EVALUATE ACTIONS

Guidance and tools

Evaluating your efforts is an important step in the community health improvement process. This allows you to be sure that what you are doing is working in the way you intended and that your efforts are as effective and efficient as possible. Accountability also increases the likelihood that funders will continue to invest in your efforts.

Purpose:
Evaluate whether policies and programs are working as intended in order to focus collective efforts efficiently and effectively.

Who to Involve:
Multi-sector team of partners, policy and program staff, people with expertise in evaluation, decision makers who were key in adopting your policy or program, community members, and other stakeholders

Evaluate Actions: Start Guide
We know evaluating our efforts is important, but we haven’t planned for evaluation yet.

Evaluate Actions: Act Guide
We have an evaluation plan in place, and we want to collect data consistently to measure impact and communicate our results effectively.
Evaluate Actions: Start Guide

Prepare to Evaluate

The Take Action Cycle shows evaluation at the end of the cycle, but in reality evaluation should be incorporated throughout your community health improvement process.

As you move through the Take Action Cycle, your evaluation will take on different purposes.

- As you Work Together you’ll want to continuously evaluate your team; you’ll find tools for this in Work Together.
- As you Assess Needs & Resources, you will want to consider what measures are available to monitor progress over time.
- As you Choose Effective Policies & Programs and plan to Act on What’s Important, you may use evaluation tools to gain insight into how your community should address priority issues.
- As you Act on What’s Important, you may use evaluation tools to improve a policy or program. Once your selected solution has been implemented, you will want to evaluate its impacts.

Involve your core team in deciding how and when you will use evaluation:

- To gain insight (also called formative evaluation):
  - Assess the level of community interest in a desired policy or program, and use that information to plan how to implement it.
  - Identify challenges to and opportunities for a desired policy or program, and use that information to advocate for it.

- To improve a policy or program (also called process evaluation):
  - Monitor the implementation of your selected policy or program, and use the results to enhance components of the policy or program.
  - Survey your target audience, and use that information to improve the content and delivery of your communication, policy, or program.

- To evaluate program effects (also called impact, results or outcome evaluation):
  - Measure the extent to which your outcome indicators are being met, and use the results to improve your policy or program and be accountable to your funders.
  - Use information about which target populations benefited most from your policy or program to target future efforts more effectively.
  - Use outcomes to be accountable to your community and to your policy decision makers.
As you work with your core team to clarify how and when evaluation will be used, consider:

- What do stakeholders want to know? How will they use the data?
- What does your community need and want to know?
- What do funders require?

You will also want to determine who will do the evaluation. Evaluation is best thought of as a team effort, and you should assemble an evaluation team to develop and guide the process. (1) You may also consider hiring an outside evaluator to work with your evaluation team. Learn more about the various options in Chapter 3 of the Program Manager’s Guide to Evaluation. Chapter 4 provides guidance for finding and managing an evaluator.

There is a cost associated with conducting an evaluation. The time, money and resources you spend on evaluation are an investment in your efforts. Evaluation is essential if you want to demonstrate that your policy or program is having the intended impact.

How much you need to invest in evaluation depends on a variety of factors, including the scope of your policy or program, the number of outcomes that you want to assess, who conducts the evaluation, and your team’s available evaluation-related resources. Evaluation cost estimates range from 5 to 7 percent of your total budget to 15 to 20 percent.(2, 3)

Suggested tools:

- Program Manager’s Guide to Evaluation: Chapter 2 What is Program Evaluation? (from the Department of Health and Human Services) lays out the advantages and disadvantages for different types of evaluation teams.
- Program Manager’s Guide to Evaluation: Chapter 3 Who Should Conduct Your Evaluation? (from the Department of Health and Human Services) provides an overview of program evaluation including the basic questions answered by an evaluation and what is involved in conducting an evaluation.
- Program Manager’s Guide to Evaluation: Chapter 4 How Do You Hire and Manage an Outside Evaluator? (from the Department of Health and Human Services) provides guidance for the logistics of finding and managing an outside evaluator.

Engage stakeholders to develop and gain consensus around your evaluation plan

Just as a successful community health improvement process begins with diverse groups of people working together toward a common vision, a successful evaluation process also begins with engaging those with a vested interest in the implementation and/or impacts of your selected policy or program.

You’ve likely already working with a diverse set of stakeholders. Review the guidance and tools in Work Together with an eye toward evaluation. Take some time to brainstorm about who your stakeholders are before you create your evaluation plan. Is there anyone else who might have a vested interest in the outcomes of your policy or program?

Each type of stakeholder will have a different perspective on your policy or program as well as what they want to learn from the evaluation. You can group stakeholders in any or all of the four main categories, depending on your specific policy or program.
• **Implementers**: those involved in making the policy or program happen.
• **Partners**: those who actively support the policy or program.
• **Participants**: those served or affected by the policy or program.
• **Decision makers**: those in a position to do or decide something about the policy or program. (4)

Now that you’ve identified who should be at the evaluation table, how should each stakeholder be involved? Involving everyone in each step would be unwieldy. Decisions about stakeholder involvement are not easy, but can be made according to their needs and interests, authority or control of resources, or specific knowledge or skills. Certain stakeholders might be key for certain stages of the process.(4)

The [CDC’s Physical Activity Evaluation Handbook](https://www.cdc.gov/physicalactivity/pdf/evaluation_handbook.pdf) (PDF) includes questions for stakeholders that can be used throughout the evaluation process and help you understand different stakeholders’ interests in your efforts and identify evaluation questions.

- What is important about this policy or program?
- Who do you represent or why are you interested in this policy or program?
- What would you like this policy or program to accomplish?
- What are the critical evaluation questions?
- How will you use the results of this evaluation?
- What resources (e.g., time, evaluation experience, funding) can you contribute to this evaluation?(4)

**Suggested tools:**
- [Developing an Evaluation Plan](https://www.cdc.gov/physicalactivity/pdf/evaluation_plan.pdf) (from the Community Tool Box) includes a general discussion of the different types of stakeholders to engage in your evaluation.
- [Engaging Stakeholders](https://www.cdc.gov/programs-framework/evaluation/engaging-stakeholders.html) (PDF from the CDC’s Program Evaluation Framework) gives a definition of engaging stakeholders, explains the role of this step in evaluation, and provides some guidance on related activities.
- [Physical Activity Evaluation Handbook: Step 1 Engage Stakeholders](https://www.cdc.gov/physicalactivity/pdf/evaluation_handbook.pdf) (PDF from the CDC) describes how to engage stakeholders and provides examples of stakeholders specific to Physical Activity Programs. The handbook also includes a worksheet that can be adapted to other policies or programs, pp. 11-15.

**Review policy or program goals and decide which are most important to evaluate**

The work you do in [Act on What’s Important](https://www.cdc.gov/physicalactivity/pdf/evaluation_plan.pdf) will shape your evaluation plan. Look back at the goals and plans you developed for your policy or program. What are you setting out to accomplish? What was the logic that drove selection of your policy or program? What are you doing to accomplish your goals? Do you need to evaluate all of the goals you’ve set?

If you haven’t developed a logic model or grounded your actions in a theory of change, you may want to take time to go back to Act on What’s Important and [clearly define your strategy](https://www.cdc.gov/physicalactivity/pdf/evaluation_plan.pdf) – what you want to achieve, and why. It is especially important to think about setting short-, medium-, and long-term goals. If you only focus on long-term goals (such as reducing obesity), you will not be able to demonstrate progress and your initiative will likely lose momentum. But if you focus on short- or medium-term goals (such as increasing physical activity by passing a policy to include sidewalks and bicycle lanes in street construction projects or increasing children’s fruit and vegetable consumption by adopting a farm-to-
school policy in your school district), you will be able to demonstrate progress throughout your initiative.

Based on the goals you determine to be most important to evaluate, what evaluation questions do you want to answer?

- **Planning and Implementation:** How well was the policy or program planned? Is it being implemented as intended? This is often done through ongoing monitoring of key indicators.
  
  **Sample Questions:**
  - What are we doing? When? Where? How much?
  - Are we on track with time and resources?
  - Are we delivering the program (or implementing the policy) as planned? If not, why has it varied?
  - Are we reaching the target audience?
  - Was the problem definition accurate?
  - Did the policy evolve during the process? How?

- **Impact:** Did the policy or program have the intended results? Data collected as part of your ongoing process evaluation may inform your impact evaluation.
  
  **Sample Questions:**
  - What is different as a result of our actions?
  - What did we accomplish? Did we achieve our objectives? Why or why not?
  - Were there any unintended effects of the policy or program?

**Suggested tools:**

- The goals you developed for your policy or program in *Act on What’s Important*
- The logic model you developed for policy or program in *Act on What’s Important*
- Describing the Program and Focusing the Evaluation Design (PDFs from the CDC’s Program Evaluation Framework) explain the role of these two steps in the evaluation process and provides guidance on related activities.
- Developing an Evaluation Plan (from the Community Tool Box) includes additional sample evaluation questions and possible methods for answering those questions.
- Developing an Evaluation Plan: Tools (from the Community Tool Box) includes a sample table that could be used to develop evaluation questions and methods.
- Physical Activity Evaluation Handbook: Focus the Evaluation Worksheet (PDF from the CDC) offers prompts to help you identify the purpose of your evaluation and potential uses for evaluation results. The worksheet can be adapted for other policies or programs, p. 22.

**Identify indicators and how to collect data to monitor progress**

Once you’ve decided which goals you will evaluate and the evaluation questions you need to answer, you’ll next want to think about indicators (i.e., specific process or impact measures) and sources of data. For each evaluation question you pose, you will need indicators to answer that question.
• **Process measures** are activities that take place during the initiative that help you determine how well things are going. Examples includes:
  
  – Participation: number of participants, frequency of participation
  – Communication: number of media stories, letters to the editor, or op-eds about your efforts, number of people on your email or mailing list, number of messages sent using email or mailing list
  – Activities: number of meetings with policymakers, number of classes or workshops held
  – Enforcement: number of variances from established protocols, number of citations issued for breaking laws

• **Impact measures** explain the overall impact that occurs as a result of your actions. Outcome measures highlight the changes that happen in the community as a result of the work done by your initiative. Examples include:
  
  – Participant-level indicators such as changes in knowledge, behavior, or perceptions of an issue
  – Community-level indicators relevant to your priority-issue such as changes in environments, laws, cultural norms, health status indicators

The Community Tool Box provides a helpful overview of how to find and use community-level indicators. As you select your indicators, consider whether they are available, accurate, possible to collect, and relevant to the initiative.(5)

Where will you get your data? Sources of data include people, documents, observations, or existing data sources. Following are some considerations for selecting data sources:

• Use different types of sources to assess different perspectives.
• Clearly state your criteria for selecting sources.
• Use both qualitative and quantitative sources.
• Collect data from enough people to make results reliable, but not from so many that data collection is impractical.
• Estimate in advance the amount of data you will collect (consider consulting professional help).
• Minimize the burden on respondents (e.g., don’t make the survey or interview too long).(4)

**Suggested tools:**

- [Gathering Credible Evidence](PDF from the CDC’s Program Evaluation Framework) explains the role of this step in the evaluation process and provides guidance on related activities.
- [Gathering Information: Monitoring your Progress](from the Community Tool Box) includes guidance on monitoring process and outcome measures.
- [Gathering and Using Community-Level Indicators](from the Community Tool Box)
- [Physical Activity Evaluation Handbook: Gather Credible Evidence Worksheet](PDF from the CDC) provides a table that aligns your evaluation questions with indicators, data sources and performance indicators (sometimes also referred to as benchmarks for success), p. 28.
Identify benchmarks for success

Before collecting data, you should decide on the expected effects of the policy or program on each indicator. This “goal” for each indicator, your benchmark for success, is often based on an expected change from a known baseline. Benchmarks should be achievable, but challenging, and should consider how far along the policy or program is in implementation, your logic model, and your stakeholders’ expectations.(4)

Benchmarks for success, sometimes also called performance indicators, are most often based on past performance. You may want to use the data you collected in Assess Needs & Resources to help set your benchmarks for success. If you don’t have data on past performance, you may want to wait until baseline data have been gathered before specifying your benchmark. Another way to avoid setting arbitrary benchmarks is to review the impacts of comparable policies or programs and/or look to the evaluation literature for parallels.(6)

Suggested tools:

- Gathering Credible Evidence (PDF from the CDC’s Program Evaluation Framework) explains the role of this step in the evaluation process and provides guidance on related activities.
- Data collected in Assess Needs & Resources
- Physical Activity Evaluation Handbook: Gather Credible Evidence Worksheet (PDF from the CDC) provides a table that aligns your evaluation questions with indicators, data sources and performance indicators (sometimes also referred to as benchmarks for success), p. 28.
EVALUATE ACTIONS: ACT GUIDE

Review Evaluate Actions: Start Guide

Has your team:

- Engaged stakeholders to review and gain consensus around your evaluation plan?
- Reviewed program goals and decided which are most important to evaluate?
- Identified indicators and how to collect data to monitor progress?
- Identified benchmarks for success?

If not, you may want to review the Evaluate Actions: Start Guide.

Work with key parties to establish data collection systems

Your evaluation plan will help you establish data collection systems, determine who will collect and use the data, and look forward to how you will analyze the data to provide insights into your policy or program. Innovation Network’s Point-K: Tell Me More! is a free online resource of evaluation tools including a Logic Model Builder and an Evaluation Plan Builder that can assist you with this planning process. (You will need to register first.)

As you consider your data collection process, it’s important to involve groups or individuals that are disparately affected by the issue you are addressing. A collaborative approach involving diverse parties will build ownership in the evaluation results, increase stakeholders’ evaluation skills, and increase the likelihood evaluators will be sensitive to participants, community context, and the logistics of carrying out a viable evaluation. Work with key parties to:

- Clarify what data will be collected, from whom, and how best to get it.
  - Decide what type of information is easily obtainable from other sources and what new data you will need to collect.
  - Consider the data you collected in the Assess Needs & Resources step. Would collecting from these same sources help answer some of your evaluation questions? As an example, see Assessing Community Needs and Resources: Possible Community Health Indicators from the Community Tool Box.
  - As in Assess Needs & Resources, consider using a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods to give your team the best picture of whether you actions are effective. Most of the sections of Assessing Community Needs & Resources in the Community Tool Box are devoted to different methods for collecting information. Each section provides an in-depth description of what the method is and why, when and how you should use it.
– Make sure the data you plan to collect is relevant to your issues, policy or program.
– Identify the people, documents, or observations that will provide information.

• Develop clear procedures for gathering, analyzing and interpreting data.

– Consider how you will analyze both quantitative and qualitative data.
– Build in considerations for different cultural perspectives of respondents, such as language and literacy needs.

• Develop data collection forms/instruments.

– Make sure your forms and instruments measure what you want to measure and that they will provide similar answers with the same population even if administered at different times or places. The Community Tool Box provides step-by-step guidance, examples, tools, and checklists for data collection in Some Methods for Evaluating Comprehensive Community Initiatives.
– Surveys are commonly used to collect evaluation information from participants in a program or those affected by a policy. Read Conducting Surveys to better understand the pros and cons of this data collection method.
  o If you decide to develop surveys, see SurveyMonkey®, SurveyKey®, Formsite®, or Zoomerang® for self-help software. (These are offered as examples and generally have a free trial option. None are specifically endorsed by County Health Rankings & Roadmaps).

• Develop training and technical support for those who will collect and analyze the data.
• Schedule data collection activities, including pilots so the data collection process can be improved
• Develop a system for analyzing the data: What will be reviewed and how often?
• Develop a system for sharing information with stakeholders.

Suggested tools:

• Data you collected in the Assess Needs & Resources step
• Assessing Community Needs and Resources: Possible Community Health Indicators (from the Community Tool Box) includes a variety of indicators (e.g., children in poverty, unemployment rate), what they are an indicator of (e.g., social environment, prosperity), and potential sources of data (e.g., Census, state employment office).
• Assessing Community Needs and Resources (from the Community Tool Box) includes 21 sections dedicated to different methods for collecting information (e.g., Conducting Focus Groups, Conducting Surveys, and Qualitative Methods to Assess Community Issues).
• Some Methods for Evaluating Comprehensive Community Initiatives (from the Community Tool Box) includes different methods for evaluating community initiatives. Each section provides an in-depth description of what the method is and why, when and how you should use it.
• Point-K: Tell Me More! (from Innovation Network) is a free searchable resource database focused on resources for evaluation and capacity building. More than 300 reports, articles, tip sheets, and how-tos. (You will need to register first.)
• Conducting Surveys (from the Community Tool Box) describes the pros and cons of using surveys as well as how to use sampling as a methodology.
Self-help software for survey development: SurveyMonkey®, SurveyKey®, Formsite®, or Zoomerang® (These are offered as examples and generally have a free trial option. None are specifically endorsed by County Health Rankings & Roadmaps.)

Collect credible data

Now that you’ve developed your data collection systems it’s time to put them to work and start collecting your data.

- Train people how to collect the data.
- Track and organize the data as you go, both to keep the evaluation in progress and to protect confidentiality of the data.
- Collect only data that will be used and use all data collected.
- Check in throughout the data collection process to reflect on what’s working, what could be improved, and whether you have answered your original evaluation questions.

Throughout the data collection process, also periodically stop to review the quality of the data you’re gathering. Some questions to consider:

- Do the data reflect the people who live in the community? The demographics of respondents should match the demographics of the priority population.
- Do the data reflect the behavior of the priority population? Are you measuring short- and medium-term outcomes of behavior change?
- Are the data plausible? Sometimes sampling strategies don’t detect what is actually happening, and other methods may be needed.(3)

Monitor progress toward achieving benchmarks

Using the data collection and analysis system you established, monitor progress toward your short-, medium- and long-term goals. It’s helpful to periodically review the goals and benchmarks you established in your evaluation plan. If you developed sustainable, measurable, achievable, realistic and time-defined (SMART) goals, use Monitoring SMART Goal Achievement (Word document) to make sure your SMART goals are being achieved and to think about corrective action strategies when they are not.

Consider using a Balanced Scorecard to monitor progress. Learn more about what a Balanced Scorecard is at Balanced Scorecard Basics. Maximizing the Results Scorecard (p. 6-14) provides specific examples of scorecards for collaborations, community health improvement, clinical care, and others. The Heartland Health Story (PDF) describes how one community is using performance measures to track progress on benchmarks outlined in their Community Health Scorecard Overview.

Suggested tools:

- Monitoring SMART Goal Achievement (Word document from StratisHealth.org) can help you monitor your SMART goals and consider corrective action strategies when your goals are not being achieved.
- Balanced Scorecard Basics (from Balanced Scorecard Institute) provides an introduction to a tool and methodology for monitoring progress on key indicators.
Engage stakeholders to review evaluation results and adjust your policy implementation or program(s) as necessary

Now that you’ve been monitoring your progress and collecting evaluation data, you can use your evaluation results to make recommendations for continuing, expanding, redesigning or abandoning your policy or program. Go back to your initial assessment and problem definition and determine whether your efforts are impacting the problem you set out to address. As you think about recommendations, you may want to revisit the work your team did to develop your evaluation plan, including your evaluation purpose and intended use.

This is an important point to re-engage stakeholders and solicit their feedback. Following are some tips for doing so:

- Consider your stakeholders’ values and align recommendations when possible.
- Share draft recommendations with stakeholders and solicit feedback.
- Relate your recommendations to the original purposes and uses of the evaluation.
- Target your recommendations appropriately for each audience.

Once you’ve vetted your recommendations with stakeholders, you can begin to use the evaluation findings to adjust your policy and program as necessary.

Suggested tools:

- Justifying Conclusions (PDF from the CDC’s Program Evaluation Framework) explains the role of this step in the evaluation process and provides guidance on related activities.
- Ensuring Use and Sharing Lessons Learned (PDF from the CDC’s Program Evaluation Framework) explains the role of this step in the evaluation process and provides guidance on related activities.
- Checklist for Ensuring Effective Evaluation Reports (PDF from the CDC’s Program Evaluation Framework) includes format and content considerations for developing your evaluation report.
- Physical Activity Evaluation Handbook: Step 6 Ensure Use and Share Lessons Learned (PDF from the CDC) provides a table that aligns your evaluation questions with indicators, data sources and performance indicators (sometimes also referred to as benchmarks for success), pp. 32-35.

Share your results

Sharing your results is an important part of your evaluation, but you may consider different reporting strategies depending on your purpose and audience. An evaluation report can be used to:

- Guide decisions about future policy and program implementation
- Tell the “story” of your efforts and demonstrate the impact of the policy or program
• Advocate for your efforts with potential funders
• Help other communities learn from your experiences (8)
• Contribute to the knowledge base about what works and what doesn’t work
• Show that policy or system change can effectively impact individual behaviors and health outcomes

Suggested tools:

• **Ensuring Use and Sharing Lessons Learned** (PDF from the CDC’s Program Evaluation Framework) explains the role of this step in the evaluation process and provides guidance on related activities.
• **Checklist for Ensuring Effective Evaluation Reports** (PDF from the CDC’s Program Evaluation Framework) includes format and content considerations for developing your evaluation report.
• **Program Manager’s Guide to Evaluation: Chapter 9 How Can You Report What You Have Learned?** (from the Department of Health and Human Services) includes tips for preparing an evaluation report and disseminating your results.
• **Communicating Information to Funders for Support and Accountability** (from the Community Tool Box) discusses sharing your evaluation results with audiences, choosing a format for the audience, and the steps in developing presentation.