



An Evaluation and Sustainability Resource Brief

The Second Chance Act Grantee's Guide to Local Evaluation Milestones

Why Timing Matters for Evaluation Success

Many Second Chance Act (SCA) grantees are required to conduct a local evaluation, and others opt to conduct them for the benefit of their program and the communities they serve. Such work serves a variety of purposes, but the most valuable local evaluation is one that informs ongoing improvements to the program, helps staff achieve and demonstrate a positive impact in the community, and supports the program's long-range sustainability.

Achieving the potential of a local evaluation to support an SCA program's long-term goals requires thoughtful planning and rigorous execution. It's also very much a matter of timing.

Beginning an evaluation too late in the grant period can mean sacrificing many of its potential benefits. An outcome evaluation that launches long after program recruitment has begun will operate from a deficit: certain options for rigorously demonstrating program

impact may no longer be available because of the smaller number of study participants.

Launching the local evaluation too early can also be less than ideal. Firming up an evaluation design before taking the time to consider what study questions truly matter to staff and stakeholders, and how best to answer them, can leave the team saddled with carrying out a study that no one is particularly excited about completing. It also sets the stage for midstream study changes that can compromise the interpretability of the data and the credibility of final results.

Timing is key to realizing a full return on the time and resources invested in your local evaluation and maximizing the opportunity the evaluation presents to support your program's long-range success. This resource brief and companion infographic identify the key evaluation milestones to achieve at each stage in the SCA grant life cycle.

Aligning Evaluation Milestones to SCA Program Implementation

For purposes of implementing a successful evaluation, calendar time matters less and where the evaluation activities fall in the SCA funding period matters more. Aligning local evaluation milestones to key SCA program implementation milestones represents the strongest approach to managing the evaluation workflow.

Not all SCA grantees operate on the same timeline, however. Some are funded for 3 years and others for 4. Furthermore, those who experience major logistical issues—for example, serious delays in receiving budget clearance, executing a key hire, or starting to enroll program participants—often request extensions to the original funding period. However,

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these differences will primarily affect the flow of program and evaluation activities during the final 12–24 months of the project. During the first 2 years of operation, all SCA grantees should execute a common set of programmatic and evaluation tasks to get the program off to a solid start and launch a meaningful evaluation.

To guide your efforts, see **Table 1**, which shows key evaluation milestones to be accomplished during the first 2 years of program operation, tracked from the date of budget clearance. Table 1 then recommends key evaluation activities for the final 12 months of the grant; the calendar timing of these activities will depend on the original award length and any extensions.

Table 1. Recommended Local Evaluation Milestone Schedule

Year	Timing Relative to Grant Period	Concurrent Program Activities	Local Evaluation Milestones
1	Upon Receipt of Award	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Accept award Pursue budget approval 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Review and finalize evaluation objectives Confirm selection of research contractor (if using an external partner) Agree on intended scope of evaluation work internally or in negotiation with research partner
	Within 6 Months of Budget Clearance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Begin Planning & Implementation guide Complete program hires 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Execute research contract (if applicable) Make internal evaluation staffing assignments Finalize research questions Plan formative evaluation, including how evaluation findings will be used to inform program operations
	Within 12 Months of Budget Clearance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Complete Planning & Implementation guide Finalize program recruitment strategy Finalize service delivery plans Train staff 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Create or update program logic model Finalize implementation and cost study designs (if applicable) Finalize outcome evaluation design, including how you will define and identify a group to whom SCA participants can be compared Agree on all constructs to be measured and identify data sources for each
2	Within 15 Months of Budget Clearance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Begin enrolling program participants (and monitor actual enrollment relative to enrollment targets) Begin delivering SCA-funded services 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Develop all data collection instruments, including intake forms, surveys, and interview or focus group guides Begin implementation data collection Develop a full analysis plan covering implementation and outcome study analysis procedures Begin outcome data collection (if applicable) Finalize secondary data export protocols and any transfer agreements

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Table 1. Recommended Local Evaluation Milestone Schedule (continued)

Year	Timing Relative to Grant Period	Concurrent Program Activities	Local Evaluation Milestones
2–3	At Least 12 Months Before End of Award	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Continue enrolling program participants • Be delivering all SCA-funded services • Implement communications plan for disseminating evaluation findings 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Export a sample dataset from each source of quantitative data (e.g., web-based survey platform, administrative database) • Address any issues with quantitative data (e.g., missing data, quality) • Complete initial implementation data analysis • Report early findings to staff and partners and discuss strategies to improve SCA services
3–4	6 Months Before End of Award	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Finish enrolling program participants • Continue all SCA-funded services 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Conduct final implementation analysis • Obtain all secondary data for outcome study • Complete all primary data collection for outcome study (if applicable)
	3 Months Before End of Award	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Finish delivering SCA-funded services 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Complete final outcome data analysis • Prepare full evaluation report • Prepare simple, user-friendly summary of evaluation results • Discuss lessons for future service delivery
	Before Award End Date	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Complete close-out documentation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Distribute final evaluation results via agreed-on communications channels based on communications plan • Present findings to partners, potential funders, and other decision makers

Staying on Track: Accessing Support for Programmatic and Evaluation Activities

The most useful SCA evaluations not only reflect a rigorous and well-executed study design; they also deliver information that staff and partners can use to inform better service delivery and that motivates funders and other decision makers to continue to support the work. Achieving these goals is a complex endeavor that requires thoughtful planning, close monitoring, and replanning throughout the SCA program funding period as new programmatic or logistical considerations arise.

Many resources are available to support SCA evaluations in staying on track, including this guide and the accompanying infographic. If you have any concerns about your evaluation design or timeline, don't hesitate to seek hands-on support from the National Reentry Resource Center (NRRC) coaches and other program-specific TTA coaches for programmatic issues, and review resources developed by the Evaluation and Sustainability TTA project to support grantees with evaluation and sustainability concerns.

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One Day at a Time: Adapting Your Local Evaluation Schedule (While Staying on Track)

Some SCA grantees may be able to attain certain evaluation milestones ahead of the recommended schedule shown in Table 1. Organizations that are using their SCA awards to continue an established program, those that begin the SCA grant period fully staffed, and those that did extensive planning and vetting of their evaluation designs before proposal submission will all be ahead of the game.

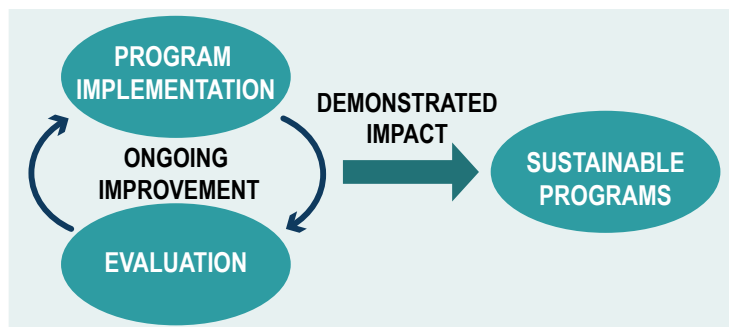
In many cases, achieving one or more of these milestones ahead of schedule can be a good thing. SCA programs are juggling many competing priorities and will almost certainly face unexpected hurdles at some point during program implementation. Getting ahead of schedule on local evaluation work can afford the team a more forgiving time frame for accomplishing the next set of milestones. However, grantees should take care to ensure that they have not finalized evaluation designs or instruments prematurely—for example, while key elements of the program approach are still being finalized or before grantees have carefully considered how the evaluation can serve the information needs of key decision makers whose funding choices will determine the future of the program.

Other grantees may discover that they need to defer one or more of these milestones beyond the recommended schedule—for example, if administrative delays affect a key hire or execution of the evaluation contract. In such cases, it is important to work proactively to mitigate the downstream effects of such a delay and, if possible, plan to allocate staff and contractor time to catch up to the intended timeline before the next major milestone.

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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.



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