PROBLEM-SOLVING JUSTICE

EVALUATING YOUR PROGRAM

Research and evaluation can help problem-solving criminal justice initiatives monitor their services, assess whether they're achieving their goals, and identify areas for improvement. They can help justice officials…

• **Answer planning questions.** Research about the community, the problems community members consider most pressing, and best practices to address those problems can help planners craft solutions. Research during the planning phase can also help planners make realistic projections about the volume of cases that are likely to be program-eligible and the program's impact on both individual defendants and local community conditions.

• **Establish performance measures.** Planners should define specific quantifiable measures of project performance (e.g., number of cases served, compliance rates, hours of community service, etc.) to track progress toward the goals of the initiative. Once agreed upon by both program and evaluation staff, these measures can be used to gauge the results and the strengths and weaknesses of specific strategies over time. Performance measures can also be used to reflect on a program's stated goals and objectives: staff can identify at least one performance measure associated with each of the program's goals, monitor progress towards achieving those goals, and then, based on performance to date, modify goals to generate a more realistic outlook on what the program can achieve.

• **Document implementation.** During the initial stages of a problem-solving justice initiative, research can provide feedback on unforeseen difficulties, allowing planners to adjust program strategies.

• **Monitor ongoing performance.** Staff can review on a regular basis (monthly, quarterly, or semi-annually) whether the program is meeting operational goals and providing services as intended. This kind of a monitoring system—or "action research"—is a key source of information for a later impact evaluation. Equally important, it serves as a form of early warning system, alerting program managers to operational weaknesses that require corrective action.

• **Measure their project's impact.** Once the initiative has been operating for a sufficient time, an evaluator can analyze collected data to see if the project is achieving its goals and having its intended impact. An impact evaluation requires an appropriate comparison to defendants or community conditions as they existed without the program. An important research task is therefore to determine the right comparison group or comparison timeframe against which to evaluate the program's effectiveness.

This practitioner tool is one in a series to support the development of problem-solving justice initiatives. For other documents in the series, please visit problemsolvingjustice.org.

no.10

CENTER
FOR
COURT
INNOVATION

BJA

Research can be conducted by an outside, independent evaluator as well as by project staff on an ongoing basis. For any evaluation to work, the program itself must be well planned with clear goals and a well defined strategy to achieve those goals. A logic model that clearly delineates how each project goal and objective relates to specific programmatic activities may be useful in helping staff to ensure the coherence of their program's conceptual model and to lay the groundwork for subsequent evaluation activities.

INDEPENDENT EVALUATIONS

An independent, standalone evaluation can provide an objective assessment of your project. There are three types of evaluations:

- **Process Evaluation:** A process evaluation helps answer how the project has been planned and implemented. It describes the policies, operations, staff, participant characteristics, and participant performance of the program, as well as how the project evolved during the planning and early implementation stages, what barriers the project had to confront, and how those barriers were addressed. It can keep the project on track and identify potential problem areas that might require changes in strategy.

- **Impact Evaluation:** An impact evaluation describes the impact of a program in achieving its goals. A proper impact evaluation should involve a comparison between participant outcomes and the outcomes of similar defendants not enrolled in the program. In a community justice context, an impact evaluation should involve a comparison between community conditions under the project and conditions without the project (e.g., conditions before the project was implemented or conditions in an adjacent area during the same period as project implementation).

- **Cost-benefit Analysis:** A cost-benefit analysis examines the efficiency and long-term economic benefits of your project by comparing its costs with the benefit to be gained. This type of research is very costly and complicated.

CHOOSING AN EVALUATOR

When choosing someone to perform an evaluation, it is useful to think about some of the following questions:

❏ Will the evaluator be able to work well with your team?
   Will he/she be able to work closely with your staff while maintaining an objective perspective?

❏ How does the evaluator plan to give feedback?
   Does he/she plan to give interim feedback about the content of the evaluation, or does she/he plan to make all evaluation decisions independently and hand you a draft final report at the end of the evaluation period?

❏ How does the evaluator perceive his/her role?
   Does he/she see it as promoting your program or as making an objective contribution to the literature surrounding your program?

❏ What qualifications does the evaluator have?
   How many evaluations has he/she performed? What do you think of his/her past work? Is the evaluation plan submitted by the evaluator in line with what you are trying to achieve?

SELF EVALUATIONS

You can also track your own data and use it to monitor everyday operations, report essential performance information, identify areas of success, and bring to light problem areas or ways to improve. This is a good idea whether or not you have engaged an independent evaluator.

Here are some key questions to answer in developing your own "action research" plan.

❏ Have you defined the major goals of your program?
   Goals identify the overall mission and purpose of the program, not specific methods or numeric targets.

❏ Have you identified the major objectives of your program?
   Objectives explain how each goal will be achieved. They need to be specific, realistic, and lend themselves to quantitative performance measures.

❏ Have you identified a set of activities that need to be completed in order for you to meet these objectives?
   Have you determined which staff will be responsible for these activities?

❏ Have you come up with a plan for obtaining the data necessary to see if you are meeting your objectives?
   Can this be incorporated into current data collection efforts, or do you need outside help? Can information systems that already exist be drawn upon, or do new spreadsheets or data collection protocols need to be developed?

❏ What should be the deadline for reporting the results?

Should results be updated on a monthly or quarterly basis?

❏ Have you identified who should receive periodic reports of program results?

Have you considered how sharing this information can be used internally to improve the program—and externally to build stakeholder support and sustain or expand funding sources?

FURTHER READING

Action Research: Using Information to Improve Your Drug Court
http://www.courtinnovation.org/_uploads/documents/Action%20Research.pdf

Community Court Research: A Literature Review
http://www.courtinnovation.org/_uploads/documents/ccresearch.pdf

CourTools
http://www.ncsconline.org/D_Research/CourTools/tcmp_courttools.htm

Defining the Problem: Using Data to Plan a Community Justice Project
http://www.courtinnovation.org/_uploads/documents/Defining%20the%20Problem.pdf

Developing Statewide Performance Measures for Drug Courts
http://www.ncsconline.org/D_Consult/STA%20Bulletin%20October5.0.pdf

Evaluating Juvenile Justice Programs: A Design Monograph for State Planners
http://www.ojp.usdoj.gov/BJA/evaluation/guide/documents/documentg.html

Guide to Frugal Evaluation for Criminal Justice
http://www.ncjrs.gov/pdffiles1/nij/187350.pdf

Navigating HATS (The University of Maryland's Automated Tracking System)
http://www.bgr.umd.edu/hats_nav.html