SELECTING AN EXTERNAL EVALUATOR

Having an experienced External Evaluator on your team can bring specialized knowledge, ability, objectivity, credibility, accuracy, and perspective to your tobacco control program's evaluation process and findings. Hiring an External Evaluator early in the project is critical. Involving the External Evaluator in the scope of work development allows you and your program staff to fully benefit from this expertise.

The purpose of this document is to provide California Tobacco Control Program-funded agencies with information to help answer the following questions: **What is an External Evaluator? What is the difference between an internal evaluator and an external evaluator? Why evaluate? What should I look for in an evaluator? How do I find the right one – that is, a qualified evaluator who can meet the program's evaluation needs? How do I forge the relationship?**

WHAT IS AN EXTERNAL EVALUATOR?

An External Evaluator is someone outside of the agency who has experience in conducting evaluation of programs and may have received formal training in research and/or evaluation. **(1)**
A good evaluator can help your program develop measures, analyze data and provide recommendations for improving intervention activities. An evaluator who is involved early has a better understanding of the intervention's design and intent, and how the various components relate. However, if it is not possible for an evaluator to participate in the design phase, extra time should be allowed for the evaluator to become familiar with the project.

WHAT IS THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN AN INTERNAL AND AN EXTERNAL EVALUATOR?

In California Tobacco Control-funded programs, grantees that are classified as Local Lead Agencies are required to have an Internal Evaluation Project Manager (EPM). The role of the EPM) is to provide oversight of the evaluation plan and ensure that evaluation is used to inform intervention activities. The role of the External Evaluator is to design the plan, develop data collection instruments, and prepare evaluation reports. Within these requirements, Local Lead Agencies can customize a working relationship that will meet the needs of the program and meet the internal/external evaluator requirements. **(2)** There is no requirement for an internal evaluator. However, this role is served in some programs by an epidemiologist, health educator, or other agency staff that perform evaluation activities.

TCEC
Tobacco Control Evaluation Center

WHY EVALUATE?

To determine the kind of evaluator that will be most helpful to your program, it is important to understand the purpose or uses of the evaluation. There are three ways in which program evaluation is used:

1. To gain insight (process evaluation);
2. To change practice or make improvements (process evaluation); and
3. To determine or assess effects (outcome evaluation).

These three purposes and the specific qualities that an evaluator must possess to support these three purposes are further illustrated in Table 1.

TABLE 1

Evaluation Uses	Evaluator Qualities
To gain insight • Assess feasibility or practicality of a new approach for broader implementation • Identify program-related challenges and opportunities	Evaluator should be: • Skilled in quantitative and qualitative analysis • An excellent communicator (speaking and listening) • Thoughtful and reflective
To change practice or make improvements • Describe the extent to which a program has met its goals • Enhance program operations by improving quality, effectiveness, and efficiency of activities • Monitor activities for program management or routine reporting	Evaluator should be: • Skilled in quantitative and qualitative analysis • Skilled in speaking and listening • Innovative • Persuasive
To determine or assess effects • Understand the relationship between program activities and certain effects or outcomes • Demonstrate accountability to partners and/or funders • Judge the value or worth of a program	Evaluator should be: • Skilled in quantitative and qualitative analysis • Able to translate data (results) into information (recommendations) • Highly credible

*Source: Healthcare Georgia Foundation. Selecting and Working with an External Evaluator.

TCEC
Tobacco Control Evaluation Center

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (3), the characteristics of a good evaluator are:
• Experience in the type of evaluation needed
• Comfortable with quantitative data sources and analysis
• Able to work with a wide variety of stakeholders, including representatives of target populations
• Can develop innovative approaches to evaluation while considering the realities affecting a program (e.g., a small budget)
• Incorporates evaluation into all program activities
• Understands both the potential benefits and risks of evaluation
• Educates program personnel in designing and conducting the evaluation
• Will give staff the full findings (i.e., will not gloss over or fail to report certain findings)

WHERE CAN I FIND EVALUATOR CANDIDATES?

There are numerous resources to find the right evaluator for your program's needs. The following are some places where evaluation assistance may be available:

Local Program Evaluator Directory

The Local Program Evaluator (LPE) Directory, maintained by CTCP, lists evaluators throughout California. Like other candidates, individuals from this list will need to describe their experience and provide references for you to be sure they can meet your needs. It is likely that individuals listed in the LPE Directory already have client organizations in their portfolio. If your program can be a little bit flexible and plan ahead, you still may be able to use their services. For example, since Final Evaluation Reports are all due on the last day of the contract, you could ask your external evaluator to begin the writing process much earlier such as detailing the rationale, methods, and timeline, then later fill in placeholders for the results, conclusions, and recommendations section. This way, an external evaluator can support multiple programs by varying timelines and due dates.

Colleges and Universities

Colleges and universities can be valuable resources for finding individuals who can provide assistance with evaluating your program. Although few universities have formal program evaluation departments, knowledgeable faculty members may be found in departments of criminology, education, psychology, social work, and public policy. Faculty researchers might be willing to help with the evaluation in order to fulfill their community or institutional service requirements. These departments may also have graduate students, and faculty may be willing to closely supervise masters or doctoral students who conduct an evaluation study to meet their degree requirements.

(3) Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Introduction to Program Evaluation for Public Health Programs: A Self-Study Guide. Retrieved at https://www.cdc.gov/eval/guide/introduction/index.htm.

TCEC
Tobacco Control Evaluation Center

Professional Organizations

Many evaluators are members of professional organizations. Contact one or more of the following professional associations for assistance in finding experienced program evaluators:

American Evaluation Association
202.367.1166
info@eval.org
http://www.eval.org/findanevaluator

Organization Development Network
651-379-7292
odnetwork@odnetwork.org
http://www.odnetwork.org/search/custom.asp?id=4269

American Public Health Association
202-777-2742
https://apha.org/

WHAT SHOULD I LOOK FOR IN AN EXTERNAL EVALUATOR?

When adding a member to your team, it is helpful to assess the existing knowledge, skills, and capacity, and endeavor to add a team member that complements these existing capacities. When interviewing, make sure you interview just as you would any potential employee or contractor. Use follow-up questions to probe more deeply.

Basic qualifications and considerations you can look for when determining who to hire as an evaluator are formal education, experience, technical skills, evaluation philosophy, organizational capacity and communication skills. Each of these are described in more detail below. Sample questions to ask an evaluator candidate are also provided. *Appendix A contains an editable form with preferred responses that can be tailored and used for taking notes during interviews. (4)*

• Formal education
• Experience
• Technical skills
• Evaluation philosophy
• Communication skills

Formal Education
Very few individuals have formal education in program evaluation. Most evaluators do have formal training in research methods, however, usually in a social science discipline. Graduate-level training should provide this knowledge; for example, someone with a masters or doctorate, regardless of the discipline, should have the research knowledge required to conduct evaluations.
• *What is your formal education/highest degree attained and in what field?*

Experience

While evaluation has a great deal in common with conducting research, there are also many differences between the two. A qualified evaluator must not only have research skills, but must also have specific experience in working with programs. Experience working in a tobacco control program is not a requirement for an evaluator; however, experience working with public health departments and/or tobacco control programs is preferred for communication, collaboration, and appropriate interpretation of evaluation findings. Having an evaluator that knows the specific content area is less important than having a top-notch evaluator with solid credentials. An evaluator familiar with coalition-based programs and empowerment evaluation would bring additional expertise to the program.

• Please describe past work on similar projects

• How familiar are you with the population and community we serve?

Technical Skills

As in all hiring decisions, when choosing an appropriate external evaluator it is important to contract with a person whose skills match your needs. At minimum, a qualified evaluator should be experienced in the following:

1) evaluation design, which involves making decisions about which data to collect, from whom, and at which points in time;

2) quantitative data collection strategies, including phone or online surveys;

3) qualitative data collection methods, e.g., interviews or focus groups;

4) database management and data analysis of quantitative and qualitative data; and

5) reporting results in various formats appropriate for various audiences.

Qualitative and quantitative data collection methods entail both developing and then using a protocol or data collection tool.(5)
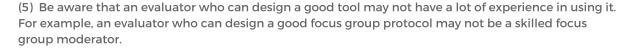
• Provide a summary of past experience with various evaluation methods, i.e., qualitative and quantitative data collection tool development, data collection, data analysis and reporting

Evaluation Philosophy

It is best to look for an evaluator who believes that the evaluation process is a collaborative one between the evaluator and project staff. In this philosophy, project directors and staff are seen as the experts and evaluators work closely with them throughout the whole process of documenting program activities, developing performance measures, interpreting evaluation findings, and making recommendations for program improvement. The goal of such evaluations is to improve the program, not to declare the program a success or failure. More formal names for this evaluation philosophy include "participatory evaluation," "utilization-focused evaluation," and "empowerment evaluation." The evaluator you hire should believe that evaluation is a collaborative process.

• Please describe an example of how you have worked with clients to help them understand data

• Please provide an example of one recommendation you have made to a program based on your data analysis

• Are you willing to train our staff on evaluation as part of your services? If so, please describe how you will help staff understand how each part of the evaluation fits with the program

(5) Be aware that an evaluator who can design a good tool may not have a lot of experience in using it. For example, an evaluator who can design a good focus group protocol may not be a skilled focus group moderator.

TCEC
Tobacco Control Evaluation Center

Organizational Capacity

Many external evaluators have multiple projects for which they work. For that reason, it is important to determine how they will make sure the evaluation-related requirements for your project are met.

• What is your capacity to take on the work, e.g., availability, current projects
• How will you handle competing project deadlines to ensure reports and other evaluation deliverables are submitted on time?
• The deadlines for final evaluation reporting at the end of the contract term are firm and not negotiable. How will you ensure on-time submission of final evaluation reports?

Communication Skills

Evaluators must be able to communicate with a wide variety of individuals who have a vested interest in the results of their work. Program staff and managers, CTCP representatives, legislators, county supervisors, city council members, and even program clients are some of the "stakeholders" to whom evaluators may be called upon to present their evaluation findings, conclusions, and recommendations. Evaluators should not only be personable and engaging, but should be able to clearly present findings and conclusions both orally and in written form.

• Do you have any limitations, e.g., the way you want to work, the type of work you do/do not perform, travel, timing of activities, workload, etc.?
• How do you structure your fees?
• Ask the candidate(s) to provide sample evaluation activity report (e.g., Public Opinion Poll), Brief Evaluation Report and Final Evaluation Report
• Please provide names, titles, and contact information for three references

Situational or Behavioral Interview Questions

In addition to the evaluation expertise, the interview questions can also assess a candidate's previous experience with other interpersonal and reflective opportunities.

• What about this position appeals to you? What do you contribute to the team?
• Describe a situation where you have to convince people about the importance and utility of evaluation
• Describe a time when you received criticism
• Describe a time when you went the extra mile.
• Describe a time you were disappointed with your work e.g. things didn't go as planned, not meeting other's expectations, others not meeting your expectations, team members not doing their part, etc. What did you do?
• How do you stay current on evaluation strategies?
• What are some of your professional development goals?

FORGING THE RELATIONSHIP

Establishing a good working relationship with an External Evaluator begins by selecting an individual who is a good fit with your program and staff. From there, it is important to clarify the roles and responsibilities that the program's External Evaluator will carry out and agree on deliverables and timeline. When you have selected an evaluator, you must specify in writing what the evaluator will do.

Before the work begins, the Project Director and the External Evaluator need to agree on the evaluation tasks and who is responsible for performing them, as well as clarify which evaluation tasks will be the responsibility of the External Evaluator vs. the Internal Evaluation Project Manager (EPM), Project Director and/or project staff.(6)

A well-written contract includes the following: (7)
• General description of External Evaluator responsibilities
• Roles and responsibilities and who is responsible for performing specific evaluation tasks
• Evaluation products and deliverables, including databases and final evaluation reporting and due dates
• Frequency and methods of communication
• Participation in statewide meetings, trainings and communities of practice
• Travel
• Budget limitations
• Hourly rate, project fee or percentage of contract (8)

Typically, data collection, data entry, and simple tallies, as examples, are performed by internal staff. The EPM may create or request additional reports (e.g., Highlights, Call to Action), disseminate findings, and/or make presentations to various stakeholders. However, these elements, as well as who is responsible, should be specified in the contract.

Collaboration
The evaluator and staff must work collaboratively in implementing all phases of the evaluation plan. Specifically, they should work together to identify program goals and objectives, link activities to goals and objectives, develop performance measures, determine what data to collect, and interpret the findings of the data analysis. Program staff should also have input on any recommendations resulting from the evaluation. A close working relationship between the evaluator and program staff will reap many benefits for both. The evaluator will have a much clearer sense of how the program functions and will be in a much better position to provide useful feedback. Program managers and staff will benefit from the fresh perspective on daily activities and how these relate to what the program is trying to accomplish. The result will be an evaluation that is useful and relevant, and one that has the endorsement of the program's staff and managers. Evaluations are more useful when the program staff works with the evaluator to develop and implement the evaluation plan.

TCEC
Tobacco Control Evaluation Center

CONCLUSION

There are many benefits to hiring an External Evaluator to help programs collect and analyze data about their effectiveness. Tobacco Control Programs should look for someone who has experience working with similar programs and who believes in a collaborative approach to evaluation. By clearly specifying in advance the tasks the evaluator will perform, project directors can be assured of getting the assistance they need in developing performance measures and instruments, analyzing data, and using the data to create community change.

TCEC
Tobacco Control Evaluation Center