

NCCIC Is a Service of the Child Care Bureau

10530 Rosehaven Street, Suite 400 • Fairfax, VA 22030 • Phone: 800-616-2242
Fax: 800-716-2242 • Email: info@nccic.org • Web: <http://nccic.acf.hhs.gov>

EVALUATION COST CONSIDERATIONS

Determining the costs of an evaluation depends on a variety of factors, including which aspects of your program you decide to evaluate, the size of the program (that is, the number of staff members, participants, components, and services), the number of outcomes you want to assess, who conducts the evaluation, and your agency's evaluation-related resources. Costs also vary with economic differences in communities and geographic locations. Sometimes funders will establish a specific amount of grant money to be set aside for an evaluation. The amount usually ranges from 15 to 20 percent of the total funds allocated for the program. Although a dollar amount cannot be specified, it is possible to describe the kinds of information you can obtain from evaluations at different cost levels. Some general guidelines follow on what you may be able to get at different evaluation cost levels.

Factors to consider in determining costs of your evaluation are your goals, what information you want or need, what stage or phase the project is in, and how rigorous the evaluation design needs to be. For example:

- **Lowest cost evaluations.** If you spend only a minimal amount of money, you will be able to obtain numerical counts of participants, services, or products and information about the characteristics of participants. You also may be able to find out how satisfied participants were with the services or the training. But this is only the foundation for an evaluation. This information will not tell you whether you have been successful in attaining your participant outcome objectives. Also, at this cost level you will not have in-depth information about program implementation and operations to understand whether your program was implemented as intended and, if not, what changes were made and why they were made.
- **Low–moderate cost evaluations.** If you increase your evaluation budget slightly, you will be able to assess whether there has been a change in your participants' knowledge, attitudes, or behaviors, and collect in-depth information about your program's implementation. However, this is only the framework of an evaluation. At this cost level, you may not be able to attribute participant changes specifically to your program because you will not have similar information on a comparison or control group.
- **Moderate–high cost evaluations.** Adding more money to your evaluation budget will allow you to use a comparison or control group, and therefore be able to attribute any changes in participants to the program itself. At this cost level, however, your information on participant outcomes may be limited to short-term changes—those that occurred during or immediately after participation in the program.

- **Highest cost evaluations.** At the highest cost level, you will be able to obtain all the information available from the other cost options as well as longer term outcome information on program participants. The high cost of this type of evaluation is due to the necessity of tracking or contacting program participants after they have left the program. Although followup activities often are expensive, longer term outcome information is important because it assesses whether the changes in knowledge, attitudes, or behaviors that your participants initially experienced are maintained over time.

Basically, as you increase your budget for an evaluation, you gain a corresponding increase in knowledge about your success at program objectives. In many situations, the lowest cost evaluations may not be worth the expense, and, to be realistic, the highest cost evaluations may be beyond the scope of most agencies' financial resources. As a general rule, the more money you are willing to invest in an evaluation, the more useful the information you will obtain about your program's effectiveness will be and the more useful these results will be in helping you advocate for your program.

IT IS IMPORTANT TO BE REALISTIC ABOUT THE TYPE, RIGOR, AND INTENSITY OF AN EVALUATION DESIGN RELATIVE TO THE DOLLARS ALLOCATED or you and everyone involved will be frustrated and time will be wasted. It is better to be prudent and deliver more than was promised than to over promise or generate too high expectations about the types of data or results that can be generated.

Related resources:

Office of Planning, Research & Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. (2006). Chapter 2: What will evaluation cost? In *Program manager's guide to evaluation*. Retrieved March 25, 2008, from www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/opre/other_resrch/pm_guide_eval/reports/pmguide/chapter_2_pmguide.html

Golin, S.C., Mitchell, A.W., & Gault, B. (2004). *The price of school readiness: A tool for estimating the cost of universal preschool in the States*. Retrieved March 27, 2008, from www.iwpr.org/pdf/G713.pdf