

**Program
Evaluation
Briefing
Series**

#2

Hiring and Working With an Evaluator



**Juvenile Justice
Evaluation Center**

**Justice Research and Statistics
Association**



**Office of Juvenile Justice and
Delinquency Prevention**



The JJEC, which is supported by the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, provides evaluation information, training, and technical assistance to enhance juvenile justice evaluation in the states. For more information about the JJEC project, visit our Web site at <http://www.jrsa.org/jjec>, or e-mail us at jjec@jrsa.org.

Hiring and Working With an Evaluator

This is one of a series of briefings prepared by the Justice Research and Statistics Association's Juvenile Justice Evaluation Center (JJEC) project. The purpose of this briefing series is to provide juvenile justice program managers with information that will help them to evaluate their programs. Each briefing addresses a topic that is of particular interest to juvenile justice program managers who are trying to determine the effectiveness of the programs they operate.

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Program managers may want to hire a qualified evaluator who has received formal training in research and/or evaluation to assist them in assessing their program's performance.

Introduction

Program evaluation is an essential tool for the management of juvenile justice programs. Evaluation can help program managers and staff members understand how their daily activities are related to specific goals and objectives, and how these goals and objectives relate to the juvenile justice problem or need that the program hopes to address. While most program managers are capable of conducting some evaluation activities, managers may want to employ a qualified evaluator to assist them with the process of measuring outcomes or designing an evaluation study that will determine whether they are achieving the outcomes they hope for. The purpose of this briefing is to provide information to juvenile justice program managers about how to go about hiring an evaluator. The briefing discusses how a qualified evaluator can assist a program manager in assessing her/his program's performance, what characteristics to look for in hiring a qualified evaluator, and how to go about finding such a person.

Who Is an Evaluator?

An evaluator is someone who has received formal training in research and/or evaluation and has experience in conducting evaluations of programs. Unfortunately, there is no easy way to identify a qualified program evaluator. For example, there are no licensing or certification requirements for program evaluators. Although many evaluators are members of professional evaluation organizations, such as the American Evaluation Association or the American Educational Research Association, membership in these organizations does not imply qualifications. There are very few university degree programs in program evaluation, and program evaluators may have backgrounds in the social sciences, such as psychology, sociology, criminal justice, public administration, or education. In a later section we discuss some of the qualifications to look for when selecting a competent evaluator.



A good evaluator can help your program develop measures, analyze data, and provide recommendations for improving service delivery.

What Can an Evaluator Do For You?

A good evaluator is part facilitator, part researcher, and part program specialist. A good evaluator can help your program with some or all of the following:

- Develop a logic model; that is, provide a written description of how the activities and components of your program relate to each other and to the goals and objectives you are trying to accomplish.
- Develop measures to determine whether your program is meeting its goals and objectives.
- Develop an evaluation design to determine whether your program is having its intended impacts.
- Design data collection forms and procedures, and databases to capture and record data collected.
- Analyze data and present results and conclusions from the findings.
- Provide recommendations to the program regarding ways to improve service delivery.

Program managers and staff will be able to perform some of these tasks themselves. Even with these, however, the program will benefit from the experience and expertise of a qualified evaluator. Think of the evaluation process as being like the process of building one's own home. If you have a great deal of time and expertise, you may be able to build your own home with no help from experts. If you have a thorough understanding of home building and expertise in all but the most difficult areas, you might do most of the work yourself, only hiring an expert to help with the most difficult aspects or those that require specialized ability or equipment, such as grading, pouring a foundation, or plumbing and electrical wiring. Finally, if you have little or no expertise (but lots of money), you may hire someone to build your home from top to bottom. Even in this last case, however, the home builder will still consult with you on a number of factors, ranging from the basic layout of the house to what color the rooms should be painted. In this same way, programs can hire evaluators to provide as much or as little help as they think they might need to successfully carry out evaluation activities.



A professional evaluator has specialized knowledge and the ability to objectively assess program operations.

Advantages of Hiring an Evaluator

There are, of course, advantages and disadvantages to hiring an evaluator. Some of the advantages of hiring an evaluator to help with some or all of your evaluation activities include:

- *Specialized Knowledge and Ability.* The primary advantage of hiring an evaluator is the same that comes with hiring any expert – specialized knowledge and ability. Evaluators understand how to document program operations and processes, how to measure program outcomes, and how to collect and analyze data to determine program effectiveness. Program managers and staff members usually do not have expertise in these areas.
- *Objectivity.* The hallmark of good program evaluation is objectivity; that is, the ability to look at information about the program and form unbiased conclusions about whether the program is achieving what it wants to achieve. Most program managers and staff believe in the effectiveness of their programs or they would not be working in them. Thus there is the potential that they will look at evaluation findings in a biased way (even if this is an unconscious bias). A good program evaluator will point out both the positives and negatives in the program's operations.
- *Credibility.* Precisely because program evaluators are more knowledgeable and objective, their conclusions and recommendations tend to carry more weight than those that might be produced by the program managers and staff. This credibility may be important to funders, for example, when making decisions about whether to continue to fund the program.
- *Perspective.* In part because they are objective, evaluators may come to the program with fresh views about program activities and relationships between program components. In addition, a good evaluator brings to the table a different way of thinking about program effectiveness, one grounded in empiricism (that is, understanding program operations and outcomes through the collection and analysis of data, both quantitative and qualitative).



For many programs, the main disadvantage of hiring an evaluator is the cost.

Disadvantages of Hiring an Evaluator

There also may be some disadvantages to employing an evaluator to assist your program with its evaluation efforts. Some of these disadvantages include:

- *Cost.* Specialized knowledge and expertise do not come cheap, and evaluation is usually no exception. It is not simply that evaluators are highly paid professionals. Conducting a carefully controlled evaluation study to determine program effectiveness can be an expensive and time-consuming process.
- *Time.* Although careful evaluation takes time regardless of who is conducting the evaluation, it may take additional time for someone who is not familiar with your program to gain some knowledge of its structure and functions. The evaluator will need to review documents and conduct interviews to gain this knowledge. Not only will this take extra time on the part of the evaluator, it will also require staff resources to locate and make copies of program documents, sit through interviews with the evaluator, and so on.
- *Lack of Expertise.* Just as hiring a builder who is unqualified will result in delays, mistakes and perhaps a poor product, so too will hiring an unqualified evaluator produce potentially damaging results. An evaluator who is not qualified may alienate staff, intrude upon clients and staff-client relationships, misunderstand the program and its functioning, and draw conclusions that are incorrect or inappropriate. If such an evaluator's work is released to funders and the public, the program may suffer damage to its reputation and may find its funding jeopardized.

Not all of these advantages and disadvantages will apply in every case. Program managers must weigh all of these factors carefully when they decide to hire a program evaluator.



The evaluator
you hire should
believe that
evaluation is a
collaborative
process.

Selecting an Evaluator

There are some basic qualifications you can look for when determining how to hire an evaluator. What follows are some considerations for selecting an evaluator.

- *Formal Education.* As noted previously, very few individuals have formal education in program evaluation. Most evaluators do have formal training in research methods, however, usually in a social science discipline. Graduate-level training should provide this knowledge; for example, someone with a Ph.D. in criminology should have the research knowledge required to conduct evaluations.
- *Experience.* While evaluation as a process has a great deal in common with conducting research, there are also many differences between the two. A qualified evaluator must not only have research skills, but must also have specific experience in working with programs. While experience working *in* a juvenile justice program is not a requirement for an evaluator, experience working *with* juvenile justice programs is. The juvenile justice system is a complex one, and familiarity with the system and with juvenile justice programs is essential for communication, collaboration, and appropriate interpretation of evaluation findings.
- *Evaluation Philosophy.* Much has been written about how evaluations should be conducted, and different evaluators view the evaluation process differently. For example, some evaluators may consider themselves to be “experts” and view their role as one of an outsider who reviews program materials, interviews managers and staff, and then makes recommendations for “fixing” the program. Others see themselves more as researchers than evaluators and may avoid providing feedback to program managers and staff until after the evaluation is completed so as not to “contaminate” the evaluation. Neither of these are particularly productive evaluation philosophies for working with juvenile justice programs. Instead, you should be looking for an evaluator who believes that the evaluation process is a collaborative one between the evaluator and program managers and staff. In this philosophy, program managers and staff are seen as the experts, and evaluators work closely with them throughout the process of documenting program activities, developing performance measures,

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interpreting evaluation findings, and making recommendations for program improvement. The goal of such evaluations is to improve the program, not to declare the program a success or failure. More formal names for this evaluation philosophy include “participatory evaluation,” “utilization-focused evaluation,” and “empowerment evaluation.”

- *Communication Skills.* Evaluators must be able to communicate with a wide variety of individuals who have a vested interest in the results of their work. Program staff and managers, funding agency representatives, legislators, city council members, and even program clients are some of the “stakeholders” to whom evaluators may be called upon to present their evaluation findings, conclusions, and recommendations. Evaluators should not only be personable and engaging, but should be able to clearly present findings and conclusions both orally and in written form.

The process for hiring an evaluator is similar to that for hiring any employee. Carefully review the evaluator’s resume to determine if she/he has experience conducting evaluations of programs similar to yours. Be sure that references include directors of programs that the evaluator has worked with in the past, and ask those individuals about their experiences with the evaluator, including how well the evaluator worked collaboratively with the program managers and staff. Interview the evaluator and determine if this is a person with whom you would be comfortable working. Ask for samples of the evaluator’s work, including evaluation reports. Review the materials to be sure they are written clearly, without a great deal of jargon, and in a way that would be understandable to you and to those with whom you would like to share the evaluation findings.



The program manager and the evaluator need to agree on the evaluation tasks and who is responsible for performing them.

Developing an Evaluation Plan

When you have selected an evaluator, you must specify in writing what the evaluator will do. Early in the process both you and the evaluator should agree on the questions to be addressed by the evaluation, the tasks that need to be performed to address those questions, who will be responsible for these tasks, and when they will be accomplished. For example, one of the questions you might want answered is whether the juveniles in your program have developed more positive attitudes toward authority figures, such as parents, teachers, and probation officers, as a result of your program. You and the evaluator will need to agree on the tasks that need to be performed in order to answer this question—for example, identifying or designing an instrument to measure attitudes toward authority figures, administering the instrument to juveniles at the beginning and end of their program participation, scoring the measurement instrument and entering the scores in a database, and analyzing the data and presenting the findings. These may all be responsibilities of the evaluator, or you may wish to save some money by having staff members, for example, administer and score the measure and enter the resulting scores in a computerized database. In any case, spelling out the responsibilities of the evaluator will avoid confusion and duplication of effort and ensure that all tasks are completed in a timely fashion.



Evaluators should produce a final report and other products specified in the evaluation plan.

Specifying Evaluation Products

In addition to an evaluation plan, you should be sure that you have agreed with the evaluator on what the products of the evaluation will be. Evaluators should produce a formal report at the end of the evaluation explaining what was done and what was found. However, you may also wish to ensure that other products are produced, such as an executive summary of the evaluation report or a briefing to your county commissioners regarding the evaluation findings. It is important that you and the evaluator agree on when the evaluator's involvement in the process ends. For example, does the evaluator's role end when the final report is submitted to you, or will the evaluator participate in the process of disseminating the findings, including presentations to various stakeholder groups and being available to answer their questions. Other considerations include whether the evaluator will provide formal progress reports during the course of the evaluation, and whether the final products will include a database, data collection forms, and other products related to data collection.



Evaluations are more useful when the program staff works with the evaluator to develop and implement the evaluation plan.

Maximizing Collaboration

A good evaluator will seek to work collaboratively with you and your staff. However, there is always the potential for conflict between the evaluator and the program staff. Staff members may feel defensive and be reluctant to answer the many questions the evaluator may have. An evaluation often means more work for staff members, who must sit for interviews, provide access to files and notes, and collect data for the evaluation. These are considerations that must be addressed at the outset of the evaluation process so that the evaluator and staff can work collaboratively.

The evaluator and program manager must explain the purpose of the evaluation to staff and assure them that the evaluator is not there to examine the job performance of individual staff members. The evaluator should explain that she/he is committed to working together with program managers and staff to improve the program and the services it provides to youth. Addressing these issues early in the process will greatly improve the ability of the evaluator and program staff to work together effectively.

The evaluator and program manager and staff should work collaboratively in implementing all phases of the evaluation plan. Specifically, they should work together to identify program goals and objectives, link activities to goals and objectives, develop performance measures, determine what data to collect, and interpret the findings of the data analysis. Program staff should also have input on any recommendations resulting from the evaluation.

A close working relationship between the evaluator and program staff will reap many benefits for both. The evaluator who works closely with program managers and staff will have a much clearer sense of how the program functions and will be in a much better position to provide useful feedback. Program managers and staff will benefit from the fresh perspective that an evaluator can provide on their daily activities and how these relate to what their program is trying to accomplish. The result will be an evaluation that is relevant and useful, and one that has the endorsement of the program's staff and managers.

Other Evaluation Resources

Up to this point, we have been assuming that programs may want to hire an evaluator to conduct evaluation activities with their programs. However, a number of resources may be available to help you with evaluation activities, and these resources may be inexpensive or cost-free. These resources may also be able to provide you with suggestions about where to find a qualified evaluator. The following are some places where evaluation assistance may be available:

- *Federal Agencies.* The Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP), the National Institute of Justice (NIJ), and other Federal agencies may fund program evaluation activities at the local level. Moreover, OJJDP contracts with a number of organizations and individuals to provide assistance to states and localities that wish to evaluate their juvenile justice initiatives. JRSA's Juvenile Justice Evaluation Center project is an example of one such initiative.
- *State Agencies.* The agency in your state that administers funds from OJJDP and other Federal agencies may have resources available to assist you with evaluation. Many of these agencies have program evaluators on staff, as do other state agencies, such as Departments of Correction and Juvenile Justice Services, along with other social service agencies.
- *Local Agencies.* Depending on the size of your locality, there may be funds and/or evaluation expertise available from the city or county government. County social and juvenile service agencies, as well as mental health service agencies, may have evaluators on staff who can provide assistance to your program.
- *Colleges and Universities.* Colleges and universities can be valuable resources for finding individuals who can provide assistance with evaluating your program. Although few universities have formal program evaluation departments, knowledgeable faculty members may be found in departments of criminology, education, psychology, social work, and public policy. These departments may also have graduate students

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available who while they may not be qualified evaluators, may have enough knowledge to assist you with particular evaluation tasks, such as developing measurement instruments or automated databases.

- *Professional Organizations.* As noted previously, many evaluators are members of professional organizations, and these organizations may be able to provide information on how to contact qualified evaluators. Those organizations include the American Evaluation Association, the American Educational Research Association, the American Society of Criminology, the Academy of Criminal Justice Sciences, the American Psychological Association, and the American Sociological Association.

Resources for Hiring and Working with An Evaluator

- Justice Research and Statistics Association
<http://www.jrsa.org>
- Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention
<http://www.ojjdp.ncjrs.org>
- American Evaluation Association
<http://www.eval.org>
- American Educational Research Association
<http://www.aera.ucsb.edu>
- American Society of Criminology
<http://www.asc41.com>
- American Psychological Association
<http://www.apa.org>
- American Sociological Association
<http://www.asanet.org>



Conclusion

There are many benefits to hiring an evaluator to help programs collect and analyze data about their effectiveness. Juvenile justice program managers who do wish to hire an evaluator should look for someone who has experience working with similar programs and who believes in a collaborative approach to evaluation. By clearly specifying in advance the tasks the evaluator will perform, program managers can be assured of getting the assistance they need in developing performance measures and instruments, analyzing data, and presenting findings to key constituent groups.

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