

A GUIDE TO WRITING A PROGRAM EVALUATION PLAN

Rural Allied Health Network Training Program Technical Assistance

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BACKGROUND AND PURPOSE

Rural Health Innovations (RHI), LLC is a subsidiary of the National Rural Health Resource Center (The Center), a non-profit organization. Together, RHI and The Center are the nation’s leading technical assistance and knowledge centers in rural health. In partnership with The Center, RHI enhances the health of rural communities by providing products and services with a focus on excellence and innovation. RHI is providing TA to the Allied Health Training Network grantees through a contract with the federal Office of Rural Health Policy.

Evaluation of grant funded programs is critical to both the success and sustainability of the program. It is critical to assess impact of the program objectives to demonstrate value, monitor progress toward the program goals, and to identify potential best practices and lessons learned. Evaluation results are also integrated back into the program to improve performance.

This *Program Evaluation Plan Guide* is designed to support the associated *Evaluation Plan Template* to provide guidance to Rural Allied Health Network Training Program grantees in writing a program evaluation plan. Recorded webinars are posted on the *Aim for Impact and Sustainability* network resource webpage and as a resource in The Center’s online Resource Library.

Content for this *Evaluation Plan Guide* and the accompanying *Evaluation Plan Template* have been adapted from multiple sources, including the Rural Health Innovations, Evaluation Plan Toolkit for Rural Health Networks, January 2015, National Rural Health Resource Center Evaluation Toolkit, Alana Knudson, Walsh Center for Rural Health Analysis, Critical Components of Evaluation and Evaluation

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Process: Design and Implementation presentation, 2014, John Gail, Maine Rural Health Research Center Evaluation Workshop, presentation, 2014, Pete Walton, Oklahoma State Office of Rural Health, Best Practices in Program Evaluation, presentation, 2014, and Rural Assistance Center online Library. See the Resources section for helpful links and documents.

GETTING STARTED

Program Evaluation

The purpose of program evaluation is to systematically collect information about program activities and objectives, monitor progress, and to report and communicate results to network members, partners, stakeholders, and community.

Spending time consider aspects and components for evaluating a program is well worth the effort as it saves significant time in the long run. The following are recommended evaluation plan components:

1. **Program Description:** Setting context for the evaluation plan including, program mission, vision, listing of program goals and objectives, network history and members.
2. **Evaluation Design:** Describing the purpose and method of evaluation.
3. **Plan to Measure Key Data:** Selecting key process and outcome data and identifying specific and defined measurements.
4. **Collecting and Reporting Results:** Gathering and illustrating program progress and impact.
5. **Communication Plan of Key Results:** Intentionally and purposefully sharing evaluation results with members, partners, community and funders, that demonstrates success and value.

Planning Framework

Planning for the future can be framed, or understood, from either of two different planning perspectives:

- Identifying the path of action, i.e. objectives or strategies that will lead to successfully reaching the goal, a general strategic planning approach.
- Identifying the expected results, i.e. outcomes of the program that will illustrate positive progress toward the goal, a specific Logic Model approach.

The difference is due to the frame of reference of the planning approach and is clearly seen within a chart or diagram that illustrates alignment between the program goals, objectives, and activities.

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- A strategic planning approach starts with strategies on the far left and works to the right with measurements of those strategies or targets for identifying success, and then aligned activities. See *Evaluation Plan Sample*, for an example of a generalized strategic planning approach.
- A Logic Model approach starts with outcomes on the far right and works to the left through process outputs toward aligned activities. See *Evaluation Plan Sample* for an example of a general Logic Model approach.

Although both approaches are valid ways to approach planning we recommend selecting one of these two perspectives and then being consistent throughout development of the evaluation plan.

Program Goals

Generally program goals are articulated within the grant application and will remain constant during the life of the program or project. These goals are what the program is aiming for and are often considered the mission and vision of the program. The overall expectation of evaluation results is to demonstrate incrementally, positive change (results) toward the program goals.

Program Goal Example: *Improving access to health care for children living in poverty.*

Program Objectives

These are the strategies or outcomes expected with achievement of the program goals. Language is different depending on which planning framework you are working with.

- Generalized Strategic Planning Framework Language:
 - Objectives are strategies that describe the high level path that will lead to program goals. For example, "*Creating a coordinated care process*".
 - These strategic objectives are measured in order to monitor progress toward the program goals.
- Logic Model Framework Language:
 - Objectives are outcomes that describe the expected success of the activities. For example, "*Coordinated care process for one chronic disease population*".
 - These outcomes are measured in order to monitor progress toward program goals.

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Tip: *Although it does not matter which planning framework guides the design of your evaluation plan, it is, however, important to be consistent in the language used throughout the evaluation plan.*

SMART Objectives

One key to successfully evaluating objectives is to have SMART objectives: specific, measurable, attainable, realistic and timely. It is worth the time and effort to consider and revise objectives to be SMART.

Sample:

- Broad Objective: Everyone is healthy.
- SMART Objective: The overall health of the patients in our community with Diabetes improves within three years.

TIP: *If you are using a traditional strategic planning framework, re-write your strategic objectives into SMART objectives. If you are using a Logic Model planning framework, re-write your short and mid-term outcomes into SMART objectives.*

FAQ: *What to do if the objectives are so broad that it is impossible to measure them?*

This is the case when your objectives do not meet the SMART 'rule of thumb'. If you are finding your objectives to be un-measurable, our suggestion is to re-write your objectives by breaking them down into smaller ideas that are SMART objectives.

CRITICAL EVALUATION PLAN COMPONENTS

Although a specific template for your evaluation plan is not required as part of your grant deliverable, the following components are recommended. These components are described in more detail through this *Program Evaluation Guide* and the accompanying *Evaluation Plan Template*.

1. Program Description

Providing context for the evaluation plan is a required component as it sets the stage for the reader. Remember that the reader of an evaluation plan is primarily external to the organization. It may be the Board of Directors or Trustees who most often review evaluation results, however, the primary audience are the member organizations, community members, potential new members, funding organizations, etc.

- a) Describe the purpose of the program. This may be the mission and vision or program goals.

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- b) Provide a list of the program's goals and objectives, i.e. strategies to get to the expected vision or outcomes.

Tip: *Use a numbering system throughout the evaluation plan so that it is easy for a reader to easily follow specific objectives or outcomes and the aligned activities, measures, targets between the different sections of the evaluation plan.*

- a. Briefly describe the program's history, including the organizational or governance structure.
- b. List value propositions of each of the program's products and services.

Tip: *A value proposition is developed for each program product or service and articulates how the member or customer perceives the value of that product or service. It is important to do this for each product and service of the program. For example, the value proposition for a 12-week, on-line certificate program might be: "Provides a quick and flexible solution for increasing opportunity for employment."*

- c. Briefly outline program members and partners and if appropriate, how specific members or partners are contributing to the program.

Tip: *Start with your grant application and develop a program description that is no more than two pages. It is important for this section to be concise and brief; providing only information an external reader needs to know to set a context for the evaluation.*

TIP: *The program description can be used for other important planning documents including a strategic plan, marketing plan, communication plan and ultimately your business plan.*

2. Evaluation Design

The design of your evaluation plan is important so that an external reader can follow along with the rationale and method of evaluation and be able to quickly understand the layout and intention of the evaluation charts and information. The evaluation design narrative should be no longer than one page.

There are three basic purposes of an evaluation plan: 1) Tracking progress of the program's implementation and execution of the work plan, 2) Monitoring or studying progress toward the program's goals by measuring objectives, 3)

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Communicating results, value, or impact of the program's achievements and successes. Describing the evaluation design is important so the external reader can follow-along with the purpose of the plan and be able to track the connections between goals, objectives, measures, and activities.

- a. Describe the purpose and reason for writing an evaluation plan, tracking activities and monitoring progress toward program goals, i.e. why is evaluation important to this program?
- b. Identify and describe the planning framework and the reason or rationale; generalized strategic planning approach or specific Logic Model approach.
 - o The planning framework being used will influence the language of your evaluation design and plan. The program objectives are identified through the planning framework as either strategies or outcomes.
- c. Provide a diagram to illustrate alignment of program objectives (strategies or outcomes) and key activities with program goals.
 - o Key activities are those that are considered critical to the success of the program and have a mid-term timeline of 6-12 months. See the *Strategic Planning & Logic Model Approaches Sample*.

Tip:

- *Be accurate and concise with language based on your planning framework.*
- *Use an outline or checklist of evaluation plan components to ensure completeness.*

3. Plan to Measure Key Data

A plan to measure key data includes asking questions about implementation activities and monitoring program impact. Steps include the work of deciding what key data to measure, identifying specific and defined measurements, and then how to collect process activity data and objectives outcome and impact data and eventually when to collect it and who is responsible.

a. Asking Evaluation Questions:

Asking evaluation questions to identify key data is a tried and true approach. Following are some examples of questions that will assist in identifying key metrics.

- What progress has been made toward program implementation?
- What progress has been made toward program impact?
- What is the impact of the program?
- What are opportunities to improve program process for next year?

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- What are opportunities to improve program results?
- What has been learned?
- What are our best practices?

There are two critical evaluation questions that should be included in any evaluation plan: “What progress has been made toward the program activities?” and “What progress has been made toward program objectives?” The following sections provide examples and suggestions for planning how to measure key data.

b. Tracking Key Implementation Activities:

Program activities are actions and processes put into place to execute objectives. They help network leaders and stakeholders track the implementation activity of a program; **“What progress has been made toward program implementation?”** Implementation activities are typically identified within the program work plan. This data is often referred to as ‘outputs’. However, external readers are primarily interested in the key activities that are aligned with the program goals and considered critical to the success of the program and that will demonstrate success of implementation.

- Tracking activities include counting historical actions or events, such as, number of events, participant rate, and number of students, number of procedures or number of calls.
- The language of tracking actions is different based on the planning framework being used, for example:
- Strategic Planning Terminology
 - Tracking activities = counting implementation results
 - Activity results are typically counted as they identify what has occurred or transpired
 - Activity example and result:
“Start-up a School and Primary Care Task Force”. The task force met 12 times last year.
- Logic Model Terminology
 - Tracking activities = counting project outputs
 - Activity results create process outputs that can be counted
 - Activity example and process output:
“School and Primary Care Task Force meet regularly”. Task Force met 12 times last year.

Tip: For tracking purposes, select 1-2 mid-term (6-12 month) activities that are considered critical to the success of the program, and identify one measure for each

of the activities. These activities are most likely included within the evaluation plan diagram that illustrates alignment of the goals, objectives and key activities.

Following is a list of examples of data for measuring implementation activities:

- Number of people served or participating
- Number of partners or stakeholders involved
- Implementation steps completed
- Number of resources addressing specific issues available
- Number of policy or regulation changes
- Certification and graduation rates

c. Monitoring Program Impact:

Program objectives are identified as either strategic objectives or outcomes depending on the selected planning framework. The data is often referred to as “achievements” or “outcomes”. External readers are primarily interested in progress that demonstrates impact of the program goals; E.g. **“What progress has been made on program impact?”** In other words, the program efforts are indeed moving toward the goals. It is this result of the effort that should be measured, i.e. the achievement.

- Monitoring program impact includes identifying expected results, such as, improved health test results, changes in data for drug use, reduced use of emergency room, satisfaction results, and increase knowledge based on test results. .
- The language of monitoring impact is different based on the planning framework being used, for example:
- Strategic Planning Terminology
 - Monitoring impact = identifying achievements or demonstrating success
 - Achievement example:
“Improved health of community members with diabetes”. The achievement is seen with 10% improvement of lab results for those patients over 6 months.
- Logic Model Terminology
 - Monitoring impact = identifying outcomes
 - Outcome example:
“Improved diabetes results within community”. The outcome is of 10% improved lab results over 6 months.

Tip: *To monitor impact, select 1-2 measures that describe objective impact or outcome. Within the Logic Model approach, these measurements will be included as outcomes within the evaluation plan diagram that illustrates alignment of the goals, objectives and key activities.*

Following is a list of data-gathering options related to measuring objectives:

- Pre-test/Post-test results, i.e. knowledge or awareness of issues
- Surveys/Questionnaires/Checklists for norms, attitudes, and satisfaction
- Electronic Health Record clinical results, such as lab results and quality measurements
- Mortality and morbidity numbers
- Quality of life scores
- Employment rates

d. Tool for Planning How to Measure Key Data:

Describe the plan to identify what data is needed to track process activities that have been implemented, are in alignment with the program, and monitor progress on the impact of the program. Utilizing a process to plan for collecting data is helpful. Following is a suggested list of details to incorporate into a chart. See *Plan to Measure Key Data Sample*.

- **Program Objectives:** Include program goal and objective. Limit your evaluation to no more than two objectives per goal.
- **What:** Measurements that provide evidence of achievement or success for the specific implementation activity or objective impact. Limit your measurements to no more than three per objective.
 - Describe the measure
 - Provide a specific target or benchmark comparison
 - Define how the measure will be calculated
 - Identify the method of collecting the data
- **When:** Identify timing or frequency of data collection (baseline, quarterly, annually, funding cycle).
- **Who:** Identify the person who is responsible for gathering data. This person ensures accuracy and confidentiality.

Tip: *Use a numbering system throughout the evaluation plan so that it is easy for the reader to quickly follow between sections of the evaluation plan, the specific objectives or outcomes and the aligned activities, measures, targets, etc.*

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e. Quantitative Information vs Qualitative Information:

Quantitative Information includes data that can be counted, for example, claims data, surveys, clinical results data and public health data. There are many ways to collect quantitative data. The key is to have a clear understanding of what the numbers are describing and how they are obtained. This understanding assists in accurately describing the results and impact.

Qualitative Information is valuable to network leaders and stakeholders as it provides opportunity through summarized findings, to highlight opportunities for improvement, lessons learned, potential innovation, and best practices or good ideas.

- Gathering qualitative data includes capturing stakeholder perceptions of successes and challenges that were experienced during various phases of the program. Examples of data gathering options may include:
 - Focus group
 - Interview
 - Observation

- Analyzing qualitative data requires a systematic approach of grouping or sorting the information and identifying themes or common categories.
 - Code data
 - Group or categorize to identify themes

f. Measuring Complex Information:

Many programs are working to impact large health disparities and complex social-economic issues. The goals and objectives may be long-term. These long-term changes and measurement of complex information will possibly need advanced data analysis. In that case, consider external evaluation when seeking an unbiased study of a long-term impact of program goals and when broader regional, state, or national benchmarks are available.

Ensure data is collected consistently at each interval to allow for appropriate data analysis.

- Identify adequate resources for data analysis
- Report significant changes based on statistical tests
- Identify changes within groups or populations
- Use visuals to display analyses (e.g., bar graphs, pie charts, etc.)

4. Collecting and Reporting Key Results:

Evaluation results provide a means of demonstrating program progress and impact to its members and the community. The results are an assessment of the program's effectiveness and should be easy for external readers to quickly see and understand the status of the program in terms of effective implementation and demonstrating positive change toward the goals and objectives of the program.

The **Evaluation Results Scorecard** is a chart that includes the result of measures identified within the Plan to Measure Key Results section of the evaluation plan, including:

- **What:** Describe the measure and specific target or benchmark comparison
- **When:** Identify timing or frequency of collecting data (baseline, quarterly, annually, funding cycle)
- **Results:** What are the collected results or actual data to report

Evaluation Results Scorecard is a tool, in a scorecard format (a Word table or Excel spreadsheet) to report key evaluation data. See *Evaluation Results Scorecard Sample* for illustrating program results and status

- Scorecards are tables or spreadsheets that provide an easy-to-read display of key evaluation results with targets and benchmarks for comparison.
- It is effective to show the result status using color (blue, green, yellow and red) to indicate success from 'exceeds targets' to 'not meeting targets'.
- Stakeholders can quickly identify those objectives that require adjustments in actions or measurement.

Tip: *Assign one person to be responsible for building and maintaining the Evaluation Results Chart as it requires routine commitment to updating the charts to keep them timely and relevant.*

5. Communication Plan of Key Results

The purpose of a communication plan is to intentionally and purposefully share program progress and impact with program members, partners, stakeholders, community members, and funders. Thinking through a communication plan focuses network leadership on a critical factor of network development; intentional

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communication builds trust and credibility between the program and its members and partners increasing likelihood of program sustainability. The external reader is interested in understanding how the program plans to communicate its successes and achievements.

Keep this section to one page of narrative and consider using a diagram or chart to describe the communication plan. See *Evaluation Communication Plan Sample*.

Communication Plan Components:

- a. Intentionally choose specific evaluation results to demonstrate the success of the program, i.e. tells the story of your impact and success
- b. Be clear on who your audience is, i.e. program staff, board members, member organization staff, potential partners, funders, community members, etc.
- c. Identify specific mode(s) of delivering the information, i.e. in-person network board meetings, email, website, SharePoint, phone, formal reports, discussion, planning retreats, social media, etc.
- d. Identify frequency for providing the information, i.e. ad hoc, monthly, quarterly, in-person only, as requested, etc.
- e. Identify the person and their role and responsibilities for communication accuracy, timeliness, frequency, etc.

Simple and Visual Communication Tools:

Diagrams or charts that provide a simple communication of achievement or progress toward critical program impact are important communication tools. The intention is to tell a story about the program and how in meeting its objectives it is helping to change the world.

Tip:

- *Use the Evaluation Result Scorecard (chart) to select only 5-10 key results that are critical for demonstrating the success of the program*
- Simplify the documentation to include only those key results
- Use color and images to provide more insight on the program success
- Other information may be included, such as members, key partners, program goals, objectives, and value propositions.

RESOURCES

Evaluation Toolkit and Evaluation Planning

Flex Program Evaluation Toolkit (Technical Assistance and Services Center)

http://www.ruralcenter.org/sites/default/files/Flex%20Program%20Evaluation%20Toolkit_0.pdf

Evaluating the Initiative (Community Toolbox, University of Kansas)

<http://ctb.ku.edu/en/evaluating-initiative>

Designing Evaluations (General Accounting Office)

http://www.gao.gov/special.pubs/10_1_4.pdf

The Program Manager's Guide to Evaluation (Administration for Children and Families)

http://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/opre/program_managers_guide_to_evaluation_2010.pdf

Evaluating Your Community-Based Program (American Academy of Pediatrics)

<https://www2.aap.org/commpeds/htpcp/resources.html>

Rural Assistance Center Online Library: Program Evaluation

<https://www.ruralhealthinfo.org/topics/rural-health-research-assessment-evaluation#program-evaluation> (*will need to copy/paste this link into your browser*)

Source: CDC Evaluation Guide: Developing and Using a Logic Model

http://www.cdc.gov/dhdsp/programs/spha/evaluation_guides/logic_model.htm

Quantitative and Qualitative Analysis

Analyzing Quantitative Data (University of Wisconsin Extension: Program Development and Evaluation (1996)
<http://learningstore.uwex.edu/Assets/pdfs/G3658-06.pdf>

Analyzing Qualitative Data (University of Wisconsin Extension: Program Development and Evaluation (1996)
<http://learningstore.uwex.edu/Assets/pdfs/G3658-12.pdf>

Analyzing Quantitative Data for Evaluation (Center for Disease Control and Prevention, Dept. of Health and Human Services, Evaluation Briefs (2009)
<http://www.cdc.gov/healthyyouth/evaluation/pdf/brief20.pdf>

Analyzing Qualitative Data for Evaluation (Center for Disease Control and Prevention, Dept. of Health and Human Services, Evaluation Briefs (2009)
<http://www.cdc.gov/healthyyouth/evaluation/pdf/brief19.pdf>

Focus Groups

Conducting Focus Groups (Community Tool Box)
<http://ctb.ku.edu/en/table-of-contents/assessment/assessing-community-needs-and-resources/conduct-focus-groups/main>

Conducting Focus Groups (Wallace Foundation)
<http://www.wallacefoundation.org/knowledge-center/after-school/collecting-and-using-data/Documents/Workbook-D-Focus-Groups.pdf>