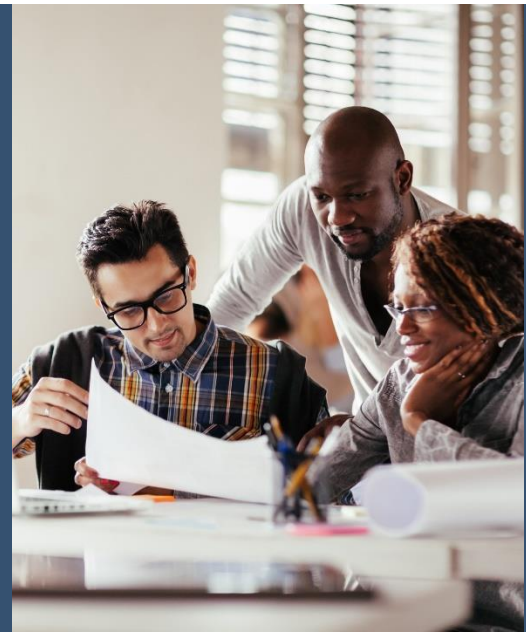


Selecting and Working With an Evaluation Partner



More than ever, child welfare and other human service organizations must be able to demonstrate the effectiveness of their services. For example, the Family First Prevention Services Act included in the Bipartisan Budget Act of 2018 requires prevention and kinship programs to be evidence based and rigorously evaluated to determine their effectiveness. However, many programs lack sufficient evidence, or they have been studied with a particular population or setting but not in contexts such as child welfare.

While some organizations are able to conduct their own evaluations, many need to partner with an external evaluator. They may not have the internal capacity to conduct a rigorous evaluation that can demonstrate successful outcomes, or their funder may require a third-party evaluator. External

evaluators can be university researchers, private consulting firms, nonprofit research organizations, or individual consultants.

Inside This Brief

- Determining Your Evaluation Needs and Goals
- Selecting an Evaluator
- Working With Your Evaluation Partner

This brief provides recommendations for determining your evaluation needs and goals, selecting an evaluator, and working with your evaluation partner. Together, you can ensure that the relationship yields useful findings to guide program implementation and organizational decision making.

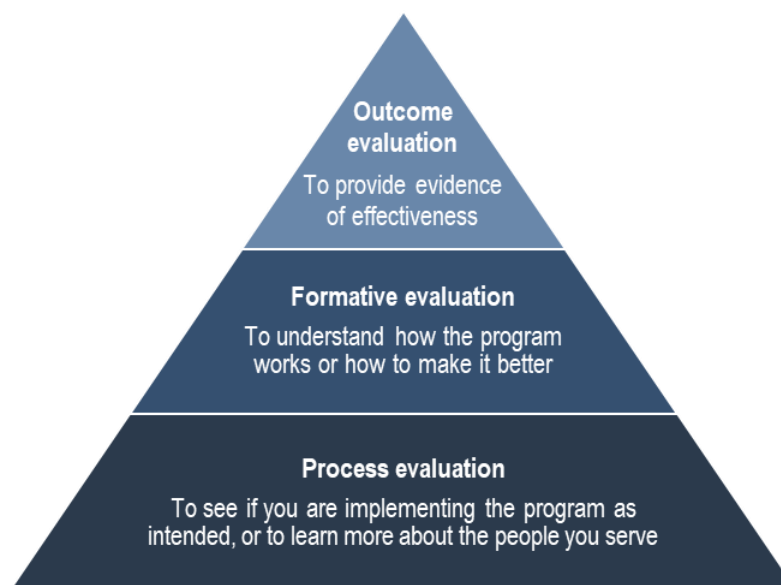
Determining Your Evaluation Needs and Goals

Your organization's leadership should consider several questions in consultation with key staff and external stakeholders:

- What are the most important issues or needs of the populations you serve? What problems are you seeking to address?
- What information could help you improve or expand existing programs and services?
- What information could help your service providers do their jobs better?
- How will your organization report and use the evaluation findings?
- Which partners and stakeholders should be informed of the findings? How should the findings be shared (e.g., through formal briefings, news conferences, official reports)?
- How will the evaluation support your organization's mission and vision?

Determining your evaluation goals will help you understand the kind of evaluation—and evaluation partner—you need (see exhibit 1). A **process evaluation** determines whether you are implementing the program as intended and gathers details about the populations you serve. A broader **formative evaluation** helps you develop or improve the program. An **outcome evaluation** may require more rigorous methods and measures progress or improvements at the individual level (e.g., knowledge, skills, behaviors) or organizational level (e.g., practices, capacity).

Exhibit 1. Evaluation Types and Goals



Selecting an Evaluator

Consider the following tips for finding and selecting an evaluator.

Start locally. Colleges and universities in your area are a good place to start, particularly departments of social work, education, psychology, anthropology, sociology, and business. Land-grant state universities often have extension services that offer low-cost support. Also look into local nonprofit organizations and consulting firms. Even if these organizations cannot assist you directly, they may be able to refer you to others who can.

Talk to your colleagues. Reach out to other organizations that are implementing programs like yours. Ask about evaluators they have worked with and their satisfaction with their services.

Check academic and professional publications. Look at peer-reviewed journals and other academic or professional publications for studies of programs like yours, and find the contact information for the authors or investigators.

Reach out to other organizations and ask about evaluators they have worked with.

Check national professional associations. Organizations such as the [American Evaluation Association](#) list evaluation consultants and firms.

Advertise. Post an advertisement in local newspapers, on your organization's website, or on the websites of professional organizations.

Request proposals or bids. Depending on your organization's fiscal and contracting policies, you may need to issue a formal request for proposals (RFP) or request for quotations (RFQ). Although a procurement process takes time, it allows you to compare evaluation approaches, skill sets, and budgets across bidders before making a decision. To generate interest and identify qualified candidates, you could start by issuing a request for information (RFI) that describes your evaluation needs and goals, parameters, expected deliverables, and timeline.

Assessing Qualifications

Once you have identified a pool of candidates, compare their qualifications. In reviewing proposals and interviewing a shorter list of candidates, consider the following factors.

Knowledge and skills. What are the candidates' skill sets? Do they have the educational background and demonstrated ability to conduct a high-quality evaluation in your field? While evaluation knowledge and skills are somewhat generalizable across fields such as child welfare, public health, and early childhood education, subject matter expertise is also important.

Have the candidates published research in peer-reviewed journals?

Experience. What experience do the candidates have evaluating programs like yours? Have they done this type of work before? Have they conducted the types of research activities that will be required (e.g., selecting comparison groups, conducting interviews)?

Credentials. What relevant licenses or accreditations do the candidates have? What awards or professional recognition have they received for their contributions to evaluation or other relevant fields? What professional or academic organizations do they belong to?

Publications. Do the candidates have a track record of publications? Have they published research or evaluation findings in peer-reviewed journals? Have they produced other high-quality reports for public dissemination? Can they provide relevant work samples, such as reports and presentations?

References. Can the candidates provide the contact information for organizations for which they have completed evaluations of similar scope, scale, and topic?

Capacity. Do the candidates have the personnel and physical resources (e.g., computers, data storage) to perform the proposed evaluation tasks, including data collection and analysis? Who will do the work? For instance, if you hire a university professor, will graduate students play a role? Is there backup support in case of turnover? Can the candidates draw on outside resources and partners if needed?

Accessibility. Are the candidates based locally or outside of your city or region? What technologies do they use to facilitate remote meetings, data collection, and information sharing?

Cost. Are the candidates affordable? Are they willing to work with you to keep costs down or leverage free or low-cost evaluation resources? For example, local colleges or universities may be willing to allow students to assist with data collection as an internship opportunity or in exchange for access to data as part of faculty research projects. Are there evaluation activities you could eliminate or conduct yourself?¹

More About Cost

You can specify your evaluation budget in an **RFI** or **RFP**, or you can ask candidates to propose a budget and then assess their competitiveness and value. Consider the trade-offs between a **fixed-price contract** (in which the full cost is agreed upon up front) and a **time and materials contract** (in which the evaluator bills for ongoing work). A fixed-price contract limits your organization's financial liability but may also limit the scale, scope, and quality of the evaluation. On the other hand, a time and materials contract provides more flexibility for conducting new or expanded research activities but exposes your organization to more financial risk.

Fit. You are entering into a professional relationship. Find someone who works well with your key staff, understands and respects your goals and mission, is comfortable interacting with your program participants, and is flexible in adapting to meet your needs as the evaluation progresses.

Working With Your Evaluation Partner

Once you have chosen an evaluation partner, you or your partner should draft a contract or statement of work. This agreement will document your shared understanding of the—

- Evaluation's scope, scale, and resources
- Key evaluation activities and deliverables
- Roles and responsibilities for data collection and other activities
- Procedures for accurate and timely communication, troubleshooting, oversight, and accountability

The content of the agreement will vary depending on the complexity of your evaluation and the roles and responsibilities of your evaluation partner. These may range from advising on research design and methodological issues to implementing all elements of a comprehensive evaluation.

¹ See [Developing a State Learning Agenda: The Maternal, Infant, and Early Childhood Home Visiting Program](#) for examples of research questions and the activities that will answer them. This may help you decide which activities can be done in-house and which may need to be done by your evaluation partner.

The agreement should clarify expectations in writing while allowing for flexibility to adapt to unforeseen issues. Include the following points.

Roles and responsibilities. List the evaluation director/principal investigator and others who will be involved in the evaluation, along with their roles and responsibilities.

Deliverables and timeline. Describe key deliverables, such as an evaluation plan, progress reports, final report, data files, data dictionaries, and presentations. Include a timeline with milestones for developing, revising, and finalizing deliverables.

Oversight. Provide accountability mechanisms to ensure the evaluator completes activities and deliverables as stipulated in the agreement. Designate someone in your organization to oversee the work and respond to issues that arise.

Requirements and consent. Identify applicable legal or policy requirements (e.g., grant requirements for a federally funded project). Outline plans for obtaining institutional review board (IRB) approval, if necessary. Even when IRB approval is not required, the agreement should define protocols for obtaining informed consent from program participants, offering incentives such as cash payments or gifts in-kind, and other policies to ensure the evaluation is conducted ethically and professionally.

Data security. Establish security protocols for data, including personally identifiable information, and procedures for addressing data breaches.

Examples of Evaluation Responsibilities

Your evaluation partner's responsibilities may include—

- Conducting preliminary needs assessments
- Developing a theory of change and logic model
- Designing and administering surveys and other data collection instruments
- Collecting and analyzing primary data (e.g., surveys, interview, focus groups) and secondary data (e.g., administrative data)
- Developing and managing information systems
- Presenting and disseminating findings through reports and briefings

Your organization's responsibilities may include—

- Assisting with primary data collection; for instance, helping to identify and arrange interviews or focus groups with program participants
- Providing access to administrative data
- Contributing meeting space to conduct evaluation activities or discuss findings

Data ownership. Assign ownership of data and deliverables. For example, will your evaluation partner be authorized to publish articles or make presentations about the findings?

Communication. Document communication protocols. For example, how often will regular meetings or briefings take place? How and when will the evaluation partner provide updates (e.g., monthly progress reports on activities and challenges)? Who are the primary points of contact to address questions or problems?

Dissemination. Outline plans for disseminating findings beyond the core project team and organizational leadership, such as other staff, program participants, the media, and the public. Specify the communication channels to be used, such as press releases, press conferences, and social media.

Cost. Include a breakdown of the estimated costs of major evaluation activities. This will help you track costs, reallocate financial resources if needed, and identify potential savings.

A contract or statement of work that includes these key elements will lay the groundwork for a high-quality evaluation and foster a positive relationship with your evaluation partner. Clarifying your information needs and considering your options for a partner up front will help ensure that your evaluation facilitates organizational decision making and builds credible evidence of your program's effectiveness.

References

The Bipartisan Budget Act of 2018, Publ. L. No. 115–123 (2018).
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