Presenting at a Conference: A Tribal Evaluation Institute Brief

When home visiting program staff present at conferences there are many benefits including increasing the general knowledge base, brining visibility to program achievements and community strengths, and reinforcing the skills and confidence of the presenter. It also can be a great team building activity because often times a presentation can highlight the work and expertise of multiple staff members.

This brief breaks down the process of presenting at a conference into five steps including: Identifying something to share; finding the right conference; planning the presentation, presenting; and reflecting on the presentation. The brief describes the major considerations and practical aspects of each step, as well as some suggestions for how to optimize potential benefits at various stages. This brief will demonstrate how, with appropriate planning, you can extend the benefits of conferences by encouraging and preparing staff to develop and present at conferences.

This brief was developed by the Tribal Evaluation Institute (TEI) to support Tribal Home Visiting Program grantees with their conference dissemination efforts. It could also be relevant to anyone who presents at conferences as part of their work, including program and evaluation staff of other home visiting initiatives as well as those in related fields such as education, health, mental health and other human services. TEI was funded by the Office of Planning Research and Evaluation and awarded to James Bell Associates, Inc. in partnership with the University of Colorado, School of Public Health, Centers for American Indian and Alaska Native Health and Michigan Public Health Institute.
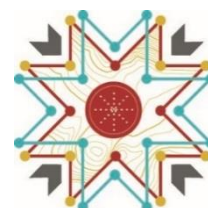
Value of Presenting at a Conference

Sometimes people think that conferences only benefit the individual who attends. The person just goes, listens, and comes back with a whole bunch of materials that do not end up getting used very much. And yet, presenting at conferences has many potential benefits to your program. There are benefits for many of your program's stakeholders: the **Presenter** her/himself, the **Home Visiting Program**, the **Community** as a whole, and finally presentations at conferences have a significant impact on all of us by contributing to the **General Knowledge Base.**

**Getting the Most out of Attending Conferences:** Conferences can be expensive and time-consuming and may not always make sense for your program. But, if you do decide to attend, there are some things to focus on in order to get the most out of the conference for yourself and your program. Attending a conference can be an effective way to set-up or reinforce professional networks with individuals and organizations across the nation. These networks can be invaluable for peer-to-peer learning and can help when your program faces the inevitable challenges of implementation. Additionally, you can support others in your network as they face challenges that your program has successfully overcome. Conferences are also an ideal venue for program staff to learn from and be inspired by others doing similar work. Last but not least, attending a conference is a great way to hear the most current research findings in your field. One way to get the most out of attending a conference is to do a presentation on your work.
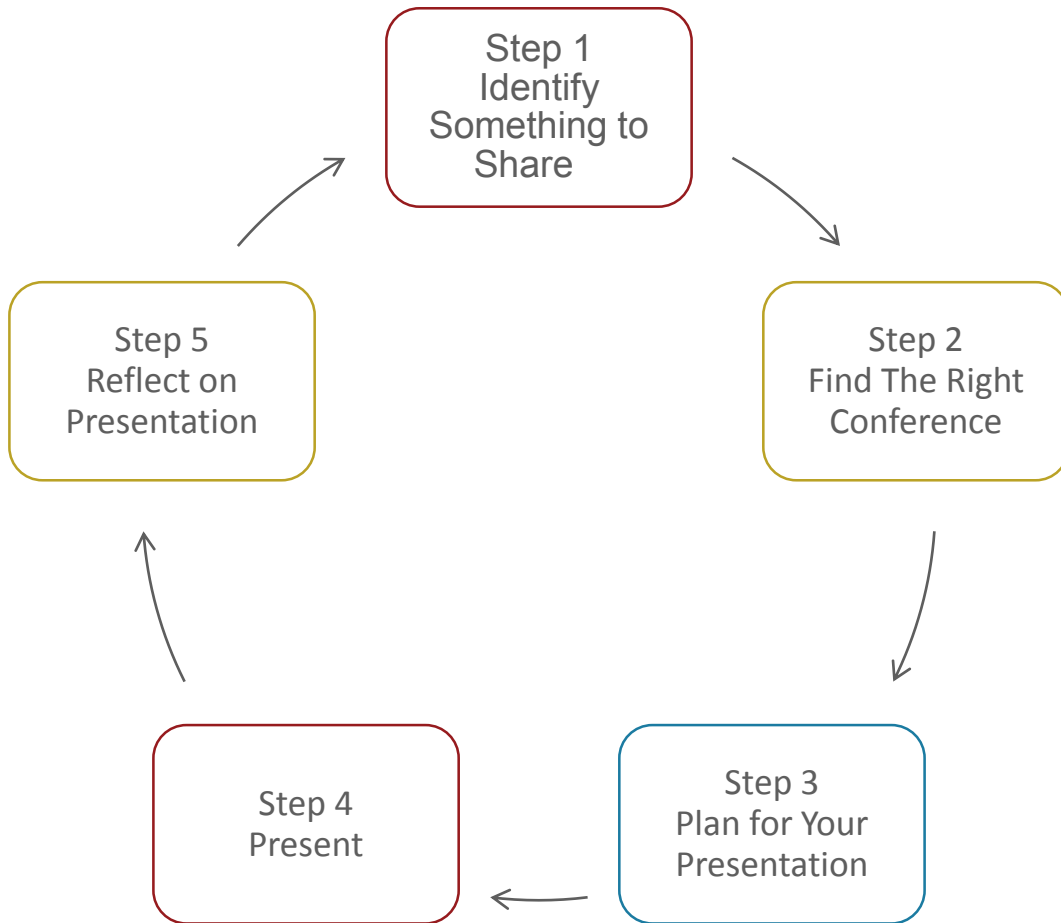
Presenting at Conferences: Presenting at a conference can:

- provide an opportunity for developing a product describing your program's work that can be used for other purposes or shared in various ways (at community meetings or to Tribal council);
- help bring much deserved attention to your program's achievements and your community's strengths locally and across the nation;
- build capacity, experience and confidence of your staff;
- share knowledge gained with other communities experiencing similar challenges;
- provide an opportunity to receive feedback from others in the field; as well as
- increase general awareness of and knowledge about home visiting.

These benefits can significantly impact your program beyond your participation. Staff development and support can improve program implementation on a day to day basis and increase staff moral and retention. Improved program visibility at the local level can increase referrals and build support for the program throughout the community. This support is essential for program sustainability and expansion. Finally, sharing information on your program to a broader audience can inspire others to improve support of children and families in their communities.

General Knowledge Base

Community

Home Visiting Program
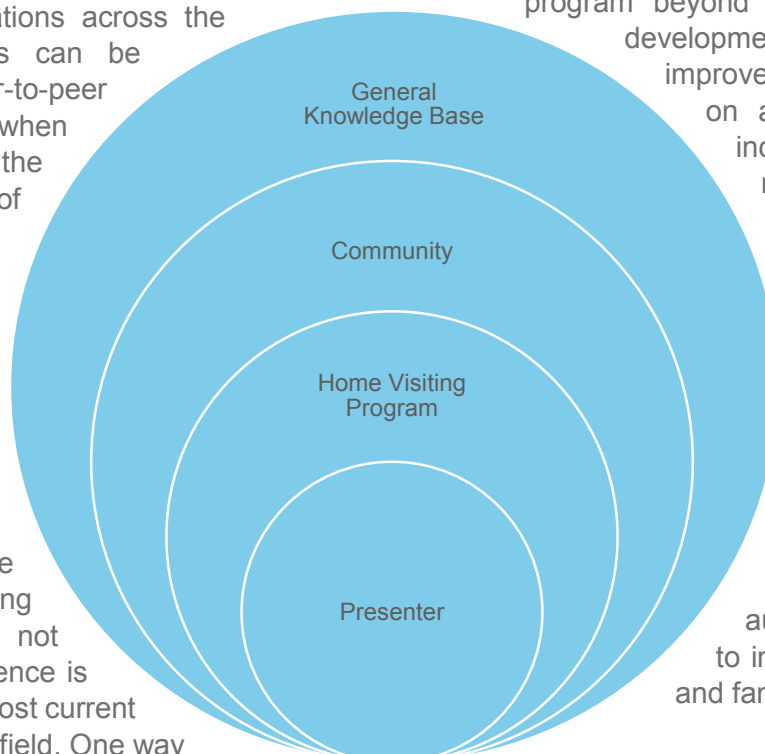
Presenter

Process for Presenting at a Conference

Step 1
Identify Something to Share

Step 2
Find The Right Conference

Step 3
Plan for Your Presentation

Step 4
Present

Step 5
Reflect on Presentation

STEP 1: Identify Something to Share

Figuring out what to talk about is the first step in your presentation development. Identifying a topic for your presentation can sometimes be really easy—someone asks you to present on something specific—or it can be a little trickier. It's often hard for people to feel as though they have something important to say. Even if you know you have something to say, sometimes it is hard to imagine actually getting up in front of people and saying it. But, think about the last conference, talk or meeting you attended: Did you at some point think to yourself, "that wouldn't work in my community" or "the same exact thing happened with us." Did you have an idea or a solution that was not covered? Did you get that flush-y feeling under your skin while trying to decide whether or not to raise your hand? If yes, chances are…*you have something to say*. You actually probably have tons to say. And yet, for a conference presentation it is not enough to have *something* to say, you also really should have something useful to *share.* In this way, it is helpful to try to figure out what other people would be interested in hearing from you.

Here are some considerations as you identify a topic for a presentation:

What do we know? It may sound obvious, but it is best to give presentations on topics you know.
- Understanding the topic helps your presentation flow, it makes it easier for you to answer follow up questions, and often it actually makes it more straightforward and easier to follow.
- Speaking knowledgably on the topic during a presentation also allows the audience to identify you as a qualified presenter, and makes it more likely that they will use the information you share.

How do we know it? Once you have identified an area of focus about which you are knowledgeable, think about why it is a good topic to present?

- What is the quality of the information you have to support your message?
- Do you have data? Can you describe how data were collected and what they say?

- If your presentation is more descriptive in nature, can you trace your description to theories or literature that might help your audience better understand the information?
- Addressing limitations related to areas that are not discussed in your presentation can actually strengthen your message and is a great way to inspire others. *Be honest about what you do not know. There might be someone listening who has a suggestion based on their own experience.*

> **You Do Not Need to Feel Like an Expert to Present!**
>
> It is absolutely fine not to have all of the answers to questions related to your presentation. Open it up to the audience and see if anyone has an answer to share.

How will this presentation be most helpful to others? Anyone who has given a boring presentation or sat through one will tell you that it is much more fun to give or experience an interesting one. It really pays off to think about not only what topic will be interesting for your audience, but also what format of presentation will best hold their interest.

- Try to present new material for the audience. If you are reviewing information you have shared before, expand and build on what you have shared instead of repeating a presentation to the same audience members.
- Involve the audience as much as you can to help them to not tune out.

Spend some time brainstorming topics for presentations and you will likely find there are many potential contributions that you can make to the field. *Now that you have something to say, find a place to say it.* Sometimes the right conference finds you (you are invited), but there are many options and choosing the right conference for your presentation can be hard.

STEP 2: Find the Right Conference

There is a lot to consider when selecting a conference:

- What type of conference would be best for my presentation?
- What will I learn from other presentations at the conference?
- What are the costs of attending both financially and time?
- What type of format works for my presentation and is it offered at the conference?
- How do I submit an application to present and what are the criteria for being accepted?

Types of Conferences: First, you might think about the common thread of the conference. Some conferences are specific to a particular career path or guild—for example the National Association of Social Workers. Others are topic based with a multidisciplinary (representatives from many different professions) participant base such as the National Indian Child Welfare Association (NICWA) or the Association of Maternal and Child Health Programs annual conferences.

Generally, conferences for particular careers (pediatrician, counselor, social worker etc.) are sponsored by various associations and are designed to support the professional development of individuals in particular career paths or in a related field. For example, if you have ever worked with a Psychologist, it is likely that you have heard of the "APAs." which are the American Psychological Association Meetings that happen annually. Home visitors do not have their own professional meeting, but the work of home visitors overlaps with many different areas related to maternal and child health,

child development, education and beyond which means home visitors can benefit from and contribute to many types of professional conferences.

Conference Lingo: You might notice when you start looking into presenting or attending a conference that there is a special conference lingo that can be a little confusing. Each conference will have its own terms. For example, a "Call for Abstracts" is really the same as a "Call for Proposals" which is the same as a "Call for Presentations." Basically, a **Call** for anything means that you can submit your presentation to be considered for inclusion in the conference agenda.

Once you understand the lingo, you will see there is some consistency in the way that conferences are structured. Generally, conferences are broken out by sessions. Each **session** brings people together in a particular location during a specific time to talk about a common theme. **Concurrent Sessions** are sessions that take place at the same time in different rooms. You will probably have to choose one session to attend or, you can move between sessions. Some conferences repeat sessions so it's good to look at the program to see if you will have another opportunity to attend a particular presentation.

There are different types of sessions, including:

- **Panel**: the most common session "type." A panel is a group of individuals, generally 3 to 5, presenting on a common theme. Each individual presents, and then a discussant sometimes addresses continuity or conflict between the presentations.
- **Roundtable:** panel discussions with increased opportunity for discussion and audience input.
- **Poster:** areas where many participants display large posters (think science fair). Typically posters are displayed for conference attendees to view at their convenience, and then there is an identified time when presenters are present and available for conversation. When poster session are held there is normally a large group milling about who may approach the presenters and ask questions.
- **Workshop**: workshops are a hands-on opportunity to learn and/or refine skills related to a particular task or endeavor. Usually directly preceding or following the conference.

Conference Information Can Be A Little Confusing

Keep an eye out for contact information for conference planning staff and feel free to ask clarifying questions. Or, ask around to see if you know anyone who has presented before and ask them for advice.

- **Keynote**: speech, generally attended by all conference attendees, setting the main underlying theme of the conference. Generally keynotes are given by leaders in the field who are invited specifically to give the address.
- **Plenary**: session that all conference attendees are expected to attend.

Submitting to present at: Once you have the lingo down, you can more easily consider submitting a proposal to a particular conference and decide what type of session would be best for your presentation.

The calls will provide information about submitting your application including when the application is due and what format to use. Calls usually include a link to a web interface for submitting your application, and will provide guidance about how presentations will be evaluated. You will likely be asked to indicate the **type of session** you would like for your presentation.

Where do I get on the list to receive the Calls: In the **Index of Conferences** (TEI Website) you will see detailed information on many conferences relevant to home visiting. The descriptions will include weblinks to sites where you sign up to receive notices from specific organizations (listserves) that sponsor conferences. Additionally, keep an eye out for emails from your federal program staff and TA partners announcing Calls for conference presentations.

Each call will have a date when applications will no longer be accepted for that conference. Make sure to give yourself at least a few weeks to prepare a quality application before that date. The applications are reviewed by conference planners. Proposals that meet basic qualifications are assessed and selected based on various factors including fit with conference theme, quality of presentation information, and potential impact of presentations. Some conferences are extremely selective and it is very difficult to get a presentation accepted, others are more open to a wide variety of presentations and accept most applications.

If you submit an application, you will be notified of your presentation's fate generally within a couple of months. If your presentation proposal is denied, think about other conferences that might be a better

fit or consider revising for the following year. If it is accepted, *get ready to present at a conference!*

Is This Process Competitive?

Typically, scholarly conferences focused on disseminating research findings are extremely selective and have very low acceptance rates, whereas programmatic conferences focused on peer-to-peer learning tend to be less selective and presentations are more likely to be accepted.

What happens once your presentation is accepted: Generally you will submit your presentation as an individual presentation or as part of a panel. Either way, conference planners will ultimately determine where and when to place your presentation or panel within the conference agenda. Individual presentations will be placed in a series or panel with other accepted presentations with a common theme. Submitting as a panel allows you to identify the other presentations and gives you a little more input in the overall message of the panel. It is important to let the conference planners know if you have any scheduling requirements early in the process so corrections to printed agendas do not need to be made.

After your presentation is accepted, some conferences will ask for a draft or final version of your presentation materials. Occasionally, a fully finalized written paper is required along with your presentation. At first this requirement can seem daunting, but it gives you the opportunity to develop your presentation in advance of the conference. Another major benefit is that after you have written the paper, you will be very far along in the process of developing a journal article for publication. In fact, sometimes there are opportunities to publish your presentation within the context of the conference itself, so keep an eye out for these additional possibilities for dissemination.

STEP 3: Plan for Your Presentation

Planning for a presentation begins way before you even think about the conference. The process actually starts by gaining an understanding of:

- Tribal or community processes for getting approval to share information;
- Agency policies & procedures for travel; and
- Any program specific issues related to conference presentations.

> **If Presenting at Conferences Is New to Your Agency or Community…**
>
> You may need to explain the value as you ask for approval to attend. Feel free to use the information in this brief to talk to supervision, agency administrators, and Tribal members about why presenting at a conference may be good for your program, your agency and your community.

Getting approval locally to present is an essential step, and it is best done early in the process. Different agencies have different policies about employees presenting and attending conferences. If the supervisor familiarize staff with these policies as they join the program expectations are clear prior to the development of a presentation. Some of these policies will be related to the content of your presentation (what you have permission to share) and others will be administrative in nature. Make sure you understand and follow your program's policies related to:

- **Sharing Information:** It is essential that program staff understand the process for having the content of their proposals reviewed and approved. Who needs to review and approve presentations and how do you submit the presentation for review in your community? This process can include an internal agency review and/or require a more extensive review by a Tribal Council or another governing body.

Depending on the community and various other factors, reviews can be quick or lengthy. It is critical you plan adequate time for this process in your presentation development timeline. You don't want to have to cancel your conference presentation at the last minute because you haven't received approval.

- **Agency Policies Related to Travel Expenses**: Understanding agency travel policies makes attending a conference much easier for everyone involved. What expenses are allowed? What has to be paid for by the employee and how does reimbursement work? Are there any limits to reimbursement? Do employees need to keep and submit receipts? Who makes travel arrangements? These are some of the questions to clarify in your agency.
- **Program Specific Issues:** In addition to agency-wide policies, programs will each have specific issues related to travel. Depending on the funder, there may be further restrictions or requirements related to travel or conference attendance. When considering a presentation, make sure you have program funds to cover conference expenses including membership and registration fees, travel, lodging and per diem (an allowance paid to employees each day during travel). Also, think about staff coverage for time spent at conferences. Who will cover home visits or can they be rescheduled? Who will manage referrals and other urgent matters?

When it is Your First Time at a Conference: Traveling to a conference for the first time can be intimidating, especially if traveling is new to you. The more you plan your trip, the more comfortable you will be. Lay out your travel plans and look up the city to get a lay of the land. Think about transportation between the airport and the conference as well as how you will get around town. Can you walk? Will you need to cab? If you are traveling alone, plan your time that will not be spent attending the conference. If you are traveling in groups, will you share rooms? Meals? What does one wear to a conference? Dress comfortably in a style that would be appropriate for a relatively casual office setting. If you are presenting, take an outfit that will help you feel confident.

STEP 4: Present

As with most things, presenting well starts with good preparation.

Preparing your presentation: Once you have a topic and a conference selected, you can start thinking about presentation structure and style. It is important to consider your presenter preference, the context of your presentation and perhaps most important, the audience. Some things to consider as you think about designing your presentation:

- **Who should present the material**? Who from your program would best present the presentation material (a home visitor, a program director, an evaluator, a participant, a team)? Do you have time for multiple speakers? Are there community partners who should be involved in the presentation?

> **Practice, Practice, and Then, Practice Again…**
>
> Being a good presenter is a **skill** not a trait, and like any skill, it is learned through **practice.** Run through your presentation many times prior to presenting live. The more you present, the easier it gets.

- **Presenter Preference:** Is the presenter more comfortable reading a written presentation or can he/she talk fluidly off an outline? If it is a team presentation, have they presented together before? What is the presenter's comfort level with various presentation technologies (PowerPoint, Keynote, Prezi)? What type of support will the presenter need before and during the presentation and who will provide it?
- **Presentation Context:** When designing your presentation, consider the types of sessions described above and identify what presentation style would be best for the specific type of session in which your presentation is included. For a roundtable presentation at a

programmatic conference, a presenter would not necessarily need a visual presentation and might instead use a more casual conversational presentation style using an outline for reference. For a panel presentation at a more technical conference, the presenter might develop a structured PowerPoint including slides with visuals of analyzed data and detailed speaking notes for the presenter to read.

- **Audience:** Considering your audience is essential to any successful presentation. Even the most refined and polished presentation can fall flat if it is not appropriate for the audience. Think about what brings the audience together and what they might be most interested in hearing from you. What amount of lecturing will the audience be able to tolerate and how should visuals be used? Try not to use jargon and define terms with which audience members may not be familiar. Think about what type of presentation technology would most effectively communicate your ideas.

Once you decide on the best structure and style for your presentation, you can start drafting it. Make sure your presentation tells a coherent story and uses appropriate examples or data to support your message. Ensure that there is a beginning, middle and end. Leave room for questions and/or comments as appropriate. As you lay out your presentation, you want to be especially thoughtful about the length so you don't under or over shoot your allotted time.

There are a few common errors in presentations and with appropriate preparation, they are easily avoidable:

- **Covering too much material in too little time**: Make sure that the goal message of your presentation is clear and your presentation stays focused on communicating that message throughout.
- **Using too many slides**: Allow at least two minutes of talking time for each slide to ensure that you do not end up rushing through your slides or overwhelming the audience with more than they can digest.
- **Too much text or too many bullets**: Slides should include just enough text to provide the information that is critical to the message of

that slide. If significant explanations or information is required for the message (more than 3 bullets), think about how it could be broken up onto multiple slides.

- **Too much animation**: We all get excited when we learn something new, but resist the temptation to use a lot of animation (where information fades or flies onto the slide).
- **Glitches:** Almost anyone who has presented has experienced a glitch while presenting. A slide is in the wrong place. A table looks funny or an embedded video doesn't play. It is really important that you run through your final presentation (the exact version you will use) at least once before your presentation to address these glitches and make sure your timing is okay. Always bring a paper copy of your presentation and speaking notes in case the technology fails.

Presenting: Now that you have your presentation prepared and thoroughly practiced, you are ready to actually present. You will notice that this is one of the shortest sections of this document because if you are well prepared, presenting is pretty straightforward. The most important thing at this point is to make sure you have what you need to present and that you get yourself into a presentation state of mind.

Practicalities:
- When you check in at the conference, find your presentation in the conference agenda to make sure you know where to go and when to get there.
- Save your presentation on a portable zip drive and bring it and any notes you will need to your presentation.
- Plan to arrive to your presentation at least 30 minutes early in case there are last minute room changes and to have an opportunity to visit with other panelists, arrange your

presentation area, and to just settle in (pour yourself some water). Sometimes you can run through your presentation quickly using the actual equipment, which can allay nerves and help address technological glitches specific to the room.

Check in the guidelines to the **Call** to see if you need to send your presentation to the conference hosts prior to the conference or if you can bring it with you.

Managing Timing: One of the trickiest things to manage while presenting is your timing. For some, the time they are presenting feels a lot shorter than it actually is. They lecture away and seem unaware that their allotted time period is coming to an end. When the timekeeper finally gets their attention, they adjust and say "Ill wrap it up…" and then talk for another 15 minutes. For others, even a short presentation can feel like an eternity. A talk that has taken 30 minutes each time when practiced, will all of a sudden be done in 15 minutes because the presenter has rushed through, talking quickly. Know yourself and try to manage your pace the best you can. Let the time keeper know if you tend to run long or go too fast and ask him or her to give you a sign if your pace is off.

Getting into A Presentation State of Mind: Obviously, this part is going to be a personal process. Think of a presentation as a performance and do whatever you generally do to feel confident and calm in front of people. If you start to feel flustered or nervous, breathe deeply and just know that most, if not all, of the people in the audience have felt the exact same way.

STEP 5: Reflect on Presentation

Now that you have finished your presentation, it is a good time to reflect on what went well and what could be improved. If your presentation went well, relish your accomplishment and give yourself a pat on the back. If the presentation did not go well, be kind to yourself and your team. Think strategically about how you can improve future presentations by reflecting specifically on your preparation, the style of your presentation, and any challenges you or your team experienced personally while presenting (nervousness, timing issues).

Try to get feedback from the audience about your presentation either informally (asking someone in the audience) or more formally (reviewing presentation evaluations). Sometimes the presentation will have gone much better than you thought and sometimes problems will have been perceived of which you were not aware. Think about what capacity building supports you and your team will need to improve your presentation skills, and create a plan for how to integrate these supports into your program.

Take some time to also reflect on other presentations at the conference. Make note of presentations that you found valuable and discuss them with your team. Think about presentations that went well and why they worked. How could you learn from these effective presentations to improve your own presenting style? Make sure to share any relevant topics or new information you learned with your team and your agency.

Reporting Back on The Outcome of the Presentation: One of the most effective ways to increase the value of doing conference presentations for your agency or community is to share the presentation and report back about the outcome. Make sure that you report presentation outcomes (how did it go, how many individuals were in the audience, any new partnerships or networks that resulted from the presentation) to your program management team, your agency, your community, the program funder and any others who authorized your presentation.

Finally, when you get back from presenting, make sure you:

- **Keep track of all program dissemination activities**. It is likely that your funders will request that you report your program dissemination activities and it will be much easier to do that if you have a list of presentations ready to go.

- **Add the presentation to your personal resume**. You will be VERY glad that you did this the next time you are updating your resume and you do not have to piece together the information from old conference agendas, your calendar and your memory.

Suggested Presentation Citation:

LAST NAME FIRST INITIAL of all presenters. (YEAR, MONTH of presentation). *TITLE of presentation.* In TITLE of panel. Presented at NAME of conference, CITY, STATE ABRRIVIATION.

Example:

Sandoval M and Anderson J (2013, Oct). *Connecting to Labor and Delivery Nurses for Referrals.* In Recruitment and Retention in Home Visiting. Presented at American Evaluation Association annual conference, Washington DC.

- **Follow-up with any contacts made during presentation:** The people you meet at conferences can become colleagues and even friends. Following-up with individuals you have met, audience members who have asked questions or people who have given you their cards or contact information, can lead to many opportunities for collaboration.

Good Luck with your presentations and we hope this brief will inspire you to present.

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Please contact us with any questions related to this brief.

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