Increasing Program Evaluation Capacity for the Health and Social Services System in the Northwest Territories

Strengthening program performance, decision-making, and appropriate resource allocation while improving accountability for results.

Introduction

Program evaluation is a tool that helps program staff[1] objectively assess programs or initiatives through the systematic collection, analysis and reporting of program information. As an essential ongoing activity, program evaluation strengthens program performance and appropriate resource allocation while improving accountability for results. The evaluation process fulfills these purposes by defining clear and explicit goals and objectives for success, collecting representative evidence of program performance, and comparing it to the goals and objectives established at the outset. In all evaluations, the success of a program depends largely on the achievement of its goals and objectives.

This discussion paper provides a brief overview of how the evaluation function within the Health and Social Services System could be implemented. This work supports the system Action Plan 2002-2005, which identified the need to fully "develop and implement capacity for program evaluation throughout (the) system with emphasis on collaborative practice."[2]

Currently, with the implementation of the Health and Social Services System Action Plan and the subsequent departmental re-organization, the role of the Evaluation Specialist is evolving into a more supportive function. By assisting in the conduct of program evaluations, and by providing advice and guidance to program staff on evaluation approaches and requirements, the Department, through the role of the Evaluation Specialist, will develop a collaborative approach by increasing evaluation capacity within the Health and Social Services System.

Organization of the Program Evaluation Function within the Health and Social Services System

Although it is never too late to evaluate a program, evaluation could undertake three main streams, reflecting the different types of questions that program staff are faced with during a program's development:

1. Is the implementation of the program consistent with the way the program was planned?

2. Is the program meeting its set standards?

3. Is the program having the intended impact?

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[1] For the purposes of this Evaluation Framework, program staff include program specialists and managers at the Department; program managers and front-line staff at the Regional Authorities; and non-governmental organizations who utilize public funds to deliver health and social services programs.
[2] Department of Health and Social Services, GNWT, "Action 9.3", NWT Health and Social Services System Action Plan 2002-2005, (Yellowknife: Department of Health and Social Services, 2002), 32.

In answering these three questions, program evaluations can be conducted in three streams within the Health and Social Services System:

1. **Process Evaluation[3]**

   This stream of evaluation will examine the implementation of new programs and/or initiatives and focuses on <u>what</u> the program is doing and for <u>whom</u>.

2. **Audits**

   This second stream of evaluation monitors the extent to which a program is meeting its set standards, ensuring that there are no significant deficiencies in the program. This stream of the program evaluation process focuses on the <u>effectiveness</u> of the program's <u>operations</u>.

3. **Outcome Evaluation[4]**

   This stream of evaluation will examine programs and services once early monitoring activities have indicated that implementation is running smoothly enough to expect some outcomes to be achieved. This stream of evaluation focuses on the <u>changes</u> that have occurred as a <u>result</u> of the program or service and whether it is having the intended <u>effect</u>.

In the Health and Social Services system, these three streams of program evaluation will be encompassed within a single program cycle as depicted in the diagram below and will take two directions: (1) as part of every new program and initiative and, (2) on a continual basis.

Program Cycle

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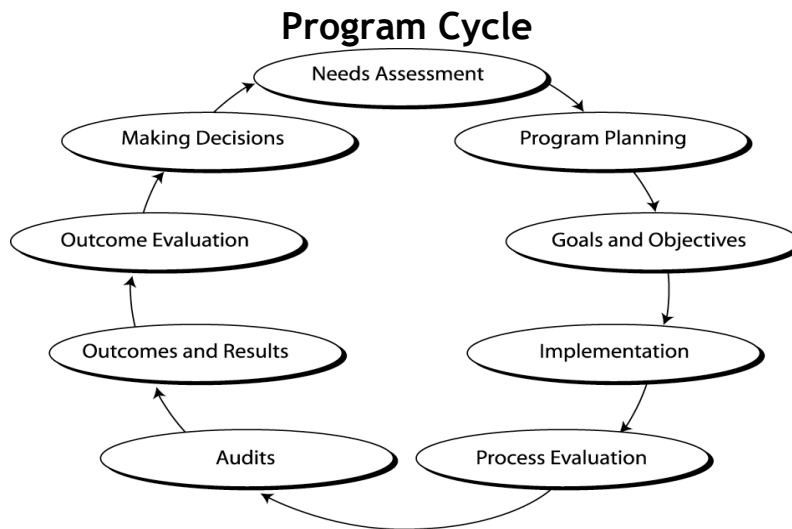
[3] This term can be interchanged with the term **Formative Evaluation**.
[4] This term can be interchanged with the term **Summative Evaluation**.

November 2002

For a new program or initiative, the program cycle *begins* with a **needs assessment** wherein program staff identify the particular needs of a particular population, and then devises a plan in the **program planning** stage to address those needs. (For ongoing programs, however, these two stages will not exist in separation from the rest of the cycle and rather will exist on a continual basis). In the next stage, **goals and objectives** are developed for new programs, while current goals and objectives are reviewed and revised for existing programs based on the decisions surrounding an outcome evaluation and further needs assessment.

The **implementation** stage encompasses the actual management and delivery of programs and services, reflecting the work directed toward achieving the agreed-upon goals and objectives. This work is intended to improve the health and well being of the people of the Northwest Territories, and is directed toward both the delivery of existing programs and services as well as the implementation of new programs and/or initiatives.

Monitoring and evaluation activities begin once a program has undergone implementation. These activities lead to the regular reporting of results and outcomes which describe the progress (or lack thereof) toward achieving the goals and objectives set out in the beginning of the cycle, while forming the basis for modification in the subsequent program cycle. These functions are undertaken in the next four stages: **process evaluation**, **audits**, development of **outcomes and results**, and **outcome evaluation**. While this regular reporting of results forms the basis for meeting the obligation to be accountable, the monitoring and evaluation activities are what distinguish the extent to which the goals and objectives of a program were actually achieved.

The evaluation process does not end once the outcome evaluation report is handed in and disseminated. The next and final step to the program cycle is for program managers to **make decisions** about the program based on the findings and recommendations presented in the outcome evaluation report. Once the recommendations have been analyzed and the preferred ones are selected, the next step is to re-start the program cycle by completing a needs assessment to determine if the recommendations selected meet the needs and improve the health and well being of the people of the Northwest Territories.

Why Evaluate?

Program evaluation can produce significant benefits for the Health and Social Services System. These benefits tend to fall under the following three categories:

1. **Improve programs to people through stronger performance measurement**

   As program goals and objectives are modified through outcome evaluations and needs assessments, so to does the program design in order to obtain the expected results and outcomes. If the performance measurement of a program is to remain relevant, the program design has to be able to adapt to these changes. Evaluation can help program staff make corrections to the program design in order to increase its effectiveness and efficiency. It helps them know what changes to make, and can be useful in communicating the need for these changes. Using evaluation, program staff can:

   - determine if the program, as designed, is likely to achieve its objectives;
   - set more realistic objectives;
   - determine what indicators are realistic and which ones are unrealistic;
   - drop ineffective activities and add more effective ones; and
   - identify and avoid potential unwanted effects.

   Evaluation can also determine whether or not the program is being implemented as intended. When implementation is not going as intended, evaluation can help program staff understand why, so they can take steps to improve implementation where appropriate by:

   - identifying and addressing problems that have arisen, such as glitches in the delivery process or service gaps;
   - implementing best practices;
   - avoiding unwanted effects; and
   - select indicators that are more relevant and useful for decision-making.

2. **Better decision-making and appropriate resource allocation**

   In a world of increasing accountability and reporting requirements, evaluation results have become an integral part of complex decision-making. In this sense, evaluations are carried out to decide on the expansion or curtailment of programs, services or resources. Program staff look for hard data for what the program does well and what requires

change; particularly since funding is increasingly becoming more stringent with requirements for reporting results and accountability functions.

In supporting effective management practices, program evaluation will provide program staff with tools and systems they can use to increase the effectiveness of programs. These evaluation tools include:

a. Logic Model

As a graphic representation of the intended program design, logic models describe how the programs works and for which target group(s) the program intends to benefit. Inclusive in the logic model are the program's goals and objectives; the activities that are implemented to attain specific objectives; as well as the immediate, intermediate and long-term outcomes that are expected of the program.

b. Program-Specific Client Satisfaction Survey

Program target groups need to know that they program is there to serve them. One way they can inform the program staff if the program is working through a satisfaction survey. Client feedback is an important tool to evaluate our programs and guide future program design. This satisfaction survey will become part of the regular monitoring and evaluation function within the Health and Social Service System.

c. Data Collection and Analysis

Collection of program data will provide any additional information needed to decipher whether a program's outcomes are being achieved. An analysis of the data collected will ensure to put the information in to perspective by providing linkages between the data collected and the specific evaluation issues and/or questions that resulted from the development of the logic model. Data collection is an important evaluation tool in that the analysis of that data is what helps program staff make reliable and effective program decisions.

3. Improved accountability for results

In a time of increasing health care expenditures and scarce resources, the importance of being accountable for the funds invested in health and social service programs, and the results achieved from that funding, has also increased. When resources are scarce, competition for funds can intensify, and program staff may allocate resources only to programs that can

demonstrate good performance. In such situations, evaluations can provide useful information for managing programs, and if performance is sound, for defending the program's worth and justifying continued funding.

NWT citizens have the right to know what the Health and Social Services System and its funding agencies intend to achieve on their behalf, and to receive information on how well they have met these intentions. In order to be able to report on these intentions, *The Accountability Cycle* (illustrated below), which forms the basis from which the Health and Social Services System will help program staff report on a program's performance within a continuous feedback loop[5].

The Accountability Cycle
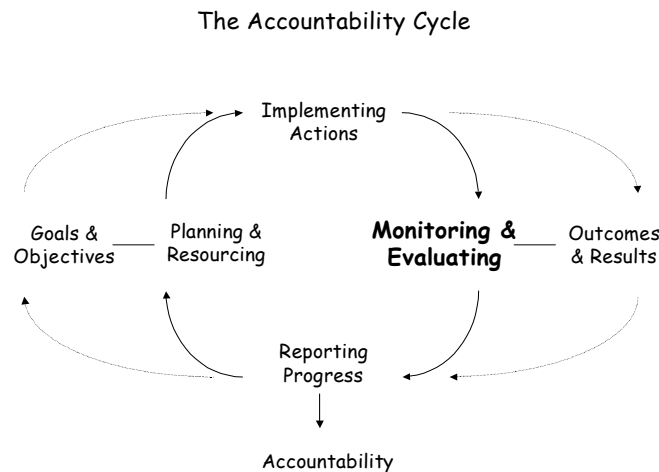
As highlighted above, program evaluation supports *The Accountability Cycle* through the 'monitoring and evaluating component'. At this stage in the cycle, program staff are requested to follow the monitoring and evaluation stages of the program cycle pictured and described on pages three and four. It is within this program cycle that the systematic collection of program information results in a final outcome evaluation which describes a program's progress (or lack thereof) toward achieving its goals and objectives. The outcome evaluation will form the basis for regular reporting of results as the final component of the accountability cycle. This regular reporting of results – progress towards goals and objectives – will then form the basis for meeting the obligation to be accountable, thereby opening the program to public scrutiny and judgment.

Without some form of evaluation, the Health and Social Services System risks devoting considerable time, money and effort on programs that are inefficient or even ineffective in meeting specified goals and objectives. Evaluation can help program staff determine:

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[5] For further details, please refer to the Accountability Framework for the Health and Social Services System, (Yellowknife: Department of Health and Social Services, July 2002), 7.

7

- if those effects can be attributed to the program design, or if they may be due to other factors outside the program;
- the merit or worth of different programs by generating multiple data collection techniques;
- the program's value thorough the judgment of client feedback; and
- the cost and effectiveness of different programs in order to support termination or expansion of programs; reduced or increased funding for programs; the selection of certain program methods that produce a given outcome for less cost, or produce a better outcome for the same cost.

Next Steps

To fully develop and implement program evaluation capacity within the Health and Social Services System, development and implementation of both evaluation training modules and an evaluation schedule needs to occur.

Evaluation Training Modules
Evaluation training modules will take program staff through a step-by-step description of what it takes to complete an evaluation. The modules developed will be specifically tailored to the program staff of health and social service programs and will provide tools to plan, conduct, and use program evaluation. Although the details need to be worked out as to how the modules will be presented to the program staff at each Health and Social Services Authority, it is estimated that the modules could be presented in a ½ day workshop format.

It is the intention that once program staff have received the training, they will find it easier to integrate evaluation into the development of every new program and initiative. The modules will help set a standard for evaluation and enhance communication across the Health and Social Services System.

Evaluation Schedule
An Evaluation Schedule developed in collaboration with Program Divisions and the Health and Social Services Authorities will reflect an appropriate balance of evaluation work that will result from the integration of evaluation into every new program and initiative. This schedule will be based on the Health and Social Services System requirements and priorities as well as the System's Business Plan, and will also reflect the priorities of the Government of the Northwest Territories.

An annual planning exercise of the schedule will be undertaken through a consultative process and will include the priorities/views of the various program area specialists, managers, directors, Authorities, environmental

scans, roundtable discussion, and multi-year coverage of the System's Core Services.

Summary

As an essential ongoing activity, program evaluation provides comprehensive information in order to strengthen program performance, decision-making and appropriate allocation of resources while improving accountability for results. If implemented at the right times as depicted by both the accountability cycle and the program cycle, program evaluation will ensure the continuous improvement of quality program and service delivery in the Health and Social Services System.

However, in order to fully build the capacity to develop and implement program evaluations at the Authority level, the Department will need to go a step further. By developing training modules specifically tailored to the program staff of health and social service programs the Department will provide the necessary tools to plan, conduct, and use program evaluation for every new program and initiative developed within the system.

Moreover, to be able to appropriately balance the program evaluation work that will ensue from the integration of evaluation into every new program and initiative, it will be necessary to develop a program evaluation schedule. In this case, the Department will further collaborate the priorities/views of the various program area specialists, managers, directors, and Authorities in order to develop an evaluation schedule that would reflect the priorities of both the Health and Social Services System and the GNWT.

The need for good program evaluation is probably greater than ever and the values evident in program evaluation are significant. It is the intention of the Department that program evaluation will take its place as an essential tool for improving accountability for results in the Health and Social Services System.