COSSUP
Comprehensive Opioid, Stimulant, and Substance Use Program

Finding the Right Evaluator to Meet Your Evaluation Needs

Why Is Selecting the Right Evaluation Partner Critical to a Successful Evaluation?

Evaluations can be used to describe how a program is implemented and how well a program is achieving its intended goals and outcomes. While choosing the right type of evaluation is important, it is equally important to find the right person(s) to evaluate your program. Some organizations have staff with the skills to do an evaluation for their program. Others may choose to find an evaluation partner outside of their organization. An external evaluator brings expertise, objectivity, credibility, and actionable recommendations to an evaluation.

If you are looking for an evaluation partner, this tip sheet will help you understand not only how to find someone, but also types of questions you should ask potential candidates and important considerations for selecting the right partner. Selecting the right evaluator is critical to the success of an evaluation, because the evaluator's experience, type(s) of expertise, approach to working with practitioners, and understanding of your program will directly influence the quality of the evaluation and the extent to which results are framed appropriately. The right evaluator can also make recommendations to improve program operations and outcomes and identify challenges or areas for improvement, if these are of interest to your team.

Aligning Your Evaluation Needs with the Right Evaluation Partner

Before you can find the right evaluator, it is important to:

1. Understand the goal of your evaluation.
2. Consider your organizational capacity for an evaluation.
3. Identify key competencies and qualifications to look for in an evaluation partner.

We describe each of these steps on the following pages.

Step 1: Understand the Goal of Your Evaluation

Determine why you want to conduct an evaluation or the goal of the evaluation. This will help you understand the type of evaluation you should conduct, which is important to consider when selecting an evaluator. Exhibit 1 illustrates three types of evaluations that are commonly used.

If the goal of your evaluation is to understand whether your program is implemented with fidelity to the program model, you would want to select an evaluator with experience conducting a process evaluation. If the goal of your evaluation is to understand the impact of your program on meeting outcomes, you should select an evaluator with experience conducting impact evaluations.

Exhibit 1. Types of Evaluations

Component	Process Evaluation	Impact Evaluation	Cost-Benefit Evaluation
Key Question	How was the program implemented? How is the program functioning?	Did the program work? What were the effects of the program?	Was the program worth the cost?
Definition	Examines the extent to which a program was implemented as intended. Focuses on the operational aspects of the program and challenges affecting the program's success, such as activities, stakeholder engagement, and facilitators.	Measures change directly attributable to a program. It assesses outcomes such as changes in knowledge, behavior, skills, or conditions among participants. Aims to answer whether the program met its intended goals and what measurable effects it had on its target population. Also likely to involve tracking outcomes for a comparison or control group.	Compares the costs of implementing a program to the benefits it generates. Helps determine whether the program's outcomes justify the investment. Examines both the tangible and intangible outcomes relative to resources used.

With all three types of evaluations, it is important to identify meaningful program goals and SMART objectives that align to your program's logic model (if you have one). An evaluator can help you do this. The goals of the program should be clear, reasonable, and reflect the scope of what the program intends to accomplish.

Goals should also be:

- Broad and visionary
- Concise/jargon-free
- Easily understood
- Long-term
- Strategically aligned

PRO TIP!

Find more information on developing SMART goals and logic models: Logic Model Tip Sheet and Template (PDF).

Objectives are statements describing the desired results and how you are going to get there. SMART components (Exhibit 2) are used to develop clearly defined objectives that are specific, measurable, achievable, relevant, and time-bound.

Exhibit 2: SMART Objectives Defined

	Component	Objective for a Goal
S	Specific	Be specific about exactly what you are trying to accomplish.
M	Measurable	Make it easy to measure using a metric that you can track.
A	Achievable	Make it achievable given your program's current resources.
R	Relevant	Make it relevant to the needs of your program.
T	Time-Bound	Ensure it is time-bound and has a finish line.

Step 2: Consider Organizational Capacity for an Evaluation

The next step is considering your organizational capacity to conduct the evaluation, or any activities associated with the evaluation, and determining the resources that are available to support the evaluation. This is especially important if you are hiring an external evaluator. Organizations should ask the following questions:

1. Does your agency have the capacity to conduct the evaluation internally? If not, how much of your agency's funds, if any, can you dedicate to the evaluation? Note: many federal funding sources, including BJA's COSSUP grant program, allow federal funds to be used to support evaluation activities.

2. **How much staff time is available to support evaluation efforts?** This applies if you are using an internal or external evaluator. For example, some programs may have staff who could help collect, analyze, or report on certain types of data like case management data. Some project teams might have an analyst or research unit that can help with data analysis.
3. **Could you shift people's roles and responsibilities to free up staff time to devote to the evaluation?**
    - How could you do this?
    - What would it mean for other people's roles and responsibilities?

Examples of BJA Grant Programs that Allow Funds to Support Evaluation

- Byrne State Crisis Intervention Program (SCIP)
- Comprehensive Opioid, Stimulant, and Substance Use Program (COSSUP)
- Community-Based Reentry Incubator Initiative, A Second Chance Act Program
- Student, Teachers, and Officers Preventing (STOP) School Violence Program

Step 3: Identify Desired Competencies and Qualifications of an Evaluator

Once you've developed your evaluation goal(s) and determined your organizational capacity, the third step is to identify **key competencies and qualifications** to select the most appropriate evaluator. As noted previously, consider the type of evaluation when selecting an evaluator **(Exhibit 1)**.

Key competencies related to evaluation include:

- Adaptability (i.e., the extent to which the evaluator is flexible to emerging or changing program goals)
- Cost analysis (if you are doing a cost-benefit evaluation)
- Community awareness (includes understanding the community and the population being served)
- Data collection and analysis
- Evaluation planning and design
- Goal setting and developing SMART objectives (particularly important for impact evaluations)
- Logic model development
- Report writing
- Strong research ethics (includes the evaluator abiding by appropriate protocols to protect participants involved in the evaluation)
- Strong communication skills (includes being able to explain complex evaluation findings in useful ways that make sense to you as an experienced practitioner)

Selecting the Right Evaluation Partner

Once you have identified your evaluation goals and the type of evaluation you want to do, there are a variety of resources to help you identify the right evaluator for you.

Resources to Help You Identify Evaluators

1. **Peers, partners and colleagues –** Start by reaching out to people you know and work with who have similar programs, and ask them if they are doing evaluations. If they are using an external evaluator, ask them about their experience and overall satisfaction with the evaluator.
2. **Local colleges and universities –** are a great place to start since people working at these institutions might be familiar with the problems facing the community you serve. Check to see if there is a criminal justice or criminology department or a department with a behavioral health focus, and look for staff whose research and subject matter expertise aligns best with your program focus areas. You can also do a search for staff at university research centers.
3. Justice Community Opioid Innovation Network (JCOIN) CONNECT – connects you with researchers and evaluators and is designed to help facilitate multidisciplinary research and collaboration across the health and justice fields. You can search for specific researchers or evaluators or by topic areas (e.g., drug treatment, reentry/release) or special populations (e.g., rural, American Indian/Alaska Native).
4. **National Associations –** such as the American Evaluation Association (AEA), are also a good resource for identifying potential evaluators. AEA has a tool, Find an Evaluator, where you can identify AEA members available for evaluation. You can also filter by areas of expertise, location, and state.

Conducting Interviews with Potential Evaluators

Once you have identified potential evaluators, conduct interviews with the top candidates (we recommend interviewing about 3 people) to learn more about them. Below we describe interview pointers and additional considerations.

Evaluator Interview Pointers

Interview questions for potential evaluators should assess their **knowledge and experience with program evaluation and the community being served.** You also want to ask questions to understand the evaluator's **experience with your program's topical area.** For example, if your program is focused on reentry, you want to know how much and specifically what type of experience the evaluator has with these types of programs. In addition to their experience with evaluation, specifically evaluation within your topic area, questions should focus on their **capacity, accessibility, availability, and interest in your program.**

Exhibit 3 provides examples of questions to ask potential evaluators.

Exhibit 3. Examples of Interview Questions

- What is your experience conducting this type of evaluation?
- What makes you interested in the project?
- What will our partnership look like?
- How will we communicate throughout the evaluation?
- What will my team's role be in designing and supporting the evaluation?
- How much time would you be able to spend on this evaluation? Over what period?
- What is the cost for the evaluation? What will my team get out of this evaluation?
- What kind of input will our team have in deciding the evaluation goals or identifying products and materials to share with others?

Additional Evaluator Considerations

Once you've completed interviewing potential evaluators, consider criteria including their experience and qualifications and whether they are a good fit for the project and the project team. Additionally, consider the resources and/or capacity you have within your organization to support the evaluation and pay the evaluator. Exhibit 4 provides questions to assess how the evaluator will fit in with the project and project team.

Exhibit 4. Considerations for Selecting the Right Evaluator

- Did the evaluator seem qualified in terms of training and experience?
- Did they seem interested in the project for the "right" reasons?
- Did they bring a perspective and appropriate approach to the project that feels "right" for our organization and the community that we serve?
- Are we excited to work with them? Why or why not?
- Did they take questions from the group in a positive way?
- Did they seem to respect members of the team as partners? Did they consider us partners as well as clients?
- Do we have resources and/or capacity to support the evaluator in successfully executing the evaluation?

Everyone who participated in the interview should provide feedback and come to a consensus about which evaluator your team would like to work with and why. At this point, it is important to articulate any additional concerns or follow-up questions you might want to ask the top candidate before moving forward. It may also be beneficial to check the evaluator's references or to email the top candidate a few follow-up questions.

Establishing a Formal Agreement

When you are ready to move forward, an important final step is establishing a formal agreement with the evaluator that clearly defines roles for both parties. The agreement should clearly state the purpose of the evaluation and evaluation questions, agreed upon deliverables and timelines, the obligations of each party, and any confidentiality requirements. The AEA includes an Evaluation Contract Template that may be helpful. Once the agreement has been finalized, you should engage the evaluator as soon as possible. We recommend identifying a clear point of contact or someone whose job it is to manage the evaluation from the program side, who can work directly with the evaluator and ensure they have access to all relevant program documentation and available data sources.

After that formal agreement is in place, you and your evaluator can start co-conceptualizing some of your most pressing evaluation questions or what you hope your evaluation will help to understand or address. This is where the work really begins!

PRO TIP!

Find more information on developing evaluation questions: Evaluation Action Plan Matrix Template (PDF).

Resources

The resources below provide more information on identifying, screening for, and hiring evaluators.

1. American Evaluation Association: Evaluation Contract Template
2. American Evaluation Association: Find an Evaluator
3. Corporation for National & Community Service: Evaluator Screening Tips (PDF)
4. Justice Community Overdose Innovation Network Coordination and Translation Center: CONNECT
5. U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs: Office of Victims of Crime (OVC) Technical Assistance Guide: Hiring a Local Evaluator
6. Western Michigan University: The Evaluation Center
7. W.K. Kellogg Foundation Evaluation Handbook (PDF)

Need More Specialized Help?

If you have questions or need TTA support related to any of the topics below, please submit a request to the COSSUP Data and Evaluation TTA Center.

- Developing logic models for your program(s)
- Developing or enhancing data collection and tracking systems
- Finding and selecting an evaluator
- Completing an evaluation planning matrix
- Developing data sharing agreements
- Reviewing data collection instruments and informed consent procedures
- Connecting you with peers and subject matter experts

COSSUP has seven TTA providers available to support grantees in meeting specific program needs and goals across a range of strategies including overdose prevention, cross-site coordination, strategic planning, prescription drug monitoring programs, increasing access to treatment, integrating peer recovery support specialists, and others. The COSSUP Data & Evaluation TTA Center provides TTA to help organizations.

- Assess and adapt activities to ensure they are as effective as they can be,
- Demonstrate a program's success and the way to communicate impact to others,
- Identify programmatic or policy changes that should be made based on information gathered,
- Collect information that can be used when applying for future funding.

This project was supported by Grant No. 15PBJA-23-GK-02256-COAP awarded by the Bureau of Justice Assistance. The Bureau of Justice Assistance is a component of the Office of Justice Programs, which also includes the Bureau of Justice Statistics, the National Institute of Justice, the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, the Office for Victims of Crime, and Office of Sex Offender Sentencing, Monitoring, Apprehending, Registering, and Tracking. Points of view or opinions in this document are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the official position or policies of the U.S. Department of Justice.