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EVALUATION BRIEF

Conducting a Process Evaluation

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Introduction

Program evaluation is an essential component of Healthy Marriage and Responsible Fatherhood Projects funded through the Office of Family Assistance. Evaluation involves the systematic collection, analysis, and use of information to answer basic questions regarding the overall effectiveness of a program or about specific services or activities conducted through the program. The term "systematic" indicates that an evaluation requires a structured and consistent method of collecting and analyzing information. Most evaluations that follow a systematic approach will include both *process* and *outcome* components. This paper discusses the differences between a process and an outcome evaluation, the importance of process evaluation, core concepts that are important for understanding process evaluation, and major steps in conducting a high-quality process evaluation.

Process Evaluation – What is it?

A *process evaluation* describes the specific services, activities, policies, and procedures that are implemented through a program. OFA grantees were funded with an expectation that a specified number of participants will be served and that specific services will be implemented through their projects. To provide useful data about grantees' success in meeting these expectations, a process evaluation often measures implementation in terms of program *outputs*, which are quantitative indicators of the provision or receipt of specific services or activities. In short, a process evaluation describes *who* received the services, *what* services they received, and *how much* and *what type* of services were provided.

Through a process evaluation, output data are collected on a regular basis to monitor and describe whether and how program activities are being implemented; this information will enable grantees to demonstrate to OFA whether they were able to provide the services that they were funded to provide. In addition, the process evaluation can provide early feedback as to whether program implementation proceeded as intended, as well as identify any barriers encountered and possible changes to the original service delivery model. Perhaps most importantly, the process evaluation helps to answer questions about why a program's intended outcomes were achieved or not achieved.

Process Evaluation – Why is it Important?

When implementing a new program, it is tempting—and common—to assume that services and activities will be implemented as originally intended. In hindsight, however, many program managers and front-line staff discover that their projects were not implemented as planned; for example, grantees may not have enrolled as many people as expected or services may not have been delivered with the intensity, frequency, or duration originally envisioned. In some cases, the program as implemented may differ substantially from the program as conceived on paper. These changes in the implementation process in turn affect whether, and the degree to which, desired changes in program participants will be realized.

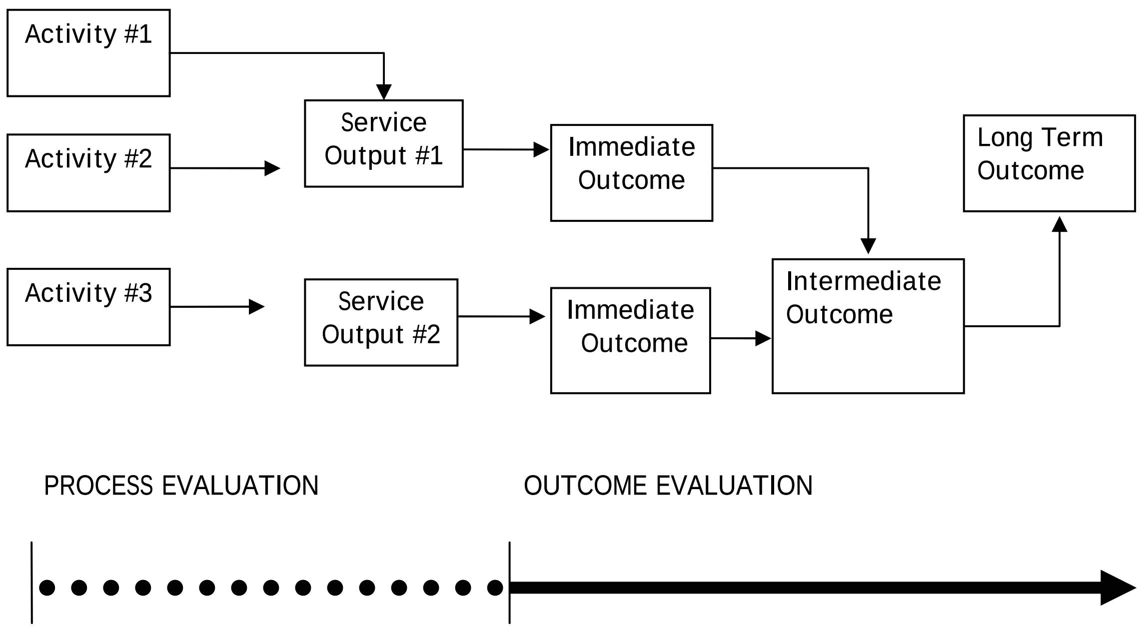
Without a rigorous and systematic process evaluation, it becomes difficult to identify specific problems that occurred during project implementation that may have influenced observed outcomes. For example, assume that a hypothetical program serving unemployed fathers does not achieve its goal of increasing average hourly wages among enrolled parents. Did this shortcoming occur because of fundamental conceptual flaws in the program's service model (e.g., erroneous assumptions regarding the needs and motivations of enrolled fathers), a breakdown in the implementation process (e.g., fathers did not receive as many hours of classroom instruction as the service model prescribes), or contextual variables outside of the immediate scope or control of the project (e.g., a lack of appropriate higher-wage jobs in the community)? The data collected through a process evaluation can assist program managers and other evaluation stakeholders in answering these questions.

Conversely, a process evaluation can also provide insight into the relationship between program services and observed positive outcomes. Turning again to the example of the program targeting unemployed fathers, assume that enrolled parents achieved the desired outcome of increasing their average hourly wage. Before taking credit for this success, how can program managers and staff be certain that this positive outcome is directly attributable to the effects of their program? Is it possible that the improvement was caused by other unrelated factors, such as another employment program operating in the community that recruited from the same pool of parents, or an improving local job market? A high-quality process evaluation, by tracking the quality and quantity of services provided, as well as the number and characteristics of the targeted population, can serve as a blueprint for linking program activities with observed outcomes with a higher degree of certainty.

Process Evaluation and Outcome Evaluation – What's the Difference?

In contrast to a process evaluation, an *outcome evaluation* is used to measure a program's results (i.e., outcomes) in a way that informs project stakeholders whether the program produced desired changes in participants' knowledge, attitudes, skills, behaviors, or status. In an outcome evaluation, outcomes are operationalized in a way that measures whether a desirable condition has "increased", "improved", or is "greater" as a result of an intervention (e.g., improved job readiness skills, increased hourly wages, increased child support payments, increased number of marriages). An outcome evaluation can also measure whether an undesirable condition has "decreased" or is "less" than it was prior to a new program (e.g., decreased marital conflict, lower unemployment rate). If outcome data indicate that changes did occur, the process evaluation can then be used to explore how these changes happened or whether they are the result of the program itself or of contextual factors outside the program (e.g., socioeconomic factors such as the availability of jobs, housing, or health care). The sample logic model in Figure 1 illustrates the conceptual relationship between the process and outcome components of an evaluation by delineating the hypothetical linkages between specific program activities, outputs, and outcomes.

Figure 1.
Relationship between
Process and Outcome Evaluation Components



Core Process Evaluation Concepts

Before proceeding with design and implementation, it is imperative to understand the basic constructs or dimensions of program activity that a process evaluation is designed measure. These dimensions are described briefly below.

- **Types of activity/services** (e.g., classes, home visits, face-to-face contacts)

- **Characteristics of program participants** (e.g., descriptive statistics such as age, race, marital status, education, employment status, income, and number of children. Data on the characteristics of program participants can be used to assess whether the program is reaching its intended target population and whether adjustments to the service approach may be necessary)

- **Characteristics of the staff offering the service** (e.g., demographics, education, years of work experience)

- **Frequency of service delivery** (i.e., how often a particular unit of service is provided)

- **Duration of service** (i.e., how long a particular service episode lasts)

- **Scope of service** (i.e., the number of venues/locations in which the service is offered)

- **Service dosage** (i.e., how many clients completed a given service or activity, how much time clients participated in a planned activity)

- **Fidelity to service model** (i.e., how closely actual services correspond to the original service model, whether the basic service model is stable or changes frequently in terms of the mix of services provided or the population served)

- **Client satisfaction** (i.e., participants' perceptions of the responsiveness of the program to individual needs or of the quality and effectiveness of services).[1]

In designing a process evaluation, grantees should carefully consider which of these dimensions of program activity will be of the greatest utility in answering key questions regarding the implementation of their programs.

Once evaluation stakeholders have identified the dimensions of program activity that are of the greatest importance or interest, these constructs must be operationalized as process indicators or *outputs*. As mentioned earlier, outputs are quantitative indicators that measure the provision or receipt of specific services or activities. Using each of the various dimensions of a process evaluation described above, several examples of outputs are provided below:

- Types of programmatic activity:

  - Distribution of different categories of service provided (i.e., a roster or inventory of different services or activities, such as classes, site visits, therapy sessions, etc.)

- Characteristics of program participants:

  - Number and proportion of participants who are married at program entry
  - Average household income of enrolled clients

- Characteristics of staff offering the service:

  - Number/proportion of direct service staff that have a BA/BS degree or higher
  - Average number of years of employment with the service agency

[1] It is important to note that client satisfaction is a construct measured through a project's process evaluation, *not* through an outcome evaluation. Client satisfaction does not provide information about actual improvements in clients' knowledge, skills, attitudes, beliefs, behavior, or status. However, client satisfaction is an important part of a process evaluation because it describes clients' perceptions about the effectiveness and responsiveness of program services.

- Frequency of service delivery:
  - Total number of classes offered
  - Total number of face-to-face contacts scheduled
- Duration of service (i.e., how long a particular service episode lasts)
  - Total hours of classroom instructional time
  - Average duration of face-to-face contacts
- Scope:
  - Number of different venues/locations in which a given class is offered
- Service dosage:
  - Average class attendance
  - Number/proportion of participants who complete all classroom modules
  - Number/proportion of planned face-to-face contacts that are completed
- Fidelity to service model:
  - Estimated number of project participants versus actual number of participants
  - Estimated/projected classroom attendance versus actual classroom attendance
- Client satisfaction:
  - Number/proportion of participants that indicate they were "very satisfied" or "satisfied" with program services
  - Average scores given by program participants (based on a five-point scale with "1" being the worst answer and "5" being the best answer) to questions on a client satisfaction survey.

Although output data are often defined and reported in a quantitative format, it is important to remember that a comprehensive process evaluation may also include extensive information collected and reported using qualitative research methods. For example, interviews and focus groups with program participants and service providers can provide invaluable information regarding stakeholders' perspectives on the efficacy and impact of services, challenges in implementing services effectively, and suggestions for program improvement.

Steps in Conducting a Process Evaluation

Designing and implementing a process evaluation is not difficult from a conceptual standpoint; however, it does require careful up-front planning, the allocation of adequate technical and personnel resources, and a commitment to collect data in a systematic and consistent manner. This section outlines the most important steps in planning, designing, and implementing a process evaluation that results in high-quality information to complement and clarify outcome evaluation findings while providing useful feedback to guide program development and improvement. Ideally, many of these steps would be implemented in conjunction with developing a complete logic model for your program. As illustrated in Figure 2 at the end of this brief, it is often helpful to outline each of these steps in a written data collection plan.

<u>Step 1: Identify Specific Program Activities and Services</u>: Before proceeding with the development of process evaluation outputs, it is imperative to identify as explicitly as possible the specific services, activities, or interventions that constitute your program. Although this step may seem unnecessary, it is of critical importance because it will prove difficult to operationalize concrete outputs without first defining the exact activity that each output refers to. The more specific and precise the definition of each service or activity, the easier it will be to formulate a corresponding measure that is discrete and meaningful.

<u>Step 2: Articulate the Immediate Result of each Activity</u>: After identifying specific program activities, briefly state the immediate result or consequence of each activity. Again, this step may seem redundant, but it serves as an important conceptual bridge between discrete program activities and your assumptions about what program participants will do in response to these activities. For example, if your program offers classroom-based instruction on developing constructive communication techniques with a spouse or partner, your assumption is that spouses and partners will attend these classes. Once you've articulated this assumption, it becomes easier to operationalize it as a specific service output. This step can often be accomplished using a simple statement or phrase, such as "spouses and partners attend classes" or "fathers attend job training classes."

<u>Step 3: Operationalize Service Outputs</u>: Once specific services or activities and their immediate results have been articulated, it is possible to operationalize them as discrete process indicators or service outputs. Outputs should be quantified in the most concrete terms possible. Using the examples from Step 2 above, examples of outputs might include "average weekly class attendance" or "number/proportion of enrolled fathers who attend all classes in the job training course." When developing outputs, think about the types of measures that will provide the information needed to understand your program's operations. The core dimensions of program activity discussed above are also useful in articulating appropriate outputs.

<u>Step 4: Identify Data Sources</u>: Clear definitions of service outputs will be of little use without knowing where the information that feeds these measures will come from. Identify the initial source of data for each output as soon as possible to allow time for refining or identifying alternative data sources before data collection begins. In the case of an output for class attendance, a relevant data source might be a daily class attendance log. In some instances, it may be necessary to develop customized data collection templates, forms, or

logs. In conjunction with the identification of data sources, it is critical to have a robust information management system or database in place to facilitate the collection, storage, and analysis of your process data. You may be able to enhance or modify existing spreadsheets or databases to accommodate the needs of your process evaluation; in some cases, it may be necessary to develop new information management systems from scratch. In these instances, the services of an in-house or third-party database developer or programmer may be required.

<u>Step 5: Specify Measurement Intervals</u>: Process data are rarely collected only once during the course of an evaluation; you will often need to identify a consistent interval to guide the collection of process data on an ongoing basis. Measurement intervals are generally anchored in calendar terms (e.g., daily, weekly, monthly, yearly) to ensure standardization in the collection of data across your service population. For example, in the case of marriage or job training classes, you may want to collect attendance data weekly (or however often classes are scheduled) on an ongoing basis throughout the duration of your program. In all cases, measurement intervals should be frequent enough to provide regular and useful information but not so frequent as to subject staff or clients to undue response burdens.

<u>Step 6: Identify Performance Targets</u>: Depending on the nature of your program or the goals stated in your original grant proposal, it may be appropriate to articulate performance targets for certain services or activities. A performance target serves as a standard or "yardstick" of achievement against which program success is measured. It is generally expressed in numerical terms (e.g., 75 percent of parents will attend all 12 classes of the job training curriculum) and is sometimes referenced against a known historical benchmark or statistic. For example, the attendance rate for other training courses that your organization has held may have averaged 70 percent, in which case setting a somewhat higher performance goal (e.g., 75 or 80 percent) may be appropriate. When identifying a performance target, it is important to set a goal that is realistic and attainable. Returning to the example of a job training course, an average attendance target of 95 percent may not be appropriate if historical attendance rates for similar courses have hovered around 50 percent.

Figure 2 on the following page lays out more examples of each of these steps using a sample data collection plan for a hypothetical healthy marriage outreach and training program. For more information about designing and conducting a process evaluation, please contact a JBA team member at:

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Figure 2
Process Evaluation Data Collection Plan for a Hypothetical Healthy Marriage Outreach and Training Program

Service/Activity	Immediate Results	Outputs	Data Sources	Measurement Intervals	Performance Targets
Standardized marriage training curriculum; classes offered 2 times weekly for 8 weeks	Couples attend training classes	Average weekly class attendance #/% of enrolled couples that complete entire 8-week course	Class attendance logs	Weekly, ongoing	Weekly attendance will average 80% of all enrolled couples 60% of all enrolled couples will complete entire 8-week course
24-hour couples hotline	Couples call the hotline	Average # of hotline calls per month	Hotline call log	Monthly, ongoing	NA
Monthly couples events (e.g., picnics, special speaking engagements)	Couples attend special events	Avg. monthly event attendance	Event attendance log	Monthly, ongoing	90% of enrolled couples will attend at least one special event
PSAs broadcast once per week for 2 months via local television station	The public views PSAs	#/% of adult survey respondents who report seeing television PSA at least once	Random telephone survey of households in PSA catchment area	Once via telephone survey 1 month after PSA campaign	NA
Billboard-based PSAs located in 5 strategic sites in the program's service area for one month	The public views PSAs	#/% of adult survey respondents who report seeing billboard PSA at least once	Random telephone survey of households in PSA catchment area	Once via telephone survey 1 month after PSA campaign	NA
Brochures regarding program activities and services distributed through local malls, other business outlets	The public takes and reads the brochures	#/% of adult survey respondents who report having read a brochure # of brochures distributed each month #/% of distributed brochures remaining at end of each month	Random telephone survey of households in PSA catchment area Brochure distribution log Site observation	Once via telephone survey 1 month after PSA campaign Monthly, ongoing Monthly, ongoing	NA 80% of distributed brochures will have been taken at the end of each month