Office of Family Assistance

Implementation Resource Guide for
Social Service Programs:

An Introduction to Evidence-Based Programming

Contents

An Introduction to Evidence-Based Programming

For most casual readers, it's difficult to have a clear understanding of the complex and conflicting terms and concepts associated with "Evidence-Based" research and practice. This is mainly because there are no clear, agreed-upon definitions or language used across the multiple disciplines (medicine, psychology, education, etc.), research, or federal agencies (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration[1] (SAMHSA), Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention[2] (OJJDP), Institute of Medicine[3] (IOM), etc. Myriad terms—which have somewhat similar meanings or speak to overlapping concepts—are used. Terms the reader may have heard of, or recognize, include: evidence-based practice; evidence-based treatment; best practices; model program; empirically supported treatments; emerging best practice; and promising practices. Many other terms used are not listed. For this discussion we wish to add the term "Evidence-Based Programming"[4]. Regardless of the terminology, there are some basic distinct concepts that are important to understand.

The first concept is sometimes called evidence-based practice or evidence-based treatment. It is the process of making clinical or treatment decisions based on data; the activity (clinical **practice**) is based on **evidence**. This is akin to clinical judgment or experience[5]. This topic will not be discussed further in this document—but understanding the distinction in similar terminology is important.

The second concept is sometimes also called evidence-based practice, or evidence-based practices, best practice, or model programs. This refers to a specific activity, treatment, or program that has been demonstrated to have efficacy. Rigorous methodological evaluation processes are used to determine efficacy. The "gold standard" is the experimental method of using randomly assigned comparison groups. Such activities can include medical treatments, such as a specific surgical technique; therapeutic activities, like cognitive behavioral therapy; a social service program, such as a nurse home-visitation program; or an educational curriculum, such as a parenting education program.

While all these **practices** or activities are very different, they may all be termed "**evidence-based**" because they have shown effectiveness in well-constructed evaluation studies. The importance and promise of utilizing programs and practices that have a proven effectiveness in improving participant outcomes—especially when resources are limited—increases the requirement to use evidence-based practices.

Indeed, this very concept—that resources will remain limited and should only be used to support proven treatments/programs—was instrumental in launching the evidence-based practice field[6]. Before this, many areas of professional practice activities and interventions had been based on experience, intuition, tradition, and other loose bodies of knowledge. At times, their use was actually counterproductive to the well being of a participant.

Unfortunately, in the social services fields there has been some difficulty in translating evidence-based programs or practices into widespread effective programs[7]. It is often found that when a program or practice is taken out of the tightly controlled environment in which it was shown effective and implemented elsewhere, that the program fails to produce the same positive results. Historically, such failures in replication are often blamed on a lack of "Fidelity" by the new implementation site[8, 9]. That is to say the new project site must not have implemented the evidence-based program or practice as intended. To be sure, such fidelity failures have occurred, and deviating from the proven program model will have serious consequences for the likely outcomes of a program or practice.

More recently, however, there is a growing awareness and acceptance that often there must naturally be some level of "Adaptation" that occurs when implementing an evidence-based program or practice. Adaptation must occur to some degree because the exact parameters of the true context in which the original program was implemented can never be recreated.

In many cases, evidence-programs and practices are sought to deal with a specific topic—but with a different target population than the one in which the practice was demonstrated to be effective. For example, a program developed to teach parenting skills to head start parents (and proven to be effective in that context), may be the only or best parenting skills program available to someone who wants to teach parenting to parents who are in prison. There is no way to know if using such a program (designed for custodial parents who interact with their children on a daily basis) will be effective with such a different target audience. However, it is also likely that no parenting program teaching the skills the program is interested in has yet been proven effective with the target population. In such cases, program developers are forced to use evidence-based practice outside of the context in which they were proven effective.

In addition, implementation guidelines for evidence-based social service programs provide detailed information about what should take place during the interaction with the participants (i.e., what topics to cover, in what order, for how long). But these guidelines do not typically address the many factors that impact the success of a program outside of the staff-participant interaction. For example, two programs may implement exactly the same evidence-based teen pregnancy prevention program. But one program may struggle with low enrollment. This could occur because of different methods of recruiting participants, because of a bad reputation for one provider in the community, or because of competition with another program or activity in the same community. While the interaction with the participants may be the same, the ultimate failure and closure of a program not meeting enrollment quotas will result in very different outcomes for the target population in each community.

This report focuses on factors that lead to the success or failure of an evidence-based practice or program, aside from actual participant-staff interactions. We are interested in how existing research literature and current research efforts (described in **Appendix A** of this document) can improve the efficacy of implemented programs.

We call these efforts **Evidence-Based Programming** or **Evidence-Informed Programming**. **Evidence-Based Programming** refers to specific programmatic activities and processes, which—based on a review of available research and ongoing research efforts—appear to be related to positive outcomes for program participants. That is to say, using or following the program design and implementation advice presented in this document appears to increase the probability that a program will have positive client outcomes.

While robust research efforts are looking at countless evidence-based practices, or at programs and their effectiveness, very little research has looked at the "Programming" or implementation factors that impact project or program outcomes. The evidence supporting these findings is much less extensive and less rigorous. That's because there have been no large-scale research efforts to date. To that end, the term "Evidence-Based Programming" indicates that, for many of the items suggested, there is a considerable research base—as well as a high level of certainty that these factors are important. The term "Evidence-Informed Programming" indicates that the research (including the current research efforts) is supportive of the importance of these factors, but their efficacy has not been conclusively demonstrated.

Finally, it should be noted that all of the programming advice given in this document is meant to improve the chances of having successful participant outcomes by improving the project. Yet it is not expected that any project or organization will implement all of these suggestions; nor is adherence to all suggestions necessary for achieving a successful project. Instead, it is thought that implementing each programming suggestion will cumulatively enhance the program with each additional implementation. With a few possible exceptions, however, no one single factor is thought to be critical to the overall success of the project.

Project Conceptualization

A critical part of having a successful program is how well planned and developed the project is. In these early stages there are clear programming decisions that will have a long term impact on the project.

1.1: Project Champion

The concept of a Project Champion is well developed in the organizational management field. Our research finds that all successful projects examined had strong project champions during the conceptualization and grant writing processes. Indeed, a common axiom in organizational management is, "If you don't have a project champion, you don't have a project." It takes a considerable amount of time and resources to write a successful federal grant application. Convincing an organization to commit the necessary resources requires someone who truly believes in the project and its chances of success.

In the projects examined for this document, Project Champions consisted of one or two people working together to make a project happen. It appears critical that at least one Project Champion have administrative control, or at least influence with the organizational administration. Without strong advocates and administrative support, projects are unlikely to move from discussion to action—and proposals that are written are much less likely to be successful. In the beginning phases, Project Champions will also have the primary responsibility for identifying and recruiting organizational partners and selling them on the importance of the project and their participation (see section 1.3 for a discussion of the importance of organizational partnerships).

Project Champions are important during conceptualization—and throughout the entire life of a project. Without a champion at the administrative level, funded projects become susceptible to being dismissed, ignored, or sabotaged. In addition, resources are often absorbed, or siphoned off, by other organizational priorities. For example, project staff funded by the project may increasingly be given other responsibilities that have nothing to do with the project, yet continue to be paid by project funds. As grant-funded projects near the end of their grant-funding period, Project Champions are critical in sustaining the project. They do this either by finding new funding, or by incorporating elements of the project into other funding streams (see section 2.10 for a discussion of project sustainability). When dealing with situations where partners or sub-contracting organizations will provide direct services, it's very helpful to identify Project Champions within each organization (for the same reasons as described above).

Over time, it's likely and natural that people who are the Project Champions may change as staff turnover and internal organizational responsibilities change. However, the importance of having someone with this role does not diminish. In fact, without Project Champions it appears almost impossible for projects to be successful and to impart a lasting positive impact on participants. As project staff become invested in a successful project and see the impact on the participants they work with, they are likely to become champions of the project.

Project Champions are typically not identified formally as such in advance, but are easily identifiable in retrospect. But some organizations may find it helpful to formally identify someone who believes in the project who is tasked with the responsibility of overseeing its success.

> ### Section Highlights
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> 1. Identify one or two people to be Project Champions who believe in the potential of the project.
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> 2. Appoint the Champions as responsible for making the project happen.
>
> 3. Ensure the Champions have the administrative clout to speak for the organization with community partners and to overcome internal barriers.

1.2: Needs Assessment and Asset Mapping

From an ideal theoretical perspective, programs are developed in communities after the need has been clearly established, and after the available resources to deal with the issue are identified. Two helpful processes are: conducting a formal, community-wide needs assessment (to identify and prioritize needs in a community); and the use of an asset-mapping process to review the resources available.

In reality, however, it's uncommon that an organization responding to a federal request for proposal (RFP) will have the time to conduct such formal processes within the confines of an application process. There are two common scenarios where such activities do take place.

In the first—and perhaps ideal—situation, a community and/or organization has conducted a formal community-wide needs assessment prior to the RFP. This step has identified the problem or issues that need to be addressed. Based on this identified need, a group may form independently to try to address the problem. One of the first steps such a group might take is to determine what resources are available to address this need—and to then develop a plan to meet the need. In such situations, what is often missing is funding to make a project possible. During the search process for funding to support project activities federal funding opportunities may be identified that closely match the goals of the proposed project.

More commonly, organizations or collaborative groups identify a grant opportunity that matches with their overall mission or goals. The applicants are then able to draw upon needs assessments or asset mapping processes that have already been conducted by others to help establish the need for the program in their own communities.

In many cases, neither of these situations will be true. For many organizations applying for federal funding, formal relevant and recent community-wide needs assessments and/or asset-mapping data are just not available. And there is not enough time to conduct such processes.

This does not diminish the importance of the concepts and strategies of needs assessment or asset mapping. In nearly all of the successful projects reviewed for this research it was found that the grantee organizations performed at least an informal needs assessment and asset-mapping process.

Effective informal assessment processes appear to have the following common attributes:

- They are based on the extensive experience of key staff persons who understand the community and the needs of the target population.

- They rely heavily on existing data from local and national sources.

- They are based on a meaningful interactive collaborative dialog among community partners who deal with the same target population, or who share a concern about the identified need.

- The benefits of conducting formal assessment processes, utilizing existing data from such processes, or at a minimum conducting an extensive informal assessment process are significant and long-term. In part, these benefits are derived from the information

obtained in addition to benefits generated from engaging in a collaborative outreach and planning process. These benefits include:

- A more data-grounded proposal that establishes the need for the program in your community, thereby increasing the chances for funding.

- The ability to focus the intervention/project on the most appropriate target population, including those who are most at risk and/or most receptive (see section 1.4 for more information on selecting the appropriate target population).

- The ability to develop collaborative partnerships resulting in multi-organizational proposals where each organization brings its strengths to the proposed project. (See section 1.3 for a discussion of the importance of organizational partnerships).

- The ability to create early community wide buy-in and support for the project, from which participant referrals are likely to be generated (see section 2.4 for more information on participant recruitment).

> **Section Highlights**
>
> 1. Research and utilize local needs assessment and asset mapping efforts in planning your project.
>
> 2. Conduct your own informal needs assessment and asset mapping processes by utilizing the experience of your own key staff and engaging in a collaborative dialog with community organizations who share an interest in the topic.
>
> 3. Use assessment data to identify the most appropriate target population (or sub-population) for the proposed project.
>
> 4. Use the collaborative process to identify project partners and to generate buy-in and excitement about the project from those not directly involved but who interact with the target population.

1.3: Building Community Partnerships and Commitment

Collaborating with community organizations to foster support is a key factor in the long-term success of a project and its ability to positively impact peoples lives. Such commitment and good will are critical—for several reasons.

Bringing together a coordinated set of service providers allows for the development of a more comprehensive project that is able to draw ideas and resources for potential partners. For example, programs that seek to improve co-parent or marital relationships by working with couples to aid the welfare of children must be aware and able to deal with issues related to domestic violence.

Yet most social service agencies interested in the wellbeing of children would not consider themselves experts in domestic violence. Bringing in an organizational partner who deals with issues related to domestic violence strengthens an application. And it results in a better outcome for participants where domestic violence is an issue (see section 1.2 for more about needs assessing community needs and strengths).

At least initially, most projects are dependent on referrals to identify potential participants—or they rely on access to participants via one or more key organizational partners. For example, a program that wants to serve a low-income Hispanic population must have a way to identify and contact potential participants. Such projects may need participant referrals from multiple community agencies that interact with this population to meet participation goals.

Organizations wanting to provide educational services to high school age students would be an example of projects requiring access to existing participants. Projects experience much higher success rates if they are able to provide students with the services in the school setting. However, such access requires the cooperation and investment of the school system (see section 2.4 for more information on participant recruitment).

As projects progress towards the end of their grant-funded period, the question of how to sustain effective program activities becomes an increasing concern. Project partners and community goodwill appear to play a critical role in the ability of a project to sustain itself (see section 2.10 for more information on sustainability).

While community partnerships are important in gaining access within the targeted community, they are not always easy to achieve, and at times, potential partners may be wary to support new endeavors. This is especially the case if there are preexisting turf issues; if the project is seen as doing something controversial; or if there is any concern (or lack of trust) about how this program or agency will affect the people the organization is geared to protect.

At times, programs may be forced to start without a great deal of community awareness or support. It must, therefore, prove its effectiveness—and the quality of its services—before community support can be developed. Our research clearly indicates that, in such cases, it is particularly important to establish proactive and aggressive partner development activities. Long-term, it appears difficult—if not impossible—for a project to be successful when it is not accepted and supported by the greater community.

Fortunately, the investigation of successful programs, and a review of the literature, suggests several successful approaches and activities that can aid in developing and maintaining community partnerships.

- The most successful organizational relationships are long-term relationships. These relationships often predate the decision to collaborate on a single grant opportunity and should continue after grant funding has ended. As such, pioneering projects should draw upon existing organizational relationships in looking for partners to support the project.

- Develop new organizational relationships and recruit new partners. Grant RFPs are opportunities to develop new relationships with organizations that share an interest in the target population or issue of concern. Whether or not the proposal is funded, the relationship can be helpful in the long term.

- Identify a person in your organization who has the responsibility for developing and maintaining organizational relationships (at least for this project). During project conceptualization and startup this person should most often be a Project Champion (see section 1.1 for more information on the role of the Project Champion).

- Most organizational relationships are based on personal relationships. Key staff members within successful organizations take advantage of informal meetings (serving on board or committees) to develop personal relationships with key staff in other community organizations.

- Organizational relationships are most beneficial when the collaborations are developed in a setting of mutual respect for the goals and talents of the other organizations, and where one organization does not dominate the relationship. The project should be designed in a collaborative process that gives each agency a chance to contribute their strengths and talents (see section 1.4 for more information on developing a project design).

- Planned Collaborations should be formalized and institutionalized by use of Memorandums of Understanding (MOU) or contracts.

Section Highlights

1. Tap into existing organizational relationships for partners.

2. Develop new relationships by building on a shared opportunity and personal relationships.

3. Assign the responsibility for developing partner relationships to a Program Champion.

4. Make organizational relationships a truly collaborative process by jointly developing the project plan.

5. Use MOUs to formalize expectations for the relationship.

1.4: Project Design

Once a clear sense of need in the community is recognized and a group of enthusiastic partners has committed to dealing with the identified problem, it is necessary to develop a detailed and encompassing plan for addressing the issue. Decisions made at this point in the project development process can have a large effect on the ability of a project to positively impact the participants.

A. Target those with greatest needs

In this phase of the process, most program designers are aware that not all people need your service or assistance equally. They deduce this from their knowledge of the service area and information gleaned from formal or informal assessment processes.

It's obvious that not all programs are intended for, or are appropriate for, all audiences (i.e., pregnancy prevention programs are not intended for senior citizens). But it may be less obvious that, among the population of people for whom a program may be appropriate for, not all people stand to benefit equally from such a project.

It has been known for some time that persons with the greatest need, and the most room for improvement and growth, benefit more than those with less severe needs or room for growth. For example, projects that provide marriage education, and teach communication skills, could potentially benefit couples involved in relatively happy and stable marriages—as well as those in less stable, somewhat unhappy marriages.

Perhaps not surprisingly, over time, those in the more unhappy relationship will show significantly more improvement in outcome measures from project participation than will the happy couple. Therefore, when resources are limited and it's not possible to serve all potential participants (as is almost always the case), a good strategy is to serve individuals with the greatest needs. However, programs must be cautious not to target those who are past the point where project services can help them and resources would be wasted.

Unfortunately, from a programmatic perspective, those with significant need are not always the easiest to interest and engage in services. That's why it is very important to clearly identify and track the key participant attributes that define your target population (via process evaluation efforts).

Over time, keeping a close eye of those you are serving can prevent program drift. In addition, serving the most at-risk populations, and properly evaluating the outcomes of these efforts, makes it much easier to demonstrate and document the impact of the program to fund providers, the public, and other audiences (see sections 1.5 and 2.7 for more on the importance of a quality project evaluation).

B. Target participants when they are most receptive to change

One of the most common challenges projects face is getting target audiences interested and involved in the project's services or programming. Using the previously mentioned marriage education example from above, project developers may find that a couple in a relatively healthy marriage—when compared to a couple in distress—is less interested in, and less willing to overcome, barriers and inconveniences that participation may present.

On the other hand, individuals in a struggling relationship, or those experiencing a relationship crisis, may be looking for anything at all that can help their situations. These couples might well be much more open to, and interested in, receiving services that a project has to offer.

Beyond expressing a greater interest in services, research has shown that people are more open and willing to make significant interpersonal and behavioral changes during times of crisis or transition. An example is men who are about to be, or have just been, released from prison.

During this stressful transitional time, men are much more interested and invested in services or programs that will help them make real long-term changes in their lives. Once these men readjust and resituate themselves in their community, their

openness to interpersonal change decreases. Similarly, young unmarried couples are much more likely to consider marriage, or other major changes to their lives, right before or just after the birth of a child.

These critical transition periods are often reflected in RFPs as important target population criteria. Paying close attention to serving those with the greatest needs, at the most effective point in their lives, can help maximize the impact and success of a program.

C. Consider involving other members of the family

Once your target audience is well defined, research indicates that it is important to think about the larger family context. Teenagers have parents; unmarried fathers need to interact with the mothers of their children; married couples may have children; and in some cultures the extended family plays an important role in everyday life. People who are the intended targets of project or services rarely exist in isolation. The best programs examined by this research often found ways to appropriately involve the larger family network.

Of course, in many cases, such extended family involvement is not practical or appropriate. For example, educational programs taught in a school setting may find it too difficult to involve parents directly in programming. However, when possible, it gives projects the opportunity to influence the larger social and environmental context in which the target group exists.

D. Use an evidence-based practice or program model

After identifying the target audience that you wish to impact, arguably the most important project planning decision is choosing which project activities or services to implement. A review of successful programs clearly and strongly demonstrates the importance of selecting and using an evidence-based practice or program model. The definitions and complications associated with the use of evidence-based practices or model programs are discussed in detail in the introduction of this document (see: An Introduction to Evidence-Based Programming), and will not be discussed in depth here again.

In many cases, it should be stressed, there will not be an evidence-based program model that targets the outcomes of interest which has been utilized previously, or been shown effective with the target population of interest to the reader. And in some cases, there may be an intervention or program put in practice by others with some reported success—but that have clearly not risen to the level of confidence to be considered "evidence-based."

The task at hand, then, could more appropriately be described as selecting the "best available" evidence-based, evidence-informed, or empirically and theoretically grounded practice or program model. Individual program designers would select the intervention they believe has the best chance of working with their population.

When selecting a practice or program model that does not quite fit the target population, it is often necessary to make small adaptations to the program. The process of making these changes is discussed in detail in section 2.3. **For a listing of resources for identifying evidence-based practices see Appendix B.**

Section Highlights

1. Target those with the greatest needs; they will show the most improvement and see the biggest changes in their lives.

2. When possible, target participants undergoing relevant life transitions and periods of crisis to capture them in a state more receptive to making life-altering changes.

3. To the extent possible and appropriate, involve members of the participants' family; change will be easier and more permanent when the environment the person lives in changes as well.

4. Use the best evidence-based program model or practice available.

1.5: Program Evaluation

Some practitioners may be surprised to see program evaluation listed as a programmatic activity that can improve client outcomes. Program evaluations, however, have two important influences on the impact and success of a project.

First, a quality evaluation provides process and implementation feedback that allows for program improvement. Secondly, program evaluation allows a project to document its impact. This has a direct affect on the acceptance and investment in the project by partners and potential backers (see more information on sustainability in section 2.10).

In cases where project planners are forced to implement program models not specifically designed for their target population (as described in section 1:4:D), program evaluation is a critical tool for making the appropriate program modifications to ensure the program's effectiveness. In addition, while it may be technically possible to have an effective program without an evaluation in place, it is impossible to prove that such a program is effective.

The current research and existing literature point to several key planning factors that improve the overall quality and usefulness of an evaluation in social service project settings. Additional information on conducting a quality evaluation can be found in section 2.7).

A. Start Early

To achieve the most accurate results from evaluation efforts, it is critical that you plan for the evaluation and involve the persons doing the evaluation from the very beginning of the planning process. While Project Champions are interviewing potential community organizational partners (see sections 1.1 and 1.3), evaluation personnel need to be involved in the discussion as well.

Ideally, the same person(s) who will be implementing any evaluation activities can be involved at this point. The more planning that has occurred before evaluation personnel are involved, the more the evaluation will be a reaction to the planned intervention. Benefits of involving the evaluation staff early are that the evaluator can add their expertise to the design of the intervention; and the more the evaluation can serve as an integrated and user-friendly aspect of the project.

B. Involve Evaluators with Expertise

Staffing for a successful evaluation can come from within or from outside of an organization's staff. It is sometimes felt that having an external evaluator provides more credibility to the results—as the evaluator does not have a personal stake in the success of the project. However, the most important source of credibility comes from having a well-designed evaluation plan.

Regardless of whether the evaluation is conducted by internal or external staff, program evaluator is one of the positions where education, training, and experience make a great deal of difference. Often the day-to-day operations of an evaluation (i.e., collection of the data using standardized instruments and data entry) can be conducted by a variety of trained personnel. However, the design of an evaluation plan, creation of quality data collection tools and processes, and the analysis and interpretation of data are high-level skills that require proper training and expertise.

If such experience and capacity does not exist in your organization, research shows that a wise investment is to contract with someone who can provide these services. Local colleges and universities are good resources for finding persons with evaluation expertise. Checking with membership organizations such as the American Evaluation Association; contacting industry publications to see who writes about your topic; and soliciting recommendations from associates and partners within the community can also locate professional evaluators. For more information about finding and hiring an evaluator see the OFA Research Brief "How to Select an Evaluator" available at http://www.jbassoc.com/.

C. Develop a Project Logic Model

Our current research demonstrates the importance of developing a clear and accurate logic model. The greatest benefits from creating a logic model occur during the conceptualization phase and beginning implementation phases of a project. The logic model serves as a critical communication tool when communicating with project stakeholders (i.e., community partners, funding providers, and evaluators) about the proposed project. It also has a critical role in designing the program evaluation.

A project logic model appears to serve as the fundamental agreed-upon description of a project between the program and evaluation staff. The logic model identifies the outputs and outcomes that will serve as the targets of the evaluation activities. Projects without logic models often find their evaluation activities are not asking the right questions, or examining what they are really trying to influence or change, and as such often show no project impacts.

D. When in Doubt, Make the Evaluation as Simple as Possible

Within evaluation activities, there is a natural tension between collecting as much information as possible and putting the least amount of burden on the staff and participants. The ability to have a successful, rigorous, and comprehensive evaluation is directly related to the resources, commitment, and evaluation capacity of the proposing organization.

Evaluations that involve control groups; post program participant data collection; qualitative data collection; or extensive amounts of data require significant resources and expertise. In the absence of such resources, organizations should plan for a more modest and realistically achievable evaluation.

Organizations sometimes hamper themselves by proposing elaborate evaluations—hoping this will improve the chances of their proposal being funded. But they often lack the commitment or necessary capacity to successfully implement such an evaluation plan. For example, a potential project may propose the use of a control group with random assignment of participants. However, they may find that they have difficulty with recruitment and are unable to recruit sufficient participants to meet their service goals and as such can not afford to put any clients in a control group that does not get services. In such situations, the evaluation becomes a distraction to program staff and funding agencies—drawing critical staff time and resources away from the project itself. Having a simple, but well planned evaluation using quality instruments will still provide the opportunity to document success without becoming a burden on the overall project.

Section Highlights

1. Start planning for the evaluation at the very beginning of the conceptualization process.

2. A quality evaluation requires involving individuals with the proper training, education, and experience in evaluation.

3. Developing a project logic model is an important process in the evaluation and will ensure the evaluation is targeting the outcomes of interest.

4. Elaborate and complex evaluations require a significant amount of resources, skill, and organizational commitment. Project planners should not propose evaluations that are beyond the capacity of the organization to accomplish.

Project Implementation Phase

The planning and conceptualization factors discussed in the previous section will not only result in a more competitive proposal, but are considered to be important in having a positive impact on participant outcomes. Similarly, the following section focuses on activities and strategies surrounding the implementation of a social service project that the research suggests will ultimately increase the impact of a project. This will include decisions and activities that need to take place relatively quickly after the start of funding and ongoing implementation activities that, over time, will help keep a project on track.

As mentioned in the introduction, these programming changes and activities are thought to be cumulative in bolstering a program. Even if the reader has not had the chance to implement the planning and conceptualization suggestions in the preceding section, they can still improve the project's chances of having positive participant outcomes by following the suggestions in this section. Research also indicates that it is never too late to make project improvements—that implementing some of the conceptualization or start-up suggestions in later years can still have a positive program impact.

2.1 Hiring Project Staff

Perhaps the single most important factor in determining the success of a project (along with using an evidence-based program model) is selecting the right staff to work on it. The qualifications, characteristics, and skills needed for various positions will obviously vary with the responsibilities of the position and the needs of the participants. However, as described below, clear and strong evidence exists about what some of the critical attributes and considerations are for filling certain types of common positions.

A. Frontline Staff

As discussed in Appendix A: Study Background and Methodology, the vast majority of projects examined by the current research effort are aimed at providing curriculum-based education and training programs. In such cases, frontline staff typically interacted directly with participants during recruitment efforts, enrollment, service provision (classes, workshops, mentoring sessions, etc.), and during follow-up activities.

In these tightly controlled curriculum or programming models, the same set of services or information are provided multiple times to different sets of people in the target population. For example, an organization may teach a 16-week sobriety course educating participants about addiction (causes, triggers, and consequences), and may teach this course to ten separate groups over the course of a year.

For such staff, current and existing research clearly indicates several important common characteristics. And just as interesting as what was found, was what was not found. There have been a number of suggestions that participants will have better outcomes if the staff had a certain educational background; possessed experience with the population; and had experience with the issue of concern, or reflected the race, culture, or gender of the target population[17]. However, the current research found (in almost all cases) that these assumptions are false.

Instead, what are really necessary are strong interpersonal skills that allow the staff person to connect with the participant and be seen as credible and caring. When asked to describe their most successful frontline staff persons the same descriptive adjectives were used repeatedly. The best frontline staffs are described as:

- Genuine and caring

- Having the ability to connect personally with participants

- Having the ability to be seen as credible by participants

- Showing respect for participants regardless of current life situations

- Passionate about the program with a strong desire to help people

As a rule, the quality of frontline's staff interpersonal skills and level of caring matter more than external characteristics. But there may be one exception to the rule. Projects that involve the discussion of personal or interpersonal issues with an immigrant Hispanic male target population may encounter what has been described as a culture of "Machismo." These men may be unwilling, or less willing, to open up and discuss issues with a female staff person. In such cases, providing a culturally appropriate staff person will likely result in better participant outcomes.

B. Other Staff Positions

The importance of interpersonal skills over experience and education only directly applies to projects where a consistent set of program activities (such as a curriculum) are provided over and over again. For positions where more complicated daily decisions are made—as is the case with management positions, case management positions, and evaluation positions—educational background and experience become much more important. The appropriate qualifications for each of these positions should be identified in advance by project administration.

Section Highlights

1. For evidence-based programs where activities are repeated over time frontline staff's interpersonal characteristics are more important than background and education.

2. The best frontline staff members are described as genuine and caring; they have the ability to connect with clients on a personal level and be seen as credible and nonjudgmental.

3. Management, case management, and evaluation positions require appropriate educational and experience backgrounds.

2.2: Staff Training

Once the most appropriate project staff members have been selected or hired, providing quality and extensive training is the next key step in enhancing the program's positive impact.

A. Initial Staff Training

The initial training of staff to implement an evidence-based practice or program model must include an intensive and complete training on the program model or curriculum to be implemented. Research suggests that this training may take many forms but needs to include instruction from qualified experts on the program model.

These individuals often include the developers of the program or curriculum, certified trainers, and/or personnel who have implemented the program elsewhere. Trainings may be on site or off site; in large or small groups; or at conferences and workshops—as long as the training is complete, and not simply an overview of the program.

Many of the best programs (when possible) will have the frontline staff persons who will implement the program join the program as regular participants. Another common and proven technique is having new staff co-facilitate or partner in the delivery of services with more experienced staff, at least until they become experienced and comfortable with the process.

While quality training on the evidence-based program model is a necessary training step, it is not, by itself, sufficient. It is also important that initial training helps to develop a clear understanding of the organization this program operates within. This training should also emphasize just how this project fits into the overall organizational mission.

Additional supplemental training is required to prepare staff for the specific issues likely to arise when serving the intended target audience. For example if a program is dealing with couples with relationship problems, it would be important that staff were trained to recognize and deal with signs and reports of domestic violence. Projects that interact directly with at-risk children may want to provide their staff with some information about normal and abnormal child development. Mental health issues, drugs or alcohol, specific cultural issues, and a host of other topics or issues may or may not be appropriate targets for staff training.

The type of additional training needed will depend on the needs of the target population. It is important for overall effectiveness that program designers use their experience and knowledge (and process data) to prepare project staff to deal with the issues they are likely to face.

B. Ongoing Training and Supervision

While the initial training is a critical phase for achieving positive outcomes, this training process should be continual in order to ensure the delivery of quality services. Depending on the timing and extent of programmatic adaptation and improvements to the project, it can take up to two or more years to fully implement and institutionalize a new program (see sections, 1.4.D, and 2.3 for more information on modification of an evidence-based program model).

During this time it is critically important to monitor—and continually improve—staff performance by closely supervising staff, and by providing ongoing training opportunities. An examination of successful programs has indicated that, at a minimum, this should include regular individual meetings with a supervisor who can review performance; direct observations of interactions with participants; and coordination of regular team meetings. If possible, this review will include the evaluation process and outcome data for the overall project—as well as results specifically related to the staff.

Many of these techniques should also be used to monitor the performance of sub-contractors' work, or project partners who are providing direct services to participants. In such cases, regular direct observation and a close monitoring of data (workshop evaluations, and pre/post test data) are extremely important to assure fidelity to the evidence-based program model.

Ongoing training can take many forms including seminars and workshops; presentations at team meetings; and discussions during individual supervision. Training topics should reinforce the proper delivery of the evidence-based program; provide information to deal with emerging and identified participant issues; and, if it is classroom-based, should increase the capacity of the staff to facilitate groups and teach others. Beyond training based around the evidence-based program model, facilitation training was identified by successful curriculum-based programs as the most important skill to be taught to frontline staff.

When organizations are able to retain staff over long periods while still providing a consistent set of program services, over time the need for ongoing formal training appears to decrease. This is because staff become experienced and comfortable with the activities conducted as their tenure with the program increases.

> **Section Highlights**
>
> 1. Initial training of staff to implement an evidence-based practice or program model must include an intensive and complete training on the program model or curriculum to be implemented.
>
> 2. Additional trainings should prepare staff for the specific issues likely to arise when serving the intended target audience.
>
> 3. Ongoing training and supervision is critical to ensuring the appropriate implementation of an evidence-based program.
>
> 4. Supervision should include one-on-one supervision and direct observation of project implementation activities.

2.3: Modification of an Evidence-Based Program Model or Practice

As discussed in section 1.4.D, program managers often find that, in order to best implement an evidence-based practice or program, some modifications to the project are necessary. This seems to run counter to the goal of maintaining fidelity to the proven program design. So a balance—between fidelity to the program model and adaptation—is an issue program designers must deal with in the first few years of any new program.

Often, changes are necessary because an evidence-based program does not exist to provide the services needed to a potential target audience. There are many situations where a program designed for one population is used with another.

- A fatherhood program may wish to provide a curriculum-based parent education program to fathers who are incarcerated and have no direct contact with their children. However, the only or best evidence-based parent education program may have been designed for parents of children in Head Start who live with their children.

- A marriage education program designed for and tested with white middle class Americans may be implemented with a non-English speaking Hispanic population.

- A suicide prevention program designed for college students using voluntary participation may be implemented in a high school classroom setting.

In all of the above cases, changes to the programs are appropriate and necessary. Changes in key concepts, language, reading level, and cultural and age-appropriate examples may all be required.

Program modification may also be needed to fit within the context of a new setting. Some of the most significant changes occur when programs are modified to fit within the timeframe of an existing service opportunity. For example, a 16-week program with the goal of reducing teen pregnancy may be reduced to a nine-week program. Substantial conceptual areas may be reduced in emphasis, or even removed. Program developers should cautiously make changes to the total amount of programming that participants receive.

In other cases, some organizations will take a model program that provides eight to 16 hours of curriculum or programming and confine it to a shorter time frame. For example, a course that takes place over several weeks with only one or two hours of programming each session could become a program that is administered in one day or over one weekend.

This often overcomes some barriers to enrollment and increases participation—as many people might not be able or willing to commit to a 10-week program, but will commit to participating for one day or one weekend (see section 2.4.C for more information about barriers to participation).

Before making such modifications, program should be well aware of their possible consequences. While the overall "dosage" or amount of time in the program may remain consistent, condensed programming eliminates the ability of participants to practice what they are learning, and to receive reinforcement and clarifications at subsequent sessions.

Such changes also reduce or eliminate the bonding and peer-to-peer learning that often take place in distributed group formats. Condensed sessions can be used for the quick transfer of knowledge but are much less effective in impacting the long-term behavior of participants.

In more extreme cases, program administration may decide (hopefully based on data) that a significant part of the program is not working as intended—and that a newer or better evidence-based program model is available to correct the problems. Such drastic changes are generally undesirable and should be avoided, if at all possible, as programs are forced to restart.

In such cases, approval would likely be needed from the funding source because this change would represent a significant departure from approved funded activities. Open and honest communication with funding sources is critically important in these processes to assure that both the grantee and grantor are getting the outcomes that are intended. Funding sources are vested in the success of the projects and organizations they fund and can be important sources of advice and support and are often supportive of making changes when presented with valid reasons. However, secretly making project changes without funding organization involvement can have long term negative consequences.

Regardless of why changes are necessary, these changes can frequently be anticipated before a program begins. In other cases, the need for change can only be determined after staff experience and project data indicate there is a problem.

When modifying an evidence-based program model or practice, the current research clearly and strongly indicates that program administration and designers should involve experts in the process. When possible, the actual developers of an evidence-based program model or practice should serve as consultants—or be hired—to implement the changes. Developing an evidence-based program or curriculum requires a great deal of topical and programmatic experience. Program designers or administrators should not attempt to make changes to practices themselves, unless they are experts on the topic and program development.

Such adaptation processes are not uncommon in the first and second year of highly successful projects. The changes reflect the realities of adhering to an evidence-based program within the context of "real world" community-based organizations and the target populations of interest.

Once a program model has been set and all the initial changes have been made, however, it is important to resist the desire to make additional or continual modifications. Effective evaluations will need several years of data to show a pattern of success with a program. Making continual adaptations and modifications not only restarts the clock on the evaluation, but also delays the outcomes—because a project cannot be assessed until and unless the project activities remain consistent.

Project evaluation activities (see sections 1.5 and 2.7) and project personnel supervision efforts (see section 2.2.B) need to pay special attention to ensure the long-term fidelity of a project. Without close monitoring programs can "drift" and end up providing services in ways that are very different from when the program began. Or a program could end up providing services to a somewhat different group of participants than was originally intended.

> ### Section Highlights
>
> 1. Adaptations to model programs may be necessary when programs are used with different target audiences than developed for.
>
> 2. Changes are most often made to deal with changes in language, culture, or environmental context of participants.
>
> 3. Changes to program dosage or delivery format should be avoided if possible.
>
> 4. Changes should only be made with the assistance of experts, preferably with the involvement of the developers of the evidence-based practice or program.
>
> 5. Adaptations should be made as early as possible and further changes should be avoided to allow a consistent program/practice to be implemented and evaluated.

2.4: Recruitment of Participants

One of the most common struggles that all programs (including programs with faithfully implemented evidence-based practices) have is involving a high number of the target population in the program. Even the best evidence-based program models are ineffective if no one participates.

Few program manuals provide detailed guidance about participant recruitment. Detailed recommendations are usually not even possible, given the complex interaction of organization, community, and target population. The current research has, however, identified proven general strategies and guidelines that appear consistently in well-performing sites.

A. Importance of Project Partners

By referring potential participants, Project Partners play a critical role in facilitating recruitment efforts throughout, but particularly at the beginning of a project. This is one of the most important roles community partners can play, and as such, special attention needs to be paid to developing and maintaining these relationships (as discussed in section 1.1 and 1.3). Early program referrals appear to be based on pre-existing organizational and personal relationships—as well as on a belief in the efficacy of project among involved community partners.

Some projects may target a very specific and localized population, such as high school students or incarcerated persons. In such cases, *access* to the potential participants is more relevant than *recruitment* efforts. The organizational relationships between the project organization and the gatekeepers to these populations will determine the success or failure of participant recruitment efforts. Agreements regarding access to participants should be established, and confirmed, prior to the submission of any funding proposals.

Without these agreements in place there is a very high chance that the project will fail to meet enrollment targets for the first few years of the project.

B. Outreach and Recruitment Efforts

Where previous relationships do not exist, community organizations may be less willing to refer clients until the program proves it is effective—or until they see firsthand the benefits to their clients. In these situations, program staff will be required to be more aggressive in their outreach and recruitment efforts.

The exact nature of these efforts will depend on the context of the program and target audience, but may include the following: advertising and public awareness

campaigns; distribution of printed materials; participation in community fairs; and individualized outreach efforts at locations the target audience frequents.

As with the frontline staff, research indicates that anyone who can connect with the clients and is considered credible can be successful in project recruitment efforts.

C. Barriers to Participation

Outreach efforts and referrals from community partners can make people aware of services and programs. But barriers may still exist that prevent members of the target audience from participating. Common barriers include:

- Lack of transportation

- Lack of childcare

- Programming schedules that conflict with jobs and mealtimes.

Not surprisingly, there is clear evidence that identifying the barriers that prevent the target audience from participating, and building in program supports to overcome these barriers, increases participation and positive participant outcomes. Such support may take many possible forms. In other words, the same results can be accomplished using different strategies.

As an example, where transportation is an issue, projects may conduct programs in-home, or where participants can attend without transportation. Other solutions include providing transportation to program services; providing pre-paid gas cards or bus tokens; or paying for taxi rides.

Where childcare is an issue, projects may provide childcare on site; use project partners to provide childcare; provide vouchers to pay for childcare in the participants' home; or involve the children in the services.

When mealtime conflicts are an issue, programs often provide meals or snacks to participants as a way to overcome these problems—and as a way to create a relaxed bonding environment for participants.

As a general proven strategy, projects should identify the barriers that are common among their target population and attempt to find ways to help the potential participants overcome these barriers. These same techniques not only aid in recruiting participants (and getting them to a first meeting) but also in retaining participants for the duration of the programming efforts.

Section Highlights

1. Even well run programs can struggle with participant enrollment.

2. Community and Project Partners are critical to receiving referrals of participants and such relationships should be developed early.

3. Aggressive outreach may be necessary and projects should not expect participants will attend just because quality or even free services are offered.

4. Projects should examine and provide support to overcome the barriers to participation, including: transportation, childcare, and timing project services that interfere with jobs and mealtimes.

2.5: Retention of Participants

Once participants begin receiving services, programs may struggle to keep them involved until the end of the services. At the same time, some participants who do not complete the program may have received services sufficient to make a measurable improvement in their lives.

Evidence-based program models or practices may or may not indicate a clear minimum amount of participation necessary to demonstrate measurable change. But there is a clear link between the amounts of service received and expected participant outcomes. The longer participants remain enrolled in services, the better the expected outcomes.

In many ways, the issues associated with retention parallel those of recruitment (again, the barriers to recruitment discussed above in section 2.4.C apply to retaining participants and will not be listed here). Over time, changes in life status (such as getting or changing jobs, having a baby, or moving) are to be expected in any target group. And programs may have to find additional creative ways to work around these life changes to keep people involved. Beyond simply overcoming barriers, current research has identified several strategies that are important and effective in retaining participants.

A. Make it Useful

The number one reason people continue to participate in social service programs is that they find it useful or helpful to them in some meaningful way. Providing a quality evidence-based program that will benefit the participant is the best thing any project can do to achieve high retention rates.

The best of these programs make sure that participants leave the first session with a specific tool, piece of information, or resource that they can utilize immediately to see a difference in their lives. For example, a marriage education program may provide couples with information on the ten steps of conflict resolution that they can use and practice before the next session.

B. Keep it Fun and Engaging

Participants are much more likely to continue participating when they enjoy the process. As much as possible, program services should be enjoyable for the participants. In addition, the program should seek to keep the people engaged as active participants by the use of activities and discussions. The program should minimize the extent to which participants simply sit and listen to information.

C. Create Opportunities for Healthy Bonding

People continue to come to a project to participate in services because, as part of the process, they develop meaningful personal relationships. This includes relationships with other participants, and with project staff members.

Therefore, programs should, when appropriate, find ways to encourage and facilitate the development of healthy interpersonal bonds. Offering opportunities for personal sharing in a safe environment; appropriate personal disclosure on the part of staff; opportunities for one-on-one conversations; and opportunities for informal interactions (such as during meals) all facilitate this process.

D. Find Ways to Celebrate Success

Many social service evidence-based programs and practices seek to achieve inner personal change and/or changes in the behavior of participants. An important part of the process of many of these programs is recognizing personal growth and change. This is also an effective strategy for improving project retention, as participants become invested in projects that have recognized their achievements. On a regular basis—or at specific transitional time-periods—effective programs find ways to openly and formally celebrate the successes of the participants.

Section Highlights

1. Provide immediately useful service or information to participants during the first project service encounter and people will continue to participate when it is useful to them.

2. Keep programming fun and engaging, when possible.

3. Create opportunities for bonding between fellow project participants, and with project staff.

4. Find ways to celebrate the success of participants.

2.6: Staff Supports

Aside from having the right kind of frontline staff persons in place, it is important that project administrators give the staff the support and structure they need to be effective in their work. This includes making sure that the staff has all the necessary equipment to do their jobs as effectively as possible.

The kind of equipment that is necessary and appropriate obviously varies depending upon the nature of the programmatic activity. But it is clear that effective programs invest in the technology to make the jobs of their valuable and "overworked" staff a little easier.

Interestingly, there appears to be an inaccurate perception among frontline staff that they are sometimes too busy, or feeling so "overworked," that they do not have sufficient time to spend with participants. In the best programs, it is common—perhaps even normative—for frontline staff to feel as if they have more work than they would like. However, in these same programs, caseloads or project responsibilities do not become so great that staff doesn't have the necessary time to spend with participants—or on project activities—to produce quality outcomes.

As project administrators, it is important not to overload front line staff with so many responsibilities that it affects their performance, or limits time spent on important tasks. But administrators also need to recognize that it is normal for these staff members to feel very busy.

Section Highlights

1. Provide staff with the equipment and resources to do their jobs in the most efficient way possible.

2. It appears normal for frontline staff to feel at times "overworked" but project administration should ensure staff members are granted the time necessary to spend with participants to achieve quality outcomes.

2.7: Implementation of a Project Evaluation

Even if a well-designed evaluation plan is developed during the conceptualization phase, actually implementing the evaluation process brings a new set of challenges. If an evaluation plan is not well developed prior to the implementation phase, the reader should review and try to utilize the information presented in Section 1.5 (Program Evaluation) above.

The current research efforts have identified several important factors related to evaluation that will directly affect the project's implementation. These are the ability to improve the project over time, and the ability to demonstrate the effectiveness of the program.

The information presented below is designed to help the reader understand the issues they must think through and deal with regarding an evaluation effort. It is not intended to be an evaluation resource to guide the development on an evaluation. For more detailed information about how to plan and implement a quality evaluation process, see the OFA publication: Evaluation Guide for Responsible Fatherhood Programs.

A. Use Standardized Instruments and Tools

When programs are developed based on emerging evidence-informed practices or program models—or when a program model used and proven with one group is subsequently used to achieve different outcomes with a different target population—there usually are no prepackaged data collection tools to assist in evaluation efforts.

Data collection tools may not exist, or do not exist to assess what the program is trying to affect. In other cases, data collection protocols used in establishing the effectiveness of a program as an evidence-based model are overly complex and burdensome to participants, staff, and organizational resources.

Developing data collection tools and processes are some of the most common and immediate evaluation implementation activities. Unfortunately, developing a proper survey or other data collection tools is also one of the most deceptively complex tasks. Many program implementers find it seems easy to create a survey instrument, but in reality, it is just as easy to create a bad survey. Issues of proper units of measurement, use of scales, double barreled questions, use of jargon, and biased or leading questions can all prevent an evaluation from uncovering what is really happening with your participants.

Whenever possible, the best approach is to use instruments, scales, or questions that have been previously developed, standardized, and proven reliable by other researchers. There are a multitude of online resources that are available to assist in this process. Many online resources provide information regarding the tools' use and psychometric properties. The online resources can provide a fast and inexpensive way to review the features of a number of potential measuring tools. These resources can also narrow the focus to those instruments best suited for your project evaluation. Examples of good online resources for selecting appropriate standardized instruments include:

- The Psychological Assessment Resources, Inc. (PAR) website contains detailed reviews of numerous assessment instruments on a wide range of topics (available at: http://www3.parinc.com/products/default.aspx);

- The National Resource Center for Community-Based Child Abuse Prevention provides summaries of a large array of standardized instruments on topics related to children and families (available at: http://www.friendsnrc.org/outcome/toolkit/annotalpha.htm).

B. Use both Qualitative and Quantitative Data (Stories and Numbers)

The use of standardized instruments as described above is just one way of collecting information. Evaluation methods are typically classified as quantitative or qualitative.

Quantitative methods provide for structured responses that can be standardized and more easily aggregated. They typically include surveys, tests, and checklists. For project evaluations, quantitative methods are most commonly used. This is because it is relatively easy to collect and analyze the necessary information, and there is a high level of confidence or certainty in the results.

Qualitative methods provide greater insight and generate new theories. Methodology typically includes interviews, observations, and case studies. Conducting quality formal qualitative data collection is another evaluation process that is a deceptively difficult process that requires specific skills and is best left to professionals. However, all programs can benefit from some level of qualitative data collection. And simply including participant narratives or testimonials can help external audiences better understand how the program is helping people.

C. Use Evaluation Data for Project Management

Program administrators often view project evaluation activities as a process independent from the rest of the program that, at the end, will indicate if the program was successful or not. This is unfortunate because the research and literature clearly indicate the benefits of an evaluation process that is integrated into project management.

Process and early outcome data should enable projects to monitor the fidelity of the evidence-based program model, and it should help discover ways in which the project is not working. Examples could include discovering that the project is not effective with a particular demographic subgroup, or that outcomes are not improving in one of the target outcome areas. In these cases, projects may modify programs to be more culturally appropriate for a target sub-population, or find/develop new or enhanced programming activities to teach the skill or knowledge that is not being effectively delivered.

Depending on the specificity of the data collected, information may be available that would also help in supervision of frontline staff. Workshop evaluations may indicate which staff members are most or least effective in their facilitation skills, indicating the need for additional trainings.

2.8: Sustaining Community Partnerships

Section 1.3: Building Community Partnerships and Commitment provides a detailed discussion of the importance and strategies of developing community partnerships to facilitate the planning and long term success of a project. All of the factors listed for developing organizational relationships remain true for sustaining these relationships, and these will not be listed again. A few new and important items, however, should be added to this list for sustainability of the relationships.

During the conceptualization phase of the project, the responsibility for maintaining community partnerships should be given to the Project Champion (see section 1.1). As projects are institutionalized and organizational roles are defined, this responsibility is often given to another staff person who communicates with partner organizations on a regular basis as a part of the project. It's extremely important that this responsibility remain clearly assigned to a specific staff person.

As part of this ongoing partnership, it is important to establish regular communications with partners to pass along not only required information related to specific participants—but also to keep partners informed of the overall status and progress of the project's activities and goals. Regular communication appears to be the key to keeping partners invested in the success of the project over the long run.

2.9: Technical Assistance

Most projects funded by federal agencies have access to various forms of technical assistance. Federal Program Officers, contracted technical assistance providers, similar "peer" organizations, or other experts may provide this technical assistance. It may be delivered individually, or in a group setting; and it may occur at the project site, at conferences or other federally arranged meetings—or it could be provided remotely.

Investigations into the technical assistance revealed several important findings.

- Requesting and utilizing technical assistance to deal with programmatic issues and concerns is a common and useful strategy. Many of the best programs have utilized technical assistance during project periods to make important and meaningful improvements to projects.

- Individualized technical assistance appears to be the most useful type of assistance, followed closely by obtaining advice from similar organizations (peer support).

- Technical assistance is most beneficial in the first two years of a project before implementation processes are complete or institutionalized.

> **Section Highlights**
>
> 1. Technical Assistance is a useful programmatic improvement tool that many of the best programs use.
>
> 2. Programs should utilize technical assistance to make program improvements before project implementation is complete.
>
> 3. One-on-one and peer-to-peer technical assistance are the most useful types of technical assistance.

2.10: Project Continuation

If projects using evidence-based practices and model programs implement these practices as intended, there is a good chance that the project will have a beneficial impact on the lives of the participants.

In order to continue producing positive outcomes over a long period of time, projects funded by federal or other grant funds must find ways to sustain these activities after initial grant funding ends. For many organizations, this is the most difficult process they will undertake; despite previously demonstrating positive outcomes, projects often "fail" or end at this point.

Evidence-based or informed strategies and information to aid the continuation of project services is very limited. Indeed, even the current research had difficulty in discovering consistently effective advice or processes from which to draw conclusions. Despite this difficulty, a few clear themes and suggestions emerged that appear useful in sustaining project.

Perhaps the most important discussion about sustainability is the framework from which to think about the concept of project sustainability. Demonstration projects like the ones funded by OFA or other sources are not intended to be long-term sources of funding.

Demonstration projects are intended to test an idea, try out new approaches, spur the development of a new field, and at times help demonstrate the effectiveness of an approach. Because these projects often rely on limited specific funds, the availability of future federal funding sources is dependent on many factors—including the economy, legislation, and administration direction.

Persons and organizations applying for demonstration project funds should not expect future funding for the continued support of their projects. Given that knowledge, programs must be prepared to find new ways to sustain project activities after grant funding ends. As persons concerned with sustainability should be aware, such projects must compete in a system of limited resources alongside a variety of other worthy causes, and established programs and services.

In some respects, there is a Darwinian "survival of the fittest" in regards to social service programming. Project administrators must think of ways that key aspects of successful programs can replace funding with other funds currently used by other programs; absorb aspects of the programming into other programs or activities; and change the service system environment so that services are provided differently after the project ends.

It is the responsibility of the administration of highly successful programs to maintain the ideas and lessons learned from the project, and to help improve the service system following the end of grant funding. To that end, the following approaches were found to be successful by some of the most effective organizations.

A. Start Early

Creating a sustainability plan early in the grant, for if and how project activities will be continued appears to be important. Forward thinking about sustainability before a project gets underway may change the approach the project takes in providing services or how it involves its partners.

For example, one project examined by this research used its resources to create a large pool of laypersons that were qualified curriculum instructors. These layperson instructors will be able to continue to provide educational services independently of the project in churches, civic organization, business, and other venues after grant funding has ended at no cost to the project.

B. Use Evaluation Data to Compete for Funding

One of the most important roles evaluation data can play is in providing evidence for the effectiveness of a project that aids in sustainability. A project that cannot convincingly demonstrate and document its success, and the changes in outcomes for participants, is much less competitive for future funding. Federal and state governments, foundations, and other funding sources are all demanding increased accountability for outcomes and may not even consider projects that lack a strong record of proven success.

C. Use Community Partners

It appears that, beyond participant referrals, one of the most important roles a partner organization can play is in project sustainability. Creating a network of agencies that are invested in the success and continuation of your project is key to successful sustainability.

When sub-contractors or community partners provide direct services, the burden of finding a way to continue services is shared by multiple invested organizations, each with their own resources and funding streams (see section 1.3 for more information on building community partnerships and commitment).

D. Create a Niche in your Community

Highly successful and innovative programs create a niche for their programming and a demand for these services in the community. When programs become popular and there are not other providers of the services in the community, successful programs are able to rally community support easily for continuation of the program services.

E. Identify the Critical Components of the Program

Often, when an organization invests in a program and sees the benefits for the participants, they find ways to support the vital parts of the program. This may involve incorporating aspects of the program into the responsibilities of staff funded by other sources, using volunteers to perform certain aspects of the program, or using internal resources to provide the essential services.

Section Highlights

1. Start planning for sustainability from the very beginning of the project.

2. Use evaluation data to prove the effectiveness of the program and build support for continuation.

3. Use community partners to aid sustainability efforts.

4. Make the program services/practice invaluable in your community by creating a niche in providing services not otherwise available.

5. Identify the critical components of the program which need to be sustained and other activities that can be discontinued.

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Study Background and Methodology

Background of the Current Research Efforts

In September 2006, OFA awarded 226 organizations demonstration grants to provide vital services that promote the overall well-being of children and families. These grants were made in two areas: 1) Healthy Marriage programs designed to provide couples with marriage education services to help form and sustain healthy marriages; and 2) Responsible Fatherhood programs designed to promote responsible fatherhood through healthy marriage education, responsible parenting education, and fostering economic stability.

At the time these grants were introduced, Healthy Marriage and Responsible Fatherhood programs of this kind were relatively new, and significant research had not yet been conducted. OFA was interested in learning from these demonstration projects about the most effective programmatic activities and processes, or "Promising Practices," so that these lessons could be shared with OFA grantees and the Healthy Marriage and Responsible Fatherhood fields at large.

Promising Practices are defined as programmatic functions, activities, and processes for which an evidence base does not yet exist, but for which staff with programmatic experience, experts in the fields, and experienced technical advisors agree are beneficial to overall functioning of the program.

As part of this process, OFA specifically tasked James Bell Associates (JBA) with investigating Promising Practices among its grantees. In reality there are numerous—and at times conflicting—programmatic suggestions that have been made to Healthy Marriage and Responsible Fatherhood programs regarding programmatic activities or suggested Promising Practices they should consider adopting. To help clarify which suggestions are more likely to be vital Promising Practices, and which are less critical for sites to devote resources to, JBA undertook a research and information synthesis process.

Overview of Research Methodology

Beginning in the summer of 2008, at the request of the Management of the Office of Family Assistance, James Bell Associates (JBA) undertook a collaborative process of investigating Promising Practices within OFA grantees. During this process JBA worked with an advisory panel that consisted of other OFA contractors and OFA staff persons.

To investigate Promising Practices and Evidence-Based Programming factors, a group of OFA Healthy Marriage and Responsible Fatherhood Grantees was identified that had documented "positive participant outcomes" and overall successful programs. Based on nominations from OFA Federal Project Officer (FPO), federal contractors, and grantees themselves, sites thought to be doing an excellent job of serving participants were recommended.

More than 100 nominations were submitted. An extensive multilayered process was developed to carefully screen potential sites to ensure they fully met the required criteria. At the end of this process a pool of 26 grantees appeared to meet the criteria for a potential Promising Practice research site.

Starting at the end of 2008, and continuing into the first few months of 2009, JBA undertook a methodologically rigorous site visit data collection process with 21 of the suggested research sites. Data collection included gathering and synthesizing grantee generated information, including:

- Semi-annual and other official reports

- Photographs

- Narrative stories of impact

- Outcome data

- Program and agency descriptions

In addition, JBA staff members visited each grantee and discussed the site's programmatic activities, policies, and procedures. Discussions were held with groups of key staff at each site to investigate the implementation and utilization of suggested Promising Practices.

This research discovered that there was a consistent pattern of results indicating that some suggested Promising Practices were more consistently implemented and more commonly associated with positive participant outcomes. Moreover, these core activities, policies, approaches, and techniques appeared to transcend the differences between different types of programs and were consistent with the literature from other fields. This set of critical core practices was relatively small compared with myriad Promising Practices suggested to sites.

This set of practices seems to suggest that if attention is paid to a relatively small group of contextual issues, evidence-based programs could be applied in a fairly straightforward manner to a variety of audiences with higher expectations of positive participant outcomes.

What was noted from this work is that the factors that appeared to be related to positive participant impact had little direct interaction with the actual program model or curriculum that these sites were implementing. These were factors that appeared to be related to positive outcomes in addition to, or beyond, the impact that the evidence based/theoretically based program produced.

For more information on the methodology used see the OFA report: *Emerging Findings from the Office of Family Assistance Healthy Marriage and Responsible Fatherhood Grant Programs: A Review of Promising Practices in Curriculum Based Programs*[10].

Based on these findings, OFA asked JBA to continue this research by investigating how these and other programming factors are related to successful participant outcomes and project functioning. JBA looked into programming and implementation research across multiple fields and domains to generate a more complete listing of the programming factors that had some empirical support for directly influencing positive participant outcomes in social service programming efforts.

This review included the work sponsored by, or conducted by, numerous government and private agencies and organizations including: SAMHSA[1], OJJDP[2], IOM[3], the Campbell Collaboration[11], the Promising Practices Network[12], CYFER Net[13], and a variety of other sources. In particular, this work was guided by the work of Robert McCall and Christina Groark and their work on Evidence-Based Programming[14].

With a detailed listing of evidence-based programming factors developed, JBA undertook a second round of site visits (using the same methodology as the previous visits) with the remaining five Promising Practices grantees to investigate more closely how these programming factors were implemented in well functioning sites. By combining the data from all 26 sites, researchers were able to develop a clear picture of how such programming factors are actually implemented in well functioning programs across the country.

Table 1 lists the 26 sites involved in this research. For a more complete and holistic description of 16 of these projects, including photographs and stories of impact, please refer to the OFA publication: Emerging Findings from the Office of Family Assistance Healthy Marriage and Responsible Fatherhood Grant Programs: *A Review of Select Grantee Profiles and Promising Results*[15].

Table 1: Promising Practice Initiative Research Sites

Agency	Project	State
Active Relationships Center	Hispanic Active Relationships Project	Texas
Alabama Community Healthy Marriage Initiative	Alabama Community Healthy Marriage Initiative	Alabama
Arizona Youth Partnership	Healthy Marriages/Strong Families	Arizona
The Bill Wilson Center	Youth WORKS Mentoring Program	California
California Healthy Marriages Coalition	California Healthy Marriages Coalition	California
Community Marriage Builders, Inc.	Southwestern Indiana Healthy Marriage Initiative	Indiana
Cornerstone Community Development Center	Enriching Marriages in Indiana Project	Indiana
The Council on Prevention Education: Substances, Inc.	Jefferson County Fatherhood Initiative	Kentucky
The East Los Angeles Community Union	FuturoNow Healthy Marriage Initiative	California
Education Service Center, Region 19	Promoting Optimal Parenting Skills	Texas
The Elizabeth's New Life Center	Marriage Works! Ohio	Ohio
(CASTLE) The Exchange Club Center for Child Abuse Services, Treatment, and Life Enrichment	Strong Fathers/Strong Families Project	Florida
Florida State University	Project Relate	Florida

Agency	Project	State
Healthy Families/Thriving Communities Collaborative Council	Fatherhood Education, Empowerment, and Development Program (FEED)	District of Columbia
Jewish Family and Children's Services of Sarasota-Manatee, Inc	Healthy Families/ Healthy Children	Florida
Latin American Youth Center	Responsible Fatherhood Program	District of Columbia
Longview Wellness Center	Healthy Marriage Education Initiative	Texas
Meier Clinics Foundation	Family Bridges Project	Illinois
Minnesota Council on Crime and Justice	Family Strengthening Project	Minnesota
New Mexico State University	The Strengthening Families Initiative	New Mexico
Northwest Family Services	Lasting Relationships	Oregon
Public Strategies	Family Expectations	Oklahoma
The Ridge Project, Inc.	Keeping Families and Inmates Together in Harmony (Keeping FAITH)	Ohio
South Carolina Center for Fathers and Families	Promoting Responsible Fatherhood Project	South Carolina
University of Texas, San Marcos	Strengthening Families Project	Texas
Utah State University	Remarriage and Stepfamily Education	Utah

Evidence-Based Practice Resources

Below is a list of resources where readers may find more information on identifying evidence-based practices and program models that may be appropriate for projects they are considering implementing. It should be noted that the information provided here is in no way exhaustive and a large number of other appropriate resources exist. Further given the rapid pace of change of information provided via the internet, as time progresses it is likely that a great deal of this information (in particular web links) will no longer be valid. The authors wish to give special thanks and recognition to ICF international for sharing information on evidence-based practices resources for this document.

The American Psychiatric Association offers Practices Guidelines (www.psych.org/psych_pract/treatg/pg/prac_guide.cfm) which provide APA practice guidelines provide evidence-based recommendations for the assessment and treatment of psychiatric disorders.

Association for the Advancement of Evidence Based Practice (http://www.aaebp.org/). The Association for the Advancement of Evidence Based Practice (AAEBP) is a cooperative association of innovative service providers, researchers, policy makers and program developers who are committed to improving the lives of youth who are at-risk for neglect, abuse, abandonment or violence; their families; and the communities in which they live. AAEBP provides easily accessible and authoritative information on the effectiveness of alternative interventions, and best practice for use with at risk youth and families; educates policy makers regarding the value and effective use of evidence-based programs; shifts resources toward more effective evidence-based programs; and assists providers and program developers design, develop, test and implement more effective evidence-based programs and practices.

Blueprints for Violence Prevention. University of Colorado, Center for the Study and Prevention of Violence (http://www.colorado.edu/cspv/blueprints/index.html). Blueprints for Violence Prevention is a national violence prevention initiative that identifies truly outstanding violence and drug prevention programs that meet a high scientific standard of effectiveness and are effective in reducing adolescent violent crime, aggression, delinquency, and substance abuse In doing so, Blueprints serves as a resource for governments, foundations, businesses, and other organizations trying to make informed judgments about their investments in violence and drug prevention programs.

The California Evidence-Based Clearinghouse for Child Welfare (http://www.cachildwelfareclearinghouse.org). The CEBC helps to identify and disseminate information regarding evidence-based practices relevant to child welfare. Evidence-based practices are those that have empirical research supporting their efficacy. The CEBC provides guidance on evidence-based practices to statewide agencies, counties, public and private organizations, and individuals. This guidance is provided in simple straightforward formats reducing the user's need to conduct literature searches, review extensive literature, or understand and critique research methodology.

The Campbell Collaboration (www.campbellcollaboration.org) offers review of the impact of social service programs. "The Campbell Collaboration (C2) is an organization that aims to help people make well-informed decisions about the effects of interventions in the social, behavioral and educational arenas. C2's objectives are to prepare, maintain and disseminate systematic reviews of studies of interventions. C2 acquires and promotes access to information about trials of interventions. C2 builds summaries and electronic brochures of reviews and reports of trials for policy makers, practitioners, researchers and the public." C2 SPECTR is a registry of over 10,000 randomized and possibly randomized trials in education, social work and welfare, and criminal justice.

The Center for Evidence-Based Practices. Orelena Hawks Puckett Institute. (http://www. evidencebasedpractices.org/). The Center for Evidence-Based Practices (CEBP) is an applied research center of the Orelena Hawks Puckett Institute. The major aim of CEBP activities and initiatives is to bridge the research-to-practice gap in early intervention, early childhood education, parent and family support, and family-centered practices by conducting research, preparing practice-based research syntheses, and producing evidence-based products.

The CEBP provides researchers and practitioners with opportunities to work together to identify and promote adoption of practices informed by research. Both primary and secondary data analyses, applied research studies, and the development and testing of child, parent, and family interventions constitute the focus of CEBP initiatives. Research-to-practice activities of the CEBP are grounded in conceptual models emphasizing the enhancement of healthy functioning and the promotion of child, parent, and family growth and development.

The Center for Learning Excellence, Evidence-Based Practice Database. Ohio State University (http://cle.osu.edu/evidence-based-programs/). The Evidence-Based Program Database at Ohio State University is a compilation of quality government, academic, and non-profit lists of evidence-based programs that appear on the World Wide Web and/or in print form. It is meant for practitioners in the health and human services, education, mental health, child and family service, juvenile justice, and other social service systems that seek to change youth behaviors.

The Child Welfare Information Gateway. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Children's Bureau. (http://www.childwelfare.gov/index.cfm). Child Welfare Information Gateway promotes the safety, permanency, and well-being of children and families by connecting child welfare, adoption and related professionals as well as concerned citizens to timely, essential information. A service of the Children's Bureau, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, provides access to print and electronic publications, websites, and online databases covering a wide range of topics from prevention to permanency, including child welfare, child abuse and neglect, adoption, search and reunion, and much more.

The Cochrane Collaboration (www.cochrane.org) sets standards for reviews of medical, health and mental health treatments and offers "systematic reviews" of related research by disorder. The Cochrane Reviews offer a summary of international published and sometimes pre-publication research. Cochrane also offers Methodological Abstracts to orient researchers and research consumers alike.

The National Early Childhood Technical Assistance Center. U.S. Department of Education, Office of Special Education Programs (http://www.nectac.org/topics/evbased/evbased.asp#practices). NECTAC is the national early childhood technical assistance center supported by the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Special Education Programs. NECTAC serves all 50 states and 10 jurisdictions with an array of services and supports to improve service systems and outcomes for infants, toddlers, and preschool aged children with special needs and their families. NECTAC has compiled a list of selected resources on Defining, Understanding, and Implementing Evidence-Based Practice. Links are provided for those materials that are freely available full-text online. The site allows you to sort, search for and export references. It also allows you to create APA-style bibliographies.

The National Healthy Marriage Resource Center. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Office of Family Assistance (http://www.healthymarriageinfo.org/). The National Healthy Marriage Resource Center (NHMRC) is a clearinghouse for high quality, balanced, and timely information and resources on healthy marriage. The NHMRC's mission is to be a first stop for information, resources, and training on healthy marriage for experts, researchers, policymakers, media, marriage educators, couples and individuals, program providers, and others.

The National Registry of Evidence-Based Programs and Practices. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Substance Abuse and Mental Health Service Administration (http://www.nrepp.samhsa.gov/index.asp). The National Registry of Evidence-based Programs and Practices (NREPP) is a searchable online registry of mental health and substance abuse interventions that have been reviewed and rated by independent reviewers. The purpose of this registry is to assist the public in identifying approaches to preventing and treating mental and/or substance use disorders that have been scientifically tested and that can be readily disseminated to the field. NREPP is one way that SAMHSA is working to improve access to information on tested interventions and thereby reduce the lag time between the creation of scientific knowledge and its practical application in the field.

NREPP is a voluntary, self-nominating system in which intervention developers elect to participate. There will always be some interventions that are not submitted to NREPP, and not all that are submitted are reviewed. In addition, new intervention summaries are continually being added.

The National Responsible Fatherhood Clearinghouse. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Office of Family Assistance (http://www.fatherhood.gov/). The National Responsible Fatherhood Clearinghouse (NRFC) is funded by the Administration for Children and Families' Office of Family Assistance's (OFA) efforts to assist States and communities to promote and support Responsible Fatherhood and Healthy Marriage. Primarily a tool for professionals operating Responsible Fatherhood programs, the NRFC provides access to print and electronic publications, timely information on fatherhood issues, and targeted resources that support OFA-funded Responsible Fatherhood and Healthy Marriage grantees. The NRFC Web site also provides essential information for other audiences interested in fatherhood issues.

The Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention's Model Programs Guide (http://www2.dsgonline.com/mpg/). The Model Program Guide is designed to assist practitioners and communities in implementing evidence-based prevention and intervention programs that can make a difference in the lives of children and communities. The MPG database of evidence-based programs covers the entire continuum of youth services from prevention through sanctions to reentry. The MPG can be used to assist juvenile justice practitioners, administrators, and researchers to enhance accountability, ensure public safety,

and reduce recidivism. The MPG is an easy-to-use tool that offers a database of scientifically-proven programs that address a range of issues, including substance abuse, mental health, and education programs.

The Promising Practices Network (http://www.promisingpractices.net/). The Promising Practices Network (PPN) is a group of individuals and organizations who are dedicated to providing quality evidence-based information about what works to improve the lives of children, families, and communities. The PPN website is a unique resource that offers credible, research-based information on what works to improve the lives of children and families. The PPN website highlights programs and practices that credible research indicates are effective in improving outcomes for children, youth, and families. In addition to providing information on Programs that Work, PPN also links to additional research information in all areas related to child well-being, including their physical and mental health, academic success, and economic security. To promote successful implementation of best practices and model programs, PPN also screens and posts evidence-based information on effective Service Delivery.

Social Programs That Work. The Coalition for Evidence-Based Policy (http://evidence-basedprograms.org/wordpress/). The Coalition is a nonprofit, nonpartisan organization, whose mission is to increase government effectiveness through rigorous evidence about "what works." Social Programs That Work includes interventions that Coalition staff have identified as highly promising based on the above criteria, though perhaps not yet meeting the Top Tier standard. The site offers a series of papers developed by the Coalition for Evidence-Based Policy on social programs that are backed by rigorous evidence of effectiveness.

The What Works Clearing House. U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences (http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/). The What Works Clearinghouse (WWC) was established by the U.S. Department of Education's Institute of Education Sciences to provide educators, policymakers, and the public with a central, independent, and trusted source of scientific evidence of what works in education. The WWC produces user-friendly practice guides for educators that address instructional challenges with research-based recommendations for schools and classrooms; assesses the rigor of research evidence on the effectiveness of interventions (programs, products, practices, and policies), giving educators the tools to make informed decisions; develops and implements standards for reviewing and synthesizing education research; and provides a public and easily accessible registry of education evaluation researchers to assist schools, school districts, and program developers with designing and carrying out rigorous evaluations.