



Framework for Program Evaluation in Public Health: A Checklist of Steps and Standards

Goldie MacDonald

The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) released the Framework for Program Evaluation in Public Health in 1999 to aid in evaluation planning, implementation, and use of findings. The Framework summarizes the basic elements of program evaluation via interrelated steps and standards of practice (Figure 1).¹ This checklist is a distillation of the content of the Framework with important clarifications or considerations for each of the steps. The purpose of the checklist is two-fold: (1) extract the core content from a forty- page publication and present the information in a format usable at the front lines of public health; and (2) enhance users' understanding of the essential content of the original publication. The only way in which the content of this checklist deviates from the original publication is the inclusion of the most recent addition to the Program Evaluation Standards: Evaluation Accountability.²

Users of this checklist can read the original Framework in its entirety at <http://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/preview/mmwrhtml/rr4811a1.htm> and access the Program Evaluation Standards at www.jcsee.org.



Figure 1. Framework for Program Evaluation in Public Health

Step One: Engage Stakeholders

Essential Elements

Identify and engage three principal groups of stakeholders with an interest or investment in the evaluation and how the information will be used:

- Those involved in program operations** (e.g., donors or sources of funds; program administrators, managers, or personnel engaged in planning or implementation)
- Those served or affected by the program directly or indirectly** (e.g., participants and their family members; community organizations; elected officials; professional associations or organizations relevant to the program or populations served)
- Primary users of the evaluation** who will do or decide something regarding the program based on the evaluation

Clarifications and Classifications

- Stakeholders' perspectives and understandings regarding the program and the evaluation *must* inform work in each of the steps to follow.
- The nature and degree of stakeholder participation in the evaluation will vary by context or setting, individual, and organization (e.g., participation limited to receipt of information or updates throughout the evaluation, direct involvement in design and implementation of the evaluation, assist or facilitate resolution of disagreements regarding the work).
- The primary users of the evaluation should be identified at the earliest stages of planning and engaged throughout the evaluation to understand and meet their information needs.

Step Two: Describe the Program

Essential Elements

Describe aspects of the program in sufficient detail to ensure shared understanding of the evaluand (i.e., the program or components of the program to be evaluated):

- Need:** the nature and magnitude of the problem or opportunity the program aims to address
- Expected effects:** what the program must accomplish or achieve to be considered successful
- Activities:** what the program does to create or contribute to change presented in a logical progression or sequence
- Resources:** assets available to plan and conduct activities (e.g., human and fiscal resources, information or evidence relevant to the program)
- Stage of development:** the maturity of the program
- Context:** setting and environmental influences relevant to the program or the evaluation (e.g., social or economic conditions, efforts of other organizations to address the same or similar needs)

- Logic Model:** picture or summary of the program’s mechanism of change (i.e., the progression from program processes to benefits or results), including how and why we expect the inputs, activities, and outputs of the program to cause or contribute to the intended outcomes (i.e., the knowledge or evidence used to inform program design)

Clarifications and Considerations

- The quality of the description of the program will be improved through consultation with diverse stakeholders regarding their understandings of the program or direct observation of activities.

Step Three: Focus the Evaluation Design

Essential Elements

Not all options for the design of the evaluation result in usable information that meets the needs of stakeholders. To establish important parameters for the evaluation, define all of the following:

- Purpose:** common purposes of program evaluation in public health include improve knowledge or understanding of the program, provide data or information to improve the program, determine the effects of the program, or affect change among participants in the program or the evaluation
- Users:** the specific persons expected to receive the evaluation findings for consideration or action
- Uses:** the specific ways in which information from the evaluation will be applied to meet the purposes of the evaluation
- Questions:** define precisely which aspects of the program will be addressed
- Methods:** how credible information will be collected to achieve the purpose of the evaluation, address the evaluation questions, and meet the intended uses
- Agreements:** summarize the procedures and responsibilities relevant to conduct of the evaluation (e.g., procedures or safeguards to protect human subjects, how resources will be used, timeline for implementation or reporting)

Clarifications and Considerations

- The importance of discussions with stakeholders to clarify the purpose of the evaluation, intended users and uses, specific evaluation questions to be addressed, methods, and agreements cannot be overstated.
- Each method has its own biases and limitations; in many cases, using mixed-method designs (i.e., the use of multiple data collection methods to address the same evaluation question) enhances the quality or richness of the inquiry.

Step Four: Gather Credible Evidence

Essential Elements

The Framework includes five items likely to influence perceptions of the credibility of evidence collected as a part of the evaluation:

- Indicators** (documentable or measurable pieces of information regarding the evaluand³): select indicators that yield reliable and valid information relevant to the evaluation questions
- Sources:** use multiple sources of evidence to incorporate different perspectives or understandings of the program being evaluated; criteria used to select sources should be made explicit to inform assessments of the credibility of evidence
- Quality:** data or information collected should meet stakeholders' expectations and thresholds for credibility (e.g., appropriateness and integrity of information)
- Quantity:** estimate the amount of data or information needed and assure that all data to be collected is matched to a pre-determined intended use
- Logistics:** the infrastructure and methods used to collect and handle data or information

Clarifications and Considerations

- To avoid or limit concerns regarding data quality or errors of inference, consult experts or specialists in evaluation methodology.
- A sound logic model of the program may be used to help identify a range of indicators from inputs and activities to the intended outcomes or results.
- Cultural factors may dictate acceptable or appropriate ways of completing work in this step of the Framework and others.
- The dangers associated with using indicators as the sole basis for decision making regarding the program are well-documented and should be considered at the earliest stages of planning

Step Five: Justify Conclusions

Essential Elements

Conclusions must be well-linked to the evidence and reflect the standards or values agreed upon with stakeholders. The Framework includes five elements necessary to justify conclusions:

- Standards:** when operationalized, standards establish the criteria or norms against which the program will be judged (e.g., the items used to determine whether a program is successful or unsuccessful)

- Analysis and Synthesis:** whether isolating key findings (analysis) or combining data sources to reach larger conclusions about an evaluand (synthesis), all decisions regarding organization, classification, determining interrelationships or comparisons of data, and display of information should be guided by the questions the evaluation was designed to address, the types of data collected, and input from stakeholders
- Interpretation:** the work of figuring out what the findings mean; data collection and analysis is not sufficient to draw conclusions regarding the program
- Judgments:** statements regarding the merit, worth, or significance of the program or components of the program; consider the findings, and interpretations of findings, against standards agreed upon with stakeholders
- Recommendations:** the specific actions that should be considered based on the evaluation; preparing these recommendations requires information beyond what is needed to make judgments regarding the merit or worth of the program

Clarifications and Considerations

- Techniques for analysis and synthesis of data, as well as interpretation of findings, should be discussed and determined before data collection begins.
- Disagreement regarding the quality or value of the program may indicate that stakeholders are using different standards as a basis for judgment and provides an opportunity for clarification or negotiation among stakeholders.
- Providing recommendations for action that lack sufficient evidence can undermine the credibility of the evaluation.

Step Six: Ensure Use and Share Lessons Learned

Essential Elements

Preparing for use of the evaluation requires deliberate action and begins at the earliest stages of planning. The Framework includes five elements to prepare for and promote use of the evaluation:

- Design:** how the evaluation questions, methods, and processes are constructed to achieve the desired uses
- Preparation:** provide time and opportunities for primary users to practice or rehearse how evaluation findings may be received or used; this activity gives stakeholders time to explore positive and negative implications of potential results and identify options for program improvement
- Feedback:** the communication that occurs among all parties to the evaluation; this exchange throughout the evaluation aids in building trust among stakeholders and keeping the work on track

- **Follow-up:** the emotional and technical support that users need during the evaluation and upon receipt of findings or recommendations; active follow-up with users may be required to remind stakeholders of planned uses, prevent lessons learned from being overlooked amidst other decisions or discussion, or prevent misuse of information (e.g., information taken out of context or used in ways other than what was agreed to among stakeholders)
- **Dissemination:** the process of communicating the procedures or lessons learned from an evaluation to relevant audiences in an appropriate fashion; the content and format of this information should be discussed with stakeholders well in advance of release
- **Additional Uses:** changes in thinking or behavior (among individuals or within organizations) that occur as a result of participation in the evaluation (e.g., personnel clarify or establish a shared understanding of program goals, more attention to decisions based on data or information from a systematic inquiry)

Clarifications and Considerations

- The design should include explicit information regarding how the findings will be used and by whom.
- A formal evaluation report is not always the most appropriate product of the evaluation; options for dissemination should be explored with stakeholders as a component of preparing for and promoting use.

Standards

The Program Evaluation Standards² include thirty statements in five categories: utility, feasibility, propriety, accuracy, and evaluation accountability. The standards names and statements are reproduced below with permission of the Joint Committee on Standards for Educational Evaluation. For more information, go to jcsee.org.

Utility Standards

The utility standards are intended to increase the extent to which program stakeholders find evaluation processes and products valuable in meeting their needs.

U1 Evaluator Credibility: Evaluations should be conducted by qualified people who establish and maintain credibility in the evaluation context.

U2 Attention to Stakeholders: Evaluations should devote attention to the full range of individuals and groups invested in the program and affected by its evaluation.

U3 Negotiated Purposes: Evaluation purposes should be identified and continually negotiated based on the needs of stakeholders.

U4 Explicit Values: Evaluations should clarify and specify the individual and cultural values underpinning purposes, processes, and judgments.

U5 Relevant Information: Evaluation information should serve the identified and emergent needs of stakeholders.

U6 Meaningful Processes and Products: Evaluations should construct activities, descriptions, and judgments in ways that encourage participants to rediscover, reinterpret, or revise their understandings and behaviors.

U7 Timely and Appropriate Communicating and Reporting: Evaluations should attend to the continuing information needs of their multiple audiences.

U8 Concern for Consequences and Influence: Evaluations should promote responsible and adaptive use while guarding against unintended negative consequences and misuse.

Feasibility Standards

The Feasibility standards are intended to increase evaluation effectiveness and efficiency.

F1 Project Management: Evaluations should use effective project management strategies.

F2 Practical Procedures: Evaluation procedures should be practical and responsive to the way the program operates.

F3 Contextual Viability: Evaluations should recognize, monitor, and balance the cultural and political interests and needs of individuals and groups.

F4 Resource Use: Evaluations should use resources effectively and efficiently.

Propriety Standards

The propriety standards support what is proper, fair, legal, right and just in evaluations.

P1 Responsive and Inclusive Orientation: Evaluations should be responsive to stakeholders and their communities.

P2 Formal Agreements: Evaluation agreements should be negotiated to make obligations explicit and take into account the needs, expectations, and cultural contexts of clients and other stakeholders.

P3 Human Rights and Respect: Evaluations should be designed and conducted to protect human and legal rights and maintain the dignity of participants and other stakeholders.

P4 Clarity and Fairness: Evaluations should be understandable and fair in addressing stakeholder needs and purposes.

P5 Transparency and Disclosure: Evaluations should provide complete descriptions of findings, limitations, and conclusions to all stakeholders, unless doing so would violate legal and propriety obligations.

P6 Conflicts of Interests: Evaluations should openly and honestly identify and address real or perceived conflicts of interests that may compromise the evaluation.

P7 Fiscal Responsibility: Evaluations should account for all expended resources and comply with sound fiscal procedures and processes.

Accuracy Standards

The accuracy standards are intended to increase the dependability and truthfulness of evaluation representations, propositions, and findings, especially those that support interpretations and judgments about quality.

A1 Justified Conclusions and Decisions: Evaluation conclusions and decisions should be explicitly justified in the cultures and contexts where they have consequences.

A2 Valid Information: Evaluation information should serve the intended purposes and support valid interpretations.

A3 Reliable Information: Evaluation procedures should yield sufficiently dependable and consistent information for the intended uses.

A4 Explicit Program and Context Descriptions: Evaluations should document programs and their contexts with appropriate detail and scope for the evaluation purposes.

A5 Information Management: Evaluations should employ systematic information collection, review, verification, and storage methods.

A6 Sound Designs and Analyses: Evaluations should employ technically adequate designs and analyses that are appropriate for the evaluation purposes.

A7 Explicit Evaluation Reasoning: Evaluation reasoning leading from information and analyses to findings, interpretations, conclusions, and judgments should be clearly and completely documented.

A8 Communication and Reporting: Evaluation communications should have adequate scope and guard against misconceptions, biases, distortions, and errors.

Evaluation Accountability Standards

The evaluation accountability standards encourage adequate documentation of evaluations and a metaevaluative perspective focused on improvement and accountability for evaluation processes and products.

E1 Evaluation Documentation: Evaluations should fully document their negotiated purposes and implemented designs, procedures, data, and outcomes.

E2 Internal Metaevaluation: Evaluators should use these and other applicable standards to examine the accountability of the evaluation design, procedures employed, information collected, and outcomes.

E3 External Metaevaluation: Program evaluation sponsors, clients, evaluators, and other stakeholders should encourage the conduct of external metaevaluations using these and other applicable standards.

References

- ¹Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (1999, September). Framework for program evaluation in public health. *Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report*, 48(RR-11). Available from <ftp://ftp.cdc.gov/pub/Publications/mmwr/rr/rr4811.pdf>
- ²Yarbrough, D. B., Shulha, L. M., Hopson, R. K., & Caruthers, F. A. (2011). *The program evaluation standards: A guide for evaluators and evaluation users* (3rd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage
- ³MacDonald, G. (2013). *Criteria for selection of high-performing indicators: A checklist to inform monitoring and evaluation*. Retrieved from Western Michigan University, The Evaluation Center website: <http://www.wmich.edu/evaluation/checklists>

Acknowledgements

Thank you to Brandi Campbell, Martha Engstrom, Danyael Garcia, Heather Klugh, Rene Lavinghouze, Janis Weber, and Lori Wingate for contributions to the content and format of the checklist.

Suggested Citation

MacDonald, G. (2013). *Framework for program evaluation in public health: A checklist of steps and standards*. Retrieved from <https://wmich.edu/evaluation/checklists>

This checklist is provided as a free service to the user. The provider of the checklist has not modified or adapted the checklist to fit the specific needs of the user and the user must use their own discretion and judgment in using the checklist. The provider of the checklist makes no representations or warranties that this checklist is fit for the particular purpose contemplated by the user and specifically disclaims any such warranties or representations.