

# Importance of Program Evaluation

## Importance of Program Evaluation

### *Why Evaluate?*

Evaluation allows for a systematic assessment of program strengths and limitations in order to improve the service delivery process and outcomes. Linking program process or performance with participant outcomes helps staff to evaluate their progress and modify the program as appropriate. Information obtained through program evaluation can be used by administrators or funders to make decisions about future program goals, strategies, and options. For example, information such as the average number of “hot calls” (crisis calls) received each month or year by advocates can be used to determine whether more volunteers should be trained.

Ongoing program evaluation must be an integral part of every rape crisis center (RCC). Program evaluation helps staff and volunteers to identify what they do well, which objectives they are meeting successfully, and in which areas improvements are necessary. Evaluation is not effective as a one-time activity completed for “outside” purposes, such as the reporting requirements of a funding source. To be effective, evaluation must be an ongoing tool employed to answer internal questions posed by program staff.

### *Formal and Informal Evaluation Strategies*

Program evaluation may involve a formal review or informal data collection strategies. While both approaches may perform many of the same functions, formal evaluation projects tend to employ more rigorous methods, using larger groups and over longer periods of time. Moreover, formal evaluations tend to use standardized tools with demonstrated reliability and validity.

Two types of program evaluation are relevant to our purposes, each of which may be accomplished formally or informally.

- **Process evaluation** focuses on how program services are delivered, as shown in the following examples:
  - Sexual assault victims are surveyed and asked if it is helpful to have the advocate come to the emergency department (ED) automatically, or if victims should be asked if they want her paged.
  - Sexual assault victims are asked if it is helpful to bring up the issue of HIV in the ED, or if it would be better to wait until a later time.
  - Followup telephone surveys are conducted 2 months after the assault to see if the victims took advantage of referral information provided by the advocate.

- Calls are placed 2 months after the assault to rape victims who did not come in for counseling. They are assessed for symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and asked if they wish to receive counseling.
- With counseling visits scheduled, data on the follow-through rate then can be compiled.
- Victims are surveyed 2 weeks after their ED visit and asked about their satisfaction with the care provided by the police, hospital medical staff, the Sexual Assault Nurse Examiner (SANE), and the advocate.
- In the ED, SANEs complete data sheets on every client, providing the following information:
  - (a) The time between the victim's arrival at the ED and the SANE's arrival.
  - (b) If no police report was made prior to the SANE's arrival, whether the SANE was able to resolve the client's fears, and if a report was eventually made.
- **Outcome evaluation** focuses on the results of a service delivered to targeted individuals or groups. It is important when designing an outcome evaluation to identify the target audience and then to state explicitly what knowledge, attitude, behavior, belief, or symptoms are expected to change as a result of the intervention. For victims of sexual assault, one goal may be to reduce the symptoms of PTSD. Results evaluated may be immediate, short-term, or long-term.

Immediate outcomes may include:

- Whether victims who did not initially want to report the rape decide to do so after talking with an advocate.
- Whether victims decide to take medication for sexually transmitted diseases or pregnancy prevention.
- Peer review of courtroom testimony.

Short-term outcomes may include:

- Case presentations and peer reviews.
- Other data gathered during the first few weeks or months after the assault (e.g., about the assault's impact).

Evaluations of client outcomes 1 year or more after the rape generally are considered long-term. The longer the time period between the initial contact and the evaluation followup, the more difficult it will be to locate former victims; thus, a smaller sample can be expected, which may or may not be representative. Long-term evaluations may include:

- One-year anniversary telephone calls or mailed questionnaires assessing symptoms of PTSD in clients seen for counseling compared with those who have not received counseling.
- Courtroom outcomes of SANE and non-SANE cases in the area; for instance, the proportion of guilty verdicts in the SANE cases versus non-SANE cases.
- Client satisfaction questionnaires completed 1 year after the rape requesting feedback about their experiences with the judicial or legal system.
- Yearly meetings with other community agencies to evaluate their satisfaction with the RCC program.
- Community sexual assault felony charge rates and prosecution rates of SANE and non-SANE cases.

### ***Data Collection and Analysis***

Evaluation data may be collected using standardized tests with established reliability and validity. It also may be collected using informal questionnaires developed specifically for RCC program evaluation. The data provided may be a simple count, an average or a percentage of cases, or it may involve sophisticated statistical analysis. Often, graphical representation of group or individual values is extremely helpful in understanding results.

### ***Evaluation Utilization***

In addition to answering questions raised by RCC staff and volunteers and ultimately improving RCC services, evaluation findings are useful in other ways. Findings may be used to convince funding sources to finance new program components or continue funding effective programs. Community leaders who support the RCC program may want access to the results to justify their ongoing support and to obtain the additional support of their colleagues. The media also may be interested in the results. The evaluation findings provide a helpful model for other groups planning to implement programs in their communities. Even if the results are negative or show where the program needs improvement, providing data to community organizations helps build the credibility and trust of the community and potential clients. When community organizations decide which programs they are going to support, they expect to see documentation of program effectiveness.

### ***Steps in Program Evaluation Planning***

1. List the RCC program's primary goals and activities.
2. Identify problem areas, questions, or concerns.
3. Identify outcomes of individuals or groups who use RCC services.

4. Formulate evaluation questions.
5. Identify the types of information needed to answer the questions.
6. Identify where the information is currently available or how to obtain it.
7. Decide who will obtain the information and in what timeframe.
8. Decide how the information will be used.

### ***Evolution of Program Evaluation***

As the RCC evolves, the type and intensity of the evaluation will evolve. New programs stand to benefit the most from effective process evaluation. Informal and simple process evaluation of immediate or short-term impact will help staff evaluate their program policies and procedures and make timely decisions to improve service delivery.

More established programs may elect to implement a more elaborate victim-and system-outcome evaluation that includes both short-term and long-term components. RCCs may benefit from the expertise often found at nearby universities. Sometimes a graduate student in evaluation or a related field may be able to integrate their thesis with the evaluation of the RCC. Local evaluation consultants also may be solicited to assist the program, at times offering their services pro bono. The RCC director, staff, and volunteers may participate in creating the evaluation questions and deciding which outcomes are appropriate for their own program.