

## WORKING TOGETHER ON AN EVALUATION: A CASE STUDY

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**Abstract** — In this article, we examine one evaluation strategy—known as the “partnership model” — that the City of Lethbridge has successfully utilized to assess the progress of community-based service programs. The model, which enables the evaluation of community-based agencies in a cooperative, nonthreatening environment, is shown to be an effective tool for evaluation management, and thus may be of use to other municipalities.

**Résumé** — Le présent article examine une stratégie d'évaluation connue sous le nom de 'modèle d'association', laquelle a été employée avec succès par la ville de Lethbridge, au sud de l'Alberta, pour évaluer le progrès des programmes de services fournis par la communauté. Ce modèle, qui permet de procéder à l'évaluation des agences communautaires dans une atmosphère de coopération et de non-agression, s'est révélé être un instrument de travail efficace pour la conduite d'une évaluation, et peut de ce fait s'avérer utile à d'autres municipalités.

**HUMAN SERVICE DELIVERY PROGRAMS** that are publicly funded are subject to periodic evaluation. Some program evaluations are comprehensive and others deal with specific target or service areas, but all aim to provide government policy-makers and service providers with valid and reliable data on program efficacy within the limitations imposed by ethical, political, monetary, temporal, and human resource constraints.

The design of an evaluation model that facilitates informed policy and action definitely poses a technical and managerial challenge. A successful model must incorporate a systematic feedback mechanism that integrates the evaluation process with the routine decision-making of the organizations involved. In this article, we examine one program evaluation strategy — known as the “partnership model” — that the City of Lethbridge in southern Alberta has successfully utilized to assess the progress of community-based service

agencies. This model, in which the service purchaser (the municipal government) and the (community-based) service providers act as partners in the evaluation of community programs, does pose certain difficulties. Nevertheless, it offers the unique advantage of enhancing municipal policy-makers' comprehension of the programs scrutinized (Rossi & Freeman, 1987). This occurs primarily because the service purchaser is able to work closely with the program providers in a relatively nonthreatening environment.

## **SERVICE PROVISION AND THE PARTNERSHIP MODEL**

The overall approach to service delivery adopted by the City of Lethbridge conforms to the recommendations of the International City Management Association (ICMA). The ICMA actively encourages its members to rely whenever possible on public/private sector cooperation in the provision of human services (Anderson, Frieden, & Murphy, 1977). The City of Lethbridge believes that municipal government can best enhance service delivery not by delivering services directly, but by cooperating with community-based agencies already addressing social issues.

Citizens tend to see local rather than provincial and federal governments as the guardian of their rights and liberties and the direct provider of their essential wants, even though local governments may have minimal authority and economic wherewithal to effectively act as such (Anderson et al., 1977). In partnership with community-based service providers, a city is often better able to meet these expectations. Using a cooperative strategy, it may more effectively uphold its obligations to shape, create, and maintain the physical and social health of the community, and to provide its citizens with opportunities for pleasure, gratification, and realization of their potential.

In essence, the relationship between the City of Lethbridge and its community service providers hinges on the mutually held belief that local government is in "partnership" with community agencies. The city sees itself as not merely a funder of programs, but as a proactive partner with community-based groups.

In the context of service provision, the distinction between "partner" and "funder" is an extremely important one, because it establishes the tone of the relationship between local government and community service providers. In a funding relationship, the municipality uses grants-in-aid to specific agencies, and the clients served are deemed to be those of the providing agency. In the partnership model, the service provider is in a contract position with government: The government purchases the services of an agency *on behalf of* its

citizens, and the clients served are those of the municipality (i.e., its citizens), not of the agency *per se*. Thus, even though direct service is provided by intermediaries, the government retains ultimate responsibility for the health and welfare of its citizens.

The partnership model has been defined in the literature as:

A set of policies and practices, on the part of the government contract agency, which views government and the private sector as part of a comprehensive human service system, and where the determining factor in the selection of contractors is a concern for the development and maintenance of the human service system. (Kettner & Martin, 1987, p.32)

Kettner and Martin also suggest that a government agency following this model should:

1. Emphasize the strengthening of the working relationship between the government funding source and the service delivery agency;
2. Practice flexibility and compromise in the development, negotiation, and administration of contracts;
3. Make contracting decisions primarily on the basis of concern for the stability of the human service system;
4. Exercise caution in experimenting with differing modes of service provision;
5. Promote specialization rather than competition among contractors, in order to capitalize on public/private sector relationships.

From this perspective, the two players in human service provision are equal partners in a joint venture. The model requires a high degree of interaction between the partners, focusing on planning, designing, budgeting, monitoring, and evaluating. It is to the evaluation aspect of the partnership model that we now turn.

## THE MODEL AND EVALUATION

Prior to the 1960s, a large proportion of evaluation research conducted on health, social, rehabilitation, education, and welfare services was done by either university-affiliated researchers or private research firms. Since the late 1960s, however, public service agencies in these program areas have been hiring individuals in staff positions to conduct in-house evaluations as well as investigations of external community service agencies.

This recent trend is not without its problems. To begin with, the use of government employed evaluators had often led to conflict, primarily because

of the differing interests of the groups involved. If a government evaluator from a "competing" direct-service delivery system is appointed as investigator, community agency personnel tend to feel threatened, with some justification. They may well ask if the service is being evaluated in order to bring delivery solely under the wing of government. Given this climate of suspicion, one might question whether a proper evaluation can be conducted at all: Will the information provided to the government evaluator be complete? Will it be valid? Such questions strike at the very heart of the relationship between municipal government and community agencies. Clearly, where there is competition for service provision, program evaluation that employs government investigators is unlikely to produce anything but hostility.

The way in which evaluations are conducted is a further source of contention. Some evaluators prefer to conduct formative rather than summative evaluations. There are debates about whether to conduct qualitative or quantitative evaluations, impact or process assessments, and systems or efficiency analyses. Often these debates obscure the fact that each approach has some utility, and that the choice of approach may to a considerable extent depend on the evaluation question at hand.

Even when there is consensus on methodology, other problems arise. Thorough and comprehensive evaluations take time. Often, however, human service administrators (in both government and community agencies) want a quick "one-shot" evaluation of program effectiveness. Moreover, this quick run-through is often done without sufficient financial commitment.

In spite of such problems and differences of opinion, the overall goals of most program evaluations do share the following characteristics:

1. Clarification of the implicit or explicit value orientation that guides the program;
2. Determination of program aims and objectives;
3. Linkage of evaluation to policy making;
4. Selection of a methodology to guide evaluative research;
5. Administration of the evaluation;
6. Analysis of results;
7. Drawing of conclusions;
8. Formation of recommendations for program planning.

Evaluations based on the partnership model also follow these steps. This model differs, though, in the way in which the service purchaser and the service provider work together to identify and articulate the evaluation steps.

Government provides the technical experts, who then work directly with the community service agencies. The partnership roles are distinct but mutually reinforcing.

The role of a government-employed researcher is multifaceted and operates on a number of levels. This person simultaneously acts as a:

1. *Conveyor*—transfers knowledge;
2. *Consultant*—assists in identification of evaluation steps and available resources (research tools, computing), facilitates, operationalizes, observes, processes data;
3. *Trainer*—instills an understanding of the knowledge and uses of evaluation;
4. *Leader*—effects linkages through the human service system;
5. *Defender*—sensitizes others to pitfalls, mobilizes public opinion, public sensitivity, and public demand for evaluations.

The role of the community agency or service provider is crucial in:

1. Determining the formative evaluation questions;
2. Providing valid and reliable access data;
3. Monitoring program delivery, based on established rules and regulations, in conjunction with the service purchaser;
4. Making necessary program adjustments;
5. Mobilizing public opinion, public sensitivity, and public demand for evaluation in other service areas.

As Moran (1987) has pointed out, if the partnership model is to be truly effective, it is important that these roles be carried out in a genuinely cooperative manner. A free and constant exchange of information is essential. Community-based service agencies must be willing to teach the researcher about the folkways of their bureaucracies; the researcher must properly instruct agency personnel on how to employ sophisticated evaluation methodologies, and so forth.

## **AN EXAMPLE OF THE PARTNERSHIP MODEL**

The efficacy of the partnership model of program evaluation is clearly demonstrated through its application in the City of Lethbridge. The following case study examines precisely how the model was utilized in the City's recent evaluation of nine community-based service agencies.

## **Establishing the Relationship**

As a first step in the evaluation process, the municipal government hired an evaluator in a staff position to work with the nine agencies under scrutiny. The evaluator's first task was to establish rapport with each of the groups. Financial information regarding agencies' access to municipal funding was removed from the evaluator's control, to ensure that the evaluation would not be interpreted as simply a mechanism for financial withdrawal.

## **Determining the Aims of the Service**

Once the evaluator had established credibility and legitimacy with the service providers, evaluative criteria were set in consultation with the agencies. In this way, inherently meaningful criteria were established, criteria that recognized the unique mission and characteristics of each group.

At the outset, each agency was asked to specify the aims and objectives of its program as well as to supply a "mission" statement. The evaluator worked closely with the board of directors of each community agency in order to ensure that goals and objectives were identified in a coherent manner. This information was then transferred onto a spreadsheet, under appropriate headings negotiated with the agencies. These included the nature of the goal, the means to achieve objectives, plans of action, the time frame for accomplishment, and the personnel responsible. One column was reserved for recording any pertinent quantitative data related to goals, and another contained those aspects of the agency's own program effectiveness about which agency personnel would like to have more information. The spreadsheet also contained a "goal outcome" column wherein agencies were encouraged to identify, with one-word responses, whether the goals they had set were attained, whether they were truly responsive to some human need, and/or whether they were appropriate to the agency's mandate.

## **Design of the Evaluation**

In the next step of the process, agency personnel were asked to expand upon these one-word goal outcome assessments, and thus to help formulate a strategy for conducting the evaluation itself. In this way a number of measures for goal attainment performance were derived. The evaluator added two more evaluative criteria, as mandated by the municipal government: financial accountability, and ability of the program to meet its stated goals and objectives.

A spreadsheet similar to the one used in goal determination was utilized to identify the objectives, data needs, and data sources for the evaluation. As had occurred with the original goal statements, the evaluation plan format was reworked several times until community agency personnel were comfortable with the evaluation tool.

### **Administering the Evaluation**

As the evaluation plan came together and information needs were identified, the evaluator worked with agency personnel to develop instruments that would assist in data collection. For example, to generate concrete indices for the evaluative criterion "client satisfaction", evaluator and agency personnel investigated categories specific to a particular client group. A yard-maintenance service for senior citizens would require a different measure of client satisfaction than a "role model" service for children of single parents. Client satisfaction in the first case might be related to time elapsed between first contact and work completion. In the second case, it might be measured in terms of the perceived quality or the duration of the match between child and role model.

If the evaluation required that data be collected on an ongoing basis, the evaluator worked with agency personnel to develop instruments appropriate to long-term information gathering. For example, an agency delivering information to parents wanted an assessment of the effectiveness of this service. One of the measures of effectiveness was the number of times that information was given to a specific number of parents. Instruments were thus developed to collect data, on a daily basis, regarding the type of information distributed, the type of call (walk-in or telephone), the gender of the caller, the nature of the request, and so forth.

Where financial information was demanded by the municipal government, monthly financial statements were provided to the evaluator, who in turn developed a computer program to keep the agency itself informed as to budget estimates, percentage expenditures, month-to-month comparative figures, and analyses of cost over- and under-expenditures. Community agency personnel were encouraged to make use of this information in undertaking cost/benefit analyses, comparative cost analyses, and budget reviews. As part of the mandate, the evaluator also examined program goals and objectives in light of plans originally submitted by the community agencies with their annual budget requests. Agencies were themselves asked to assess their level of success and to explain their reasons for under- or over-achievement.

## Analyzing the Results and Drawing Conclusions

Where computer assistance was needed in analyzing data, the evaluator performed the analysis. Where no computer assistance was required, the evaluator and the agency personnel worked through the data and jointly interpreted the results. Findings were then written up and submitted, through the evaluator's supervisor, to the municipal government. Reports were also made available to any other financial supporters of the agencies in question.

## Making Recommendations

Agency personnel were directed to examine the evaluation's results and conclusions in order to assist in the formulation of recommendations for program planning. Once established, these recommendations were added to the financial evaluation report.

The recommendations also became part of the agencies' program plans for the following year. Often this resulted in alterations to both service and budget planning in the interests of enhanced program efficiency. For example, one agency examined its advertising campaign and determined that the cost/benefit ratio did not warrant continuation of the television segment, which was eventually dropped. Another agency determined that personnel did not adequately understand its information management systems and undertook to rework these.

## Advantages

The paramount advantage of the partnership model is its ability to make the evaluation process comprehensible to front-line personnel in both government and community-based agencies. Within this context, the evaluator provides an important point of liaison between community agencies and municipal governments. In helping to establish a mutually acceptable strategy for program evaluation, the evaluator ensures that the two parties are able to meet their information needs, in a language that both understand.

Furthermore, the partnership model of evaluation provides a comprehensive range of information. Rather than approaching evaluation as a one-shot effort, it ensures that programs are assessed in a thorough, ongoing manner. Overall effectiveness, for example, is assessed by examining goal and objective achievement over an extended period; "softer" qualitative aspects of service delivery, important to the agencies themselves, are better expressed; and financial accountability can be assessed over the long term.



Perhaps most important, the procedure effectively ensures that the data collected by and on behalf of the agencies in question accurately reflect the actual program. Since agencies themselves examine their own programs on their own terms, the evaluation process becomes a meaningful management tool. Agencies are also provided with justification for service delivery beyond moral appeals to the necessity of righting wrongs done with widows, orphans, the destitute, and the infirm. And the municipality benefits from the provision of information that can be aggregated for overall trend analysis and used in projecting future program expansion, maintenance, or reduction.

### **Disadvantages**

The partnership model of evaluation does have a number of flaws. To begin with, the process itself involves a considerable amount of effort on both sides. Yet agency personnel are already overburdened by inadequate budgets and by the strain of meeting the demands of several levels of government. To make matters worse, private sector financial supporters do not always see the need for program planning and evaluation. Nor do agency personnel: In order to ensure that personnel themselves accept the need for evaluation, the evaluator must work tirelessly as both educator and facilitator. Agency personnel must also be made to feel comfortable with the evaluation process and confident that evaluation is not simply an excuse for funding cuts.

Some community-based service agencies, though cognizant of the need for assessment, resist partnership evaluation because they lack the requisite time and financial and personnel resources. Such agencies prefer that the evaluator perform the evaluation on his/her own, using more traditional evaluative criteria, instruments, and data-collecting methods, and then make recommendations independently of the agency. Their concern is that they are not evaluation experts, planners, or researchers, and thus are not in a position to determine what works and what does not. The need to reassure them that this is not the case puts yet further strain on the evaluator, and does not always meet with success.

### **CONCLUSIONS**

For some time, governments have worked cooperatively with industry, labor, construction, and real estate developers in the interests of economic development and prosperity. It is no less appropriate for governments and community-based service agencies to work together towards the creation of a healthy social environment. The partnership model of human service provision

facilitates this goal, and at the same time provides an effective framework for evaluating the success of community-based social service initiatives.

In Lethbridge, the evaluation strategy developed from the partnership model is still very much in the formative stages; this may account for some of the problems discussed in the previous section. Yet the strategy has already provided both agency personnel and the municipality with a wealth of information to assist general program planning and specific program design. To the extent that it continues to enjoy considerable success in the program management area in Lethbridge, there is every reason to believe that its adoption by other Canadian municipalities would bring similar results.

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