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ISSUE BRIEF

Evaluating Community-Based Partnerships: Why? When? Who? What? How?

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Throughout the United States, people are working on a flood of local initiatives to improve the quality of life in our communities. Whether the goals are broad—to achieve social justice, to make people healthier—or focused—to improve immunization rates, to decrease emergency room visits—people and organizations are coming to several key realizations:

- Communities will not truly change if change efforts are focused on a single facet of community life.
- Because community change is multidimensional, multiorganizational partnerships are effective for dealing with complex problems.
- If these efforts are to be sustained, program managers must be able to prove—to funders, community members, policymakers, and others—that they are effective.
- To document progress on initiatives, make midcourse corrections if they are needed, and discern overall effectiveness, program managers need appropriate, functional methods and tools.

This report will present some basic information about evaluation for both community improvement programs and the partnerships that may implement them. The sections that follow answer the basic questions about evaluating community partnerships.

Evaluation Basics: Why?

A good evaluation plan will provide a wealth of useful information to a community partnership. Information from the evaluation can be used to:

- Make strategic decisions and allocate resources
- Help staff make midcourse corrections to increase effectiveness and efficiency or refine and redefine program goals and objectives
- Demonstrate financial accountability
- Demonstrate program effectiveness
- Document what does or does not work as a learning tool for other communities

In other words, it's about collecting solid information to make smart decisions concerning your program.

Evaluation Basics: When?

An evaluation can begin at any point in the life of a community partnership, but the most effective and helpful evaluations will be an integral part of the program and planned from the very start of the idea. This way, key stakeholders can be involved from the outset, leading to smoother relations among all members and less resistance down the line. As will be discussed below, some kinds of evaluations can be useful in determining the need for midcourse corrections in network activities or in how the partnership is operating. An evaluation that is done at the end of a project (called a "retrospective" evaluation) can help inform other initiatives, but is of no use to its subject along the way.

Another reason to plan for an evaluation from the outset is that it may help you choose the best course of action for achieving your goals. In addition, early planning can ensure the availability of the data and information necessary to draw reliable conclusions. That is, all too often there is no information kept on characteristics or activities that are later determined to be critical to assessing the effectiveness of a program. Sometimes the information is available but at much greater cost (for example, a retrospective survey) than if it were collected as part of the program administration as it proceeds.

At the same time, it is important that an evaluation be realistic about the time line of the partnership and its projects. Many community-based initiatives tackle problems that will take years to solve. In those cases, the evaluation should assess progress made toward final outcomes and not jump to conclusions because no "real change" has been made. A theory of action (see below) is one approach that allows you to assess the short-term progress made toward long-term goals.

Evaluation Basics: Who?

An early question in developing an evaluation is who will do the evaluation. The first decision is whether the evaluation will be internal or external. That is, will you use staff of the partnership or partner organizations, or will you use someone from outside the partnership? Each approach has its advantages and disadvantages.

An *internal evaluation* is designed and conducted by a team or an individual with a direct connection to either the partnership or one of the partner organizations. Because of this connection, the evaluation starts off with a base of useful knowledge and relationships. An internal evaluation team often has established trust with important people in the partnership and community and, we would hope, understands community dynamics and politics in a way that an outsider might not (or at least with less effort than an outsider would require). An internal team would also be expected to be sensitive to cultural issues in the community as they affect the process of the evaluation. This last point is key; if the results are to be useful, the evaluation must "ring true" with the community residents and partners.

A disadvantage of an internal evaluation is that outside funders and community members may feel that the team is biased and the results may thus lose credibility. Another concern is staffing. Local staff may not have the skills necessary to conduct a valid and reliable evaluation. Furthermore, it is important to devote sufficient resources—most critically, staff—to a good evaluation. Even if there are staff available with the needed skills and experience, if they are doing evaluation as an adjunct to their "day job," it is likely to get short shrift and have less than desired results.

An *external evaluation* is designed and conducted by a team or an individual with no direct connection to the partnership or its partner organizations. An external evaluator can, in fact, be a community resident. However, external evaluations are often conducted by program funders, which can set up a negative dynamic in which community members feel they are being judged and that their future funding depends on the evaluation results. An external evaluation may be part of a larger project, as is the case with national demonstration projects funded by the federal government or large foundations. In order to demonstrate that their projects or approaches are effective, these funders need to look across sites and determine what works and what does not. They need to compare different communities and different initiatives to determine which ones are most effective in achieving the overall program goals.

External evaluators bring two primary benefits to a community: (1) skills, knowledge, and experience, and (2) objectivity. They often can see the big picture more clearly than someone associated with the partnership or a member organization, and they have no predetermined point of view or expectations. In addition, they have the time to devote to the evaluation because it is the only reason they are involved. What they usually lack is in-depth knowledge of the community and the trust of its residents.

As you might expect, some communities are able to combine the best of both worlds. They might have an internal evaluation of their activities but an external evaluation of the partnership. Or they might have a team with both internal and external members. A third approach is to have an external evaluation with a community advisory board, or an internal evaluation with an external consultant to help design the evaluation plan. The decision depends on the goals of the evaluation, the characteristics of the community, and the resources available.

No matter who is chosen, though, it is critical that program staff and evaluation staff communicate regularly and openly about the expectations, design, and implementation of the evaluation. It may be necessary to modify the program and/or the evaluation because of the findings or because of changes in circumstances or needs of the community. Open communication will help ensure that program and evaluation goals are somewhat coordinated and can be successful.

Evaluation Basics: What?

There are four key sets of information that will help communities make the most of their evaluation resources and get the most helpful information. Before you choose personnel or methods, ask:

1. What do we want to accomplish?
2. Who do we want to impact?
3. How will we do that?
4. How will we know that we have succeeded?

The first three questions are part of program and partnership design. Again, integrating evaluation design and goals early in the planning process facilitates the overall evaluation. They lead up to the fourth, which will be answered by the evaluation.

In the context of a community-based partnership, question 4 can be very complex. When thinking about it, it is important to think about the definition of success for all the stakeholders. “Improved health of everyone in the community” might be just one of many goals. For institution leaders, success might include a component of financial gain (or at least no loss) for their institution. For community members, success might include a component of increased ability to manage and implement future projects. For local employers, success might include a decrease in employee work days lost to illness. For program staff, success might include an increase in personal knowledge. A comprehensive evaluation should include those measures of success that are important to everyone involved in the partnership.

Evaluation Basics: How?

There are many different ways you can slice the concept of “evaluation” into types, and the terminology can be very confusing. You can talk about process vs. impact, theory of action, empowerment, formative vs. summative, and retrospective evaluations. Each has its place, and in the ideal world you might well want to have characteristics of several in a comprehensive evaluation of your community-based partnership.

Again, it is critical that the evaluation fit the program, especially when you are defining measures of progress or success. The type of evaluation chosen depends on the needs of the stakeholders in the community. In many cases, a process evaluation can be used to look at the partnership itself, while an impact evaluation can be used to look at the programs and progress of that partnership. The following descriptions will help you chose which evaluation is most appropriate for you, based on your needs and available resources. It is critical that the methodology you choose fits the questions you are asking.

Process vs. Impact Evaluation

Process evaluations focus on hows: how the program is implemented, how outcomes are achieved. Process evaluation helps you to know if a program was implemented as planned and, if not, what changes were made and how congruent those changes were with the original goals of the program. This type of evaluation may report on what services people received and what they experienced in the process. Process evaluations are often labor-intensive. They are highly qualitative; they get at what happened, how and why, rather than measuring how much was done or how much change was achieved. Counts or lists of the number of activities performed (i.e., number of health fairs held, number of people at an education session) are a simple type of process evaluation.

Process evaluations can be especially important in cross-sector partnerships in demonstrating that the partnership itself is valuable and is achieving results that would not have been achieved by the individual partners alone. Working in partnerships is not easy; all the good intentions in the world are not sufficient for overcoming barriers such as those related to trust, different incentives for different partners, and power and financial imbalances. Thus a process evaluation can be critical in learning what is working among the partners, what needs to be changed, and why. Process evaluations in partnerships will focus on domains such as leadership, conflict management, decision-making, and perceived benefits and costs. Tools used may include questionnaires, surveys, interviews, and observations.

The disadvantage of a process evaluation is that it does not tell you anything about the results of the program: whether or not it achieved its goals, whether or not the people targeted were helped.

Impact evaluations focus on whats: what outcomes were achieved, how much things changed. Impact evaluation systematically assesses relationships between programs implemented and outcomes achieved. That is, is there a relationship between A and B, and is it causal? To what extent? Impact evaluations are usually evidence-based; that is, they use data to demonstrate the results of the initiative. The timeframe may be short- or long-term.

The domains that may be measured include changes in attitudes, knowledge, and behavior, as well as changes in status or costs. It is often tempting, in fact, to measure attitudes or knowledge because they are more amenable to short-term change than is behavior or, certainly, cost or health status. However, if the evaluation is to be credible and useful, it is critical that any demonstrated change relate directly to change in the program's long-term objective. This need for a clear tie between what is measured and the objective of the program will be discussed further under "Theory of Action Evaluation." It is also critical in impact evaluations to avoid being too general; instead, you should look at specific categories of impact.

Tools used in impact evaluations of community-based programs include surveys, administrative and financial records, and analysis of existing data. However, finding useable data can be a significant challenge. While it may seem that there are many sources of useful data, in fact it can be almost impossible to find data that apply to a specific community and only that community. If a project targets an entire political jurisdiction, such as a city or a county, the challenge is somewhat easier; many city, county, and state government agencies (such as health departments) regularly collect useable data. If a project targets only the users of a particular service, such as patients at a community health center, the administrative records can often provide useful data and a way to identify individuals for new data collection. But if a project targets a neighborhood, or a region, or a metropolitan area, obtaining good data is much more difficult. It can even be hard to specify how many people are eligible for the program, so as to be able to measure the percentage of the eligible populations receiving services. (This is known as the "denominator problem." For example, you can't say that half the eligible women received mammograms because you don't know how many women there are in the target area, and how many are eligible and appropriate candidates, even if you do know how many women received mammograms.)

Solving data problems takes ingenuity and creativity. For some questions, census tracts or zip codes provide a useable definition of the target area. At times, user groups (i.e., patients, program attendees) will need to be used as a substitute for the entire population. In that case, you are assuming that if the number of users is increasing and they are improving on whatever dimension you are measuring, you are making progress toward population-wide improvement.

Theory of Action Evaluation

One very useful approach to evaluating community-based partnerships is the "theory of action" (also called "theory of change" or "logic model") evaluation. Often the timeframe for an evaluation is much shorter than the period in which you would expect to see measurable results. For example, a coalition's goal might be to reduce the number of deaths from heart disease in the county. This is clearly a long-term goal—one that might take 10 or more years—but you would not want to wait that long to see if you are making a difference, or at least if you are on the right track.

The theory of action evaluation addresses this problem by looking at how activities are logically connected to desired long-term outcomes. The evaluators look at the program activities and at the long-term goals of the partnership and assess whether or not the activities are likely to produce desired changes leading toward the long-term goals. That assessment is, in the ideal case, based on research evidence demonstrating the connection between the activities and the long-term goal. Often the assessment will look at an intermediate indicator that is chosen because it could change in the time span being looked at, and it should logically lead to the longer-term change that is the final objective of the partnership.

To continue the example, perhaps the activities of Our Town Partnership (OTP) are to conduct smoking cessation classes, conduct an advertising campaign focused on the dangers of smoking, pass an ordinance to raise local taxes on cigarettes, pass an ordinance forbidding smoking in bars and restaurants, and provide rewards to any community resident who quits smoking for a year. Because smoking has so definitively been linked to heart disease, the OTP evaluation could demonstrate success by demonstrating an improvement in a single indicator: the number of residents who quit smoking.

On the other hand, perhaps the activity of Our Local Coalition (OLC) is to hold health fairs and pass out pamphlets about cardiovascular health. OLC has chosen two indicators of success: number of health fairs and total number of attendees. But in fact, while education may be a necessary first step, there is not a strong research base to show that learning about cardiovascular health actually decreases heart disease. Therefore, a theory of action evaluation would say that it could not demonstrate that OLC is on the road to success, no matter how many health fairs were held and how well-attended they were.

Looking a bit deeper, another goal of conducting health fairs could be to build partnership momentum and trust by implementing an activity that is well received in the community. In that case, a theory of action might say that the OLC health fairs are successful, because they are a necessary first step in building the partnership capacity to take on more challenging collaborations, such as changing local ordinances regarding smoking in public places.

In sum, a theory of action approach forces the community partnership to articulate the reasons for each activity rather than simply forging ahead without thinking it through. It encourages partnership members to look at the research underlying community improvement strategies, to think clearly about how to get from where they are currently to where they are going in the long term. It is relatively easy for community-based partnerships to agree on a long-term mission and to choose activities; it is much harder to draw evidence-based connections between the two.

Empowerment Evaluation

Empowerment evaluation refers to an evaluation in which local stakeholders are trained to participate in or conduct the evaluation. Empowerment evaluation began as a model when a local community was not getting information from the government regarding toxic waste, so it is based in efforts to change public policies. Its popularity has grown to include community-based collaborations. A problem that may arise in conducting an empowerment evaluation is including everyone in the community in the decision-making process. It can be difficult to decide who is to be included and who is to be informed after a decision has been made, but it is necessary. Trying to come to complete consensus can paralyze your efforts to accomplish anything. On the other hand, the results of an empowerment evaluation may have built-in legitimacy and credibility because of the community involvement. Furthermore, conducting an empowerment evaluation builds the capacity of community members to assess future programs and partnerships.

Formative vs. Summative Evaluation

A formative evaluation assesses an on-going program in order to be able to make changes and improve performance before the program ends. A summative evaluation is done at the end of a program, to look back and see how much progress was made or what was achieved. The results can be used to decide whether or not to continue the program, or whether or not to replicate it in another place or for another purpose. A simple example is the difference between a weekly test that is used by a teacher to see whether or not to move on in the curriculum (formative), and the test given at the end of the year (summative). Both formative and summative evaluations can assess either process or impact, or both.

In many cases, the only evaluation done of a community-based partnership is a summative evaluation. The argument is sometimes made that the partnership cannot be objectively assessed if the program changes in midstream, and therefore assessment results should not be shared until the initiative is “complete.” This is unfortunate, for it deprives program planners and participants of the opportunity to improve and thus, we would hope, maximize the results achieved. Given the seriousness of the problems addressed by community coalitions, every opportunity should be taken to be as effective as possible. In addition, community work is rarely a pure “scientific” experiment. The value of total objectivity is outweighed by the value of using all available means to optimize program results.

Retrospective Evaluation

In some cases, community partnerships are designed without including an evaluation component until well into the process. In this case, a retrospective evaluation may be the only alternative for conducting an assessment. A good retrospective evaluation requires you to document changes that have taken place, retrieve data that document conditions prior to and after the program, and analyze amount of change (Roos, 1975). A theory of action approach can also be used to assess whether or not any change seen can be attributed to the program conducted by the partnership. A major weakness of retrospective evaluation is that the information collected may not be reliable. Data may be incomplete or inaccurate, and memories of what happened early in the process may be distorted by what happened later.

Data Questions

As we discussed above, obtaining useful and reliable data to evaluate a community-based partnership can be one of the greatest challenges you face. Any assessment is only as good as the data on which it is based, so it is important to choose data sources carefully.

There are two major types of data that can be used. *Primary* data are collected specifically for the evaluation. Data collection tools include observations, surveys, interviews, and case studies. The advantages of collecting primary data are that you can control the accuracy and applicability of the data. In ideal circumstances, you could collect information from every person in the target group. The disadvantage is that circumstances are never ideal. The cost of collecting perfect data is virtually always too high; it requires considerable resources in both time and expertise.

Consequently, many evaluations rely upon *secondary* data, which are collected for a purpose other than evaluating the project. Through national surveys and the Census, the federal government collects data that can sometimes be sources of good information for specific communities. State and local government agencies also regularly collect useful data such as vital statistics (including birth and death data), crime statistics, and education information. Administrative records can also provide information about program usage and the characteristics of the program clients. The advantage of secondary data is its relatively low cost. The disadvantage is that it may not measure exactly the dimension or population group that you are interested in.

Community Fit

A final consideration is what we might call “community fit.” If your evaluation is to be meaningful and useful, it must make sense to your community. The evaluators must understand the community well enough to be sure that the conclusions are valid in the specific context of time, place, and people. This entails being culturally sensitive to community groups and meanings. It requires listening to the community and to the program staff.

Community fit also means presenting conclusions in a way that respects the community’s needs and concerns. This is not to suggest that evaluations should be “dumbed down,” but rather to say that the language used should be clear and free of unnecessary jargon and technicalities. For example, often community members will not care about statistical significance. Instead, they care about meaningful change that makes a difference in people’s lives. And deciding what is meaningful is a value-laden process that depends upon the community’s values. Therefore it may be necessary to involve the community in evaluating the results of the evaluation; that is, ask community members what amount of change would say to them that things are better.

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Using Traditional and Empowerment Evaluation Methods: Overview of Evaluation Design and Methods. http://apha.confex.com/apha/129am/techprogram/paper_23789.htm

Additional Resources

http://www.ces.ncsu.edu/depts/foodsci/ext/faculty/curtis/HACCP/verify-fsis/sld004.htm

http://www.icdel.com/allother.htm

http://www.nur.utexas.edu/Rider/nursing/tsld038.htm

http://www.mapnp.org/library/evaluatn/evaluatn.htm

http://www.gao.gov/policy/10_1_4.htm

http://trochim.human.cornell.edu/kb/intreval.htm

http://www.bja.evaluationwebsite.org/html/roadmap/introduction/what_when/what.html

http://www.health.org/govpubs/phd627/eval.htm

http://www.scu.edu.au/schools/sawd/arr/qualeval.html

http://www.stanford.edu/~davidf/empowermentevaluation.html

http://www.stanford.edu/~davidf/institute.htm

http://home.wmis.net/~russon/cr/power.htm

http://www.ids.ac.uk/eldis/hot/pm1.htm

http://apha.confex.com/apha/128am/techprogram/paper_12322.htm

Useful Sources of Data

http://www.census.gov/

http://www.fbi.gov/ucr/ucr.htm

http://www.rand.org/

http://www.rand.org/health_area/

http://www.silverplatter.com/catalog/out/ALDR/CS.html

http://www.kcpd.org/SERVICES/STATISTICS/statistics.html

http://www.crd.bc.ca/regplan/RIS/Facts/

http://www.hillsboroughcounty.org/com_stats/home.html

http://www.hartfordproperties.com/communities/

http://nces.ed.gov/

http://www.relopoint.com/ktn/

http://www.unitedwayinfo.org/kitsaplinks/statistics.htm

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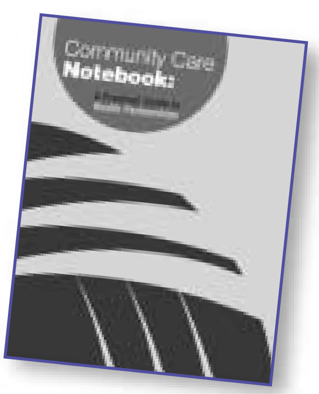

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