

# Evaluation Brief #1

## Why should we do evaluation?

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### What is an evaluation?

Evaluation is the examination of the value, merit or worth of a program or a project. It is different from an informal assessment because an evaluation uses scientific methods to systematically assess the design, implementation, outcomes or impact of a program/project. Ideally, evaluation should be incorporated into the planning process, but it may also be implemented at later stages.<sup>1</sup>

### Why evaluate?

There are many reasons, often interrelated, why a program, project or intervention should be evaluated. The most common ones are:<sup>2</sup>

- **To make judgements about program effectiveness**, i.e. the extent to which a program has met its expected outcomes (e.g. an evaluation of the Ottawa Model for Smoking Cessation in 9 hospitals revealed an 11% increase in long-term quit rates among general patient population after the introduction of the model)
- **To improve performance** (e.g. BCHU's internal communication survey helped identify the current state of communication practices in the organization, areas for improvement and potential solutions)
- **To make better decisions** about a program or policy (e.g. the Ontario Breast Screening program developed Mobile Coaches because the program evaluation revealed that women in Northwestern Ontario did not have equal access to screening services)
- **Remain accountable** – to funders, stakeholders and the general public (e.g. evaluation of a pay-for-performance program in Ontario hospitals showed a reduction in emergency department wait times following the introduction of the program, without negative effects on quality of care).

Sometimes programs lead to unintended consequences or a completely different outcome. Evaluation can help identify what went wrong or explain why a program did not achieve its expected outcome.

Think of program evaluation like the way we think about communication. It aims to answer the *What? So what? and Now what?* questions<sup>2</sup>. The answers to those questions can help identify areas for improvement, clarify solutions, and inform actions. Evaluation is thus a mindset that keeps an organization continuously learning about how it can improve and provide the highest quality of service to the public.<sup>2</sup>

Overall, evaluation is about learning. It is learning whether a program is reaching its intended population, if it is delivered as planned, what needs to be improved in it, and if it is making a difference in the lives of the end users. It is a continuous learning process, which can help us understand if our efforts are having an impact.

### References

1. Rossi, P.H., Freeman, H.E., Lipsey, M.W. (1999). *Evaluation: A Systematic Approach* (6<sup>th</sup> ed). Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE.
2. Patton, M. Q. (2012). Introduction, Overview, and Context: Utilization-focused reality testing: Finding Out is what is hoped really happened. *Essentials of utilization-focused evaluation*. (pp. 1-14) Los Angeles, CA: SAGE.
3. Patton, M.Q. (2014). *Evaluation flash cards: Embedding evaluative thinking in organizational culture*. St. Paul, MN: Otto Bremer Foundation.

“Experience doesn’t make you wiser; **evaluated** experience makes you wiser” – Andy Stanley