



National Resource Center on Domestic Violence

Outcome Evaluation for Domestic Violence Programs

Evaluation Issue Brief #1

Why Should We Want to Evaluate Our Work?

While the thought of “evaluation” can be daunting, if not downright intimidating for many domestic violence (DV) programs, there are many good reasons to evaluate the job we are doing. The most important reason, of course, is to understand the impact of programs and practices on the lives of survivors and their children in order to build upon those efforts that survivors say are helpful to them and stop putting time and resources into efforts that are not helpful or relevant to them. Evaluation is also important because it provides “hard evidence” to present to funders, policymakers, and allied organizations, encouraging them to continue and increase the resources available to support effective programs and approaches.

Most of us would agree that these are good reasons to examine the kind of job we're doing...*BUT*...we are still hesitant to evaluate our programs for a number of reasons.

Why Many Domestic Violence Programs Resist Evaluation (and reasons to reconsider!)

“Research has been used against victims and their children.” It is true that people can manipulate or misinterpret research data. However, this is actually a reason why we need to understand and conduct our own evaluations. To effectively argue against the misinterpretation of other research, we must at least have a general understanding of how data are collected, analyzed, and interpreted.

(related): “I don't trust researchers.” Too many programs have had bad experiences with researchers who come into their settings, collect their data, and are either never heard from again or who then interpret their findings without a basic understanding of domestic violence issues. In the academic arena we refer to this as “drive-by data collection,” and we would strongly recommend programs turn such researchers away at the door. But please remember that working with a researcher to do program evaluation is optional. With basic information, you can conduct your own outcome evaluation.

“Funders (or the public) will use our findings against us.” A common concern we have heard from program staff is that our own evaluations could be used against us because they might not “prove” we are effective in protecting victims from intimate partner violence. This fear usually comes from people who think that the funders (or the public) expect us, on our own, to *end* intimate partner violence. We would argue that it is unrealistic to expect victim service programs to end victimization – that is the role of perpetrator service programs as well as the larger community. We do, however, need to know if we are effectively meeting goals that *are* realistic.

"I have no training in evaluation!" There is a scary mystique around evaluation – the idea that evaluation is something only highly trained specialists can (or would want to!) understand. The truth is that information is readily available to help you conduct a program evaluation.

"We don't have the staff (or money) to do evaluation." It is true that evaluating our programs takes staff time and money. One of the ways we need to more effectively advocate for ourselves is in educating our funding sources that evaluation demands must come with dollars attached. However, it is not necessary for every program to "re-invent the wheel."

"Everyone knows that you can make data say anything you want to, anyway." This actually isn't true. Although data are open to interpretation, such interpretation has its limits. For example, if you ask survivors, out of context, how often they slapped their assailants in the last year, and 78% reported they did so at least once, you could *try* to make the argument that women are abusive toward men (which is why it is so important to word questions accurately and ask contextual questions). On the other hand, if you collected this same information and then claimed women *never* slapped their assailants under any circumstances, you would not have the data to back you up. Data can be manipulated, but only so far. The more you understand research and evaluation the more easily you will be able to point out when and how data are misinterpreted.

"We've already done evaluation [last year, 10 years ago]; we don't need to do it again." Things change. The issues facing survivors change, as do community realities. Programs change, and staff change. We should continually strive to evaluate ourselves and improve our work.

Knowledge is power. The more service providers and advocates know about designing and conducting evaluation efforts the better those efforts will be. Evaluating our work can provide us with valuable information we need to continually improve our programs.

The other Evaluation Briefs in this series review the distinctions between research and evaluation and between process and outcome evaluation (#2), explore ways to attend to safety, confidentiality and diversity (#3), further define outcome evaluation (#4), provide practical guidance on gathering, maintaining and analyzing data (#5), and recommend how we can make evaluation work for us (#6).

The content of this series of Outcome Evaluation Issues Briefs is drawn from a 2007 NRC DV publication entitled *"Outcome Evaluation Strategies for Domestic Violence Services Programs Receiving FVPSA Funding: A Practical Guide"*, authored by Eleanor Lyon, PhD and Cris Sullivan, PhD.

Eleanor Lyon recently retired from her position at Director of the Institute for Violence Prevention & Reduction at the University of Connecticut, where she directed many research and evaluation projects focused on violence against women. She remains active as a consultant for the NRC DV, the National Center on Domestic Violence, Trauma and Mental Health, and others. ***Cris Sullivan*** is Professor of Ecological/Community Psychology and Coordinator of the Violence Against Women Research and Outreach Initiative at Michigan State University (MSU). She is also Associate Chair of the Psychology Department and is a Senior Fellow of MSU's Office on Outreach and Engagement. She has been an advocate and researcher in the movement to end violence against women since 1982. Her areas of expertise include developing and evaluating community interventions for abused women and their children, and evaluating victim services.