Evaluation Guide

Evaluation Reporting:

A Guide to Help Ensure Use of Evaluation Findings

EPET

Evaluation and Program Effectiveness Team . Division for Heart Disease and Stroke Prevention

CDC

Acknowledgments

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PURPOSE OF THE EVALUATION GUIDES

CDC's Division for Heart Disease and Stroke Prevention (DHDSP) evaluation guides are a series of evaluation technical assistance tools developed for use by CDC-funded programs. State health departments, tribal organizations, communities, and partners working in a variety of public health areas may also find these tools helpful. The guides clarify approaches to and methods of evaluation, provide examples specific to the scope and purpose of DHDSP programs, and identify resources for additional reading. The guides are also intended to aid in skill building on a wide range of general evaluation topics while recognizing that funded programs differ widely in their experience with, and resources for, program* evaluation.

This evaluation technical assistance tool is best used in conjunction with other DHDSP Program Evaluation Guides in the series

- Writing SMART Objectives
- Developing and Using a Logic Model
- Developing an Evaluation Plan
- Fundamentals of Evaluating Partnerships
- Using Indicators for Program Planning and Evaluation

*In this guide, the term "program" refers to any intervention, practice, strategy, or environmental approach that promotes public health goals.

INTRODUCTION

Importance of Evaluation Reporting to Ensure Use

There are various aspects of evaluation reporting that can affect how information is used. Stakeholder needs, the evaluation purpose, and target audience should be considered when communicating results. Evaluation reporting should not only identify what, when, how, and to what extent information should be shared but take into account how information might be received and used.

In a 2006 survey of American Evaluation Association members, 68% self-reported that their evaluation results were not used.[1] Findings such as this suggest a greater need for evaluation results to make it off the bookshelf and into the hands of intended audiences. Similarly in the CDC Framework for Program Evaluation[2], the "utility evaluation standard" charges evaluators to carry out evaluations that lead to actionable findings for intended users. This commitment to conducting evaluations that improve the lives of participants serves as the inspiration for this guide.

This guide is one in a series of Program Evaluation Guides developed by DHDSP to assist in evaluating heart disease and stroke prevention activities. This guide focuses on ensuring evaluation use through evaluation reporting and addresses the following topics

- Key considerations for effectively reporting evaluation findings
- Essential elements for evaluation reporting
- Importance of dissemination
- Tools and resources

While this guide offers suggestions and resources for evaluation reporting, always refer to the reporting requirements set forth by your funding source to ensure full compliance in reporting evaluation findings.

Who Might Use This Guide

- Program managers can collaborate with evaluators to identify appropriate evaluation products and processes.
- Evaluators and epidemiologists can use the guide to help communicate findings and outcomes.
- Other stakeholders can use this guide to help with dissemination efforts.

KEY CONSIDERATIONS FOR EFFECTIVELY REPORTING EVALUATION FINDINGS

In determining how to report your evaluation findings, there are a few key considerations to guide you through the evaluation report development process. Incorporating these ideas increases the likelihood that the intended users will take action or influence someone or something based on the findings presented in your evaluation report. The following three areas are reinforced throughout the guide but are not intended to be sequential in nature

- Engage stakeholders
- Revisit the purpose of your evaluation
- Define your target audience

Engage Stakeholders

Most program evaluation frameworks, including the CDC Framework for Program Evaluation,[2] promote the engagement of stakeholders as an important component of the evaluation process. Stakeholders—individuals who are invested in the program or potentially affected by the evaluation—can play a key role by offering input throughout the evaluation process to ensure effective and useful reporting of evaluation results. Strategically encouraging input and participation from this group at critical points along the way can increase the likelihood that evaluation findings will be used. There are several opportunities for engagement

- During the planning phase, stakeholders can help determine the intended use of the evaluation findings, identify potential primary users of findings, and help develop a reporting and dissemination plan
- Once data have been collected, stakeholders can review interim findings, interpret data, help prepare findings, and assist in developing potential recommendations
- Stakeholders can also play a key role when developing the evaluation report by defining the audience, identifying any new potential uses of the information, and ensuring report findings meet the evaluation purpose

To maximize stakeholder involvement and expertise, consider ways to keep the lines of communication open from the initial stages of planning through reporting and dissemination. Remember, stakeholder needs should be prioritized, recognizing that the evaluation may not be able to address everyone's interests.

QUICK TIP

To re-engage stakeholders in reviewing the evaluation purpose statement

- **Revisit how the evaluation and findings will be used**
- **Reassess what the users of the evaluation want to learn**

Revisit the Evaluation Purpose

It is always helpful for an evaluation to have a clearly defined purpose statement that articulates the reason for and intended use of the findings. At every phase of the evaluation, including development of the report, revisit the agreed upon intent of the evaluation to see whether the purpose continues to capture new program developments and emerging needs or priorities. You may need to revisit the purpose if there are any changes in

- Stakeholders
- Intended users of the evaluation report
- Priorities of the program or evaluation
- Information needs of the evaluation
- Programmatic context
- Organizational context

The purpose determines how the evaluation report and findings are used, who the users are, and the most appropriate type of reporting. There may be multiple purposes for conducting an evaluation. The following highlighted area summarizes some common purposes for conducting public health evaluations.

Common Public Health Evaluation Purposes[1,2]

To gain insight

- Assess feasibility or practicality of a new approach for broader implementation

To change practice or make improvements

- Describe what a program has done and to what extent
- Enhance program operations by improving quality, effectiveness, and efficiency of activities
- Monitor activities for program management or routine reporting

To determine or assess effects

- Understand the relationship between program activities and certain effects or outcomes
- Demonstrate accountability to funder or partners
- Judge the value or worth of a program

To affect participants involved in the evaluation

- Generate a positive influence on stakeholders or participants (to reinforce program messages, empower participants, or facilitate social transformation)

Two common reasons for evaluating CDC-funded programs are to guide program improvement and ensure program effectiveness. Let's use these two examples to show how the purpose can define the users and type of reporting.

Examples

- Program Improvement
  - Program staff may want to see a dashboard report of selected indicators and receive brief, regular verbal updates at meetings to learn what midcourse adjustments to make to improve program operations and activities

- Program Effectiveness
  - A funding agency may ask for a detailed, comprehensive report to demonstrate whether program components are contributing to expected outcomes for accountability purposes

As highlighted in the previous examples, the evaluation purpose can have a direct effect on how evaluation data are applied and used. Often, the desire is for evaluation recommendations and findings to inform decision making and lead to program improvement. Alternatively, evaluation results may be used to support or justify a preexisting position, which results in little to no programmatic change. The following diagram shows how a range of evaluation purposes can influence the use of data, findings, and recommendations. As illustrated in the figure below, data can be used for monitoring or accountability, depending upon your purpose. Similarly, recommendations can be used for program improvement.

Figure 1. Relationship between evaluation purpose and evaluation use

Define Your Target Audience

Consider and define the target audience of your evaluation report and findings. Who are the intended primary users or the specific stakeholders that will most likely use the findings? Is it for the funding agency of the program, individuals who are served by the program, or key legislators or decision makers in your local government? Evaluation findings can be presented differently depending on the target audience and primary evaluation users.

Some things to keep in mind about your audience that may contribute to the development of the report and ensure use of evaluation findings are

- **Effective communication channels.** Identify the appropriate, preferred, and commonly used channels of communicating with your audience.
- **Desired action.** Consider what action you want the audience to take and what is within their sphere of influence. Explore how the target audience makes decisions or decides to take action on the basis of new information.
- **Technical expertise or comprehension.** Reflect on the level of familiarity the audience has with the particular subject matter and tailor the level of language to meet their comfort level. Opt to use plain language over more technical language.[3]
- **Culturally appropriate.** Ensure that reports are culturally appropriate for the audience.
- **Perceptions and expectations.** Identify the audience's interest in or expectations of the project. Evaluation results may not always be expected or favorable. Regardless of the perception of the findings, the opportunity for use remains. Also consider how the audience perceives the evaluator and the evaluation process.
- **Presentation of information.** Present findings according to the audience's preference. For example, select between written documentation and oral communication, or presenting anecdotal stories versus data.
- **Experience and context.** Consider how your audience may interpret the findings based on their understanding and experiences. Provide context where necessary and keep the methodology description simple.

MAKING EVALUATION REPORTS WORK FOR YOU

Keeping these considerations in mind—engaging stakeholders, revisiting the evaluation purpose, and defining the target audience—you are now ready for evaluation reporting. These considerations will direct the scope of the evaluation report, the way findings are discussed, and the manner in which the report is delivered. This portion of the evaluation guide focuses on key aspects for preparing an evaluation report designed to ensure use.

Types of Evaluation Reports

Evaluation reports can take on many forms, from detailed reports to one-page briefs, but the primary goal in any evaluation is to ensure that the findings are used by the stakeholders. This section highlights two different approaches for evaluation reporting—traditional and action-oriented—while focusing on the benefits of action-oriented reports.

Traditional Reports

Often, formal evaluations are followed by formal comprehensive reports, which is the traditional style of reporting. Traditional reports are frequently required to satisfy funding requirements and serve a number of uses. Traditional reports:

- Add to the knowledge base of evaluation practice
- Provide context and historical reference
- Serve as foundation for supplemental reports
- Provide accountability

Although traditional reports have great value, they may not be conducive to ensuring use of the evaluation results. Traditional reports can be expensive, time-consuming to prepare, and too lengthy for easy reading.

In many cases, a funder may require a comprehensive evaluation report for program accountability and reporting requirements. In such instances, it's important to comply with reporting requirements as requested by the funder.

It can be helpful to consider the evaluation reporting approach that will prompt your audience to action. One such type of reporting is action-oriented reporting. An action-oriented report is intentionally shorter than a traditional formal report and is focused, simple, and geared toward a particular audience.[4]

QUICK TIP

- **Use active voice**
- **Use graphics and illustrations**
- **Be selective in the information presented**
- **Create different summaries for different audience types**
- **Avoid jargon and technical language**

Action-Oriented Reports

Action-oriented reporting offers flexibility in terms of time and creativity. A well-designed action-oriented report saves time by calling attention to important findings and possible next steps. With a little bit of creativity, the range in options for delivering action-oriented reports is countless. Action-oriented reports can be presented in the form of newsletter articles, Web site postings, one-page fact sheets, or executive summaries, just to name a few. Also, verbal presentations and briefings bring people together who share an interest and provide the opportunity for discussion (see figure below). Decision makers may be more inclined to attend a briefing than read a lengthy report.

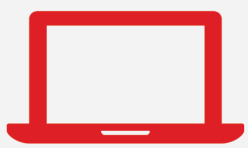
Figure 2. Delivery format and report examples

Written

- Executive summary
- Success story/human interest
- Dashboard report (a customized graphical report that is brief and visually appealing), bulletins, print media

Verbal

- PowerPoint presentations, panels
- Debriefs, town halls, radio/TV
- Informal meetings



Electronic

- Web site
- Webinars, social media
- Podcasts, mobile updates

Remember that the primary reasons for selecting an action-oriented report are predetermined by the evaluation purpose, the audience, and stakeholder needs. Using the example of program improvement, action-oriented reports should be tailored to the users of the evaluation results and emphasize actions that are of greatest priority.

The case below presents a description of action-oriented reporting in the area of program improvement.

An evaluator has been tasked with evaluating three areas of a state-funded health promotion program for the purposes of program improvement. As the evaluation progresses, the stakeholders, or evaluation users, note that there is one program area (referred to as program area "C") that warrants more attention than the others. Although a formal report was negotiated as an end product, the primary users are particularly interested in better understanding how to improve and enhance program area "C." It's agreed that a descriptive report of the full evaluation is helpful, but an action-oriented report for program area "C" is essential. As a result, the evaluator delivers an oral presentation to program staff, which is accompanied by an executive summary of the entire evaluation. The evaluator then provides a follow-up briefing to management staff and presents a brief descriptive report highlighting recommendations for program area "C."

The following table presents examples of reports and delivery formats (written, verbal, and electronic) based on three general types of evaluation users. This table is offered as a sample illustration and is not an exhaustive list of the different approaches for evaluation reporting.

Table 1. Intended users, delivery format, and report examples

Intended Users	Report Examples	Report Delivery
Program leadership	• Executive summary • One-pager • PowerPoint presentation • Dashboard report	
Program staff	• Traditional comprehensive report • Executive summary • Article in intra-agency newsletter • Web site postings	
Other users (e.g. public health practitioners, policy makers, evaluators)	• Journal article • Traditional comprehensive report • One-pager • GIS map • Web site posting • Conference presentation	

The Anatomy of a Report

The essential sections of an evaluation report (whether you choose a traditional or an action-oriented approach) may include a summary, background, methods, findings, and closing. The following provides a synopsis on each of these sections to assist in your plans for evaluation reporting to ensure use.

REMEMBER

Always refer to the reporting requirements set forth by your funding source to ensure full compliance in reporting evaluation findings.

Section 1: Summarizing the Report

The purpose of the summary is to succinctly inform your audience about the highlights of the evaluation. Including a summary page serves as a useful reference tool in your dissemination strategies and may be delivered in a variety of ways, such as a written executive summary, a verbal briefing, or a short blurb in a newsletter. The summary should include a brief description of the program and highlight key findings and recommendations from the evaluation.

In short, the summary should be reflective of a full report and include the most relevant highlights for the

- Background
- Evaluation purpose
- Methods
- Key findings
- Recommendations
- Lessons learned

Section 2: Providing Context Through Background Information

The background section, also known as the overview or introduction, of an evaluation report presents baseline information and the context for which the evaluation was undertaken. In this section the reader should learn about the key evaluation questions and ascertain the evaluation's

- Purpose
- Use
- Stakeholders

The background section also includes a description of the program or intervention that is being evaluated to understand potential uses of the evaluation. Depending on the purpose of your report, other aspects that may be addressed in the background section include

- Statistics on the public health issue being addressed (also referred to as the statement of need)
- Description of the organization
- Other information that may provide context for the evaluation

Section 3: Describing the Methodology

This section of the report describes the approach you undertook to answer the evaluation questions. Portions of the methodology section address the

- Evaluation design
- Data collection (e.g., questionnaires, interviews, site visits)
- Sample or target population of the evaluation
- Data analysis procedures
- Limitations of the evaluation

Again, considering the needs of your audience, the purpose of the evaluation, and the complexity of the evaluation activities, this section may be as simple as a few statements or as extensive as several pages. Be selective and intentional in your choice of information for any portion of the report.

QUICK TIP

Don't forget your *Limitations*. Including a Limitations section in the report also is helpful for the reader to understand the potential weaknesses of the evaluation and implications of the findings.

Section 4: Presenting the Findings

The purpose of the findings section is to convey your most important results. Make certain what you choose to include tells the complete story of your program—both positive and negative findings. Data presentation must be balanced and objective.

Communicate your findings in understandable terms. Present the data in a way that the audience can easily understand what was found. It is best to display and discuss your findings by pairing graphs, tables, and charts with a narrative description. Do not assume that your readers will look at both the displays and the narrative—with that in mind, ensure that all of your graphs, tables, and charts can stand alone.

Also, it can be a good idea to include both quantitative and qualitative information in your findings section. Having a quotation or short case example can be an important way to add richer detail to your numbers.

Section 5: Interpreting the Findings

Interpretation means looking beyond the data itself and asking what the results mean in relation to your evaluation questions. It is not always easy to get a sense of the importance of your findings when you first look at the data—you may lose the most important point or you may overemphasize a minor finding. So try to stand back from your findings and look at the broader picture before finalizing your report.

It is always a good idea to review the results with selected stakeholders before completing an evaluation report. This review can be accomplished by circulating an interim or draft report and holding a meeting to discuss it together. Discussions with others can bring out new perspectives on the meaning of your findings. This step is especially important if there are unexpected or puzzling findings. You can always acknowledge in your report the possibility of more than one interpretation of your findings.

QUICK TIP

People are inundated with information—it is a good idea to place additional sections of the report (e.g., data tables, evaluation plan, survey instruments) in an appendix. This allows people who are keenly interested in a particular topic to access this information while still keeping the main body of the report succinct.

Section 6: Closing the Evaluation Report

The concluding section is paramount to ensuring use of an evaluation. It informs the next steps for a program's process or future. There are different approaches to framing the closing section of a report. Some include

- **Recommendations.** The recommendations should address specific findings and be feasible, realistic, actionable, and tailored to intended users. A list of recommendations is especially useful for evaluations that are intended for program improvement or to inform a decision-making process.
- **Lessons Learned.** A retroactive account of a program's experiences may be framed through lessons learned. A report that details lessons learned is particularly useful in contributing to public health practices and reporting for accountability purposes.

The selection of one or a combination of these approaches should be based on the intended use of the evaluation by the intended users.

KEEPING IT OFF THE BOOKSHELF— THE IMPORTANCE OF DISSEMINATION

Writing the report is not the end point or the final step in the evaluation process. To ensure use of evaluation findings, work must continue beyond completing a final report. A plan for disseminating the evaluation findings will avoid having evaluation reports "sit on the shelf."

Effective dissemination requires a plan to get the right knowledge to the right people at the right time, and to help them apply it in ways that may improve a program's performance. Disseminating findings and recommendations in a timely manner provides the chance to improve a program's developmental practice and organizational performance. Effective and efficient dissemination can help build meaning and understanding, develop support, and generate learning opportunities.

This section describes the five steps you can take to increase the likelihood that evaluation data will be used.

Step 1: Create a Dissemination Plan

Dissemination needs to be an intentional activity. Knowing what resources are available to support dissemination will provide clear guidance on the scope of possibilities. An effective dissemination plan selects from the wide range of tools that are available and identifies one or more that are tailored to achieve your dissemination goals (see Table 2).

Your Dissemination Plan Answers These Questions

- Who is the target audience?
- What medium will you use to disseminate findings—hard copy print, electronic, presentations, briefings?
- How, where, and when will findings be used?
- Who is responsible for dissemination?
- What resources are available to accomplish the work? What are the follow-up activities after release?
- How will follow-up activities be monitored?

Table 2. Sample dissemination plan template

Audience	Product	Medium (print, electronic, verbal)	Release Date	Person Responsible	Follow-Up Activities
State policymakers	2-page summary	Print	Oct. 2013	Staff A	Press conference
Community stakeholders	Slides	Verbal	Nov. 2013	Staff B	Internal project meeting to discuss

Step 2: Identify a Person to Oversee the Dissemination Plan

Identify a person to lead the dissemination effort. This person makes certain that the dissemination plan is carried out. This person should have experience making information accessible and understandable to different audiences.

QUICK TIP

For every product you prepare, always ask yourself

- **Who is the intended audience?**
- **What is the key message?**
- **What data and information should be emphasized?**

Step 3: Know the Current Landscape

Recognize that most reports have a shelf-life and findings have a "relevancy date." Be knowledgeable of your context and select optimal release times. For example, if there is a great deal of media coverage about a topic related to your work, such as helping families stay healthy, you may wish to be connected to an existing press release or press conference. By the same token, if there has been negative publicity that could be associated with your topic, you may wish to "plan around" this coverage.

Step 4: Consider the Timing and Frequency

Always consider timing and frequency of products. Dissemination works best when multiple products (i.e., full report, summary report, evaluation brief) and channels (i.e., print, verbal, and Web) are used.

Step 5: Stay Involved

Make certain there is involvement beyond the dissemination of the report. Convene follow-up discussions and facilitation as needed to enhance use. You can take advantage of events that may help keep continued focus on your findings such as social media, brown bag lunches, meetings, conferences, or workshops.

CONCLUSION

When embarking upon evaluation reporting, remember to

- Address these three key considerations to maximize the use of your evaluation report—
  - Engage your stakeholders
  - Revisit the evaluation purpose
  - Define your target audience
- Be selective in what you report. There are many facets of an evaluation that may be written up and shared; however, an important step is to identify the evidence that will help inform decision makers and meet stakeholder needs.
- Be mindful of how you report. Prepare an evaluation report that is going to drive the intended users to action. This is one way of making your report meaningful and actionable.
- Disseminate, disseminate, disseminate. Get the report moving and into the hands of those who will use it.

Refer to the appendix for a companion checklist that highlights the main concepts of this guide.

RESOURCES

Importance of Evaluation Reporting to Ensure Use

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APPENDIX

Checklist for Evaluation Reporting: A Guide to Help Ensure Use of Evaluation Findings

Key Considerations for Effective Evaluation Reporting

Engage stakeholders

- Prioritize stakeholder evaluation needs
- Identify mechanism for open and ongoing communication with stakeholders
- Involve stakeholders during various phases of the evaluation: planning, -data collection, report and product development, and dissemination

Define and revisit purpose of the evaluation

- Craft a clearly defined purpose statement that explains the reason for and intended use of findings
- Revisit the purpose statement if there have been changes in
  - Stakeholders
  - Intended users of report
  - Priorities of program or evaluation
  - Information needs of the evaluation
  - Programmatic or organizational context

Define target audience

- Identify the target audiences for the evaluation report
- Identify the preferred media and communication channels for the target audience
- Ensure information is presented in plain language and is culturally appropriate
- Consider how members of the target audience will interpret the findings based on their understanding and experiences

Evaluation Reports

- Always review and refer to reporting requirements set by the funding source to ensure compliance
- Decide whether a traditional or action-oriented report is most appropriate for sharing information
- Ensure the report includes these sections
  - Summary
  - Background
  - Methods
  - Limitations
  - Findings
  - Closing and conclusion
  - Appendices
- Choose the best mode of delivery—written, verbal, or electronic
- Select the product that best suits the evaluation purpose and stakeholder needs
- Consider creating different summaries for different audiences
- Use active voice
- Avoid jargon and technical language
- Use graphics and illustrations
- Be selective in the information presented
- Call attention to important findings and possible next steps

Dissemination

- Create a dissemination plan
- Identify someone to oversee implementation of the dissemination plan
- Know the current social and political landscape or environment related to the topic
- Consider timing and frequency of dissemination of products
- Stay involved beyond report dissemination through events and social media

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