Evaluating Coalition Work

Background

This resource helps your coalition evaluate whether its activities are advancing coalition goals and identify opportunities to improve. It describes three steps your coalition should take as part of an evaluation: 1) develop a theory of change, 2) outline the questions you want to answer along the theory of change, and 3) identify the information you need to collect to answer those questions.

Develop a theory of change

A theory of change outlines how your coalition's activities will lead to the outcomes you hope to achieve. To create a theory of change, start with what you hope to achieve over the long-term. Work backwards, listing the steps that need to occur before that outcome can happen. Figure 1 outlines an example theory of change for a ParkRx program that gives clinic patients free park passes, so they can access outdoor activities and improve their physical and emotional well-being.

Figure 1. Theory of change for a ParkRx program

Strategy	Early changes				Short-term outcome	Medium-term outcome	Long-term outcome
Coalition members provide ParkRx training for clinics	Clinic staff attend ParkRx training	Clinic staff make ParkRx referrals to eligible clients	Clients receive park passes	Clients visit outdoor park events	Clients' interest in outdoor activities increases	Clients spend more time outdoors	Clients experience improved physical and emotional well-being

Key consideration: Understanding outside influences

As you map out your theory of change, think about things beyond your program that could affect how you implement your plan or the results you hope to achieve. For example, in the ParkRx program, could clinic workflows make it harder for staff to make referrals? Could lack of transportation prevent clients from coming to park events? Are there other outdoor physical activity programs that could also be influencing clients?

Depending on your evaluation results, you may want to gather more information about outside influences. For example, if you find clinic staff are not making referrals, consider holding meetings with them to understand what is getting in the way. If there are other physical activity programs in the community, consider asking ParkRx participants to share their experiences with the program, and how it is unique.

Outline evaluation questions

Create evaluation questions to assess whether each step in your theory of change occurred. Depending on your coalition's capacity and how long you have been doing an activity, it may be challenging or too early to gather information on medium- or long-term outcomes, like improved well-being for program clients. As a starting point, focus on early changes and short-term outcomes.

Figure 2. Evaluation questions for a ParkRx program

Strategy	Early changes				Short-term outcome	Medium-term outcome	Long-term outcome
Coalition members provide ParkRx training for clinics	Clinic staff attend ParkRx training	Clinic staff make ParkRx referrals to eligible clients	Clients receive park passes	Clients visit outdoor park events	Clients' interest in outdoor activities increases	Clients spend more time outdoors	Clients experience improved physical and emotional well-being
	How many and what types of clinic staff attended the ParkRx training?	**Did clinic staff refer eligible clients to the ParkRx program?**	**Did referred clients follow through on ParkRx referrals?**	**Did clients with park passes attend park events?**	**Does participating in ParkRx events change clients' views towards outdoor activities?**	**To be assessed in future evaluations**	**To be assessed in future evaluations**

Answer evaluation questions

After specifying your evaluation questions, consider how you will answer them. For each evaluation question, ask yourself: 1) what information you will need to answer it, 2) how you will collect the information, 3) who will collect the information and when, and 4) how you will use the information after you collect it. The table below provides examples of information the ParkRx program can use to answer its evaluation questions and assess short-term outcomes.

Evaluation question	Information needed to answer the question	How we will collect the information	Who will collect the information	When we will collect it	How we will use the information
How many and what types of clinic staff attended the Park Rx training?	Number and types of clinic staff trained Percentage of client-facing staff at the clinic trained[1]	Sign-in sheets List of client-facing staff	Trainer Clinic staff	After each training	Determine whether all clinic staff who interact with clients are reached and identify any overlooked groups (like community health workers).
Did clinic staff complete referrals for eligible clients?	Percentage of eligible clients referred to ParkRx program	Clinic report on referrals	Clinic	Monthly	Understand if clinic staff are comfortable with the referral steps and able to complete them. If referrals are not completed, follow up with staff to identify barriers.
Did referred clients follow through on ParkRx referrals?	Percentage of clients referred, who received a park pass	Clinic report on referrals Distribution list of new park passes	Clinic County Parks and Recreation	Monthly	Check whether clients contact the Parks and Recreation Department after referral. If not, talk with clients to understand barriers to follow through.
Did clients with park passes attend park events?	Percentage of park pass clients at park events Number of events attended by each client	Online event registration data	County Parks and Recreation	Monthly	Determine whether clients attend park events. If attendance is low, explore reasons with clients.
Does participating in ParkRx events change clients' views towards outdoor activities?	Percentage of clients reporting an increased interest in outdoor activities after attending park programs, compared to before	Post-event MS Form surveys that ask whether the event increased the client's interest in outdoor activities	Workgroup	After each event	Assess whether our program is influencing clients' views. If not, consider how programming can be improved.

1. When possible, it can be helpful to report percentages to understand whether all potential clients are being reached. However, if this is too difficult to obtain, your coalition can also track numbers over time (e.g., the number of park pass clients at events).

Key consideration: Demographic information

When possible, also consider asking participants for basic demographic information, such as gender, race, or age. It can be helpful to understand who your program is reaching and whether any groups are overlooked. If you find that certain groups are not participating, explore why this is the case. Consider how to tailor your program to make it more accessible or relevant for these groups.

When you are ready to measure medium- and long-term outcomes, consider collecting baseline data about how participants are doing on these outcomes before your project begins. You can gather this information through surveys or interviews. This will allow you to see whether participants change in these outcomes over the course of your program. If possible, ask participants the same questions before and after they start your program. For example, the ParkRx program might ask participants how many hours they spend outside per week at the start of the program and after six months, and compare answers. If pre- and post-surveys are not feasible, consider developing surveys that ask current participants to reflect on changes to their behavior. For example, a question could be: "How has your level of physical activity changed after participating in this program? a) It has increased a lot; b) It has increased slightly; c) It has not changed."

Key consideration: Working with partners to collect data

Working with multiple coalition partners to collect data can be challenging. Consider these strategies to help engage partners in the data collection process:

- Develop memorandums of understanding (MOUs) or other documents outlining each partner's data collection responsibilities
- Create secure, shared files and storage for reporting data
- Use coalition meetings to review evaluation findings so partners can see how their data are being used

Ultimately, your evaluation can help you demonstrate how your coalition is having an impact in your community. It can also help you understand where to improve your activities. Evaluation is a continuous process – as you make updates to your activities, refine your program model (i.e., theory of change) and evaluation questions, and continue collecting information to keep improving.

Sources

The content in this document was informed by the following resources:

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