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Process Evaluation 101

An Overview for Justice Practitioners

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Process Evaluation 101:
An Overview for Justice Practitioners

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The purpose of a process evaluation is to document and explain the goals, key program elements and operations of a project. A process evaluation describes the size and characteristics of the population served by a project, the services or interventions provided, and the expected outcomes. It provides a qualitative context for the project by describing the social, legal or political events that motivated stakeholders to undertake the project or affected its implementation. It examines whether a project was implemented as its stakeholders intended and provides a basis for assessing the reasons for a project's success, shortcomings or failure.

Multiple research methods can be used in a process evaluation: interviews with stakeholders, interviews or focus groups with participants, structured observations of meetings, and the collection of participant data including personal characteristics. Because it is difficult for a project coordinator to objectively observe and document a project in which he or she is heavily involved, an ideal process evaluation is conducted by someone who is not an integral part of the operations team, such as a graduate student or professor or a professional researcher. A process evaluation does not usually require complex statistical analysis, so someone who is familiar with the program, the field of literature, and general research methods but is not skilled in advanced statistics may be an acceptable candidate to conduct the process evaluation. A strong process evaluation, however, involves analysis of basic quantitative trends – participant characteristics, service mandates, infractions, sanctions, and basic program outcomes such as graduation or failure, so some quantitative research proficiency is essential.

This article describes the essential components and methods of conducting a process evaluation of a criminal justice innovation, with a particular focus on problem-solving courts. It concludes with a brief discussion of the difference between a process evaluation and an impact evaluation.

Documentation of Program Operations, Policies and Procedures

Many projects in the criminal justice system and social service sector have user manuals for staff and/or participants, but these manuals are seldom kept up-to-date and rarely observed faithfully. The best way to find out what is happening in a program is to observe it, document it, and ask the players about it.

Key Staff Interviews. A good first step is to determine who comprises the group of key staff members; the project coordinator is often the best person to help with this task. The players will vary based on locale and specific project objectives, but a justice system team will usually include a project or resource coordinator, at least one judge, a prosecuting attorney, perhaps an assigned or regular defense attorney, and representatives from the agencies providing the services (such as substance abuse or mental health treatment liaisons.) The key group may also include some of the following staff: probation/parole officers, community service supervisors, law enforcement or corrections.

Once the relevant individuals have been identified, the evaluator should schedule informal interviews with each person. Generally, it is acceptable to talk with multiple prosecuting attorneys together, for example, but interviews should not span more than one role at a time. There are several purposes or goals for each interview, and each person may only be able to answer some of these questions:

- What is the process by which a defendant (or litigant in a civil context) becomes a participant of this justice program? Staff should trace the exact path defendants take from arrest to participation, including:
 - Who (or what agencies or mechanisms) refers defendants to the program?
 - What makes someone eligible for the project, and what are the common reasons that people are found ineligible (charges in the instant case, prior criminal history, mental illness, homeless status, etc.)?
 - Is there an assessment of potential participants? If yes, what is being assessed, does the assessment use a validated tool, and who conducts it?
 - At what stage in the criminal justice system or traditional court processing do defendants join the program? In a court-based program, for example, are defendants required to plead guilty to join the program?
 - What is the implication of program participation for the outcome of the defendant's case, and what are participants told regarding these implications? For example, is there a jail alternative for failure, and does the participant know how much jail time he or she is facing? Is there a positive incentive for successful completion, such as a probation reduction, charge reduction, or case dismissal?
- What does program participation entail?
 - How long does it take for a participating defendant (or litigant) to enter the program after the initial arrest or release?
 - How often is a participant required to come to court?
 - How often is a participant required to talk with a supervision officer (case manager, probation officer, etc.)?
 - Is a participant required to have drug tests? If so, how often? What drugs are tested (alcohol, prescription drugs, etc.)?
 - Is a participant required to attend community-based services, such as drug treatment, mental health treatment, GED classes, job training, parent skills classes, etc.? Which services are required, for how long, and are mandates uniform (e.g., X months for all participants) or variable (based on individualized treatment or supervision plans)?
 - What are the possible responses to positive and negative compliance (*i.e.*, sanctions and rewards)?
 - How does the court assess and track progress?
 - How long does a participant typically stay in the program?
 - What are the ways someone leaves the program (completion, types of failure)?
 - What are the ramifications of leaving – in reality, what happens upon graduation or failure?

- Does the program have staff meetings to discuss participant status? If yes, the evaluator should observe these meetings. Data an evaluator might collect could include:
 - Who attends the staffing?
 - Who are regular participants in the conversation?
 - What types of cases are discussed (all active cases, only cases on docket for that day, only noncompliant cases, etc.)?
 - Are decisions reached in the staffing or just recommendations made? If decisions are made, who makes the final decisions?
 - What is the range of possible responses discussed to respond to a participant's progress or problems? What are the most commonly discussed sanctions and rewards?

- Do key staff members attend trainings to keep up-to-date on new techniques and approaches to issues of relevance?

Program operations, policies and procedures change over time due to changes in clientele, staff, resources, and political reasons, but a process evaluation can only document the practices at the time of investigation. A good process evaluation might additionally document the original policies and how and why they changed over time. For this reason, it is not a critical issue if a process evaluation is being conducted some time after the beginning of a project, as discussed later. Interviews with team members might ask them to reflect on barriers and issues earlier in court operations, while describing current policies and practices.

Observation of Courtroom Practices. In a court-based justice program, it is important to observe the court process and not just talk with stakeholders. A structured courtroom observation might document:

- How often does the judge make eye contact and talk directly to the defendant, as opposed to the judge speaking only through the defense attorney?
- What types of things does the judge discuss in court (progress in treatment, family circumstances, performance in school/job, interests, etc.)?
- Is the defendant given an opportunity to speak in court and express his or her questions and concerns?
- Is the courtroom open to spectators, family members, the media and/or the public? Does this create a positive audience effect and/or a negative confidentiality issue?
- Is the judge consistent in giving sanctions and rewards to participants?
- How long is the appearance in court? Is it longer for participants who are noncompliant?
- How does the court deal with confidential information?

In programs implemented at other points in the justice process, such as pretrial diversion, probation, or parole, appropriate direct observations might also be conducted of the interaction between participants and relevant agents of the justice system.

Participation Data. Interviews with team members will illuminate the policies of the program, but they may not always precisely reflect the actual procedures of the court and behavior of the players. For example, program staff might tell an evaluator that they follow a strict schedule of sanctions and rewards. In reality, however, a judge or supervision officer might overrule the schedule in individual cases, for example jumping to a short-term jail sanction more or less quickly than the schedule defines. Therefore, a good process evaluation must also collect data on what actually happens in the program during the participation process. Many programs keep electronic records of these program elements. Some participation data that a process evaluation should collect include, but are not limited to:

- Number of referrals to the program;
- Number of actual participants;
- Reasons for non-participation (for example, refused participation, why found ineligible);
- Basic participant demographics – age, race/ethnicity, gender, education and employment history;
- Prior criminal and/or family court involvement;
- Prior substance use and treatment history;
- Prior mental and physical health history;
- Scores and individual item responses to any validated assessment instrument that is administered at baseline and/or follow-up;
- Frequency of various treatment modalities and services employed by the program (i.e., substance abuse treatment, mental health treatment, batterer’s intervention program, etc.);
- Actual rewards and sanctions given by the program;
- Other measures of compliance (such as drug test results, community service hours, or attendance);
- Time from program entry to graduation or failure from the program;
- Reasons for exiting the program;
- Numbers of completers and failures; and
- A one-year retention rate.

In the ideal, a process evaluation might be able to go beyond the above list, but that is not always possible depending on the availability and quality of data kept by the program.

Stakeholder Perceptions

Justice system projects do not exist in a vacuum. A process evaluation should be sure to go beyond talking only to the key staff members who hold active roles in the program; the evaluation should also capture the impressions of court and institutional staff who were responsible for bringing the program into existence. Often this may include someone at a high level in the courts, the district attorney’s office, and the public defender or defense attorney agency. Depending on the type of program, a key stakeholder may be someone at probation or parole or someone with a treatment or victims’ agency.

A process evaluation would not only document who is included in this broader stakeholder group, but also their impressions of the program. Expect to get different answers to each of the following questions from different team members; highlighting the differences in perceptions of each stakeholder is an important part of a process evaluation. Some questions for stakeholders should include:

- What were the original goals of the program, including the target population, the intended services to be delivered, and initial policies and practices?
- What were some early barriers to achieving those goals, and what were the attempts to overcome the obstacles?
- What were some unexpected events that led to changes in the policies and practices of the program (for example, change in legislation, change in administration, a local political event, funding complications, or change in staff personnel)?
- What are the goals for the program at the time of the evaluation?

Often, a process evaluation can document stakeholder perceptions during the same interviews used to document program policies and practices described earlier. A focus group is another potential vehicle for obtaining this information.

Participant Perceptions

Talking with staff members and stakeholders, observing court, and observing staff meetings provide a broad description of the program in question. If there is enough time and resources, though, another important perspective to capture in the process evaluation would be the perceptions and opinions of the participants themselves. The most efficient method is usually a focus group (or groups if the evaluator can do more than one.) What is discussed in participant focus groups should always be kept private from the staff, and consent forms are a necessity. It is recommended that the evaluator propose a participant focus group plan to his or her local Institutional Review Board to be assured of taking proper precautions when working with a vulnerable population. (Many agencies have such a board, whose express purpose is to review proposals to conduct research with sensitive populations, ensuring, for example, that potential research subjects are administered a proper informed consent protocol in which participants are made aware that research participation is voluntary and will have no adverse effect on their program status.)

A focus group with participants should be informed by the rest of the process evaluation so that the evaluator knows the key questions or debates among stakeholders as well as the services and policies of the program. A focus group might discuss some of the following issues, though the full list of potential focus group topics is much longer:

- Which parts of the court process are clear to the participants and which are harder to understand?
- Which sanctions and rewards are most effective at motivating positive behavior?
- How often is noncompliant behavior undetected by the team?
- What are the positive and negative features of the court appearances and interactions with various staff members?
- Do the participants think they will return to the problematic behavior that was responsible for their engagement in the justice system (such as drug use, violent behavior, or other criminal activities)?

Impact Evaluation

The purpose of a process evaluation is to comprehensively document the policies, procedures, and characteristics of those served by a program, but a process evaluation does not go so far as to assess its effectiveness or success. That is the challenge of an impact evaluation. The process evaluation should help an evaluator identify the outcomes of interest (such as reduction in criminal activity, reduction in drug use, reduction in violent behavior, and improvement in mental health and family functioning), and an impact evaluation would statistically measure whether, and to what extent, the program was successful in meeting those goals.

A common and important outcome for a court program is a reduction in criminal activity: recidivism. Many impact evaluations will start with recidivism and may measure only this outcome. Testing the impact of the program on reducing recidivism likely will require an evaluator who is familiar with advanced statistics and who can gain access to confidential administrative records.

While recidivism is an essential outcome to measure, there are many others an impact evaluation can and should identify. An impact evaluation, regardless of the outcome to be measured, will draw a sample of participants to serve as the “treatment” group, but there should also be a sample of non-participants to serve as the “comparison” group. If a comparison is not included in the analysis, it is not truly an impact evaluation.