

# ETHICAL ISSUES

## *Tips for conducting program evaluation*

***Before beginning your evaluation project, it is important to consider and address ethical issues and professional standards.***

Strategies to protect the rights and dignity of evaluation participants should be incorporated into the way that you design and carry out your project. It is also important to consider safeguards that may be needed when your participants are children or other vulnerable populations, including some victims of crime.

Many professional organizations provide ethical guidelines (e.g., the American Psychological Association, the National Association of Social Workers, and the American Counseling Association). While their details vary, most guidelines address four over-arching issues:

- **Help or benefit to others** – promoting others' interests, by helping individuals, organizations, or society as a whole.
- **Do no harm** – bringing no harm, such as physical injury and psychological harm (such as damage to reputation, self-esteem, or emotional well-being).
- **Act fairly** – treating people fairly and without regard to race, gender, socio-economic status, and other characteristics.
- **Respect others** – respecting individuals' rights to act freely and to make their own choices, while protecting the rights of those who may be unable to fully protect themselves.



## **Key ethical issues related to program evaluation**

### *Consideration of risks and benefits*

Many benefits can result from evaluations. In some cases, there may be direct benefits to participants, such as receiving a gift certificate or other incentive in exchange for being interviewed. Other benefits emerge as a result of changes made at the program or agency level – for example, the evaluation may guide strategies for improving a program's impact, leading to more positive outcomes for current or future participants.

However, there may also be risks. You should carefully consider any harm that may result from an evaluation, and take steps to reduce it. With evaluations of crime victim services, potential risks include:

- Disruptions to participants' life (e.g., sacrificing time and energy to participate).
- Emotional consequences (e.g., answering painful questions about their victimization or traumatizing events).
- Safety concerns (e.g., allowing an abuser to learn about their involvement in services, exposing them to potential future victimization).
- Social harm (e.g., violating confidentiality, so that others learn about their victimization experiences).

In designing an evaluation, work to maximize benefits and minimize risks. While you may not eliminate risk, you should reduce it to an acceptable level relative to the potential



*Risks and benefits, continued:*

benefits. Other sections of this tip sheet address safety and confidentiality. In addition, consider these suggestions:

- Keep evaluation procedures as brief and convenient as possible to minimize disruptions in subjects' lives.
- Do not ask emotionally troubling questions, unless they are necessary to help you improve services.
- Provide incentives, such as food, money, or gift certificates.

The time and money spent on evaluation are maximized when the results have value. Target your evaluation to key questions, carefully review findings, and use your results. Upcoming tip sheets will provide strategies for using evaluation to improve services, demonstrate your program's value, and guide policy and advocacy efforts.

### ***Informed consent***

Everyone who participates in the evaluation should do so willingly. In general, people participating in any research project, including an evaluation, have the right to:

- Choose whether or not to participate without penalties (e.g., participation should not be a requirement for receiving services).
- Withdraw from the project at any time, even if they previously gave consent.
- Refuse to complete any part of the project.

The word "informed" is important – people have the right to understand all implications of their decision whether or not to participate. To ensure that potential participants can make an informed decision:

- Provide them with information about the evaluation (what you will ask them to do, how you will use the results, and how long it will take).

- Describe the benefits of participation and any foreseeable risks, including possible discomfort.
- Share this information using understandable language – avoid jargon and translate if needed.
- Answer any questions they have about the evaluation.

Participants may not need to sign a consent form if they are capable adults, have not been coerced, and will not be put at risk. For example, if you ask clients to fill out an anonymous survey about their satisfaction with a shelter, the fact that they complete the survey can be construed as providing consent. Signed consent forms may be necessary, however, especially if you plan to:

- Include children or others who cannot provide their own consent (in which case you need consent from a legally authorized person, such as a guardian).
- Collect very sensitive information.
- Use the results for purposes other than program improvement, such as publication, training, or participation in a larger research project.
- Gather information about participants from third parties, such as program staff, case workers, or family members.
- Require significant time or effort, such as time-consuming interviews.

### ***Confidentiality***

It is not always possible to conduct evaluations without identifying information, such as names. However, all evaluation information should be kept confidential and not shared with others. To ensure confidentiality:

- Collect data in a private location where surveys cannot be seen and interviews cannot be overheard.

- Do not discuss information about individual participants with other people, including other agency staff.
- Keep completed surveys or interviews in a secure location where they cannot be seen by other people.
- Securely dispose of completed material when it is no longer needed.

You may face situations in which you feel that it is important to disclose confidential information. This may be due to a legal requirement (e.g. a mandated reporter of child abuse). In other cases, you may learn through the evaluation that someone plans to harm themselves or others, or is at risk of harm from others. To the extent possible, consider in advance the types of disclosures that may be needed and develop a plan to handle these situations. When you obtain consent, provide information about circumstances in which you might share confidential information.

### *Ensuring safety*

In conducting an evaluation, you may have concerns for participants' safety, especially when working with victims of crime. Be thoughtful about participants' needs and take care to protect them. For example, if participants are not at home when you call

for an interview, consider whether it is appropriate to leave a message. In the course of collecting information, you may learn that a client is in an abusive situation. While your ability to intervene may depend upon the level of imminent risk, it might be appropriate for evaluation staff to refer participants for assistance if desired.

### *Other considerations*

Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA) – if you are a health care provider collecting information about physical or mental health, you may be required to comply with HIPAA, a 1996 federal law designed to protect the privacy and security of health information. If you are unsure whether HIPAA applies to your evaluation, research this issue in advance to ensure that you comply with the guidelines.

Institutional Review Boards (IRBs) – An IRB is a federally-recognized committee authorized to review research projects and ensure that they comply with ethical standards. Many colleges, government offices, hospitals, and research agencies have established IRBs. Usually, IRB approval is not required for evaluations. In some cases, it may be needed, especially with some federal funding.

## **Key ethical issues related to evaluator's roles**

There are also ethical guidelines you need to follow as an evaluator. The Joint Committee on Standards for Education Evaluation issued a series of standards in 1994 that have been widely adopted. Under this framework, evaluators' work should reflect the following four standards:

- Utility – Evaluations should address important questions, provide clear and understandable results, and include meaningful recommendations.
- Feasibility – Evaluations should be realistic and practical, so that they can be completed in a time- and cost-efficient manner.
- Propriety – Evaluations should be legal and ethical.
- Accuracy – Information should be collected, analyzed, reported, and interpreted accurately and impartially.

## Addressing ethical challenges

In some cases, you might face situations in which the ethical direction is not clear. Ask yourself the following questions when faced with an ethical challenge:

1. What does my intuition tell me? Am I feeling stress or self-doubt about my chosen direction?
2. Is there an established way that my colleagues would act in the same situation?
3. Does my profession have a set of ethical guidelines? If so, do they suggest a course of action?
4. Are there existing laws that apply? If so, what requirements do I need to follow?
5. Which overarching ethical issues apply (e.g., helping others, doing no harm, acting fairly and being respectful)? Does a clear solution to the challenge emerge when considering these principles?
6. What are my personal values and beliefs? What guidance do they provide?

If you are unable to decide the best course of action, consult with others, including colleagues, supervisors, your board of directors, evaluators or researchers, or legal counsel.

## Quick links to more information

*For more information about HIPAA, go to <http://www.hhs.gov/ocr/hipaa/>*

*For more information about IRBs and research with human subjects, go to <http://www.hhs.gov/ohrp/>*

*For links to other sites providing guidance on conducting ethical program evaluations, go to <http://www.cdc.gov/eval/resources.htm#ethics>*



## In future tip sheets

- Analyzing and understanding data (1/08)
- Communicating evaluation results (4/08)
- Using evaluation for program improvement (7/08)

Find previous tip sheets on the web: [www.ojp.state.mn.us/grants/index.htm](http://www.ojp.state.mn.us/grants/index.htm) or [www.wilderresearch.org](http://www.wilderresearch.org).

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