

Evaluation Plan Development Tip Sheet

A Resource for Child Welfare Organizations

Introduction

This tip sheet is designed to support state and local child welfare stakeholders—including states developing title IV-E prevention services plans under the Family First Prevention Services Act (FFPSA), Children’s Bureau discretionary grantees, service providers, foundations, nonprofit organizations, researchers, evaluators, and others—in developing an evaluation plan for a child welfare intervention.¹ A clear and comprehensive plan improves the likelihood of a successful evaluation by ensuring that the design is aligned with the intervention’s goals and objectives, potential challenges are addressed, and roles and responsibilities are assigned. The tip sheet presents components to consider including in a complete evaluation plan; users are encouraged to review them and decide which are useful and appropriate to include in their own plans.

Evaluation Plan Components

1. Intervention, Target Population, and Evaluation Goals and Rationale

Describe the intervention to be evaluated.²

- Include key features that have been or will be implemented.
- Reference any relevant books, manuals, or other program documentation.
- Note any modifications or adaptations to the intervention and why they were made.
- Summarize past research and evaluation findings regarding the intervention, including findings from evidence reviews.

Describe the target population for the intervention.³

- Summarize the characteristics of the target population (e.g., demographic and case characteristics, risk factors).
- Explain why this population was targeted.
- Note whether a needs assessment or other data analyses were conducted to identify the target population.
- List the eligibility/screening criteria.
 - Describe or include a copy of any screening tools/instruments that will be used to identify participants.
- Provide additional relevant contextual background about the target population.

Describe the evaluation's goals and rationale.

- Explain the primary goals/purpose of the evaluation. (Why is this particular intervention being evaluated?)
- Indicate whether the scope of the evaluation is primarily formative (i.e., examining implementation and early outcomes) or summative (i.e., examining impacts).
- Identify the primary audience(s) (e.g., state or local child welfare agency, state or local legislative body).
- List the primary research questions. (What do you hope to learn from the evaluation?)⁴
- Describe how information and findings will be used.

2. Theory of Change

Articulate the theory of change for the intervention.

- Identify the key issues/problems the intervention seeks to address.
- Describe the root cause(s) of these issues/problems.
- Specify the theoretical or causal links between intervention activities and expected changes (e.g., using an outcomes chain, series of "if-then" or "so-that" statements).
- Articulate the assumptions used to develop the theory of change (e.g., adequate resources are in place to implement the intervention fully, root causes of the problem[s] addressed by the intervention have been accurately identified).
- Cite any literature to support the theory of change (e.g., research demonstrating the identified root causes, empirical or theoretical linkages between the intervention and expected outcomes).

3. Evaluation Design

Describe the evaluation design.

- Articulate the conceptual or theoretical framework (e.g., participatory, utilization-focused, developmental).

- Explain how this framework aligns with and supports the evaluation’s goals.
- Specify the key components of the evaluation.
 - **Process evaluation** examines how an intervention is implemented (e.g., policies and procedures put into place, types and volumes of service delivered, characteristics of the population served).
 - Articulate the specific research questions the process evaluation will address.
 - Are the questions specific and measurable?
 - Include any relevant indicators of fidelity with respect to adherence, exposure, implementation quality, etc.
 - **Outcome evaluation** examines testable hypotheses regarding desired short-term and more distal changes in children, families, and organizations. (In a child welfare context, there may be a special focus on child/family safety, permanency, and well-being.) Outcome evaluations should also address whether any observed changes are attributable to the program or service provided, and if such outcomes are different from those that would have been achieved under “as usual” conditions.
 - Articulate the specific research questions the outcome evaluation will address.
 - Are the questions specific and measurable?
 - Include any relevant performance targets or benchmarks (e.g., x percent of families will not have a second maltreatment report within x months).
 - **Cost analysis** examines the costs of an intervention in various categories (e.g., by program/service type, cost per participant), cost effectiveness (i.e., the costs incurred to achieve a specific outcome) or benefit-costs (i.e., the net benefits of an intervention [quantified in monetary terms] versus net costs).
 - Articulate the specific research questions the analysis will address.
 - Are the questions specific and quantifiable in monetary terms?
- Describe the research design(s) that will be used to answer the questions identified for the process, outcome, and cost evaluations (e.g., randomized controlled trial, matched case, propensity score matching, comparison group/site, pre- and posttest, regression discontinuity, descriptive study, case study).⁵
 - If the design includes a control or comparison group, note the steps taken to maximize its equivalence or comparability to the intervention/experimental group (e.g., protocols to maintain the integrity of the random assignment process, selection of appropriate matching variables, how outcome data will be collected for both groups).
- Explain the rationale for selecting the research design.
 - Why was it selected over other options? How is it best suited to answer the evaluation questions?
 - Cite any relevant literature to support the selection.
 - Were other designs not selected for methodological, practical, or financial reasons (e.g., to reduce data collection burdens, no valid comparison group is available)?

- Discuss how issues of timing will be addressed when implementing the proposed research design (e.g., ensuring adequate time for follow-up data collection, timing random assignment to maximize the number of eligible cases that are offered services).

4. Logic Model

Develop a detailed logic model for the intervention.

- Specify intervention activities; outputs (the immediate results of your intervention activities); and short-term, intermediate, and long-term outcomes, as appropriate.
- Ensure that it corresponds/maps to the theory of change described earlier in the plan.
- Map the model to the research questions you've articulated for the process, outcome, and cost analysis components of the evaluation.

5. Data Collection, Sampling, and Analysis Plans

Develop a data collection plan.

- Include specific indicator(s) for each output and outcome articulated in the logic model.
 - Do the indicators map to the outputs and outcomes articulated in the logic model?
 - Are the indicators discrete and quantifiable (e.g., number/percentage of families served, number/percentage of families that achieve a certain milestone)?
 - If not quantifiable, are the outputs and outcomes measurable in some other way (e.g., using detailed qualitative data)?
- Include the tools, instruments, or other methods (e.g., surveys, interviews, focus groups, observations) that will be used to collect data on each output and outcome.
- Provide names, authors, and psychometric characteristics (e.g., reliability, validity) of standardized tools/instruments. Cite any relevant validation studies.
- For self-developed instruments, describe the development process and steps taken to ensure or improve their reliability and validity.
- Describe the procedures and protocols to collect and compile data for other data collection methods (e.g., interviews, focus groups, case record reviews, observations, secondary administrative data).
 - Include copies of relevant protocols, discussion guides, etc., in an appendix.
- Explain the rationale for selecting the instruments or other data collection methods. (Why is each one the best way to collect data on its associated output or outcome?)
- Indicate the specific respondents, population, or subpopulation for each data collection method.
- Note the schedule and frequency of data collection for each method (e.g., baseline and at 3 and 6 months).

(NOTE: Consider summarizing the above information in a table or chart.)

- If your evaluation includes a control or comparison group, indicate whether data will be collected on it and what methods will be used to collect the data.

Develop a sampling plan, if appropriate.⁶

- Describe the sampling method (e.g., random, stratified, composite, convenience).
- Describe the sample recruitment strategy and inclusion/exclusion criteria.
 - Include copies of any tools/instruments that will be used to screen participants for inclusion or to collect evaluation data more broadly.
- Account for sampling and measurement error. Describe any potential sources of sampling bias and how it will be addressed.
- Indicate expected levels of attrition and plans to minimize it.
- If multiple groups will be sampled, describe how baseline equivalence will be established for key characteristics (e.g., demographics) prior to the start of the intervention.
- If groups are not equivalent, describe matching techniques to control for demographics and other case characteristics at baseline (e.g., propensity score matching, difference-in difference, kernel matching).
- If applicable, describe how the control or comparison group will be selected, recruited, and retained.
 - If the evaluation includes administrative data, describe how it will be used to define the control/comparison groups.
- Include a power analysis that estimates the sample size required to detect statistically significant effects and the magnitude of effects that will be detected (small, medium, large).
- If no power analysis will be conducted, explain how the proposed sample size is adequate to detect effects.

Develop a data analysis plan (quantitative, qualitative, or both).

For Quantitative Data

- Describe specific statistical methods to be used to analyze data (e.g., descriptive, inferential statistics such as t-tests or ANOVA, predictive statistics such as regression analysis).
- Identify statistical software programs/packages to be used to conduct the analyses.
- Indicate strategies to address missing/incomplete data (e.g., regression imputation, nonresponse weighting).
- Describe plans to ensure results are presented in a balanced and objective manner (e.g., including both statistically significant and nonsignificant findings; including negative, positive, and inconclusive results).

For Qualitative Data

- Describe specific qualitative analysis methods to be used (e.g., open, axial, selective coding).
- Indicate strategies to establish the trustworthiness/credibility of findings and minimize the personal biases of observers/data collectors (e.g., including detailed verbatim descriptions of participant accounts, employing member checks by inviting participant feedback on coding schemes and analyses).

For Both Qualitative and Quantitative Data

- Describe how results will be triangulated using multiple data sources to mutually corroborate their accuracy and validity.
- Identify potential confounding factors and efforts.

6. Study Limitations

Articulate the study limitations.

- Describe any potential weaknesses or limitations of the selected research design and/or data collection and analysis methods (e.g., small sample sizes, selection bias, potential design contamination if a comparison group receives similar services).
- Explain how any anticipated limitations will be addressed in advance or minimized.

7. Reporting, Disseminating, and Using Findings

Develop a plan to share and apply the findings.

- Promote transparency by making information about planned and ongoing evaluations easily accessible to the public (e.g., by preregistering your evaluation plan).
- Indicate the frequency and format of methods to be used for communicating evaluation findings to the evaluation client/primary audiences (e.g., interim and final evaluation reports, progress reports, periodic and final briefings).
- Describe plans for disseminating evaluation findings broadly (e.g., conference presentations, journal article submissions, other forums).
 - Indicate the secondary audiences for these dissemination efforts (e.g., community organizations, partnering service agencies, government agencies, legislative bodies).
- Explain whether and how findings that emerge during the evaluation will inform intervention activities and program/organizational improvements (e.g., continuous quality improvement plan).

8. Data Security and Privacy, Informed Consent Procedures, and Institutional Review Board Approval

Develop procedures for safeguarding data and protecting participants.

- Describe procedures and protocols for maintaining the security and confidentiality of both electronic and hard-copy data sources (e.g., password protected computer files, methods for the secure storage of case records).
- Describe procedures for obtaining informed consent from research subjects on whom evaluation data are collected.
 - Include a copy of the informed consent form in the evaluation plan.
- Identify the institutional review board (IRB) that will review and approve the evaluation and associated research activities.
 - Describe the process/procedures for obtaining IRB approval.

- Indicate the estimated timeframe for obtaining approval.
- If approval is delayed, describe plans for adjusting the sequence/timing of evaluation activities.
- If you are claiming exemption from IRB review, specify the reasons for the claim of exemption and how it will be obtained.

9. Evaluation Roles and Responsibilities

Describe the evaluation roles and responsibilities of staff and others.

- Identify key evaluation staff. Describe their relevant knowledge, skills, and experience.
 - Include staff resumes/CVs in an appendix to the plan.
- Explain staff roles and responsibilities for all major evaluation activities (e.g., designing survey and interview protocols, administering surveys and interviews, cleaning and analyzing data, supervising data collection activities, writing reports and presenting findings).
- Identify entities/organizations outside of the core evaluation team that will be involved in the evaluation; specify their responsibilities for collecting and reporting data.
- For evaluations involving administrative data from child welfare and other human service organizations—
 - Describe plans for accessing these data sources.
 - Identify the person(s) responsible for obtaining and managing these data.
- Include copies of any memoranda of understanding (MOUs) or data sharing agreements in place to obtain these data.

10. Timeline

Develop an evaluation timeline.

- Provide a timeline that specifies the estimated start and end dates of all major evaluation activities, including initial planning and startup, staff recruitment and training, IRB approval, instrument development, data collection, data analysis, submission of reports, and other dissemination activities.
- Allow time to revise the report, redo analyses, etc.

(NOTE: Consider including a Gantt chart or table to display the timeline.)

11. Budget

Develop an evaluation budget.

- Estimate the costs, including the following items as applicable.
 - Staff salaries (expressed in full-time equivalents [FTEs]⁷ if appropriate) and fringe benefits
 - Other overhead/administrative costs
 - External consultants/subcontractors
 - Data collection/analysis software

- Travel
- Incentives (in-kind or monetary) for research participants
- Communication (e.g., conference calls, webinars)
- Printing, supplies, other equipment
- To the extent possible, break out evaluation costs separately from the costs of implementing the intervention or other programmatic/organizational costs.
- Consider whether the evaluation budget is—
 - Appropriate for the scope and scale of the evaluation design and the questions it seeks to answer
 - Adequate to ensure quality and rigor
 - In line with available organizational resources

Additional Tips

- Include a table of contents.
- Number the pages.
- Number the evaluation/research questions.
- Include full terms the first time you use them, followed by the abbreviation or acronym in parentheses.
- Include summary tables that align the research questions with associated outputs/outcomes, data collection methods and tools, data collection timeframes/intervals, respondents, and proposed analysis methods.
- Restate your research questions before describing data collection methods, analysis methods, etc.

Other Helpful Resources

The following resources may be useful in developing an evaluation plan and in designing and implementing an evaluation more generally.

- [**Cost Evaluation Toolkit**](#) is a technical assistance resource that helps users identify the strengths and weaknesses of various types of cost evaluation, develop a plan for collecting data on labor and other cost categories, and analyze and report findings in clear and meaningful ways. Currently, the toolkit consists of two volumes: Module A focuses on program-level cost evaluation and Module B covers case-level cost evaluation.

- [Evaluation Brief: Reporting and Presenting Evaluation Findings](#) explores factors to consider when reporting and presenting evaluation findings, including the audience(s) for the findings, interpretation of results, recommendations, and presentation formats.
- [Evaluation Brief: Selecting an Evaluation Approach](#) discusses programmatic and contextual factors to consider when choosing a research/evaluation design. It also provides a brief overview of commonly used evaluation designs, including randomized control trials, matched case designs, propensity score matching, time series, pre- and posttest designs, and case studies.
- [Evaluation Resource Guide for Children's Bureau Discretionary Grantees](#) summarizes online and print resources on a range of evaluation topics, including research designs and methodologies, data collection and analysis, and reporting and using evaluation findings.
- [Final Evaluation Report Checklist for Maternal, Infant, and Early Childhood Home Visiting Program Awardees](#) summarizes the recommended components of a comprehensive final evaluation plan.
- [Formative Evaluation Toolkit: A Step-by-Step Guide and Resources for Evaluating Program Implementation and Early Outcomes](#) outlines the key steps and provides examples of a formative evaluation, which parallels the elements of a process evaluation and initial elements of an outcome evaluation. Topics covered include theories of change, logic models, selecting outputs and early outcomes, and analyzing and reporting data.
- [Maternal, Infant and Early Childhood Home Visiting Program: Ensuring Quality Evaluations](#), summarizes federal expectations for evaluations and includes a summary of key elements that should be included in a quality evaluation.
- [Working with an External Evaluator: The Maternal, Infant, and Early Childhood Home Visiting Program](#) provides tips to consider when selecting an external evaluator to plan and implement an evaluation.

¹Intervention” in this evaluation tip sheet refers broadly to a program, service, practice, approach, or strategy.

² More than one intervention may be the subject of your evaluation. For simplicity, this tip sheet assumes one intervention.

³ Refers to the population of individuals potentially eligible to receive the intervention (i.e., those who meet the intervention eligibility criteria). This may differ from the individuals who actually receive the intervention after being screened for services and assigned to a treatment or control/comparison group. See Section 5—Data Collection, Sampling, and Analysis Plans.

⁴ These research questions may be restated in the process and outcome evaluation sections described later.

⁵ More than one research design can be included in an overall evaluation, depending on the nature and number of questions the evaluation seeks to answer.

⁶ If you plan to collect and analyze data on an entire population rather than a sample, note that in the plan as a rationale for not drawing a sample and using associated sampling methods.

⁷ FTE is a unit that indicates the workload of an employed person in a way that makes workloads comparable across an organization or project. For example, an FTE of 1.0 is equivalent to a full-time worker while an FTE of 0.5 indicates half of a full workload.

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