

## Laying the Groundwork Before Your First Evaluation Details of Audio

This is a new presentation that we haven't yet presented as part of our evaluation core curriculum, so you're in for a treat!

The learning objectives are for you to:

- Understand five critical activities for your first grant cycle
- Recognize how these activities lay the foundation for future evaluation work
- And learn how to plan ahead to ensure that your program achieves key first-cycle milestones.

Pre-award time period, 6-12 months before the program is expected to start.

This is the time for you to do everything you can to set your program up for success in its first year.

We understand that there will be variation in how programs use this "planning year" – some programs already exist and are just adding AmeriCorps members; some programs are in formula and can make refinements well in advance to set themselves up for success in competitive; some programs actually have planning grants (either commission formula or tribal grantees); some programs are brand new and may have varying levels of resources they can devote to planning for a grant they may or may not get, but if they can devote any time/resources to this, they should, and they should definitely use their time wisely from the time they learn they are funded to when they will begin enrolling members.

Regardless, the planning period is the time to think through risks/threats to implementation and mitigate them.

Since programs are expected to begin collecting data immediately in year 1, they should develop their data collection systems and performance measurement plans during the planning period to the extent that is realistic for them.

We're going to discuss these six activities: (1) program design and implementation, (2) building and refining data collection systems, (3) performance measurement, (4) staff capacity and responsibilities, (5) evaluation planning, and (6) becoming a learning organization.

The activities we will discuss today are foundational and should not be afterthoughts in the first three years.

It is important to budget money and staff time in the first 3 years for the activities we will be outlining in this workshop, just as you would later budget for evaluation activities.

All of these activities should be occurring during all three years of the first grant cycle, as shown on this slide.

How much you focus on each will obviously ebb and flow over time, but it's important to keep focused on all of them from the start.

You want to set yourself up for success in the first grant cycle and beyond. Don't wait until it's too late to put these foundational elements in place!

As an agency, CNCS continues to invest in a portfolio of programs reflecting a range of evidence, from evidence-informed to evidence-based. The diagram on this slide illustrates CNCS's approach to building evidence which emphasizes that evidence of effectiveness is built over time and falls along a continuum. Evidence should be appropriate for a program's life cycle and investment of public dollars. This diagram shows different stages to situate a program's cumulative body of evidence along an evidence continuum. Having a long-term research agenda will help programs progress from stage to stage along the evidence continuum in a resource efficient manner. Programs are not expected to follow the same linear path to building evidence along the continuum. Some programs may accumulate evidence from output performance measurement activities (stage 2) to having causal evidence of effectiveness from an RCT/QED (stage 5). Others may move from collecting output performance measurement data (stage 2) to having pre/post outcome data (stage 3). Programs may also go back and forth between stages as they refine and adjust their program models over time.

The key stages that a program goes through as they build their evidence base are shown in the diagram.

- Stage 1: Identify a strong program design
- Stage 2: Ensure effective implementation
- Stage 3: Assess program outcomes
- Stage 4: Obtain evidence of positive program outcomes
- Stage 5: Attain causal evidence of positive program outcomes

It's important to note that these stages are not mutually exclusive and they do overlap, so consider the continuum to be a guide.

For more information check out our new Evidence Continuum video on the Evaluation Resources page!

The activities we discuss today will mostly fit into Stage 1 and Stage 2.

First, we will discuss program design and implementation. The goal of this activity is to improve your program design and ensure that your program is being implemented effectively.

This means refining your logic model, assessing implementation, possibly conducting a more formal process evaluation, and using the resulting data to adjust your program model as needed.

Your program's logic model is much more than just filling out the boxes. The logic model should clearly explain all the inputs and activities involved in running your program, and it should clearly lay out the outcomes you expect to achieve.

A well-defined program model is specific and complete – it leaves little room for question or interpretation about how your program operates and what it intends to achieve.

It is critical to understand (and minimize) variation in implementation unless there is a good reason for it.

The weaker or less well-defined the program model is, the more difficult it is to ensure effective implementation. A poorly defined program model is also very difficult to evaluate down the road.

As you refine your logic model, you want to discuss it with all relevant stakeholders and ensure that everyone is on the same page about what the program model is, and what it isn't.

You also want to ensure that all the pieces of the model are connected, and connected in a plausible and achievable way.

One of your handouts is the Impact Evaluability Assessment Tool, which we will discuss in more depth later in the presentation. Here we have highlighted the sections of the tool related to the theory of change and the program's timeframe. This is on page 3 of your handout.

This tool can serve as a guide as you refine your logic model. Think about the questions posed here:

- Is there a coherent, logical program theory?
- Are strategies and activities logically connected to the intended outcomes and desired changes?
- Is program participation clearly defined?
- Is there a shared understanding among all stakeholders about the core elements of the program and how it operates, and what the expected outcomes are?
- Does the intervention have a clearly defined timeframe?
- Do all stakeholders have reasonable, shared expectations about when outcomes will occur?

It is ok if implementing the program causes you to learn that some parts of your model are not plausible or some outcomes may not be realistic.

For example, say that as you implement your program and collect data on that implementation process, and the data show that beneficiaries require a more intensive intervention (more one-on-one time with members, for instance) than originally expected. Your program may decide to spend more time serving fewer people than you originally proposed in your logic model, in order to achieve the desired comes.

The logic model you submit in your application may be your best/ideal version. Know that that the model may change as it is implemented, and it is important to document those changes because you have to evaluate what you are actually doing

For example, suppose that member time sheets show that sites are providing more training than expected. The program analyzes the data and learns that sites are having to provide follow-up training to address concepts that members did not master during their initial orientation. The training component of the program model can be changed to reflect that--either the program can standardize additional training across all sites or change what is offered at orientation.

If there is variation in implementation that cannot be mitigated for whatever reason, it is important that you document that. Later on, when you plan an evaluation of your program, you will need to understand where and how implementation may be different and account for it in the evaluation design.

Here again is another portion of the Impact Evaluability Assessment Tool, on page 4 of your handout, this time the section related to program implementation. As you assess implementation of your program, ask these questions:

- Is the program implemented with fidelity to the logic model?
- If the program is being adapted or revised, is that based on systematic data, and can the changes be documented?
- Are staff and members qualified and properly trained?

- Are there enough staff and members to successfully implement the program?
- Are you tracking service provision and service usage using appropriate data collection methods?

Next, we'll talk about building and refining data collection systems.

From day one (or even before day one!) it is critically important that you have systems in place to collect and manage high-quality program data.

You'll need to figure out how you want to collect data, build data collection systems, put a system in place to manage the data, figure out how you will access other administrative data (if applicable), and in all cases ensure that the data you collect is high-quality.

First, you should look at your logic model and think through what data you need to collect—including data about outputs, outcomes, and implementation processes.

In addition to output/outcome performance measurement data, you should be tracking implementation data. This includes output data other than beneficiaries served – for example, data about dosage/delivery of the intervention, data that makes it possible to ensure unduplicated counts, track multiple interventions provided to the same individual; demographic data; privacy concerns, etc.

Where do you start? Think about how you want to be able access, analyze, and use the data and by look at your logic model. Begin with the end in mind.

Instrument development: don't just wing it. We have resources online about data collection for both performance measurement and evaluation. There are lots of high-quality instruments out there that you can use, and in most cases you will not have to create your own from scratch. You may want to work with an expert to develop instruments.

Designing valid and reliable instruments means that in many cases they can also be used later for evaluation.

You also need a data management system to store your data and allow you to access it and use it for program improvement, reporting, and decision making.

This can be either a very costly endeavor or not.

Low cost tools include Google docs, Microsoft Excel, and other widely available resources.

Excel even has pretty sophisticated data analysis options that will accomplish most of your analytic needs at this stage.

Eventually you will likely want to invest in a more sophisticated option, especially as your data storage needs increase and you require more complicated analytic tools.

Talk to other grantees about systems that have worked well for them.

We put some examples up here, but there are many options out there.

You need to ensure that the data you collect is high-quality. This means the data are:

- Valid: the data mean what they are supposed to mean
- Complete: everyone is reporting a full set of data

- Consistent: everyone uses the same data collection methods so that the same data are collected, in the same way
- Accurate: the data are free from errors
- Verifiable: Everyone follows the same standard practices and checks their data

Data quality is very important. It means that you are describing your program's achievements in a trustworthy manner.

Check out Sarah Yue's data quality course for more information

All grantees are required to collect and report performance measures to CNCS, but we really want you to be using performance measures data for program improvement.

Performance measures are not a compliance exercise – they should be useful data that will help your program accomplish its goals.

You will need to select appropriate performance measures, determine how often you will measure, adjust the measures over time as needed, use performance measurement data for program management, and eventually connect performance measurement and management processes to evaluation.

We know that many grantees think of performance measurement as just collecting data on the output(s)/outcome(s) in their grant, but really good performance measurement is much more than that.

Especially with regard to implementation, you should start thinking about what other performance measures you need to be tracking: member enrollment/retention (already should be tracking for compliance purposes), member training outputs/outcomes, member supervision milestones, data on how the intervention is being implemented.

Or, you may be tracking key performance measures but don't know how that data can be used to understand and strengthen implementation, which is what we'll talk about in the next slide.

You want to set targets that are ambitious yet achievable, and you may need to adjust your measures or your targets over time.

You should not just be collecting and reporting performance measurement data to CNCS – you need to use that data for program improvement.

In order to achieve your program goals, you need to know if your goals are being met. One way to do that is by looking at performance measures data.

Good measures can help you understand how your program is working. For example, let's say that you want to understand more about program implementation, specifically member training. You could create a performance measure that looks at member knowledge gains at pre-service and in-service training sessions. These data can help you understand a key component of your program, member training, specifically how it is implemented. If targets are not achieved on this measure, you will know that member training is not being implemented as designed, and you should work to improve it so that targets are met.

Performance management should be a continuous feedback loop, where you measure, analyze, identify improvements, make programmatic decisions that are grounded in data, and strengthen implementation as needed.

For more information on performance measures, check out the Performance Measures Core Curriculum on the [nationalservice.gov](https://nationalservice.gov) Resources page.

Here's an example of good performance management. A moderate sized AmeriCorps program operates a housing assistance hotline, where those in need of shelter can be connected with available housing units.

The program selected the following Economic Opportunity performance measures: O5 (Number of economically disadvantaged individuals, including homeless individuals, receiving housing services) and O11 (Number of economically disadvantaged individuals, including homeless individuals, transitioned into safe, healthy, affordable housing).

They set a target of fielding 500 calls during the project year, and placing 600 individuals in housing. At the end of the project year, the program reviews its data and discovers that they have exceeded their call target for O5 by 400 calls, fielding 900 calls during the project year. Additionally, they discover that they have only placed 300 individuals in housing.

Reviewing the member call logs, used to track the number of calls fielded for O5, they find that individuals have called the hotline multiple times in order to secure their placement in housing. The program had anticipated that placement would be completed in the course of one call. Further, the program finds that the lower number of placements than the target of 600 for O11 reflects the fact that the placement process took longer than anticipated, requiring multiple touch points between the member and the client.

In response, the program uses this data to make program improvements. First, the program will make adjustments to the call intake process to allow clients to call back multiple times through a separate number, preserving the hotline for first time callers and allowing for triage of cases. In addition, the program will readjust their target for O11 to more accurately reflect the time intensiveness of the placement process and demand for services. Finally, for the PM in question (O5), individuals calling the hotline multiple times cannot be double-counted when reporting the PM actual. So the program would want to ensure, for data quality purposes, that they are only counting individuals once when reporting their PM data.

Performance measures should be collected on an ongoing basis and compared to a target level, whereas an evaluation is designed to answer a specific research question about the goals of the intervention.

Despite these differences, the two activities are closely linked and should be aligned.

Well-chosen performance measures can be the basis for future evaluation activities; for example, outcome measures can be extended or expanded upon, data collection instruments used for performance measures can often be used or adapted for evaluation, and reflecting on performance measures data can help when considering research questions for an evaluation.

Importantly, performance measurement should be ongoing, all the time, every year. It does not stop once you begin your first evaluation.

From day one, you need to be thinking about how you can build your staff's capacity to collect, manage, and utilize data.

We acknowledge that this may require a change in both individual mindset – because not a lot of people go into national service because they want to measure things – and in organizational culture.

However, the sooner you make staff development in this area a priority, the better you will fare down the line, and not just with CNCS. This is a core competency for 21<sup>st</sup> century managers.

Not only do you need to develop staff skills in these areas, but you need to assign responsibilities and sometimes engage external experts for more specialized or technical tasks.

We will touch on this last point, becoming a learning organization, toward the end of the presentation.

We don't expect staff to be experts, but they should be reasonably capable. Staff need to know how to collect high-quality data and manage that data, and at least one person on staff should have basic analytic skills.

It's important for program managers to know what they know and what they don't know, and what their staff know and don't know. That can help you figure out in which areas you need to seek outside expertise, or where you can target staff development activities and resources.

It's also important that responsibilities for data tasks are clearly defined and assigned. Key tasks need owners so that nothing is missed or overlooked.

Staff can check out the Evaluation and Performance Measurement Core Curricula, both available online on the Resources page.

For some technical or complicated data tasks, you'll want to engage external experts.

Experts can be particularly helpful when you are designing data collection instruments, conducting complicated analyses, or when you have questions about measurement or evaluation.

Tap into all available resources. Think about finding expertise through cooperative extension programs or universities, volunteer pro bono experts, your board, or consultants.

Talk to other programs in your network – tap their brains, see where they have sought out help.

Now we're going to take a few minutes to have you start filling out the Impact Evaluability Assessment Tool.

You can use this tool as a starting point/planning tool – we don't expect you to have all the answers now, and some of the pages will only be relevant down the road when you start planning an evaluation.

You could do the assessment annually, identify growth areas to focus on, make a plan, and assign responsibility for implementation of the plan, and assess again at the end of each year.

There is a lot in here, so for now we will highlight some of the areas of focus that would be likely to be the best use of time for programs in first three years: theory of change, and implementation.

- Theory of change is on page 3
- Implementation is on page 4.

To recap, we've covered the 1<sup>st</sup> 4 key foundational elements, and now we'll cover the last 2: evaluation planning, becoming a learning org.

By end of first grant cycle you should be developing a plan for your first evaluation, which will be executed in your second grant cycle. Can start slightly earlier if you want.

- Planning process has a few core components
  - Select research questions
  - Budget for evaluation
  - Develop evaluation plan
  - Make design decisions

We have many courses on each aspect of the evaluation process, all available online on the Evaluation Resources page, so for now we will just touch on a few key points.

- One of the first steps taken as you plan any evaluation is to develop RQs
- Research questions are a list of questions that you anticipate being able to answer at the end of the evaluation.
  - They focus the evaluation and provide important parameters for the evaluation design
  - RQs should test part of your TOC and map back onto your LM
  - There are a few things to remember when creating your RQs:
    - Clear, specific, and well-defined so they can be thoroughly answered after completing the other evaluation activities (e.g., instrument development, data collection, analysis, etc.).
    - Also, need to focus on a program or program component.
      - As AC grantees, make sure your evaluation focuses on the AC component of your program, in order for it to meet our evaluation requirements.
    - It's also important that your RQs be measurable by the evaluation, because they eventually need to be answered by your evaluation activities.
    - Finally, RQs need to be aligned with your program's logic model.

The RQ development process is a great time to engage stakeholders and gives a chance to get buy in and increase a feeling of ownership in the evaluation.

Creating RQs that follow these 4 guidelines sets your evaluation up for success and helps manage internal and external expectations for the evaluation.

In general, evaluation budgets should:

- Reflect the expectations of stakeholders, particularly in terms of scope, duration, and level of rigor of the evaluation. Any requirements or mandated components as a condition of funding are also important here. For example, CNCS grantees receiving over \$500k are required to conduct an external impact evaluation covering at least one program year. The use of an external evaluator and the methods needed to implement a comparison or control group design, for example, both bring their own particular cost requirements. So you can see that design requirements, scope of the evaluation, and who will be conducting the evaluation will

affect the final budget. The evaluation budget should also reflect any stakeholder investment, be it financial or in another form such as time or technical assistance.

- Evaluation budgets should also be appropriate for the research design used and the key research questions you want to answer. Certain evaluation methods or techniques, like primary data collection, simply cost more to execute than others. Relatedly, some key research questions will require different levels of investment, depending on their scope and the depth with which you want to answer them.
- Budgets should also be of sufficient size to ensure that your evaluation will be high quality and rigorous. Underfunding may result in design choices that jeopardize the integrity of your evaluation. It can also lead to last minute workarounds, shortcuts, and quick fixes taken in the midst of your evaluation that can seriously impact the results produced.
- Finally, an evaluation budget should reflect the financial, human capital, and other resources your program or organization has. For example, consider what kind of data collection systems you currently have in place and what you can plan to build for the future.

Evaluation can provide critical insight into your program. We feel strongly that program evaluation goes beyond meeting requirements and provides important information for program management, decision-making, and improvement. We view evaluation as a smart strategic investment in improving your program, and ultimately, as a stepping stone to serving more beneficiaries more effectively.

A key activity in evaluation planning is formalizing the details of your evaluation in an evaluation plan.

An evaluation plan is a written document that provides detail on all the evaluation's steps and activities.

- Can be rel. short, a few pgs., or quite long, depending on the level of detail needed/desired.
- Important to record all info here b/c plan serves as a guide AND an accountability tool. Can be v. important when working with ext. evaluation or stakeholders.
- Dynamic tool that is continually updated as the evaluation is planned and developed. Keep in mind that you can start a draft plan as soon as you like, steps are not linear.
- A solid evaluation plan has the following items, at a minimum. [read slide]
  - Intro: purpose of evaluation and need for info generated
  - Other: ext. evaluation quals, LM, TOC, etc.

Again, we have an entire Evaluation Core Curriculum class on developing an evaluation plan, so this slide just briefly shows the key components of a well-developed evaluation plan.

- Last foundational element to be aware of in 1<sup>st</sup> 3 years: the concept of learning organizations. Start to implement steps to becoming one.
- A learning organization is an organization that creates, acquires, and transfers knowledge, and modifies its behavior to reflect new insights.
  - Remain relevant, effective b/c can continuously improve their programs based on data.

- Data needed to continuously improve are readily available through performance measurement and program evaluation. Ideally you are doing both.
- By engaging in perf. Msmt and strategic program evaluation, you can collect the data you need to
  - Remain competitive in a scarce funding environment,
  - Justify increases in scale, scope, and reach,
  - Demonstrate accountability to your stakeholders
  - Build an evidence base demonstrating program efficacy

The key takeaway here is that by doing PM and evaluation, you are enhancing your capacity to make data driven decisions, and hopefully to improve your services.

We've covered the 6 foundational elements, and to recap, by the end of your first grant cycle you should have met these key milestones:

- Refined your program and ensured it is being implemented effectively
- Built, tested, and refined your data collection systems
- Collected high-quality performance measure data and used that data for program improvement
- Develop staff capacity and assigned responsibilities for data tasks
- Prepared your first evaluation plan
- And begun the process of becoming a learning organization

If you've been able to make good progress on these foundational elements, you'll be set up for success in coming grant cycles.

- For this exercise, we are assuming you are all in your first grant cycle, at some point (or you have just seen the light and want to get up to speed on evaluation).
  - Take the next 10-15 min. to go through this worksheet and write down 2-3 activities that you've done or are planning to do in this grant cycle for each of the 5 elements listed here
  - The idea is that this worksheet can be a roadmap for you to follow.
  - If you're a brand new grantee in your first year, be aspirational. Think about what you want to do over the next 3 years, and how you want to go about that.
  - If you're in your 2<sup>nd</sup> or 3<sup>rd</sup> year, write down what you may already be doing currently, then think about the next year or two.
- For more information on evaluation, please go to the [National Service Evaluation Resources page](#)