

CHAPTER 1



Making the Case for Program Evaluation



Program evaluation has unlimited potential for improving services. It can help to clarify and develop the kinds of services that recipients need. It also can help to identify and/or adjust services that are not being delivered to more effectively serve the appropriate people. Crucial information can be discovered about the benefit of services through questions like these: Are program participants

getting anything out of the programs? Are recipients doing better after receiving the services? Is everyone better off? If not, who is better off and who is not? What aspects of the program are associated with those who seem to be doing well? How can the program be managed to ensure that everyone gets the service that seems to have the greatest impact?

While this list of questions seems very relevant to social work practice, social worker practitioners and research/evaluators seem to operate on different planets. Practitioners are usually committed to delivering the best possible service that directs attention to their immediate interactions with the client, for example, such as a counseling session or the completion of a referral. This orientation does not leave excess time or energy for evaluation. Additionally, research and evaluation activity is often separated from practice. Many agencies have distinct departments and/or staff functions that perform these duties. Research or quality assurance arms in organizations usually are separate from direct-service wings. The schism is further reinforced in most social work curricula where there is a clear distinction between practice courses and evaluation/research courses.

The primary focus of social work intervention is to improve the lives of individuals, families, and their communities by working with them to assist them with helpful services and resources. Consistent with organizational and educational reinforcements, when thinking about this mission to improve the lives of clients, it is unlikely that program evaluation is one of the first topics that comes to your mind. While we understand that, we would like to argue that an effective evaluation can be a very powerful tool for improving the quality of services and increasing the positive impact on service recipients.

ETHICAL OBLIGATIONS

As social workers, we have an ethical responsibility to exploit all resources in our repertoire in the interest of improving the lives of the clients we are serving. While our Code of Ethics guides us in the treatment of clients and the clarification of moral dilemmas that may arise in social work practice, there is also attention focused on the importance of providing services that are effective and helpful to clients (NASW, 1999).

Additionally, our Code of Ethics emphasizes a social worker's mandate to focus on social justice in the interest of interrupting the oppression of high-risk groups dispensed by prominent social institutions (NASW, 1999). If you are

truly committed to at-risk individuals, families, and/or their communities, then program evaluation is a great ally. You can discover if services are actually being delivered to targeted groups or find out if services are being delivered as intended or if services are having the desired impact. Evaluation can also help to identify the services that are actually needed. When you consider the array of tools a social worker has at his or her disposal, program evaluation techniques have great potential for assisting in this fundamental mission to improve lives.

Checking Vitals



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A recent trend in social work service is the choice of services models based on evidence-based practice. Social workers with this orientation would choose service treatment modalities that have been proven to work with the specific target population of interest. Choosing a model with an empirical history of effectiveness is an excellent practice; however, it does not ensure that the service will benefit the service recipients. In addition, evidence-based practitioners need to evaluate specific services to ensure that the model's effectiveness generalizes to that setting (Yeager & Roberts, 2003).

Social workers in managerial and supervisory capacities often practice from a consumer-centered management framework. The use of evaluative information to assess consumer needs, the effectiveness of the implementation of services, and the eventual impact of services is central to a consumer-centered approach to administrative practice (Poertner & Rapp, 2007).

Very similar arguments about the needs for service and its respective effectiveness are critical in the process of securing funds. Evaluation findings can be invaluable in the process of seeking new funding or continuing existing funds for services. When seeking grant monies, public or state contracts, or foundation dollars, it is likely that some type of evaluation will be required to enhance the likelihood of securing the award.

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PUTTING IT INTO CONTEXT

In addition to the practical and ethical arguments, evaluation is useful in service delivery efforts that are exceedingly complex. Clients bring complex sets of needs to the service setting, with economic and social challenges often at the center of those needs. Client families often come from racial or ethnic groups who have faced a lengthy history of injustice and discrimination. Additionally, individuals and families may have received services from established systems that do not have a track record of helping their clients. Despite these challenges, individuals and their families seem to find personal strengths that allow them to endure and survive.

In most cases, social work services are housed in extremely complex organizations. Ongoing discussion of organizational politics does not necessarily cast a favorable light on the individuals who participate in processes that impede the use of evaluation data (Rubin & Babbie, 2005). Our experience indicates that various players within these organizations engage in these processes as a part of their jobs, and the accompanying complexities come with the territory. When you look at these services systems you will find that different individuals design, implement, fund, and often evaluate the same services from different vantage points in the organization. For example, while direct service staff actually deliver the service, supervisors, managers, and administrators hire, fire, and manage these staff. Depending on the size of the organization, other staff functions may manage the payroll and benefits of these staff, deal with computers and technology, and also raise funds for the services. Finally, executive directors and upper management personnel usually oversee the operation at the top level of the organization.

All of these parties rely on external constituencies for many critical things. Funding and contractual arrangements may come from public or private entities. Favorable laws that support the mission of the organization require the agency to lobby legislators (local, state, and federal) and their supporters. The point of this discussion is not to review your organizational theory, but to keep in mind that doing evaluation and using data to improve services often gets lost in the shuffle. The staff at various levels of the organization are forced to deal with pressing matters, and unfortunately, in most cases, evaluative work is not viewed as the most pressing matter.

The low priority of evaluation within social service organizations is also complemented by the aforementioned historical schism that exists in the social work world between research and practice. Research is often viewed as something outside of practice. This is often reinforced in schools of social work where research and evaluation courses are taught in isolation from direct practice. In our conversations with students about research and taking additional research courses, even those who do well in the research course see it as a separate and less critical part of their professional development. This is further supported in organizations where ongoing evaluation is often excluded from the “real work” of the agency.

SO WHY BOTHER?

Despite the challenges, the potential payoffs for program evaluation efforts are significant. We have said it before and we will say it again: Program evaluation data can be used toward the betterment of social work practice in a number of ways. When agency staff at all levels participates in evaluation, it enhances the quality of the evaluation, the evaluation process, and the prognosis for securing credible and useful information. Additionally, social workers who participate in the evaluation process pick up skills that can improve their skills as practitioners. Patton (1997) describes the skills that participants in the evaluation process acquire that make them better practitioners as “process use” (p. 88). Participants are better able to concisely and concretely conceive and define an intervention and employ information to determine if it works. These skills put practitioners in a better position to develop interventions that are more likely to be effective, even before any evaluation has taken place.

Beyond the advancement of conceptual skills, evaluation can help to more effectively identify the services needs of client populations. Before any service can be successful, the specific needs to be addressed must be clear,

and evaluative research can be instrumental in clarifying individual, family, and community needs. Evaluative efforts can make the intended outcomes of services more clear and meaningful (see Chapter 7). Surprisingly, practitioners who work in the same program can often have vastly different views on the intended outcomes of a program. Evaluation can help practitioners to flesh out and unify their unique perspectives, putting everyone on the same page of program intentions, which inevitably enhances the program's potential for impact.

Checking Vitals



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One of the increasing demands for program evaluation is the development and completion of evaluation plans for program funders to demonstrate the program's impact. Most major funding sources require a program evaluation as part of the program proposal. However, the evaluations are often treated as a box to check in the interests of meeting funder reporting requirements. It is our hope that the ideas and concepts presented in this book will encourage practitioners to view these evaluation opportunities as viable methods for improving services.

The insights gained from evaluation can be used to make a myriad of different types of changes in the interest of better services. For example, one process evaluation about family therapy discovered that family therapists were spending time doing things that did not facilitate contact with families, such as supervising work and lunch activities. As a result, the supervisors reassigned these tasks and gave the family workers more time to meet with families. In another case, the staff from a children's group home found out the successes from the program were not succeeding in the community 3 months after release. To compensate, the program manager adjusted significant program resources to expand the aftercare services for their clients in community placement.

A somewhat unique use of program evaluation is the promotion of programs. Social workers engage in a litany of amazing practices within program models that are often very impressive. They engage with individuals and families who have often been effectively excluded from services previously. They help consumers to identify and accomplish specific goals under dire circumstances. They implement complex treatment plans in the community by working around barriers and taking advantage of existing resources. However, social workers are really not committed to telling the world about the great things they accomplish (Kapp, 2000), most likely because they are too busy doing the job to tell folks about it. Additionally, social workers often perceive marketing and advertising as self-aggrandizing. While that may be true, it is also true that social workers need to let their various constituents know about the wonderful things they do, as other professions are often being considered as cheaper or more convenient alternatives. Furthermore, program advocacy can often result in additional resources for the individuals, families, and communities receiving services. Models constructed in the process of evaluation and evaluative data are excellent tools for telling our many stakeholders about the great things being accomplished by individuals, families, and communities with the support of social workers.

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WHY ISN'T EVERYONE DOING IT?

If evaluation is so fantastic, why is this book opening with such a shameless promotion about the wonders of evaluation? If it is so wonderful, should it not be integrated into all aspects of agency practice? Right? As mentioned earlier, most social workers have minimal training in research and evaluation skills. The lack of significant background is nicely complemented by the view that evaluation does not fit into most notions of social work practices. Even when evaluation is completed, the lacking skill sets, conceptual frames, and interest levels that preclude evaluation work do not help. The track record of getting evaluation findings integrated into practice decisions is not good. Busy practitioners do not naturally find ways to assimilate evaluation data into the routine decision frameworks. Much of this book is directed at that challenge.

Poertner and Rapp (2007) argue that using evaluation is an excellent way to organize and focus all of the disparate factors that go into service on the effectiveness of those services. The potential benefits of evaluation outweigh the complexities associated with implementing an evaluation. For example, a clinical social worker might report to a supervisor, "You know, this family could really benefit from family therapy, but with what they have been through, it is just too hard. I am not going to even attempt to work with them!" There are many likely responses, ranging from telling the social worker to work with the family or lose his or her job, to engaging in a more supportive process that might help the social worker to more constructively deal with some of the barriers. But it is unlikely that the supervisor would say, "No problem, I don't blame you!" Evaluation has similar potential for improving the lives of those being served by social workers and likewise, it is unacceptable to avoid because of its inherent complexity.

Despite these challenges, evaluation is still conducted, maybe not in all organizations, but in many cases. This may occur at the behest of a funding source, or an organization may have a commitment to evaluation despite the complexities identified. If evaluative activity is going to be initiated, the evaluators or those acting in that capacity need to plan to invest the time and resources into the project in a manner that addresses the organizational and political dynamics of the organization. In cases where the evaluation is conducted oblivious of the organization, we feel it is unlikely that positive changes in the interest of clients will occur.

The purpose of this book is to prepare those who are doing evaluation to complete the work in a meaningful fashion that will promote positive changes for clients. We also hope to make people aware of various land mines and to

offer suggestions for transforming those impediments into assets for completing an evaluation that will be helpful, useful, and lead to better services.

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From a minor clarification of a program expectation . . . to promoting a plan to a funding source . . . to making a significant change in program operation based on evaluative data—services can be improved in innumerable ways using program evaluation. The point of this book is that evaluations are overcome by a variety of barriers and impediments when social workers try to take the research concepts learned in their research courses and apply them in the dynamic confines of agency social work practice. Unfortunately, research courses often focus more on methodological issues and never get around to the feisty matters that crop up when an evaluation is being implemented in an agency. Our plan is to apprise readers of what they will face in this enterprise and to give them ideas, skills, and techniques to address and optimize those same factors in the completion of an evaluation that facilitates the improvement of services.

This book promotes the idea that conducting program evaluation in an agency is a type of practice; there are specific pieces to the practice; and those pieces are clearly defined. In this book, we will define these specific aspects of program evaluation practice and ground our explanation in our experience as evaluators. While social workers and social work students are exposed to research methods, very little discussion addresses the application of these methods within an agency context.

Patton (1997) speaks intelligently about the craft of evaluation, focusing on the use of the information. He insightfully describes the most critical part of evaluation as “People, People, People” (p. 39). Our emphasis on practice speaks directly to finding ways to engage “people” in the evaluation process who would

otherwise abstain from or impede the process. While agency practitioners are busy going about their particular aspect of service delivery, they prefer to stay out of evaluation practice or obstruct its implementation. This activity is often perceived as interfering with the business of service delivery. The practice of program evaluation presents numerous opportunities for engaging practitioners in the evaluative process, hoping that, at the least, they will not interfere with the process, but most likely participate in the use of the evaluation data.

Checking Vitals



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KEY PIECES OF PROGRAM EVALUATION PRACTICE

Program evaluation practice involves the following:

1. Engage stakeholder in the evaluation process.
 - a. Find the individuals with the information needs.
 - b. Find the individuals needed to support the process.
 - c. Find the individuals necessary to help with conducting the evaluation.
 - d. Engage them in the evaluation process.
 - i. Secure an initial investment.
 - ii. Maintain their engagement throughout the process.
2. Assess and address agency political factors.
 - a. Conduct an assessment of the agency's readiness to participate in an evaluation.
 - b. Use the learning from the political assessment to implement and complete the evaluation.
3. Choose an evaluation design.
 - a. Describe the program in a participative fashion.
 - b. Identify information needs in the context of the program.
 - c. Examine data sources to fulfill the information needs.

- d. Determine research methods based on information needs.
 - e. Develop strategies to maintain the integrity of the evaluation process during implementation.
4. Data collection.
 - a. Develop plans to collect information that require original data collection.
 - b. Develop plans to acquire and organize data from available sources.
 - c. Develop plans to support the data collection action throughout the process.
 5. Reporting and using data.
 - a. Develop methods for presenting data to different groups of users in a timely manner.
 - b. Work with users to determine their plans for using the data.
 - c. Practice using data with them.
 - d. Support them in the use of the data.
 6. Addressing culturally competent program evaluation.
 - a. Identify insensitivities that are often reinforced in evaluation methods.
 - b. Develop techniques for addressing those insensitivities.

The practice of program evaluation addresses these dimensions of the process. If you were to compare this list of activities to other evaluation texts, the treatment of methodology might look similar, but the emphasis on engaging agency staff in the process is the *raison d'être* of this book. Not only do we think that the process of engaging key organizational and service actors is critical to evaluation, we feel that social workers are the ideal candidates for taking on this role. The same clinical or interpersonal skills that social workers have acquired to assess and intervene with clients will suit them well in the practice of program evaluation. The remainder of the book will develop this notion of program evaluation practice by describing these concepts in more detail and sharing multiple examples of the application.

REVIEW AND REFLECT

Big Ideas

- Program evaluation is a critical part of practice that is consistent with our Code of Ethics, emphasizing effective services and advocating on behalf of oppressed groups.

- Program evaluation is regularly required to secure funding for services addressing the needs of underserved populations.
- Practitioners interested in evaluation can have a significant impact on the use of evaluation to improve services by involving agency personnel in the process.
 - Defining the program.
 - Identifying information needs and methods.
 - Developing plans for eventual use of the information.

Discussion Questions

- List and discuss some of the typical attitudes toward program evaluation. You may have experienced these attitudes or simply heard of them.
- Pick two of the attitudes identified in the previous question; then discuss the way they may impact program evaluation in an agency.
- How is the Code of Ethics tenet about effective services related to program evaluation?
 - What is the relationship between social justice and program evaluation?
 - What are some benefits of involving agency staff in the program evaluation process?

Activities

- The authors of this book make a huge deal about the value of program evaluation for improving services. Do you buy their argument? Why or why not? If you assume this argument is true why would you think program evaluation is not a more critical part of every service?
 - Make a list of three barriers to using program evaluation to improve services. Comment on the validity of the barrier, whether it is really a barrier, and then suggest some ways to address it.
- The authors make a somewhat unique argument about program evaluation as an essential element of a social justice approach to advocating on behalf of underserved people. Critique this argument. Present a position in favor of this position and one against. Then, defend the position that is most consistent with your point of view.

Resources

- *Evaluation terminology*. Retrieved from http://www.irvine.org/assets/pdf/evaluation/evaluation_terminology.pdf
- Hatry, H. (2007). *2006 performance measurement: Getting results* (2nd ed.). Baltimore, MD: Urban Institute Press. Retrieved from <http://www.urban.org/books/pm/chapter1.cfm>
- Morley, E., & Lampkin, L. M. (2004, July). *Using outcome information: Making data pay off*. Retrieved from Urban Institute: <http://www.urban.org/publications/311040.html>
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