



## An Evaluation and Sustainability Resource Brief

# Improving Evaluation Readiness for Reentry Programs

## Why Evaluation Readiness Matters

Evaluating your reentry program can answer basic questions such as whether the program was effective, how it was implemented, and how it might be improved. However, evaluation can be complicated, and not all evaluations succeed. Often a disappointing evaluation is the result of the program's or the organization's not being *evaluation ready*. In other words, the program may not have had the necessary infrastructure to engage in the evaluation.

Ensuring that the program is evaluation ready—from the very beginning of the program—allows for a more efficient, reliable, and successful evaluation. Attempting to evaluate a program that is not evaluation ready can leave unanswered questions, waste grant resources, and lead to failure of the evaluation, which is frustrating to program staff, funders, and partners.

## Building a Program's Evaluation Readiness

This brief summarizes key steps that reentry programs and research partners can take to build your program's evaluation readiness and increase its capacity for evaluation. We will describe foundational activities necessary for conducting strong process and outcome evaluations, as well as for producing basic performance measures required by grant funders.

### Key Definitions

- **Evaluation readiness:** An organization's ability to successfully implement an evaluation.
- **Performance measures:** Basic program metrics and participant outcomes that are used to monitor a program's accomplishments and progress toward established goals.
- **Process evaluation:** An assessment of the *implementation* of a program (e.g., the population served, the services that were delivered). Some process evaluations use the findings to guide program development and refine program operations (formative evaluation) and sometimes include a fidelity assessment to determine the extent to which the program was implemented as intended.
- **Outcome (or impact) evaluation:** An empirical assessment of the extent to which a program achieved its desired *outcomes*. Answers questions such as, "Did participants benefit from the program in ways not evident among similar individuals who did not receive the program?"

Very often, evaluation readiness depends on the infrastructure that is in place at your program or the organization. For example, the way that your program is designed, implemented, and managed influences how well it lends itself to being evaluated. No matter how experienced and qualified a research partner

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is, if the program is not evaluation ready, the evaluation may be set up for failure. At the same time, grant-funded programs often have an evaluation requirement that is imposed without consideration of the program’s evaluation readiness. In such cases, your goal should be to get the program as ready as possible under the circumstances, anticipating likely challenges and developing workable solutions. **Table 1** lists some common evaluation readiness challenges.

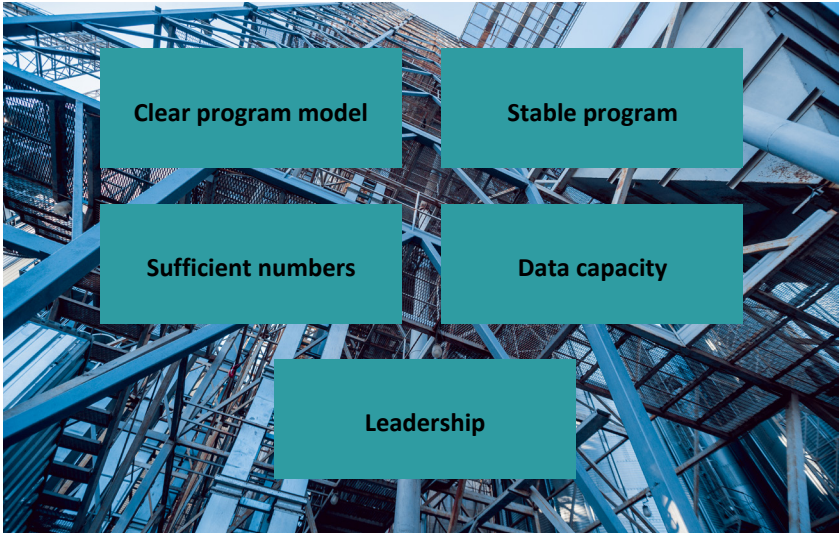
**Table 1. Common Evaluation Readiness Challenges**

| Common Challenges   | Explanation  |
|---|--|
| <p><b>“Our program serves a small number of clients because we strongly believe in providing individualized services”</b></p>                                   | <p>Some programs are intentionally small because they offer very personalized services and have a limited number of staff. Others end up with low numbers of clients not by design but because their eligibility criteria are too restrictive, their recruitment approach is ineffective, or other contextual factors have reduced the size of the eligible population. Rural or tribal programs may also have low numbers of potential participants and may experience challenges in client outreach. Regardless of the reason for low enrollment, it is problematic for evaluation. Programs are simply in a better position to be evaluated if they serve a larger number of clients. With small sample sizes, the evaluation can have a difficult time concluding whether participants in the program are doing better than people who do not receive the services. In other words, the more people that can be assessed in the evaluation, the more confident we can be in the findings that are generated.</p> |
| <p><b>“Our program is operating, but we are modifying our treatment model because of unexpected conditions that require us to change what we are doing”</b></p> | <p>Sometimes programs are forced to adapt their program offerings or service delivery approach because of budget cuts, staff shortages, restrictions on in-person service delivery, or other factors. However, evaluation is not well suited to a state of flux: if different clients are experiencing different service models, it will be impossible to conclude what worked. Under highly unstable programmatic conditions, evaluation work should focus on documenting program adaptations through ongoing process evaluation and on ensuring that outcome evaluation results clearly acknowledge program adaptations and the limitations of the evaluation in determining program effectiveness.</p>  |
| <p><b>“Our program doesn’t have a case management system”</b></p>   | <p>If a program does not have an electronic case management system (or any data collection system) that documents which clients were served and what services were provided to them, the evaluation will be unable to produce basic performance metrics. For example, the program will have difficulty quantifying its services, such as how many people were served or how many people completed the program within 12 months.</p>  |

## Five Key Recommendations for Getting Your Reentry Program Ready for Evaluation

Programs need the appropriate scaffolding to get them ready for an evaluation. Several factors need to be in place to ensure that the programmatic and organizational infrastructure is sufficient to support a strong and credible evaluation of reentry programming. The rest of this brief highlights five foundational components of evaluation readiness (see **Figure 1**).

Figure 1. Foundational components of evaluation readiness



### Clear Program Model

A program needs to be clearly articulated through a logical framework to be evaluated. Without a logical framework, what the evaluation should actually measure will not be clear. Your program staff should clearly articulate this framework by showing how your program’s resources and activities are arranged to drive specific outcomes. A clearly articulated framework allows evaluators to compare what the program should look like to what is happening on the ground.

A *logic model* is a visual representation of the framework. It shows how the respective program components—including goals and objectives, target population (including eligibility criteria and anticipated number of participants to be enrolled), resources (e.g., staff, funding), and activities (e.g., intensive case management, counseling)—are logically organized to reach desired outcomes (**Figure 2**). Be sure that all components of the program logic model are well defined, specific, and logically ordered, with plausible connections between program activities and expected outcomes, so that your evaluation partner can

Figure 2. Main components of a logic model



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measure the components. You can further subdivide the desired outcomes as short-term, intermediate, and long-term outcomes. You can also specify outcomes as client-level, staff, and systems-level outcomes. Ultimately, a clearly articulated program logic model allows your program to be evaluation ready and provides the framework for the evaluation.

Second Chance Act (SCA) grants have a built-in planning phase, which is necessary for refining how the program is designed and will be implemented, designing the evaluation, and preparing for the rollout of the program and the evaluation. Your research partner or evaluator should be actively involved from the beginning of the planning phase in order to ensure that the program planning and evaluation plans are in alignment.

## Stable and Fully Implemented Program

Before being evaluated, your program needs to be fully implemented and stable, and it should have experienced at least one cohort or enrollment period in which no major changes were made to the target population or program model. Otherwise, drawing any conclusions about the program's effectiveness will be impossible. Even worse, there is a risk of evaluators' concluding that the program is not effective in reaching its desired outcomes when in fact it was simply not fully implemented.

While programs should be fully operating before an outcome evaluation, it is often a good idea to have a soft rollout or pilot phase of a program. During this phase, *formative evaluation* activities are particularly beneficial. A formative evaluation is an assessment of the program while it is still beginning implementation, and the information collected can help to guide early decisions about the program and inform improvements. For example, your program can collect early feedback from participant satisfaction surveys or focus groups. You can also assess program

outputs, such as the number of trainings delivered or the number of case management sessions held with clients per month. This formative evaluation may also be an ideal time to pilot test any intake or new data collection procedures put into place to support the evaluation.

## Sufficient Numbers of Participants

Some reentry programs, particularly those providing intensive case management with a limited number of staff, intentionally serve a small number of participants. However, many programs unintentionally end up with lower-than-expected enrollment (see Table 1). Having a small number of participants makes it nearly impossible to determine the program's impact because statistically detecting small or moderate program effects is difficult. In other words, with a small sample, the impact of the program would have to be extremely large to be detected as statistically significant, and large impacts are often unrealistic (see sidebar, "Power in Numbers"). Therefore, your program should make every effort to enroll a larger number of clients, while still reserving a pool of eligible individuals for the comparison group. Below are some ways of maximizing the number of program participants.

### ✓ Do not make eligibility criteria overly restrictive

Sometimes programs impose eligibility criteria that are not absolutely necessary for programmatic purposes and that eliminate many potential participants. Carefully assess each criterion to see whether it is essential. If its elimination would not compromise evidence-based strategies that incorporate risk-need-responsivity, consider it for elimination.

### ✓ Automatically enroll participants

Explore the possibility of automatically enrolling eligible clients in the reentry program (and, ideally, assigning some to receive standard reentry

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programming to serve as the *comparison group*) rather than relying on participants to proactively learn about the program and express their interest in participating. In fact, automatic enrollment has been used in some reentry programs as a standard operating procedure within a facility. This approach could facilitate strong evaluation not only by increasing the number of participants but also by providing a framework for assigning some individuals to the comparison group.

## ✓ Do not rely on word of mouth

Relying on word of mouth—such as distributing brochures or flyers or otherwise expecting individuals to learn about the program and reach out to program staff—will yield fewer participants. Systematic approaches such as using available administrative data can be used to identify individuals meeting basic program eligibility criteria. Your staff can then meet with these individuals to determine their interest in participating.

## ✓ Monitor enrollment data in real time

Regardless of the recruitment strategy, program staff need to establish procedures to monitor enrollment in real time throughout the program so that recruitment efforts can be increased (or decreased) as necessary.

Combined, these strategies should increase program enrollment. However, to effectively plan for different scenarios, your research partner should work with the program team to conduct power analyses with different enrollment scenarios during the planning stage (e.g., enrollment target, 20% lower than target, 20% higher than target). The ability to detect the effect of the program will differ with varying levels of enrollment. Evaluators should share the implications of these enrollment levels with your program staff during the planning phase. Doing so will help to ensure that all parties are aware of the impact of enrollment decisions on the evaluation.

## Considerations for Tribal or Rural Programs and Additional Support for Increasing Program Enrollment

Tribal or rural programs may have a small pool of eligible participants available for the program. In addition to considering the recommendations listed here, other strategies that might be useful for smaller jurisdictions include: 1) extending the program enrollment period (to allow for more participants to accrue), 2) using a historical (pre- program) comparison group (so that no individuals eligible for the reentry program need to be reserved for the comparison group), and 3) exploring whether your site's data could be pooled with a similar (both program- and population-wise) jurisdiction's data for analysis purposes.

For SCA-funded programs struggling with enrollment, targeted training and technical assistance (TTA) from BJA-funded TTA providers or BJA Policy Advisors may be available. TTA providers may be able to work with you to explore potential changes to eligibility criteria and strategies for effectively recruiting and enrolling eligible clients in your program.

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## Power in Numbers

The ability of an evaluation to detect modest program impacts is much greater with a larger number of treatment and comparison group members enrolled in the study. As an example, consider what the program impacts would need to be to conclude that a reentry program resulted in significantly better outcomes for program participants for

- a program that serves 25 people (and has 25 in the comparison group) or
- a program that serves 150 people (and has 150 in the comparison group).

Suppose the program uses the outcome of any rearrest within 12 months of release from incarceration and staff assume that 50% of comparison group members will be rearrested within 12 months of release (which is the rearrest rate documented in the most recent cross-site evaluation of adult SCA grantees; Lindquist et al., 2018).

- For the small program to be able to produce a statistically significant treatment effect, **only 17% of treatment group members could be rearrested** (compared to 50% of comparison group members). This result would represent a **very large** treatment effect, which is unrealistic for most reentry programs.
- For the large program to be able to produce a statistically significant treatment effect, **up to 34% of treatment group members could be rearrested** (compared to 50% of comparison group members). This result would represent a **medium** treatment effect, which is much more typical of reentry programs.

Typically, reentry program evaluations will be powered to detect medium program impacts. Many SCA funding streams require that 150 participants be enrolled. If all of these participants can be included in the evaluation, along with a comparable number of comparison group members, the evaluation will be well powered to detect medium program effects as statistically significant, using dichotomous outcomes (e.g., any rearrest within 12 months) or continuous outcomes (e.g., number of new arrests within 12 months). However, if program enrollment ends up much smaller than planned, the program would have to produce very large results (i.e., hardly any participants could get rearrested) to be able to conclude that the program worked.

## Data Capacity

The capacity of your program to provide data to support the evaluation is critical to the program's being evaluation ready. During the planning stage, you and your staff and evaluators should work together to assess existing data sources, new data to be collected, data agreements and data transfer, electronic data systems, and staff time.

Complete a data assessment for both the process evaluation (including any formative evaluation objectives) and the outcome evaluation. The results of this exercise should inform modifications to data collection procedures and to the evaluation plan so that the final plan is feasible. You may need to eliminate some of the originally planned research questions if you cannot collect the data needed to answer them. Several key questions should be asked during the data assessment.

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**Existing data sources:** What data relevant to the evaluation are you *already* collecting (e.g., client data collected through existing intake procedures, staff training records, administrative data available in jail/prison management information systems)? Additional questions to consider include the following: How are the data entered/stored? How will the data be exported and in what format? Who enters the data? What is the quality of the data (e.g., how complete, accurate)? Can these data be shared with the evaluator for research purposes?

**New data to be collected:** What *new* data and data collection procedures need to be put into place (either by program staff or evaluators) to collect additional data that are crucial to addressing your research questions? Questions to consider include the following: Who will be responsible for collecting the data? If program staff are to collect the data, can these procedures be built into existing protocols to minimize staff burden? What staff training will be required? What data quality control procedures will be put into place? Where will the data be stored?

**Data agreements and data transfer:** For both existing and new data, what data transfer or data use agreements does your program need to implement to allow these data sources to be shared with the evaluator for research purposes? If multiple data sources will be transferred, is there a unique identifier (e.g., a participant's department of corrections number) that can link multiple spreadsheets or data sources?

**Electronic data systems:** One critical component of data collection capacity for reentry programs is whether the program has a system for keeping electronic records (at the individual client level). Therefore, assess your existing infrastructure for collecting, storing, using, and exporting data. Ideally, your program should use a case management system that tracks participant identifiers (e.g., the names and other identifiers for participants served by the program), enrollment and completion dates, program

## Special Considerations for Outcome Evaluation

Importantly, if you are planning an outcome evaluation, some special considerations apply. Outcome evaluations require a comparison or control group—a carefully selected group of individuals who are comparable to the program participants on all eligibility criteria, but who receive standard services or supervision rather than the reentry programming being evaluated. It will be critical for the data assessment to determine what data are available (or can be accessed) for both reentry program participants and comparison/control group members so that the evaluation provides a rigorous test of the impact of reentry programming as distinct from standard services.

If the evaluation involves comparing outcomes for reentry program participants with those of a comparison or control group, ideally you should use the same case management system for both groups. Doing so is often difficult for programs (particularly if they do not have any contact with comparison/control group members), but it is worth the investment to have this information for both groups.

enrollment and completion metrics, services received by participants, and outcomes that participants have. Very few reentry programs document the services they deliver in sufficient detail. They miss an opportunity for assessing the *dosage* of services and the extent to which services received by participants relate to outcomes. Also, few programs document client outcomes such as employment status or housing stability, which are often just as important as recidivism outcomes to determine

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whether the program met its intended goals (or are key intermediate outcomes in assessing program impacts). A case management system that can track program engagement and all key outcomes would greatly strengthen the quality of the evaluation.

**Staff time:** Ensuring that program staff have sufficient time available for evaluation-related responsibilities, including data collection, is a critical component of evaluation readiness. This may involve time for training on data collection procedures and involvement in quality reviews (to assess the completeness and accuracy of the data that are collected), in addition to the time required for the actual data collection. The amount of time needed for evaluation-related responsibilities may vary across programs because of staffing capacity and responsibilities and the complexity of the evaluation. Soliciting staff input on evaluation-related responsibilities can help identify ways to streamline these processes into existing responsibilities (e.g., embedding questions into intake forms) and generate buy-in (or, if planned evaluation activities are felt to pose unrealistic demands on staff, can result in a modified evaluation design that better reflects real-world conditions).

## Leadership Support for the Evaluation

Finally, to be evaluation ready, your program needs the support of its leadership (and the leadership of all parties who will be involved in evaluation activities). Buy-in from the program and organizational leaders at both the lead agency and partnership agencies often affects the actions and attitude of frontline staff who will play a role in supporting evaluation activities. Leadership support also helps to ensure that unanticipated challenges the evaluation encounters over the course of time can be resolved successfully (e.g., by having individuals in a position of influence

actively work to resolve the problem), and it increases the likelihood that the evaluation findings and recommendations will be used by the agency to further inform its reentry work.

However, building leadership support often takes time and strategic thinking. Organization and program leaders are often faced with competing priorities and busy schedules, and may they not have had the opportunity to give the evaluation enough thought. Emphasizing to program leaders how the evaluation will document agency challenges and inform program improvements can help them understand the importance of the evaluation. Also, funders commonly ask programs to provide evidence documenting their services (outputs) and any associated outcomes. Impacts on public safety and any cost savings achieved by the program are particularly appealing to agency leaders.

## Summary and Additional Support for Evaluation Readiness

The recommendations in this brief will help to ensure that your reentry program is evaluation ready and, therefore, increase the chances of a successful, informative evaluation. In addition to this brief, the accompanying *Reentry Program Evaluation Readiness Guide* and other resources developed by the Evaluation and Sustainability Training and Technical Assistance project can further support program staff who are interested in getting their program evaluation ready. Other checklists may be of use to reentry programs, such as the **Impact Evaluability Assessment Tool** (Zandniapour & JBS International, 2014), and the **Capacity and Organizational Readiness for Evaluation (CORE) Tool** (Innovation Network, Inc., n.d.).

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## References

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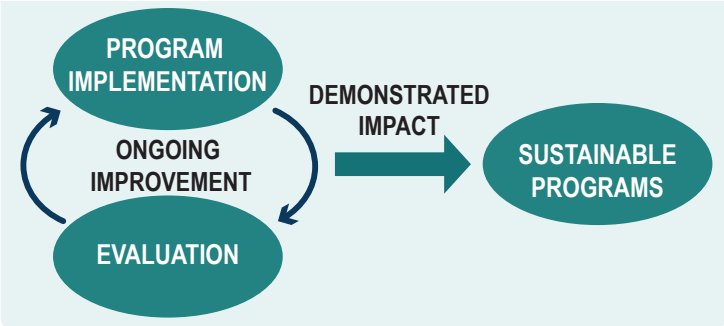
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## The Evaluation and Sustainability Training and Technical Assistance Project

The Evaluation and Sustainability Training and Technical Assistance (ES TTA) Project supports Second Chance Act (SCA) grantees in conducting more rigorous evaluations that lead to data-driven program improvement and demonstrated impact and that support programs’ long-term sustainability. For more information about the project, contact [ESTTA@rti.org](mailto:ESTTA@rti.org).



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