

Process Evaluation as a Quality Assurance Tool

What is process evaluation?

Process evaluation, also known as implementation evaluation, focuses on how a specific program operates and is designed to answer the questions of what is done, when, by whom, and to whom. If conducted correctly, process evaluation can:

- provide information that can be used to enhance program quality;
- ensure that the total quality of a program is captured; and
- help the program be accountable to various stakeholders, including sponsors, donors, client groups, administrators, staff and other community members.

What are the three main questions process evaluation can answer?

Process evaluation can provide answers to three important questions:

1. Why was this program developed?

This question is critical to justify continuing, changing, or ending a program.

2. How is this program operated?

The answers to this question are necessary to guide any attempts at program replication and to analyze activities that cannot be easily quantified. The answers will address:

- how, why, and by whom program decisions are made;
- the types of resources needed to run the program;
- the conditions (social, legal, economic, cultural) in which the program operates; and
- unexpected challenges, opportunities and barriers encountered in running the program.

3. Is the program operating as intended?

This question is often raised by funders who want to ensure that their money is being used as intended. This information is also critical to understand why quality outcomes were or were not achieved. The answer to this question may be used to justify a change in program focus, delivery process, staffing or resources to improve quality.

Determining whether a program is operating as intended can help it deal with new demands, such as a sudden influx of clients. Such events call for adjustments in program specifications and plans that will allow a program to take these demands into account while maintaining quality. Showing that you can make these adjustments will help a potential funder to understand and accept changes in your program that may have resulted from unforeseen circumstances.

The process of answering the three questions outlined above will provide information that will help you describe your services and monitor how well they are being provided. This is critical when seeking new or renewed funding. Capturing this information will also help you prepare for financial audits.

When should process evaluation be conducted?

It is important to think of process evaluation as an ongoing process and not just a one-time analysis. At the same time, because a community health clinic's main focus is providing services to its clients, process evaluation, although important, shouldn't be allowed to overshadow the main focus of an organization's work.

Because organizations often fall behind in conducting process evaluation, it's important to find a balance that allows at least some process evaluation to be conducted as a necessary step in securing funding. One approach would be to demonstrate to potential funders that you are effective in areas in which they are interested and convince them that your program is worthy of funding. In this kind of situation, it is important to focus on answering the two or three questions that will get you the funding and the extra staff that you may need, rather than conduct a large-scale study.

What are some methods of process evaluation?

The first thing to consider in conducting a process evaluation is timing. As mentioned above, process evaluation can be conducted on an ongoing basis or at a specific point in time. The advantage to ongoing process evaluation is that you will always have current information

readily available. A disadvantage is that it involves significant time and resources. Although conducting process evaluation at a specific point in time can minimize the time and effort involved and provide tailored evaluations, up-to-date information will not always be available.

You will also need to determine your audience for process evaluation. External audiences for process evaluation results include funders, clients and community advocates, while audiences for internal process evaluation include program staff, managers, and the board of directors.

The methods for conducting process evaluation, which include document review, observational studies and/or interviews, are selected based on the questions to be answered:

- To answer a question involving why a particular program was developed, document review is used.
- To answer a question involving how a program operates, document review, observational studies and/or interviews are the best methods.
- To answer a question about whether a program is operating as intended, document review, observational studies and/or interviews are the most appropriate methods.

As you begin, it is important to master the basics. Don't try to collect data for its own sake. Remember that funders have specific questions they want answered. With time, you can add more questions, but it is the precision with which you monitor your processes that counts, not the quantity of data you collect.

Determining quality of data collection requires developing only three or four questions. Asking your staff to participate in brainstorming sessions is one way to determine what these questions

should be. This process will generate many questions, from which you should pick the three or four that are most important.

To help keep data collection efforts ongoing, look through your client records and select the four or five response categories that best address your quality needs. Then re-examine these categories weekly or monthly and summarize this information so that it is at your fingertips. This may require an hour or so to review client forms and another hour to make sure your financial data is in order, depending on how many clients you serve. Then, when the financial auditors arrive, the information is readily available.

The time-consuming component of this approach is the initial work of establishing the process and ensuring that you have the information sources you need, as well as an individual designated as responsible for this activity.

What are process evaluation data sources?

Once you have selected a method for conducting a process evaluation, it is time to consider what data sources should be used. In conducting process evaluation, it is important to use data about quality that are already available in your organization and to consider adding additional data sources only if you know exactly what additional questions you want to ask and from what perspective—that of the funder, the client, or your staff.

When deciding which data source to use, you must first decide what questions about quality you want to answer.

Questions Involving Quality

Answering questions involving the quality of a particular process, such as the budget process, may involve simply reviewing meeting minutes related to the budget to determine how budget decisions are made. It may not be necessary to use another instrument at all.

Looking at the quality of the services provided generally involves using standard client record forms to find the needed information. In some cases, you may need to create an abstracting tool to isolate information that is found on client record forms in a Word file or Excel spreadsheet.

Other sources that are useful in reviewing the quality of services include:

- program policy manuals
- program logs
- observations
- media reports
- legislative reports
- interviews

Questions Involving Program Operations

To determine whether a program is operating as intended, it is often helpful to use an already prepared proposal that lists or describes the services you intended to provide. Use it as a checklist to determine whether goals are being met. Other data sources that can be used to answer questions involving program operations include:

- program policies and manuals
- program logs
- observations
- client records
- interviews

Questions on Why a Program Was Developed

Data sources that can be used to answer a question related to why a particular program was developed include:

- planning documents
- meeting minutes
- memoranda of understanding
- funding proposals
- needs assessments

Tips for Data Collection

Set a routine for collecting data and stick to it.

Divide tasks and assign individual(s) to each task.

Maximize existing opportunities.

Only answer questions of interest and keep the evaluation focused.

Periodically review your instrument to make sure that the evaluation is still useful.

What is the importance of community involvement in process evaluation?

Making sure that your clients see your quality data is a way to provide tangible evidence of the effectiveness of your services, and it gives clients confidence that they are receiving high-quality services. For example, one way data can show growth in services and quality to clients is in the form of a chart or graph.

Organizations also must find ways to engage the community in process evaluation while building community support and eliciting community feedback. A very effective way to do this is through the use of advisory councils. For example, maternal and child health services and/or primary care services organizations need to establish links with other agencies in the community, such as local churches or recreation centers, in order to publicize their services and get feedback from community residents regarding what services they need.

It is important to capture the work that is involved in engaging the community, and it's also important to document your efforts, including the diversity of your clients and the frequency of the programs. It is also critical to document the impact your activity has had on programming in order to show that you are targeting males and females and those who belong to different racial and socioeconomic groups in your information-gathering efforts.

If you hold community meetings, a staff member can create a general profile of those who attend. Meeting sign-in sheets also can be used. In proposals and project reports, make sure that you note that you are holding discussions with community activists. If you have written input from short surveys, include this as well so that you are reflecting the full range of your activities.

It is also strongly recommended that you involve the community and your clients in helping to determine what quality means for them. When you have differing notions of quality, it's important to measure all of them.

Finally, after you go out into the community to hold meetings, make presentations and gather information, it is important to be able to show those you meet that there is a link between the input you requested and any program changes you have decided to make. This shows that you are responsive and that you really care about the people you are serving.

What are some additional sources for data and technical assistance?

If you find you need to gather additional information from clients, one of the easiest approaches is to conduct waiting room interviews, possibly using self-administered questionnaires. Basic instruments for different reading levels that can be tailored for use with your clients are available on the Internet. Reformatting existing instruments is another useful approach.

Other sources of data collection and technical assistance are community colleges and universities. Many professors—especially in the fields of sociology, health services research, psychology and even business—want their students to gain practical experience in measuring quality, and they will supervise them in providing high-quality assistance to your program.

The American Association of Retired Professionals (AARP) chapter in your community is another valuable source for assistance. Many retirees who belong to AARP are professionals who have the time and interest to become involved on a pro-bono basis.

Where can I find standard tools for process evaluation data collection?

Although standard tools are readily available for data collection, it is important to remember that because your program is unique, the way you will measure its quality should be unique as well. Standard tools are available at the following organizations through their websites:

The **United Way** (www.national.unitedway.org/outcome/library) provides outcome measurement tools that are very helpful as well as links to other sites with similar tools.

Those working with families and children will find the **Annie E. Casey Foundation's Kids Count** materials helpful (www.aecf.org/kidscount/).

Innonet (www.innonet.org) was established specifically to assist non-profits. On their website, you can obtain one free technical assistance consultation. After you submit your answers on the website, they will provide suggestions on how you can measure your work.

The **Aspen Institute Roundtable** (www.aspen-measures.org) features a variety of instruments—so many, in fact, that it is recommended that you call them at (212) 677-5510 to discuss your specific needs first.

Following is a list of additional agencies and Internet resources where you can find valuable guidance and materials related to evaluation tools, planning and performance.

- Healthy People 2001
www.healthypeople.gov
- Healthy Minnesotans 2004
www.health.state.mn.us/divs/chs/phg/intro.html
- JCAHO ORYX® Core Performance Measures
www.jcaho.org/pms/core+measures/

- Agency for Health Care Policy and Research
www.ahcpr.gov
- Consumer Assessment of Health Plans Survey (CAHPS)
www.ncqa.org
- Health Plan Data and Information Set (HEDIS®)
www.ncqa.org/Programs/HEDIS
- National Association of Healthcare Quality
www.nahq.org
- Health Resources and Services Administration (HRSA)
www.hrsa.gov ■

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