Program Evaluation Plan Guide

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# How to use this Evaluation Plan Guide

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 Network Development 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 activities to demonstrate value, monitor progress toward the program goals, and to identify potential best practices and lessons learned. Evaluation findings are integrated back into the program to improve performance.

This Program Evaluation Plan Guide is designed to support the associated template and provide guidance to Network Development grantees to create a program evaluation plan. This guide is supported with an educational webinar: *Program Evaluation Planning and Tools.* The webinar will be recorded and posted on the *Aim for Impact and Sustainability* network resource webpage and as resources in The Center’s Resource Library.

Content for this Evaluation Plan Guide and the accompanying template have been adapted from multiple sources, including, The National Rural Health Resource Center Evaluation Toolkit, Alana Knudson, Walsh Center for Rural Health Analysis, Critical Components of Evaluation and Evaluation 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 On-line Library. See the Resources section for helpful links and documents.

# Getting Started

**Program Evaluation Plan:**

This is a document describing the evaluation design and measurement data for the Network Development program. The purpose of a program evaluation is to systematically collect information about program activities, progress toward objectives and opportunities for program improvements. Evaluation findings are used to communicate program results and impact to network stakeholders and funders.

* Components include:
* Program description to set the context for the evaluation including the program mission, vision, goals and objectives
  + Evaluation design to describe the rationale and method of how the evaluation monitors progress toward program objectives
  + Measuring and reporting data to track and monitor progress, including, measurement, how the data is collected, the frequency of data collection and communication, who is responsible for gathering the data
  + Evaluation findings to illustrate program progress and impact to the network members and the community, and
  + Communication methods to share evaluation results with stakeholders

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 in all of its activities (initiatives, activities and outputs) and objectives (strategies or outcomes). The expectation is for incrementally positive change (results) toward the program goal.

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

Planning Framework: The Network Development program can be framed, or understood, from two different planning perspectives:

* Identify the expected results, outcomes, of the program that will illustrate positive progress toward the goal or
* Identify the path of action, strategies, that will lead to successfully reaching the goal

Neither of these two ways of framing or understanding your program is more right than another. The difference is solely due to the frame of reference of the planning methodology.

* The two examples of planning frameworks include a generalized strategic planning approach and a common, but specific Logic Model approach.
* The significant difference in these two models when described in a visual chart or diagram:
  + Strategic planning approach starts with strategies on the far left and works to the right with measurements of the strategies, targets for identifying success, and then aligned activities. *See, Evaluation Plan Template, Appendix A, for an example of a generalized strategic planning approach.*
  + Logic Model approach starts with outcomes on the far rights and works to the left through process outputs toward aligned activities. *See, Evaluation Plan Template, Appendix A, for an example of a general Logic Model approach.*
* It is recommended that you choose one of the two frameworks and then consistently use the approach language to reduce confusion.

Program objectivesare developed directly from 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 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 the program goals.

**Tip: Use Consistent Language**

Although it does not matter which Planning Framework guides the design of your evaluation plan, it is important to be consistent in the language used within the evaluation plan. Additional description and guidance of the Planning Frameworks and examples of using consistent language will be provided within the Evaluation Plan Guide and the accompany webinars.

# 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 Evaluation Guide and the accompanying template.

1. **Program Description:** setting context for the evaluation plan, program mission, vision, history and members.
2. **Evaluation Design:** describe the purpose and method of the evaluation including program goals and objectives.
3. **Measuring and Reporting Data**
   1. *Track Activities:* An important aspect of evaluating a program is to track implementation of activities with data.
   2. *Monitor Objectives:* Monitoring measureable program objectives are central to your evaluation plan.
   3. *Consider Qualitative Information:* Qualitative information provides insights on lessons learned and identifies best practices.

1. **Evaluation Findings:** Plan, Do, Study and Act:Evaluation findings illustrate program progress and impact to its members and the community and provide an opportunity to consider adjustments.
2. **Communication of Evaluation Findings:** A communication plan to share evaluation findings with stakeholders is key to illustrating program progress and impact.

## Program Description

Providing context for the evaluation plan is a required component as it sets the stage for the reader, for example:

* Describe the purpose of the organization, i.e. articulate the program goal. This may be the organization’s mission and vision.
* Provide a listing of the program objectives, i.e. strategies to get to the vision or outcomes expecting to be realized
* Briefly describe the organization history, including how it is organized or governed, what value the organization brings or solutions it provides to community problems
* Briefly outline network members and partners, illustrating how they are benefiting from and contributing to the organization and its goals

**TIP**: Start with your grant application and develop a program description that is one to two pages. If you write this program description well you can use it for each of your important planning documents: strategic plan, marketing plan, communication plan and ultimately your business plan.

## Evaluation Design

There are three basic purposes of an evaluation plan: 1) monitor, or ‘study’ your grant program’s progress toward the vision of the program by measuring the program objectives, 2) communicating the results, value, or impact of your organization’s work, and 3) identifying opportunities for making adjustments, or ‘acting on’ to either increase the impact of the work or continue making progress toward the goal.

To describe the evaluation design, consider including the following. Keep this section to no more than one page of narrative and consider using a diagram or chart to illustrate the alignment and connections between the goals, objectives, actions and outcomes.

* Describe the rationale of the evaluation, i.e. why is evaluation important to this program? And how the evaluation findings will be utilized.
* Describe the evaluation method by identifying the planning framework and listing the measureable objectives.
* Provide a diagram to illustrate alignment of program objectives (strategies or outcomes) with program goals. *See, the Template, Appendix A, for examples of the strategic planning method and a Logic Model diagram.*

**TIP**: 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.

Spending time with your evaluation design will save time in the long run:

* Be intentional and focused on having measureable objectives that are aligned with program goals
* Be concise and accurate with language based on your planning framework
* Use an outline or checklist of evaluation plan components to ensure completeness

## Measuring and Reporting Data

* 1. **Tracking Activities: “Was the program implemented as planned?”**

Program activities are actions and processes put into place to execute on objectives. They help network leaders and stakeholders monitor the activity of a program and to answer the question, “Was the program implemented as planned?” Activities are tracked and monitored through action teams and are included in the evaluation plan.

* 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.
* Language of monitoring actions is different based on the planning framework being used, for example:
* Using strategic planning terminology;
  + Tracking activities = counting implementation results.
  + Activity results are typically counted as they identify what has happened.
  + Activity example and result, *“Start-up a School and Primary Care Task Force”. The task force met 12 times last year.*
* Using the 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.*
  1. **Tracking Activity Chart**

Action Tracking Chart is a tool to collect data on activities that have been implemented in alignment with program objectives. Utilizing a process to collect the data is helpful; following is a suggested list of details to incorporate into a monitoring chart: *See, Template Appendix B for examples tracking activities.*

* **What**: Activity that is being implemented and the resources needed
* **Where**: Location of data
* **How**: Method for obtaining or gathering data (quantitative and qualitative)
* **When**: Timing or frequency of collecting and communicating data (baseline, quarterly, annually, funding cycle)
* **Who**: Person who is responsible for gathering and analyzing data, and who has the information – internally or externally. This person ensures accuracy and confidentiality
  1. **Monitoring Objectives: “What is the impact of the program?”**

A key to successfully monitoring objectives is to collect data on specific measurements that are attainable, realistic and timely; SMART objectives. Utilizing a process to collect the data is helpful; following is a suggested list of details to incorporate into a monitoring chart: *See, Template Appendix B for example of measuring objectives*

* + **What**: Definition of measurement (how the measure is calculated)
  + **Where**: Location of data
  + **How**: Method for obtaining or gathering data (quantitative and qualitative)
  + **When**: Timing or frequency of collecting and communicating data (baseline, quarterly, annually, funding cycle)
  + **Who**: Person who is responsible for gathering and analyzing data, and who has the information – internally or externally. This person ensures accuracy and confidentiality

**FAQ:** How to write SMART objectives?

A tried and true approach in writing measureable program objectives is to follow the SMART mnemonic; SMART= specific, measureable, achievable, realistic, and timely. [CDC Check List for Writing Smart Objectives](http://www.cdc.gov/healthyyouth/evaluation/pdf/brief3b.pdf).

**FAQ**: *What to do if the objectives are so broad and huge 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.

SAMPLE:

Broad objective: Everyone is healthy

SMART objective: The overall health of the patients with Diabetes in our community improves within 3 years.

**KEY**: Start with your program application to hone in on the 2-4 key SMART objectives of your project that can be accomplished in the coming 24-36 months.

* If you are using a traditional strategic planning framework, re-write your strategies into SMART objectives.
* If you are using a Logic Model planning framework, take a look at your short and mid-term outcomes and re-write into SMART objectives.
  1. **Quantitative Information**

Includes data that can be readily counted, for example, claims data, surveys, clinical results data and public health data. There are many ways to collected 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.

Following is a list of examples of data to measuring 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 people with access to care
* Policy or regulation changes
* Attendance or certification and graduation rates

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, satisfaction
* Electronic Health Record clinical results, such as, lab results
* Mortality and morbidity numbers
* Quality of life scores
* Participation rates or graduation rates
  1. **Qualitative information**

Is valuable to network leaders and stakeholders. It provides opportunity through summarizing findings to highlight opportunities for improvement, lessons learned, and potential innovation, best practices or good ideas.

Gathering Qualitative Data: there are many ways to gather qualitative data and there are pro’s and con’s for each. The key is to ask questions that capture stakeholder’s perceptions of successes and challenges that were experienced during various phases of the program. Following is a list of data gathering options:

* Focus group
* Interview
* Observation

Analyzing Qualitative data: 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
  1. **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. For example, consider external evaluations when seeking an unbiased study of the longer term impact of program activities 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.)

## Evaluation Findings: Study and Act

Evaluation findings provide a means of illustrating program progress and impact to its members and the community. It is also at this step that you consider what to do with the information you have been collecting as part of the Plan Do Study Act cycle. To study is to consider the progress toward program objectives and to determine what adjustments are needed to continue positive progress toward reaching program goals. Using a dashboard chart to illustrate progress toward objectives and results is helpful in illustrating progress.

**KEY**: Evaluation findings are the assessment of the program’s impact. The results of the evaluation and the interpretation of these results is what demonstrates value, monitors progress toward the program goals, and identifies potential best practices and lessons learned. This step of analysis, synthesis, and interpretation provides the answers to your evaluation questions:

* What progress has been made toward the program objectives?
* What are the needed adjustments to program process, evaluation, or objectives for next year?
* Are there specific ways to improve program results?
* What is the impact of the program on program goals?
* What has been learned?
* What are the best practices to share?

**TIP: Use a dashboard to illustrate status and progress**

Dashboards are diagrams or charts that illustrate the status and progress of program objectives. Results are color-coded (blue, green, yellow and red) to indicate measurement results status of success from ‘exceeds’ to ‘not meeting targets’. Stakeholders can quickly identify those objectives that require adjustments in actions or measurement. This is a key tool for the Study and Act portion of the PDSA cycle. *Please see Template, Appendix C, for example of a dashboard for illustrating program status and progress.*

## Communication Plan of Results

A communication plan of the evaluation results for stakeholders is important for building trust and credibility between the network and its members and partners.

Key Components of a Communication Plan:

* + Consider the audience: staff, board members, member organization staff, potential partners, funders, community members, etc. when deciding how to provide the information and how frequently. A mix of narrative or charts and diagrams of the findings may be necessary.
  + Identify the best time and mode to deliver the information: at quarterly network board meetings, network annual reports and planning retreats, network staff meetings, and member leadership meetings as well as the website, annual meetings.

# Resources

**Evaluation Toolkits and Evaluation Planning**

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

The Community Toolbox (University of Kansas): <http://ctb.ku.edu/en/evaluating-initiative>

Designing Evaluations (GAO): <http://www.gao.gov/special.pubs/10_1_4.pdf>

The Program Manager’s Guide to Evaluation (ACF): <http://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/opre/program_managers_guide_to_eval2010.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: <http://www.raconline.org/topics/rural-health-research-assessment-evaluation#program-evaluation>

Source: CDC Evaluation Guide: Developing and Using a Logic Model. <http://www.cdc.gov/dhdsp/programs/nhdsp_program/evaluation_guides/docs/logic_model.pdf>

**Quantitative and Qualitative Analysis**

University of Wisconsin Extension: Program Development and Evaluation “Analyzing

Quantitative Data” (1996), <http://learningstore.uwex.edu/Assets/pdfs/G3658-06.pdf>

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

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

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

**Focus Groups**

Community Toolbox: Focus Group Guide: [Community Tool Box: Conducting Focus Groups](http://ctb.ku.edu/en/tablecontents/sub_section_main_1018.aspx)

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