this discussion. Tasks and deliverables may change over time, but the evaluator should not work on any activities outside the established scope of work without your agreement.
- **Establish a timeline for reports and other products.** Establish due dates for each deliverable listed in the scope of work, building time in for review and revision of drafts. Monitoring the evaluator's adherence to the schedule is part of assessing their performance.

- **Write a clear contract.** The contract should include the following elements:
 - *Scope of work* (see above).
 - *Evaluation personnel and task responsibilities.* Evaluations often involve a team in which there is a senior evaluator who heads the team and junior staff who do much of the work. Delegation of responsibilities is to be expected. However, you should know which tasks the head evaluator will perform and which tasks will be carried out by assistants. The contract should also specify any evaluation tasks that will be the responsibility of your initiative staff.
 - *Ownership of data.* Specify who owns the information and data collected by the evaluator and who has the publication rights. The initiative or its parent agency usually owns this information. Authorized agency staff should always clear release of information to outside parties. This includes the publication of data in professional papers and journal articles.
 - *Expected contacts with the initiative.* Specify any required progress reports, meetings with the initiative staff, and attendance at other meetings.
- **Keep the relationship professional.** Like most working relationships, it is important to maintain a relationship that is focused on tasks and performance.
- **Meet regularly.** Regular interaction (at least monthly) will allow you to monitor the progress of each task in the scope of work. During these meetings, ask the evaluator to brief you on the status of each task and identify any problems encountered. Use these meetings to make any changes formally to the evaluation design. If regular in-person meetings are not possible, regular conference calls can suffice.
- **Ask questions.** Anytime you're unsure about the work that is being done, ask questions. Don't be afraid to ask for explanations of how work activities relate to the tasks in the scope of work.

- **Require progress reports.** Brief monthly or quarterly progress reports are helpful. These reports should cover at least three areas: (1) activities that were undertaken during the reporting period, (2) any problems or issues that surfaced and how they were addressed, and (3) activities that are expected to be carried out during the next reporting period.
- **Adhere to the schedule of deliverables.** Make sure that all reports and other products are delivered according to schedule. Don't be afraid to ask in advance if the next scheduled deliverable will be on time. Delays in the delivery of one product may have a ripple effect on the delivery of subsequent products. If the delivery schedule is too tight or unrealistic, modify the schedule as needed.
- **Adhere to the agreed upon payment schedule.** Evaluation consultants can be paid in a variety of ways. This is something you need to negotiate with your consultant before a contract is signed. Small consulting contracts are sometimes paid in one lump sum at the end of a contract or when the final evaluation report is submitted. Larger contracts are often paid in monthly installments upon the consultant's submission of a detailed time log.

Perhaps one of the most important things to remember is to deal with issues or concerns early, as they arise. Trust your instincts—don't sweep problems under the rug or ignore nagging worries just because you don't know all the subtleties of evaluation design. Treat your evaluator as you would any other staff member. Remember, he or she is not on board to judge you or your initiative, but to work *with* you to improve the quality of the services you provide.

Strategies for Minimizing Evaluation Costs

There are no two ways about it: well-designed evaluations cost money. Just how much money depends on the experience and education of your evaluator, the type of evaluation required, and where you are located. A good rule of thumb is to budget 10-15% of available funds for evaluation. Are there ways to cut corners and evaluate for less? Yes—but unfortunately, low-budget assessments tend to produce results with little

validity. How, then, can you save money without compromising the worth of your findings? Here are some suggestions:

- **Look for a qualified but inexpensive evaluator.** Faculty at colleges and universities are a good bet. They might consider making the evaluation a project for one of their classes. They may also have access to students who can act as paid research assistants but who earn less than other evaluation staff. (Just make sure that the faculty member will be closely supervising any students who be involved.)
- **Look for an evaluator who may be able to get independent funding through a separate grant or contract.** This is rare but not unheard of. The chief drawback is that you may have to wait—sometimes several months—to see if this can be done before moving forward.
- **Explore other incentives.** For example, look for an evaluator who is interested in branching out and trying something new. Sometimes an evaluator will work more cheaply in order to have an opportunity to do research on a new topic.
- **Look for an evaluator who has experience evaluating initiatives like yours.** Again, this will save money because the evaluator is already familiar with instruments, design issues, and other factors to consider.
- **Start small.** Narrowing the scope of your evaluation will save costs without compromising outcomes. One way to do this is by limiting your evaluation to specific target audiences. Another way to save money is by focusing on intermediate outcomes, since long-term outcomes are usually more difficult to assess.
- **Use a collaborative model.** Having staff carry out some evaluation tasks (like survey monitoring or data entry) reduces costs.
- **Ask the evaluator to price components of the evaluation.** This will make it easier for you to drop certain elements or make informed decisions about how to spread around the work.

- **Estimate cost before specifying an amount in your funding proposal.** If you pick a number more or less out of the air, you are going to get proposals for studies that cost close to that amount. But there may be a chance that you could get the study done for substantially less.

Keep in mind that despite the cost, investing in evaluation can save you time and money over the long haul. With the information you learn from a worthwhile evaluation, you can focus your resources on the most critical problems facing your community and the most effective countermeasures. However, you are much more likely to collect this information if you partner with a knowledgeable evaluator who understands your initiative and with whom you can work comfortably.