Program Evaluation: Knowing is Half the Battle

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We gather, assess, and use information in our decisions every day, mostly in an informal or even unconscious manner. Deliberate and systematic data collection and use turns everyday fact collecting into productive program evaluation. Program evaluation is an essential component to every rape crisis center, dual/multi-service agency, and coalition. With the right ingredients, it can be a powerful tool for success and growth. Evaluation is "the capacity to judge what the agency does; how it does it; and the consequences, outcomes, and effectiveness of its programs, procedures, and products. Effectiveness is measured against criteria formed by the principal values of the organization" (Moxley & Manela, 2000, p. 317).

Program evaluation in sexual assault services can take many different forms, and a multifaceted approach is the most likely to yield rich data (Moxley & Manela, 2000). As a practice, it can encompass evaluation of an entire agency or evaluation of single projects in the agency, including client outcome evaluation, client satisfaction, and evaluation of prevention outcomes.

We believe our sexual assault work is good and useful; evaluation is how we know it is good and useful. Evaluation lets us measure what we are doing right and figure out how to do more of the right stuff. Evaluation proves our success and worth to funders and community leaders. Evaluation shows progress and change to employees, who often feel like they are moving a mountain with a teaspoon. Evaluation paves the way for successful organizational or personal change. Most importantly, evaluation gives survivors and community members a voice in our empowerment-based agencies. We cannot know if services are working for survivors unless we ask. We cannot know if we are in step with community goals unless we listen. We cannot be certain we are living our mission every day unless we evaluate.

In these pages, we will discuss the benefits and creative possibilities in program evaluation. We will look at evaluation that is practical, respectful, and innovative. At the end of the paper, you will find resources for starting your own program evaluation.

What is the value of program evaluation?

Creating our own program evaluation based on our unique programs is important. Program evaluation builds "a knowledge base of effective indigenous agency practices that support successful services, ongoing improvement, and ultimately, effective transformation" (Moxley & Manela, 2000, p. 318). When it comes from within, we can be sure of alignment to our goals, mission, and values. For example, it is possible to complete satisfaction surveys just after crisis intervention, but that does not match the values of every agency. Evaluation based in your values and beliefs will be more successful and better supported by staff than evaluation that conflicts with values or is driven by the desires and perceptions of outsiders.

Society is constantly changing and evolving, as are our agencies. "Agency based evaluation helps the organization meet changing environmental and internal expectations, standards, and requirements in an effective manner" (Moxley & Manela 2000, p. 318). The changing environment – be it external or internal – affects agencies in many ways. Sometimes, our fundamentals are strong, but we need to shore up or prove the program's performance. Other times, we lose our way or find our original mission no longer works: staff is restless or unhappy, program planning is aimless or off the mark (Moxley & Manela 2000). And occasionally, agencies find themselves in the middle of a societal "redistribution of power and resources, human-service agencies, along with other social institutions, must consider their survival…They may find themselves off balance and without a clear position within the new or emergent environment" (Moxley & Manela 2000, p. 320). Evaluation plays an important role in weathering these changes. When the agency structure is essentially sound, we can *revitalize* the agency by using evaluation to assess quality, realign to mission, improve productivity, or identify growth opportunities. When agencies have lost touch with the vision, evaluation can spark a *renaissance* by surfacing important questions about and challenges to the agency vision and structure. When the renaissance begins, evaluation helps us find new values, purpose, innovations, and practices. Finally, when there is a major shift in society, such as an economic decline or swing in local politics, evaluation can help us *recover* our footing by surfacing values and activities that match the new environment and by demonstrating the importance and success of the agency to the community. In any kind of change, evaluation is our touchstone to these ever-changing internal and external environments (Moxley & Manela 2000).

Many rape crisis centers, dual/multi-service agencies, and coalitions explicitly value collaboration and empowerment. Program evaluation can be an effective method for manifesting both, and thus an integral piece of the strategic plan. Many of us in the field believe it is critically important to ensure that the work we do is guided by the voices of survivors. This, we hold, both keeps us accountable to survivors and empowers them. What better way to celebrate their voices than to offer evaluation? However, many of us worry about giving survivors surveys at inappropriate times or overwhelming them with long and complicated instruments. As the Pennsylvania Coalition Against Rape (PCAR) found when its centers surveyed counseling clients,

Rape crisis center staff members were initially worried that victims/survivors would be reluctant to complete a survey, but found the opposite to be true. Victims/survivors were generally happy to complete the survey and actually felt empowered through this process. Many victims/survivors are involved with multiple human services agencies and indicated that they seldom have the opportunity to evaluate those services (L. Carson, personal communication, September 30, 2011).

There are creative ways to do program evaluation with survivors that are simple, appropriate, and aligned with our values. One of the most important issues is the introduction or invitation to the instrument, especially if you will be surveying survivors. The Kentucky Association of Sexual Assault Programs (KASAP) calls their service evaluation the "Healing Voices Project" to convey a sense of empowerment and value to survivors. The survey has a brief introduction that is reassuring and explains client rights in everyday language. KASAP also trained staff at centers to invite survivors to complete the survey in a sensitive and respectful manner.

It is critical to identify the value of program evaluation to your agency and the survivors you serve. KASAP found "our work does help reduce trauma symptoms in our clients, as reported by those clients. We've also learned that the more help they receive, the more the symptoms decrease. This data set is very useful both in encouraging those who do the work and as evidence to provide to our funders" (E. Tamas, personal communication, September 21, 2011). Spend some time talking about evaluation's place in your agency, *before* you look at a single survey instrument or draft a procedure. KASAP "spent about two years in the planning, development, and implementation of this evaluation program," including focus groups with directors and practitioners from KASAP's member programs (E. Tamas, personal communication, September 21, 2011). Similarly, PCAR spent a few years studying the literature and creating a tool. The coalition is in regular contact with centers to provide training and technical assistance on the evaluation tools.

Many programs are struggling to maintain funding in the current economic climate. Program evaluation can prove our efficacy and efficiency to local, state, and federal funders, and confirm that we are responsible stewards of taxpayer dollars. PCAR found evaluation to be "helpful in demonstrating to funders that rape crisis centers are evaluating their services and being proactive in making necessary changes, when needed" (L. Carson, personal communication, September 30, 2011). Evaluation can also help us stay aligned with the mission, renew commitment to established practices, or support new program development. To match all these varied purposes, there are myriad evaluation methods. Dr. Stephanie Townsend explains,

Often times when people think about evaluation, they have in mind something like *Consumer Reports*. They want to rate programs so they know which ones work and which ones are best. Or they may think of evaluation like a report card: How well did this program do as measured on some supposedly objective scale? However, evaluation is actually a much broader concept. Different types of evaluation answer different

questions. It is important that program staff identify what type of evaluation will best answer *their* questions (personal communication, September 26, 2011).

Reflect on the following questions, as an individual exercise or in discussion with your board and staff.

- How does evaluation serve your mission statement and vision?

- What agency values and beliefs do you want to infuse in program evaluation?

- How could evaluation benefit…
    - The survivors you serve?
    - Your staff and volunteers?
    - Your board?
    - Your community?
    - The statewide network of centers?

What do we want to know? What is the goal?
Evaluation can be done on any scale, from a statewide outcomes study that justifies state funding to an individual educator tracking changes in student knowledge in one school. The goal of program evaluation is creation of organizational knowledge. "Knowledge is the meaning and understanding that practitioners gain from making sense of data" (Cherin, 2004, p. 240).

Evaluation is most effective when it responds to a specific question or goal. Collecting data for the sake of collecting data does not create knowledge. Likewise, trying to examine everything will generate very little usable data to turn into knowledge. If you're driving from New Hampshire to Oklahoma, you don't need to know about every highway in North America. Instead, you look at a map and learn about just the roads you'll travel. Focusing on specific questions or goals gives the best prospect for learning. For example, one of KASAP's tools investigates "[program] response and the response of other first responders to victims of sexual assault in the medical and legal setting" (E. Tamas, personal communication, September 21, 2011). The Pennsylvania Coalition Against Rape (PCAR) designed an evaluation of survivors' progress in recovery, using several proven measures of trauma symptoms, like nightmares, psychosomatic issues, and concentration (Collins, et al., 2008). Whatever question you choose to study, you may find multiple benefits of evaluation. PCAR found "written responses from clients are especially useful for providing positive reinforcement to staff and thanking them for their efforts" (L. Carson, personal communication, September 30, 2011). To select a question or goal for evaluation, consider the following strategies:

- Look at your current strategic plan.
    - What objectives could be served or augmented by program evaluation?
    - How do you know when the agency has accomplished items in the strategic plan? Could program evaluation help you demonstrate progress? How?

- Assess the current needs and conditions in your community (which is a valuable evaluation exercise by itself).
    - What questions or issues does this assessment raise for you? What does the assessment tell you about your services?
    - How could program evaluation help you explore or answer those questions?

- Think about current obstacles or vulnerabilities.
    - How can program evaluation mitigate problems?
    - How can program evaluation reveal strengths?
    - Could program evaluation help you find new strategies? How?

How will we measure it?

Creating measures is perhaps the most daunting part of program evaluation. There are so many logistical questions to sort out, like what method to use, how to time the instrument, or what to do if a survivor is in crisis, that we sometimes shy away from starting at all. However, it can be energizing and creative. There are many excellent resources to explain the entire process in detail and get you started (see the list at the end of this paper). Here, let us consider just the basic concepts of evaluation. According to Townsend,

> There are five main types of evaluations. *Needs assessments* identify and prioritize needs and can help when making decisions about how to allocate scarce resources. *Program theory* clarifies the underlying ideas about why and how a program works and can be used to improve the clarity of the program and to articulate immediate and long-term effects. *Process evaluation* describes how a program is operating and can identify implementation problems and to make sure that there is consistency in how the service or program is delivered. *Impact or outcomes evaluations* determine if a program has achieved its intended effects and to what degree. This is useful when making decisions about continuing, expanding or modifying a program or service. Finally, *efficiency evaluations* compare the program costs to its outcomes and can be used to make larger scale decisions about funding allocations (personal communication, September 26, 2011).

What you want to know determines what you will measure and how you will measure it. To figure out how to measure what you want to know, create a theory of change or hypothesis. This can be as simple or detailed as you like; the critical issue is that it must be logical. *Change* or *logic models* "link outcomes (both short- and long-term) with program activities/processes and

the theoretical assumptions [and] principles of the program. This model provides a roadmap of your program" (W.K. Kellogg Foundation, 2004, p. 35). Every piece of the change model should be specific and measurable. When all the pieces are measurable, we have many different questions we can ask and many ways to ask the question. In any theory or model, "the main question we are trying to answer with a logic model is, *how does change happen?*" (Townsend, personal communication, September 26, 2011).

Contemplate your question or goal statement. Define your goal in specific, measurable terms, as in this goal statement from PCAR, "Clients will have increased knowledge and skills, and decreased symptoms due to the impact of their victimization" (Collins, et al., 2008, p. 3-2). With that goal, PCAR programs know what to measure: knowledge of options and trauma effects, coping skills, and level of trauma symptoms. The programs also know who to talk to and how often: clients are the source of information, so they are given a survey at carefully determined points in services.

Typically, when we measure change, we look at outputs and outcomes. Outputs are the activities of our work, like advocacy hours, prevention education sessions, or number of counseling clients. These measurements tell us what we have done in quantified terms and have an important purpose. An advocate, Marge, wants to manage and prevent vicarious trauma better. She might track how many survivors she sees in a month as a measure of her exposure to vicarious trauma. She can use this data to make well-timed vacation requests. Measuring the amount of time staff spend doing outreach and seeing survivors in a particular county can tell you if it is time to open an office in that county or apply for new funding. However, measuring time in this way does *not* tell you if survivors are pleased with the service they receive or if the service is helpful. To measure survivor satisfaction, you need a satisfaction evaluation. To measure the helpfulness or efficacy of the service, you need to measure outcomes.

Outcomes evaluation measures the effects "the project [is] having on clients, its staff, its umbrella organization, and its community" and can "answer questions about what works, for whom, and in what circumstances, and how to improve program delivery and services" (W. K. Kellogg Foundation, 2004, p. 28). For a lot of us, figuring out the outcomes is confusing. It can feel overwhelming or impossible to find the common denominators or consistent factors in our work; we know that each survivor is unique and requires specialized attention. However, there are commonalities across individualized services. Townsend tells us,

> Outcomes should focus on the most important parts of your services. It is easy to generate an overwhelming list or to be so broad the outcome cannot be measured. Try to gain consensus about the core changes you expect or hope to see. Outcomes should be easy to

understand. Your outcomes should help you explain to the public about what you are doing. You probably have multiple outcomes; do not lump them all together. Make sure each outcome contains only one core idea. This will make your evaluation more precise and help you determine which aspects of the services are working well and which may require a different approach. Above all else, be realistic about what can be achieved given the nature and intensity of your services. For example, if you are limited to providing only four sessions of counseling, it would be unrealistic to expect that someone suffering from PTSD would become free of all symptoms. However, there may be an alleviation of specific trauma symptoms (personal communication, September 26, 2011).

Many programs find it helpful to work with a consultant in drafting the outcomes and change theory. Coalitions also play an important role in creating outcome measures for the entire state, as the Texas Association Against Sexual Assault (TAASA) discovered. With the help of an evaluation consultant and the Texas Office of the Attorney General, TAASA convened several meetings with member programs to "develop Texas-specific outcome measures that reflect service providers' needs, practices, and resources. The committee produced logic models, standardized outcomes, and measurement tools for each sexual assault service [accompaniment, crisis intervention, follow-up, hotline, counseling, and volunteer programs]" (Busch, Heffron, & McClendon, 2003, p. 1). Victoria Camp, deputy director of TAASA, explains that giving rape crisis centers these peer-created standardized outcomes and models reduces the workload and stress at centers. Camp also says evaluation gives her "a clear sense of where a project is and where it needs to go. In addition, the evaluation serves as a marker in the ongoing development of the project" (V. Camp, personal communication, September 21, 2011).

How will we implement program evaluation?
There are many ways to design your program evaluation instruments, from surveys and focus groups to observation and appreciative inquiry. We all do evaluation throughout the day, but we often don't recognize it. Consider the following case:

> Maggie is an advocate in a college town. In the first six to eight weeks of the school year, her caseload usually doubles. During this time, it is 60-75% college freshmen. This year, however, she does not see a big increase of freshmen in her caseload. In fact, her September caseload was lower than July. She's checked with campus police, medical providers, and campus counseling services, and they've all seen the same drop. She raises her concern at a staff meeting, wondering what is going on at the college. Bart, the prevention educator, says that he usually presents at freshman orientation, but he wasn't asked to come this year. Maggie and Bart surmise that his orientation presentations are the main way freshmen hear about what do after sexual assault.

Maggie and Bart both have important information about Maggie's caseload drop, but they did not know it until they stopped to discuss it and compare measures. Simply having the conversation in staff meeting is a form of program evaluation. To strengthen this program evaluation, they can document it in some way. If they want to take the next step, they can evaluate data on Maggie's caseload and Bart's prevention work over the last few years and look for other patterns. If they wanted to take a big step and do a large, formal evaluation, they could collaborate with the college to assess freshman knowledge of sexual assault and sexual assault services and create a new marketing plan.

The question should determine the method, not the other ways around. From your question or goal, consider all the current and potential sources of data. Who might have insight on this issue? What kinds of data could prove or disprove your hypothesis? Are there alternate sources of data? Survivors are the only ones who can tell you about their satisfaction with your services. However, survivors are not necessarily the best source for evaluating the quality of medical care or criminal legal responses. In KASAP's investigation of systems' response to survivors, they realized that survivors know only their unique experience in the emergency department or with law enforcement. In addition, even in the best of circumstances, seeking medical care or reporting to law enforcement after a sexual assault is traumatic and upsetting. Advocates, by contrast, could compare each unique experience to others and to benchmarks from a more emotionally removed place. KASAP, therefore, designed an assessment of the systems response that is completed by advocates, not survivors. They created a separate instrument for survivors to evaluate their satisfaction with the rape crisis program. In this way, they obtain data from the best sources, as determined by the goal.

Sometimes, the best source of data is your filing cabinet. Many, if not most programs collect data on survivors, such as demographics, service usage, and type of victimization. This information can be organized to produce new knowledge and new questions. For instance, comparing demographics of the survivors you serve to the demographics of the community can show what groups do or do not seek services at your agency. Do you see many teenagers? Does the local immigrant community come to you? These data will tell you what services are happening for whom and when, which can lead you to new questions and logic models.

"Data are useful and are ultimately used when the information is a part of practice and not seen as an add-on to practice and the delivery of service" (Cherin, 2004, p. 241). If data collection takes too much time or effort, staff will resent and potentially undermine the evaluation effort. Making program evaluation a collaborative effort takes more time in the beginning, but it will save significant time and stress in the end. Staff will have ideas about how to integrate evaluation seamlessly, or at least comfortably, into current services. Workers (and agencies) may fear what will happen if they receive bad scores on satisfaction measures, or do not meet outcome goals. Coming to agreement about the value and purpose of program evaluation will go a long way towards calming those fears, as will discussing the consequences of doing or not doing evaluation. It is helpful to recognize the costs of avoiding evaluation, such as limiting

organizational learning and losing opportunities to build upon our strengths, alongside a discussion of our fears of doing evaluation. In addition, many programs worry about the logistics and feasibility of program evaluation. You may find it helpful to do some pilot testing of the instrument before adopting its widespread use. Pilot testing will show any gaps or issues in evaluation and give you an opportunity to make changes on a more manageable scale. Making changes to the instrument after adoption is difficult, because it affects your ability to synthesize data. PCAR recommends convening "a users group of rape crisis center staff to ensure the project continues with fidelity at the local level. The users group can also identify new evaluation needs, identify issues or problems with implementation, and offer suggestions for improving the project (L. Carson, personal communication, September 30, 2011).

How will we use the data?

This brings us back to our original question: what is the value of program evaluation? If we believe that program evaluation is of value to survivors, staff, the agency, and the community, we will want to use the data in some way. Program evaluation data can shed light on necessary program changes by shedding light on strengths and gaps. We can also use the data to examine community changes. KASAP's examination of medical and criminal legal systems' response to survivors, for example, is useful for local communities and the state. Individual programs can look at the data on police service to survivors to design new police training programs, or new advocate training programs on interacting with police. KASAP can use the same data to advocate with statewide entities or to propose new legislation.

Program evaluation is very helpful in strategic planning and other agency planning efforts. Data can show program strengths and challenges, as well as trends and opportunities, to address in strategic planning. Data can also highlight smaller issues for change initiatives.

Taking the Next Step

Many books, websites, and articles can give you detailed instruction on designing program evaluation for your agency. There are also evaluation experts and consultants that you may hire to help with your program evaluation. Keep in mind that evaluation will be best when you have a strong voice in its creation. These resources or an evaluation consultant can guide your process or work out the details, but only your agency can decide what you want to measure and how.

- Several state coalitions have done program evaluation projects, including KASAP, PCAR, and TAASA. Information on coalition program evaluation projects is available at www.resourcesharingproject.org.
- The W. K. Kellogg Foundation *Evaluation Handbook* explains many different types of evaluation for nonprofits in detail.

- If you want to research and study evaluation in more depth, check out *Qualitative Research and Evaluation Methods* by Michael Quinn Patton (2001, Sage) and *Evaluation: A Systematic Approach* by Peter Rossi, Mark Lipsey, and Howard Freeman (2003, Sage).
- The Free Management Library (http://managementhelp.org) has a large collection on evaluation for nonprofits.
- The American Evaluation Association (http://www.eval.org) is devoted to evaluation and has resources and referrals (though not all evaluation consultants are listed). Be sure to check out the *Tip-a-Day* at http://www.aea365.org/blog.
- *Mission-based Marketing: Positioning Your Not-for-Profit in an Increasingly Competitive World* by Peter Brinckerhoff (2010, Wiley) explains evaluation's place in overall agency marketing.
- *Checklist Manifesto: How to Get Things Right* by Atul Gawande (2011, Picador) shows how simple checklists can keep us on track.
- For an introduction to online survey tools, take a look at TechSoup's article, *Use Online Surveys to Get the Feedback You Need to Succeed at* http://www.techsoup.org/learningcenter/internet/page5048.cfm.

One of the great strengths of the anti-violence field is our ability to deconstruct and make sense of horrific acts and complicated responses. We, as a field, are skilled at seeking knowledge and turning that knowledge into powerful tools. Program evaluation, when it is thoughtful and well planned, can be one of our most potent and incisive tools for change.

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