james bell associates

Serving the public and non-profit sectors through independent program evaluation, applied research, and technical assistance.

EVALUATION BRIEF

Nine Strategies for Improving the Quality of Your Evaluation

August 2007

1. **Submit your logic model and evaluation plan to JBA early in the first year.** Logic models are often created under the pressure and time crunch of submitting proposals, when grantees do not have the time to fully develop a logic model. Many initial logic models fail to depict expected pathways of change. Similarly, many evaluation plans in proposals are preliminary and lack detail. Developing or revising your logic model during the first year will allow you to use your logic model as a blue print to guide both your program and evaluation and to structure your reports to the Children's Bureau. Asking JBA for assistance early on will allow us to identify any missing intermediary outcomes and data needed to measure these outcomes before your program undergoes IRB review. Making changes to our data collection plan after obtaining IRB approval can be difficult.

2. **Use your logic model to structure the components you address in the semiannual reports.** Semiannual reports are an important part of your ongoing evaluation. Use your semiannual reports as a way to share your progress, not only on meeting implementation objectives but also on your evaluation. Using your logic model to structure your report will help you address your progress on all key activities implemented and your progress obtaining short-term and intermediate outcomes. If you use your logic model in reporting, you will be addressing all of the activities, not just those where you achieved success. The Children's Bureau wants to know about your program's successes *and* challenges.

3. **The logic model should reflect plausible linkages and include outcomes that can be operationalized.** Your Logic model should include outcomes that are operationalized, meaning quantified and measurable. Without measurable outcomes, it is not possible to determine whether the program was successful. Your logic model should also include outcomes that are realistic, given the interventions planned. Avoid collapsing multiple activities into one box, leading to the same outcome. Only when your logic model tracks the discrete pathways of change can you understand how different activities influence a project's

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outcomes. Look critically at your logic model and ask others to review it as well, to see if they can follow the linkages between the interventions you are providing and the kinds of outcomes you expect to occur. If not, consider making revisions.

4. **The Grantee and Evaluator should work together as a team.** The Evaluator is not conducting the evaluation in isolation, but is part of the overall team. The Project Director needs to understand the evaluation and what the Evaluator is doing. In order to conduct a robust and thorough evaluation, the Evaluator should be given access to the program activities, staff, and clients as needed. The program staff can help the Evaluator to better understand the program being implemented.

5. **Include a comparison group or comparison data.** A comparison group provides a stronger link between your intervention and outcomes. Consider the following possible comparison groups: similar target population in your own agency, similar target population from another agency in your community, or a similar target population in another county agency. If a comparison group is not available, consider utilizing comparison data, such as historical agency data, rates in the community, or data from pre-post tests. Without comparison or baseline data, there is no way of knowing whether your program's outcomes reflect an improvement over the services that existed before your program received a grant from the Children's Bureau.

6. **Establish a working agreement with your Evaluator that is specific.** It is important to be clear about available resources upfront when establishing expectations of the Evaluator and the tasks to be performed. Establishing a written consulting agreement that is updated each year is one way to clarify expectations and define the scope of work and tasks to be performed by the Evaluator. The agreement should address the resources available for each year of the evaluation and the specific tasks to be performed; the reporting requirements and the frequency and type of written reports to be developed by the Evaluator; expectations of the Evaluator with respect to attendance at program staff meetings and activities; and the individual who will be performing various tasks (e.g., the Evaluator or graduate students).

7. **Secure plans for accessing Child Welfare data as soon as possible.** Speak with persons in the Child Welfare agency so that you can understand what data are maintained and in what format. In establishing a relationship with your Child Welfare agency regarding access to data, it is important that you educate the agency about the project and the evaluation and how the data will be used. Try to help the agency understand how the evaluation findings could be helpful or useful to the agency (so they can see the potential advantages of sharing the

data). You need to be specific about whether you are requesting aggregate level data (which counties already supply to States for NCANDS and AFCARS reporting) or client-level data. In the case of obtaining client-level data, each local child welfare agency will have its own policies regarding the release of information and what type of consent is required in order to obtain the information. You may be asked to sign a data sharing agreement that specifies how you will take precautions in handling client-level information and its reporting. In establishing a relationship, you will want to have the support of someone like the agency director or another person with the authority to approve the release of data for the evaluation. It is important that a written agreement be put in place that specifies the information that will be shared, the frequency of providing the data, and the format in which the data will be received. Written agreements should be updated regularly since there can be staff turnover and new persons may be unfamiliar with the terms agreed upon.

8. **If an evaluation approach is not working, consider whether it should be continued.** A key program evaluation question to remember is "Did the intervention happen?" If it did not, then it does not make sense to continue to dedicate your resources to evaluating that component. Other situations that may warrant changing your evaluation plan include:

   - The data sources originally anticipated are not available;
   - Too few referrals makes random assignment impossible;
   - The original evaluation plan or Logic model included the "wrong" outcomes given the interventions being implemented; and
   - The project is trying to implement an overly ambitious evaluation, evaluating too many components without enough staff or resources.

   Discuss with JBA your plans for making changes to evaluation and contact your Federal Project Officer to obtain approval before making any changes.

9. **Consider submitting a draft of the final evaluation report before your grant ends.** Final Reports are due 90 days following completion of the grant. Follow-up on questions, clarification, and gathering additional information is difficult because of the abbreviated timeline. Submission of an early draft enables JBA to provide comments, ask questions, make suggestions for inclusion of information that is missing, or to clarify presentation of data.

Source: Adapted from DeSantis, J. (2006). Technical Assistance on Evaluation: Improving the Quality of Local Evaluations. Presentation at the Children's Bureau Orientation Meeting for New Grantees. January 2006. Washington, D.C.