

Asthma Community Network – Conversations for Advancing Action Podcast Series

Episode Transcript

Episode 1 – Program Evaluation

Narrator: Welcome to “Asthma Community Network – Conversations for Advancing Action” –a podcast series from AsthmaCommunityNetwork.org - an online Network designed for people committed to improving asthma outcomes in their community. This podcast series is designed to share best practices for reducing the impact of asthma through delivery of comprehensive, community-based care, especially in underserved communities. In these podcasts you’ll learn about strategies for managing effective program delivery systems, addressing environmental triggers, and leveraging community assets through partnerships.

Today’s topic is program evaluation.

Maureen Wilce: Success builds success and if people understand that you are building something successfully and you’re doing good things and you can articulate where your successes are, and how you can achieve a way to build on those challenges. Everybody wants to bet on a winner and that’s the way to show it to them.

Narrator: That’s Maureen Wilce, of the Air Pollution and Respiratory Health Branch in the CDC’s National Center for Environmental Health. CDC offers guidance and tools for programs to conduct robust program evaluations.

Evaluation is a systematic way to improve and account for public health actions and outcomes.

The Coordinated Federal Action Plan to Reduce Racial and Ethnic Disparities identifies the importance of setting up a robust evaluation framework to help identify the factors that most contribute to improved health outcomes. Evaluation can also allow you to track the cost effectiveness of each program element.

Karen Myerson is the manager of the Asthma Network of West Michigan. Her program started in the mid-nineties, and used evaluation right from the start and immediately saw the benefits.

Karen Meyerson: We were just launching this program, it was really cutting edge, there was nothing like it at that time. We made a conscious decision to evaluate from Day One. We were able to evaluate to establish after a year, some reductions. We were able to present at national conferences; we have used it for grant dollars; we have taken it to managed care partners. We have agreements with five health plans who reimburse us for our services. We are believed to be the first grass roots asthma coalition to get third party reimbursement for these services. It has helped us quite a bit throughout the years. We continue to measure our outcomes: patient satisfaction, quality of life, asthma control through our asthma control tests, hospital days, length of stay, emergency department visits, school days missed, we try to measure as much data as we can.

Narrator: So what is an evaluation process? The CDC uses a six-step cycle as its framework for program evaluation. The first step is to engage the stakeholders, which Maureen Wilce of the CDC thinks is the key element in making evaluations exceptional:

Maureen Wilce: I spent the first 10 years of my career doing evaluation *to* people. The CDC framework frees us from that, we do it *with* people. This is a way to engage everybody with this.

Narrator: A key strategy to reducing racial and ethnic disparities in asthma is to promote coordination among different services and stakeholders in a community, such as health, housing, tobacco control, obesity prevention, healthy homes and weatherization programs. While preparing to engage with stakeholders, Sarah Gill, a contractor with the National Asthma Control Program at CDC, says it’s best to be inclusive.

Sarah Gill: They need to think broadly about who to listen to. First, get a lot of people around the table: people who are involved in the program, people who benefit from the program, people who make decisions about the program, get all of those folks around the table. It’s not always easy to have that mix of people around the table. But at the end of the day, you end up at a much better place.”

And then listen to them, what their questions are. What makes them crazy when they go home at the end of the day and they can’t figure out why something isn’t working. Or, what do they get really excited about that is working, that you can build on or celebrate.

Look systematically at those celebrations and successes and the problems you encounter and then use that information. The point of evaluation is not to create a really good doorstop, in the form of an evaluation report. The point of evaluation is to improve your program.

Narrator: Here are the steps in CDC’s six-step evaluation cycle:

- 1) Engage the stakeholders.
- 2) Describe the program. By reaching agreement on definitions and terms, lay out your program’s objectives, its ability to adapt and its role in the bigger picture. Use a logic model to depict the intended relationships of your program’s activities and desired effects.
- 3) Focus the evaluation design. By developing the right questions and establishing priorities, you can determine what results can be expected, given your program’s scope and stage of development.
- 4) Gather credible evidence. By deploying a variety of data collection methods, including document review, interviews, and analysis, pull together the facts you need to help measure your program’s processes and results.
- 5) Justify conclusions. Take the facts you’ve gathered, analyze their importance and relevance to each of your stakeholder audiences, and strive for a consensus on how to move forward.

6) Ensure you’re using the findings and sharing lessons learned. Determine how to leverage your successes, target areas for improvement, strategize for changing your activities or priorities, share the knowledge with staff, garner political support and begin to plan for the next round of evaluation.

Effective evaluation creates a positive framework for improving a program, without finding fault or placing blame for past results. In fact, Maureen Wilce points out that evaluation is really a road map for success.

Maureen Wilce: I’ve been working in public health and human services for 20-some odds years and I’ve never met anyone who didn’t want to do a better job and I’ve never met people who are more sincere about helping people and making things better. But sometimes, you get an idea and you start running and you don’t know if you’re running the wrong way. By using the systematic process that we’re preaching, people can do that check-in, make sure they’re going in the right direction, change direction if they have to and they end up winning in the long run.

Narrator: While there are clear tangible benefits to using evaluation, in increasing effectiveness and efficiency and perhaps as a tool for generating increased funding, the human factor shouldn’t be overlooked. Sarah Gill:

Sarah Gill: People generally do this work because they want to make a difference. If I’m not making a difference, I’m going to go snowboarding tomorrow. I want to know if I’m making a difference and if I’m not, I want to know what I can do better. And evaluation is just a tool for all of us to do that.

Narrator: For additional resources on evaluating asthma management programs and to hear other podcasts in this series, visit asthmacommunitynetwork.org/podcasts.

And for more information on asthma management, go to AsthmaCommunityNetwork.org – an online Network for people committed to improving asthma outcomes in their community.