Second Chance Act Program

Evaluation Readiness Planning Guide

NOTE: *This planning guide accompanies the resource brief "Improving Evaluation Readiness for Second Chance Act Programs" and provides some questions to consider as you review the five main recommendations.*

1: *A Clear Program Model*

A program needs to be clearly described through a logical framework for it to be evaluated. Below are some guiding questions that can help programs get started.

- **Eligibility:** What are your program's eligibility criteria?
- **Goals & Objectives:** What are the program's overarching goals and objectives?
- **Resources:** What resources exist that support these objectives (e.g., staff, funding)?
- **Activities:** What are the planned program activities that promote each objective (e.g., training, case management)?
- **Outputs:** What are the expected outputs of the activities you will implement (e.g., number of clients enrolled, number of sessions delivered, number of staff trained)?
- **Outcomes:** What outcomes do you expect in program clients (both intermediate and long-term outcomes)? What systems-level outcomes do you expect?

2: *Stable and Fully Implemented Program*

Fully implemented and stable programs lend themselves to a more rigorous evaluation. Consider the following points when assessing a program's stability.

- **Program time frame:** How long has the program been operating?
- **Program stability:** During this time frame, how stable has the program been? If there have been significant changes, it may be necessary to select a more focused time frame in which the program was stable. Consider these questions.
  - Have there been any major changes to the program's eligibility criteria or are any changes anticipated in the immediate future?
  - Have there been any major changes to the program's activities (or are any changes anticipated)?

2: *Stable and Fully Implemented Program (continued)*

- **Planned evaluation design:** Determining when the program has been operating in a stable fashion (based on the questions above) will help to inform the evaluation design. For example, a program that was stable and fully implemented over the past 5 years, but for which major changes are now planned, may need to use a retrospective evaluation design (with the evaluation focusing on a historical cohort). Conversely, a program that is now fully operational and stable after 2 years of programmatic changes may consider a prospective design to assess the "new and improved" program (see text box).

Factoring in program stability when selecting an evaluation design

Prospective and retrospective designs can both be used to evaluate a program. **Either design is appropriate as long as the conditions are stable throughout the study period for the cohort being followed.**

A **prospective design** monitors a cohort of study participants (including a treatment and comparison group) going forward in time. Ideally, eligible individuals are randomly assigned to participate in either the program (intervention group) or a control group that does not receive the program or the full menu of program services. Regardless of the study design, both the treatment and control/comparison groups are monitored over time to see whether differences in outcomes, such as arrest rates, emerge between the two groups.

Example: An evaluation might follow a cohort of 200 clients who enroll in the program over a 2-year period and a control group that is released from incarceration during the same time period. The evaluators will collect primary data (e.g., employment outcomes) and obtain administrative data (e.g., arrest outcomes) for both groups.

A **retrospective design** reviews information that has already been collected among a cohort of previously enrolled program participants and comparison group members (which, in a retrospective design, are often identified using available administrative data to construct a demographically similar comparison group). This design requires that all the data needed for outcome analyses (e.g., recidivism outcomes) exist in administrative records.

Example: An evaluation might examine the administrative records of a cohort of clients who were previously enrolled in the program, and a matched comparison group (e.g., individuals with criminal histories and risk scores similar to those of treatment group members and returning to the same communities) who were released from incarceration during the same time period.

3: *Sufficient Numbers of Participants*

A sufficient number of participants is needed to ensure that the evaluation has the statistical power to detect treatment effects. When determining if the sample size available for the evaluation is sufficient, consider the following questions.

- How many clients were enrolled (or do you expect to be enrolled) in the program? How many comparable clients are available for the control/comparison group?
  - Evaluations with at least 150 people enrolled in both the treatment and control groups (for a total of 300) are typically well powered to detect medium program effects as statistically significant.
- What are some of the reasons the program does not have (or does not expect to have) enough clients during the specified program time frame? Are the reasons related to the program's eligibility criteria (e.g., strict eligibility requirements)? Are the reasons related to any limitations on the program's recruitment approach?
- For sites with fewer participants, such as tribal or rural sites, would it be possible to extend the program period? Is it possible to use a historical comparison group? Can your program's data be combined with a similar or neighboring jurisdiction?

4: *Data Capacity*

The capacity of a program to provide data to support the evaluation is a key step in being evaluation ready. The program will need to have the necessary data infrastructure to conduct the study. In general, programs will need to review program data that have already been collected to monitor program performance as well as identify new data that need to be collected. Consider the following questions.

- What data are currently being collected, or have been previously collected, to monitor the program's outputs (e.g., attendance, program completion)? For which program activities?
- Who collects the data? When are data collected? How are data collected?
- Are there any program activities and outputs that are not currently monitored and will require new data to be collected?
- Where are the existing data stored or where will the data be stored? Can the data be exported?
- Does the data system have a unique identifier for each program participant?
- Has the necessary time been allocated for staff to collect data?
- Are data collection protocols established (e.g., forms, guides for staff, clear staff roles)?
- Have the necessary staff been trained on data collection procedures?
- Has the necessary time been allocated for data quality, such as to assess the completeness and the accuracy of the data collected?

Note: Some of these questions may need to be asked differently or may not apply depending on whether a retrospective or prospective evaluation design is used.

5: *Leadership Support for the Evaluation*

A program needs the support of its leadership to be evaluation ready. When assessing your program's leadership support, consider the following:

- Do program and organizational directors understand the evaluation and what it entails? Has the evaluation been formally explained?
- Have program leaders been informed about the potential benefits of the evaluation?
- Have program leaders been informed about what is needed to be in place for the evaluation to be successfully implemented (e.g., resources, staff time)?

The Evaluation and Sustainability Training and Technical Assistance (ES TTA) Project is conducted by RTI International and the Center for Court Innovation with funding from Grant No. 2019-MU-BX-K041 awarded by the Bureau of Justice Assistance. The Bureau of Justice Assistance is a component of the Department of Justice's Office of Justice Programs, which also includes the Bureau of Justice Statistics, the National Institute of Justice, the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, the Office for Victims of Crime, and the SMART Office. Points of view or opinions in this document are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the official position.