

Chapter 2: The Importance of Evaluation

Change often occurs in reaction to social problems. Changes within Child Advocacy Centers (CACs) are no exception. During the 1980s, a dramatic increase in the reported number of child sexual abuse (CSA) cases occurred, and the public became aware of the problem through the highly publicized McMartin Preschool case and other similar cases. The public viewed CSA investigations as another form of abuse, albeit system-induced abuse. In direct response to the criticism, the first CAC was developed in Huntsville, Alabama, in the mid-1980s. The Huntsville CAC and other new CACs attempted to redress the inadequacies of conventional case processing.

"I see our center benefits children and families, but there are doubters, so we have to be able to say this is what we do and the benefits we produce."

In about 15 years, the number of CACs has grown tremendously—more than 400 CACs are now established and 211 more are in the planning stages.¹ Continuous funding by the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP) since 1993, as authorized by the Victims of Child Abuse Act, has contributed to the growth of CACs nationwide. In addition, the CAC network has become increasingly coordinated. The National Children's Alliance (NCA) (formerly the National Network of Children's Advocacy Centers) coordinates

efforts among the CACs, provides resources, and produces national guidelines for the centers.

One of the goals of NCA is to reduce the amount of system-induced trauma children experience as a result of an investigation. For example, NCA recommends limiting the number of interviews to which children are exposed.

CACs are established to realize these goals, but whether they are succeeding has never been empirically tested.² A formal interview of CAC directors and an extensive literature search found only one published CAC outcome evaluation (Jenson et al. 1996). However, OJJDP has funded a national CAC evaluation, which is currently being conducted by the Crimes Against Children Research Center at the University of New Hampshire.

"Our major problem with evaluation was the response rate. We got back maybe 25 percent of the surveys, which gives us a biased perspective. It's really not very useful."

Although most centers are not conducting formal evaluations, they are evaluating their programs informally. Informal evaluations may include personal client data, such as letters from children and parents who have used CAC services. This type of evidence suggests that the center is meeting the needs of the children. The

danger in relying on informal evidence exclusively is that it fails to reveal the effects of the center on the rest of the client population. Similarly, many centers are administering client satisfaction questionnaires in an effort to evaluate their program, but the low response rate of these surveys renders the results unreliable.

The Benefits of Evaluation

A CAC evaluation can benefit programs in numerous ways. An interview with CAC administrators found that 56 percent of directors believe evaluation can help them improve their program; 40 percent believe that an evaluation would be useful in documenting how they are doing; and 33 percent said it would help them obtain funding.

CAC directors identified the following benefits of evaluations:

- **Meeting children’s needs.** Directors believe that serving children is their primary goal. The best way to determine how well children are being served is to ask them. An evaluation that includes children’s responses helps assess how well the CAC is meeting its goal.
- **Promoting the program.** An evaluation can identify specific accomplishments that can be used to promote the program’s public image in the community. Furthermore, promotions help to inform the community of the mission, how it is carried out, and the benefits from services provided.
- **Obtaining funding.** Evaluations show results, and these results can place a CAC in a better position to obtain funding. Data from evaluations can be used in grant proposals and presentations to funding agencies. This information is also useful in guiding annual budgets and justifying resource allocations.
- **Improving staff morale.** Staff members seldom hear from clients or others about their performance. An evaluation is an opportunity to provide feedback to staff and enhance staff morale.
- **Improving the program.** An evaluation identifies strengths and weaknesses and can suggest effective strategies for correcting weaknesses. In addition, evaluation information can help improve the staff’s work performance by providing direction, identifying training and technical assistance needs, and recruiting talented staff and volunteers. Furthermore, evaluation information can be used to support annual and long-range program planning. The following examples illustrate how directors have used evaluation to improve their program:
 - “We were looking at barriers to therapy. We found the main barrier was transportation, so we changed our protocol to include transportation.”
 - “We thought our center was child friendly, but we found out it was congested; it looked like a daycare center sometimes.”
 - “Through focus groups and interviews, some negative systemic problems were illuminated, which angered many people. The child abuse unit in the police department had never had a sergeant, but after the results of the study were disseminated, they got their own sergeant.”
 - “We were having trouble getting the team to case review each week. We did an evaluation and found we needed to modify our protocol. For example, we reintroduced the written agenda and that seems to have worked well to solve the problem.”

- **Stimulating the community to make changes.** Evaluations are helpful in convincing a community to make changes. Holding an open house provides an opportunity to display evaluation results for the community to learn about program activities and the effectiveness of a program.
- **Enhancing interagency cooperation.** Illustrating a program's effectiveness can make the program more attractive to other regulatory agencies and can be used to bring aboard new partner agencies.
- **Deriving broader societal benefits.** Data obtained from individual evaluations may benefit the human services field in general. However, it is essential that the public be made aware of evaluation results to accomplish this goal.
- **Increasing organizational capability.** Evaluation information is also useful to focus the attention of board members and other stakeholders on programmatic issues.
- **Improving outcome measurement systems.** Evaluation reports are useful not only for outside funding agencies and community leaders, but also as tools for improving the program itself. Evaluation results may reduce the time and cost of ongoing program monitoring activities, such as data collection procedures and instruments, training of data collectors, and data entry procedures.
- **Enhancing accountability.** The Government Performance and Results Act of 1993 requires Federal agencies to identify the goals of their programs and report the degree to which those goals were achieved. Indeed, many Federal (and some State) block grants require performance measurement and reporting. In addition, nonprofit agencies

such as the United Way are requiring performance measurement reports. This resource book gives CACs access to materials developed specifically for CAC administrators to facilitate accountability.

- **Meeting the challenges of a changing organization.** Incorporating the evaluation process into a program structure from the beginning gives the program flexibility, which in turn facilitates organizational survival. Some centers experience "growing pains" during early development years and may require considerable adjustment. An evaluation during a program's first year can be helpful in identifying problem areas. When a center has been fully operational for some time, the need to re-examine its goals and objectives is important. An evaluation at this stage of organizational development may be helpful in identifying what is working well and what needs adjusting.

Evaluation Motivators

The interview with CAC administrators (see appendix B) found that 53 percent of directors are conducting some type of program evaluation. Among these directors, 47 percent were conducting evaluations to improve their program; 22 percent were required by either a parent organization or their board to conduct an evaluation; and 20 percent were conducting evaluations to fulfill funding or grant requirements.

Directors identified several factors that would motivate them to independently begin an evaluation: 56 percent cited program improvement as a motivator for beginning an evaluation; 40 percent stated that an evaluation would be a means to document how the center is doing; and 33 percent said that conducting an evaluation would facilitate obtaining funding.

Evaluation Barriers and Responses

For a variety of reasons, many program directors are reluctant to begin an evaluation. The interviews revealed that directors believed a number of significant barriers exist to conducting program evaluations. Forty percent of the directors believed time was a major factor for not conducting an evaluation. Skill or knowledge of the evaluation process was a detractor for 22 percent of the directors. Lack of money, fear of results, and widespread lack of cooperation represented a barrier for 21 percent of the directors.

The following is a list of commonly noted barriers to conducting an evaluation, with rebuttals designed to alleviate concerns directors might have with conducting an evaluation:

- **Evaluations may make the program look bad.** Problems that are revealed by an evaluation should not be viewed as evidence of program failure, but should be taken as an opportunity to learn what needs to be changed to improve the program.
- **Evaluations divert resources away from the program.** Because evaluations provide information on what does and does not work, an important purpose for conducting an evaluation is to determine which aspects are economically feasible in light of the program options.
- **Evaluations cost too much.** There are four levels of evaluation costs. Low-cost evaluations typically involve frequency counts and satisfaction outcomes, but do not indicate success in attaining outcome objectives. Low- to moderate-cost evaluations involve changes in participants' knowledge, attitudes, and

behaviors, but the evaluation cannot attribute changes to the program because a control or comparison group is not used. Moderate- to high-cost evaluations typically involve the use of a comparison or control group, but are limited to short-term participant outcome changes. High-cost evaluations include all of the above data, as well as knowledge of long-term outcomes (e.g., after participants have left the program).

Money spent on evaluations is generally viewed as an investment in the program because knowledge is gained as to whether the program is benefiting the participants. Experts suggest that on average, an evaluation costs between 10 and 20 percent of the program's total budget. Limited funds do not preclude an evaluation. Costs incurred by conducting an evaluation may have to be offset through alternative funding methods.

- **Evaluations increase the burden for program staff.** The burden for conducting an evaluation should be evenly distributed. Indeed, evaluations provide useful feedback that can be used to learn about the needs of the program and participants, improve staff performance, and validate staff successes.

"Evaluation comes across as an eight-legged beast."

- **Evaluations are too complicated.** The complexity of an evaluation depends on the type of evaluation being conducted. Program monitoring evaluations are relatively simple and systematize what most CAC administrators already do. Impact evaluations, on the other hand,

are complex and may require the assistance of evaluation professionals.

- **Performance standard setting is too difficult.** Evaluations make it possible to set standards of performance. Without evaluation information, performance standards are completely arbitrary.

Notes

1. Benjamin Murray, personal communication, April 3, 2002.

2. A multisite evaluation project has been implemented by the Crimes Against Children Research Center at the University of New Hampshire under the direction of Dr. David Finkelhor.