Initiating an Evaluation

This resource is designed to support Federal staff who plan, need, or want to begin an evaluation. Federal staff may retain external evaluators to initiate and conduct an evaluation. Both Federal staff and external evaluators can use the tip sheet below to guide their activities.

How to use this resource: The resource lays out six questions to consider when initiating an evaluation. For each question, we explain why the question is important, steps to answer the question, and what related resources are available. Answering these questions will help you plan an evaluation, regardless of whether the evaluation is done in-house or by an external third party.

The questions below will help identify:

- Why the evaluation is being conducted or planned (including the purpose and the goals)
- Who the interested parties are, and what they want to learn
- Activities and expected outcomes of the program, policy, or process
- When and how data should be collected, analyzed, and shared
- What resources are needed to design and implement an evaluation

Not all questions are relevant for every evaluation, but all the questions can facilitate and document decision-making.

Question 1: Why is the evaluation being initiated/considered?

Why the question is important	Answering this question will define the purpose and scope of the evaluation.

Steps to answer the question	Gather responses to the following questions to understand the context for the evaluation:
	• Who requested the evaluation?
	• Why did they request an evaluation? Some examples include:
	  o To meet a mandate?
	  o To demonstrate impact or effectiveness?
	  o To identify potential improvements to the program?
	  o To determine if an approach could be replicated and disseminated to similar agencies?
	  o To determine how to improve program goals and outcomes?
	• What (evaluation) questions do key interested parties want answered?
	• When are the evaluation findings needed?

Additional resources	- Foundations for Evidence-Based Policymaking Act of 2018, 115th Congress. - Evidence and Evaluation, Office of Management and Budget.

Question 2: Who has key information about the program, policy, or process that could inform the evaluation?

Why the question is important	Answering this question will identify colleagues, partners, leaders, and program office staff who can: • Ensure that you have all information about the program, policy, or process that you need to design an evaluation. • Build collaborative relationships to improve your ability to facilitate the evaluation and to assist at various stages across the evaluation lifecycle.

Steps to answer the question	• Make sure interested parties are committed to the value of the proposed evaluation:
	    o Who should be consulted with and informed about the evaluation?
	• Gather as much documentation as you can about program, policy, or process activities:
	    o Each interested party may have some of the information needed or have different perspectives that can shape the evaluation.
	• Identify which parts of the program, policy, or process are to be evaluated and over what time period:
	    o Which components of the program, policy, or process should be evaluated?
	    o How much time is needed for an accurate assessment of the activity and outcomes, to assess performance?
	• Learn more about the interested parties and their experiences with evaluation to better facilitate a collaborative relationship:
	    o What concerns do staff involved in the program, process, or policy have about the evaluation?
	    o What do involved staff hope to learn about the evaluation?

Additional resources	- The Step-by-Step Guide to Evaluation: How to Become Savvy Evaluation Consumers; Chapter 6: Determine Stakeholders and Engage Them in the Evaluation, published by the W.K. Kellogg Foundation. - A Practical Guide for Engaging Stakeholders in Developing Evaluation Questions, H. Preskill and N. Jones, published by The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation.

Note: The resources use the term "stakeholder." Per CDC guidelines, our tip sheet uses the term "interested parties."

Question 3: Can the program, policy, or process identify and connect activities and expected outcomes or changes?

Why the question is important	Answering this question will ensure that there is a clear and shared understanding of how a program, policy, or process works, which activities will be evaluated, and what the anticipated outcomes will be.

Steps to answer the question	• Identify the inputs, activities, outputs, and outcomes of the program, policy, or process:
	  o Determine if a logic model exists and whether it is comprehensive or accurate
	    ▪ What documentation exists about the program, policy, or process?
	    ▪ Can you gather details about the program, policy, or process activities and goals?
	• Update or create a logic model that can then be used to identify:
	  o Questions to answer
	  o Aspects of the program, policy, or process to evaluate
	  o Type of evaluation design
	  o Information to collect
	  o Measures and data collection methods
	  o Evaluation timeframe

Additional resources	- How to Develop the Right Research Questions for Program Evaluation, Corporation for National & Community Service. - How to Develop a Program Logic Model, Corporation for National & Community Service. - Program Evaluation Framework Checklist: Describe the Program, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Question 4: What are the goals of the evaluation?

Why the question is important

Answering this question can help clarify the purpose of the evaluation. One important distinction is whether the focus would be on building evidence more broadly (for example, through research) or on evaluation specifically. Research develops generalizable findings, while evaluation determines the efficiency and/or effectiveness of a program, policy, or process.

Once evaluation goals have been clarified and the focus determined to be on evaluation rather than on research, identify the specific questions that the evaluation will answer. Start by asking "what do we want to know" and then translating the responses into an initial set of evaluation questions.

Screen your initial set of evaluation questions and assess whether the answers to these questions will result in the information you need about your program. Also, do you have the data you need to answer those questions, or will you need to collect additional data? And, have you identified which method is most appropriate to answer your question and whether that method is feasible in your context?

Steps to answer the question

- Draft evaluation questions that:
  - Are open ended, empirical, relevant, and unbiased
  - Ask about one, specific thing
  - Use simple and clear language
- A logic model may help devise evaluation questions
- Evaluation purpose (see question 1 above) can guide decision about evaluation type:

Process/implementation Evaluation

Assesses how the program, intervention, operation, regulation is implemented relative to its intended theory of change, and often includes information on processes, content, quantity, quality, and structure of what is being assessed, such as services provided.

Formative Evaluation

Typically conducted to assess whether a program, policy, or organizational approach—or some aspect of these—is feasible, appropriate, and acceptable before it is fully implemented. Can include process and/or outcome measures.

Outcome Evaluation

Measures the extent to which a program, policy, or organization has achieved its intended outcome(s) and focuses on outputs and outcomes to

	assess effectiveness. Cannot attribute causality. Outcome evaluation can complement performance management. Impact Evaluation Estimates and compares the outcomes of a program, policy, or organization, or aspect thereof, usually seeking to determine whether a causal relationship can be established between the activity and the observed outcomes by using an experimental or quasi-experimental design. • Ask colleagues, partners, and staff (identified in question 2) to review evaluation questions. Do the questions reflect the evaluation goals?
Additional resources	- How to Develop the Right Research Questions for Program Evaluation, Corporation for National & Community Service. - Asking the Right Questions: Tips and Tools to Help Agencies Formulate Strong Evidence-Building Questions, D. Berman and E. Zielewski, published by the Office of Management and Budget. - Types of Evaluation, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. - Evaluation Questions Checklist for Program Evaluation, The Evaluation Center, Western Michigan University. - Developing Evaluation Questions, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. - Good Evaluation Questions: A Checklist to Help Focus Your Evaluation, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Question 5: When and how should data be collected, analyzed, and shared?

Why the question is important

Answering this question will provide information needed to create an evaluation timeline and plan. Understanding the timeline using evaluation information can ensure that data are collected and shared at appropriate intervals.

Steps to answer the question

- For an evaluation plan, ask:
  - What sources will be used to answer the evaluation questions (e.g., surveys, administrative data, etc.)?
  - What metrics will be used with each source?
  - How will the data be analyzed, and who will participate in the analysis?
  - What kind of study will be conducted (e.g., observational, quasi-experimental design, or randomized control trial, etc.)?
- For an evaluation timeline, ask:
  - What phases will the evaluation have?
  - When does each phase of the evaluation begin?
  - How might we analyze and provide interim evaluation results or phased results that can be used for program improvements and decision making?
  - When will each phase end?
- Create a decision-making calendar, or a calendar of events for the upcoming year. The calendar should note key dates, who participates in each decision-making process, and when evaluation findings will be shared.
- Compare the evaluation timeline with the decision-making calendar to see what data will be available to share for each decision-making date:
  - Identify the cadence for collecting and sharing data to keep evaluation dissemination on the agenda.

Additional resources

- Developing an Effective Evaluation Plan, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.
- Elements of an Evaluation Plan, Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality.
- Evaluation Timeline Example, EvaluATE.
- Sample Evaluation Timeline, Office of Justice Programs.

Question 6: What resources are needed to evaluate?

Why the question is important	Answering this question will help identify financial, personnel, and leadership support needed to conduct the evaluation.

Steps to answer the question	• Identify existing resources:
	  ○ Existing resources may include dedicated staff or funding, prior evaluations that answer proposed evaluation questions, or ongoing data collection efforts that could answer proposed evaluation questions.
	  ○ Explore ways in which data collection can be integrated into staff's daily functions without overburdening them.
	    ▪ How are data about the program or activity already collected?
	    ▪ How should staff be involved to facilitate new data collection?
	• Determine whether additional resources are needed:
	  ○ Identify potential funding sources, such as direct appropriations for funding, set-aside funding, or funded recipient/ grantee-led evaluations.
	  ○ Identify staff with needed expertise, either inside or outside of your agency.
	    ▪ Federal staff may consider engaging an external evaluator to design and/or conduct an evaluation. External evaluators can be engaged for multiple reasons including:
	      • Limited internal resources and/or expertise)
	      • Scope of the proposed evaluation
	      • Impartiality
	    ▪ Type of evaluation funding may dictate specific requirements for external evaluators, for example, cooperative agreement versus contracts versus grants.
	  ○ Engage your agency leadership and Evaluation Officer to make the case for evaluation
	  ○ Determine if data collection must address Paperwork Reduction Act requirements.

Additional resources	- Evaluation Policy and the Federal Workforce, D. Epstein, E. Zielewski, and E. Liliedahl, published *New Directions for Evaluation*.

Evaluation Worksheet

Question	Prompts for Discussion	Answers
Question 1: Why is this evaluation being initiated/considered?	• Who requested the evaluation? • Why did they request an evaluation? • What (evaluation) questions do key interested parties want answered? • When are the evaluation findings needed?	
Question 2: Who has key information about the program, policy, or process that could inform the evaluation?	• Who should be consulted with and informed about the evaluation? • Which components of the program, policy, or process should be evaluated? • How much time is needed for an accurate assessment of the activity and outcomes to assess performance? • What concerns do staff involved in the program, process, or policy about the evaluation? • What do involved staff hope to learn about the evaluation?	
Question 3: Can the program, policy, or process identify and connect activities and expected outcomes or changes?	• What documentation exists about the program, policy, or process? • Can you gather details about the program, policy, or process activities and goals?	
Question 4: What are the goals of the evaluation?	• Process evaluation questions: Describe the program, policy, or process. Who, what, where, when, why, and how? • Outcome evaluation questions: Did the program, policy, or process result in a change or have an impact on a specific outcome for the intended group? • Formative evaluation questions: Is the intended group aware of the program, policy, or process and what is working well or could be improved? • Impact evaluation questions: Are any changes seen due to the program, policy, or process? In the absence of the program, policy, or process, how would things be different?	

Question	Prompts for Discussion	Answers
Question 5: When and how should data be collected, analyzed, and shared?	• What sources will be used to answer the evaluation questions (e.g., surveys, administrative data)? • What metrics will be used in each source? • How will the data be analyzed, and who will participate in the analysis? • What kind of study will be conducted (for example, observational, quasi-experimental design, randomized control trial)? • What phases will the evaluation have? • When does each phase of the evaluation begin? • How might we analyze and provide interim evaluation results or phased results to be used for program improvements and decision making? • When will each phase end?	
Question 6: What resources are needed to evaluate?	• How are data about the program or activity already collected? • How should staff be involved to facilitate new data collection?	

Evaluation Worksheet

Here is an example for using the "Initiating an Evaluation" Worksheet. Veterans Treatment Courts (VTCs) were developed to address the intersection of challenges, such as crime, mental illness, trauma, and substance use disorders, faced by veterans in contact with the criminal justice system. The example from the National Institute of Justice **depicts** the process of conducting an evaluation (Baldwin and Hartley, 2022).

Question	Answers
Question 1: Why is the evaluation being initiated/considered?	The National Institute of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, (U.S. Department of Justice) funded an exploratory evaluation of Veterans Treatment Courts (VTCs). The evaluation was conducted to understand VTC program approaches and functions, the VTC population of interest, and program and participant outcomes. There are over 600 VTCs and veteran-focused court programs in operation. When the evaluation began, there was little information on the programs.
Question 2: Who has key information about the program, policy, or process that could inform the evaluation?	*Funders:* VTCs are funded through the Office of the Attorney General in partnership with the Secretary of Veterans Affairs. General information on VTCs can be gathered from the Bureau of Justice Assistance, under the U.S. Department of Justice. *Implementation teams:* VTCs within states must be contacted for specific information and documentation related to programs and participants.
Question 3: Can the program, policy, or process identify and connect activities and expected outcomes or changes?	*Key VTC activities conducted with veterans*: Assessing risks and needs of justice-involved veterans, providing effective interventions to reduce recidivism and increase access to critical treatment and recovery support services, and providing enhanced supervision. *Key VTC activities conducted with implementation teams:* Pre- and post-implementation training to VTC program administrators, including evaluation capacity building; delivery of updated information on relevant case law, best practices, program operations, and program outcomes; and provision of technical assistance for 1) matching services to participant needs, 2) developing strategic partnerships with interested parties, and 3) conducting quality improvement activities to improve program functions and outcomes. *Outcomes to assess*: Improvement in participant's quality of life, reduced recidivism, and improved community safety.

Question	Answers
Question 4: What are the goals of the evaluation?	Evaluation questions included: 1) What are the structures of the VTC programs? 2) What are the policies and procedures of the VTC programs? 3) What populations are the VTCs serving? 4) What are the basic program and participant outcomes?
Question 5: When and how should data be collected, analyzed, and shared?	*Primary data sources*: VTC participant interviews, staff member and research affiliate surveys, and observations of VTC sessions and staff meetings. *Secondary data sources*: Program documentation, docket lists, and progress reports. *Data collection timeline*: between July 2016 and June 2019 *Analyses*: Both qualitative and quantitative analyses, including: - Qualitative: content analysis and thematic coding - Quantitative: univariate and bivariate descriptive statistics of single and related variables and Chi-square tests of hypothesized relationships between variables. *Findings were shared through*: Final report, executive summary, data package (including methods, data sets, and code books), presentations, and peer-reviewed articles.
Question 6: What resources are needed to evaluate?	- *Funding*: U.S. Department of Justice. - *Access* to information and documentation on program participants and program operations. Data include inclusion and exclusion criteria, benchmarks, progress updates, and data on participants after their departure from the VTC program (e.g., substance use, mental health reports, and engagements with law enforcement/criminal justice). - *Staff* with skills to conduct needed analyses.
Sources	- Research Abstract: National Institute of Justice's Multisite Evaluation of Veterans Treatment Courts, Office of Justice Programs' National Criminal Justice Reference Service - Veterans Treatment Court Grant Program, Bureau of Justice Assistance, U.S. Department of Justice - Training, Justice for Vets