

Lessons Learned: Evaluating Anti-Hunger Programming

In 2010, two program evaluations were conducted for a large urban non-profit focused on anti-hunger activities. The first project was an evaluation of a single program in one community. The mobile market program provides free fruits and vegetables to eligible community residents. The second project was an evaluation of an initiative comprised of several programs including free food, nutrition education, and partnering with other agencies. The initiative is intended to provide a comprehensive approach to addressing hunger, health, and access to healthy foods in several communities.

What to Measure – Key Points of Inquiry

Initial planning and methodology development for the mobile market evaluation was enhanced by the client's prior development of clear objectives for the program.

- To increase access to and demand for high quality fresh produce and other nutrient-dense foods;
- To increase awareness as to the causes and effects of nutrition-related diseases while providing the information and tools necessary to enable residents to improve their dietary health; and
- To contribute to a positive change in dietary behavior.

These objectives facilitated the development of four Key Points of Inquiry to frame the evaluation process:

- Behavioral changes in participant community engagement;
- Attitude and behavioral changes towards food and health improvements/changes;
- Change and perception of change in food availability and demand within the community; and
- Program process effectiveness and efficiency.

The Key Points of Inquiry were used to create survey instruments, interview guides, and other data collection strategies and served as a framework for the evaluation results.

The planning and methodology development for the larger initiative was significantly more difficult to accomplish. The initiative had developed organically within the organization and at the time of the evaluation did not have clear objectives or goals in place. The objectives that had been developed were a mix of outcomes and outputs and were inconsistent with a comprehensive evaluation project focused on determining the impact of programming.

- Increase access to high quality fresh produce, nutrient-dense foods, and educational information for at least four low-income communities reaching at least 5,121 households (15,875 individuals) by the end of FY11 (June 2011);
- At least one member of 1,600 households (1,600 individuals) at four communities will have shown anecdotal positive change in their diet as a result of participating in at least one of the community programs;

- Access new information on gaps in the community food systems acquired through at least two community food assessments to help further optimize food systems in each of the communities served;
- Initiate and/or support at least seven market mechanisms in the target neighborhoods through partnership with other organizations and strengthen local food systems, through technical, financial, evaluative, or other related means of assistance; and
- Increase awareness through a communications plan reaching 15,000 people in service site communities focusing on diet-related diseases and healthy dietary behaviors.

A further complication was the various life-cycles of the programs within the initiative. Some programs were well-established while others were newly initiated. Programs in different life-cycles require different approaches to evaluation and have different expectations for results. These complications were addressed by working with the client to create preliminary outcomes for each program within the initiative, developing overarching Key Points of Inquiry tying all the programming together and constructing a life-cycle evaluation framework. The resulting Key Points of Inquiry mirrored the mobile market evaluation:

- Level of program implementation;
- Effectiveness and efficiency of organizational process;
- Positive change in dietary behavior among participants to increase consumption of healthy, nutrient rich foods;
- Increased demand for healthy, nutrient rich foods;
- Increased access to healthy, nutrient rich foods;
- Increased community engagement in creating and maintaining sustainable solutions for access to healthy, nutrient rich foods.

How to Measure Change

A key element of the evaluation projects was to determine whether programming was resulting in positive change for participants and communities. This was accomplished through several methods.

Self-Report

Within surveys and interviews, respondents were asked to self-report whether and how the programming had changed their shopping and eating behaviors and the health of themselves and their families. Qualitative information from the interviews universally supported the effectiveness of the programming for both the mobile market and the programs of the larger initiative.

Participant vs. Non-Participants

A significant aspect of both evaluations included comparisons between participants and non-participants through various techniques. For the mobile market evaluation, participants were surveyed at a mobile market event. Non-participants were identified as residents in the housing development eligible to participate in the program. Apartments within the housing development were randomly selected and screened initially for program participation. If non-participation was confirmed, respondents were asked to complete the survey. For the larger initiative, participants were surveyed at place of programming and neighborhood residents were surveyed through a street-intercept sampling methodology.

Both program participant and non-participants were asked a variety of questions related to their consumption of fruits and vegetables and other healthy foods, eating behaviors, and shopping behaviors. Results from both evaluations showed that participants were statistically significantly more likely to engage in healthy behaviors than non-participants providing evidence that the client's programming is effectively addressing elements of the Key Points of Inquiry.

Pre- & Post-Intervention Testing

Pre- and post-intervention surveys were conducted with participants of some of the programming in the larger initiative. The data was aggregated across programming and provided substantial evidence that program participants significantly improved their eating and shopping behaviors as a result of their participation. Based on this experience, the client is developing pre- and post-intervention tests for other programs within the initiative.

In addition, mapping exercises comparing food outlets at time of the evaluation to the outlets available prior to the implementation of programming allowed for assessment of whether access to healthy foods had improved in the targeted communities.

Using Validated Scales and Questions

In an effort to reduce time and cost and allow for potential comparison to other datasets, relevant questions and scales which had been previously developed and validated were used in the project. For example, questions from the USDA short-form food security module, Share Our Strength nutrition education curricula evaluations, and the NYSDOH Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System were included in surveys for both evaluations. These questions will continue to facilitate the clients' efforts to gather data and compare it to national and state-wide data.

Methodology Challenges

Both evaluations were conducted using a mixed-methodology approach including surveys, interviews, focus groups, and secondary data. A significant element of the methodology included surveying and interviewing low-income urban residents. This type of surveying can be very difficult and low response rates are not uncommon.

Community Engagement

This issue was successfully addressed by using community residents as surveyors. The surveyors were known in their communities which successfully reduced the barriers of mistrust and disengagement in the process. With training on appropriate survey technique community surveyors were able to generate very high response rates for both projects.

Incentives

In addition to using community surveyors, incentives for participation were offered for the more difficult populations to survey. Non-participants for the mobile market survey were offered an opportunity to be entered in a drawing for three \$50 gift-cards. It is unclear whether the incentive was useful as many people completed the survey, but declined to be entered in the drawing. For the larger initiative evaluation, survey respondents were offered a one-way pre-paid subway cards in

appreciation for their participation. The incentive, while costly, proved to be extremely useful in improving response rates.

Language Barriers

A further complication to surveying was the various language barriers of the low-income communities. A university program offering free translation services was used to generate surveys in Spanish, Russian, Mandarin (Chinese), and French. This extra effort ensured that the survey sample was representative of the communities.

Through these various efforts, the following response rates were generated:

Mobile Market Participants	78%
Mobile Market Non-Participants	74%
Initiative Participants	95%
Initiative Non-Participants	72%

Organizational Data

The client organization had developed a culture of data gathering, but faced several challenges in the process. The disparate programming of the larger initiative resulted in a lack of consistent measurement tools and indicators making it difficult to aggregate the data. In addition, inconsistent data collection and data storage resulted in the loss of many valuable data points. The client is currently in the process of developing indicators which will cut across programming and a database system to track measurement activities and to house the data.

Long-Term Issues for Programming

Several long-term challenges and opportunities for programming were identified in both evaluation projects.

Sustainability

A key issue for any non-profit's programming is the sustainability of their programming. In the final reporting, the client was offered several potential methods to improve sustainability including increased community engagement through improved communication with residents, increased recruiting of community residents as volunteers, and placing an organizational emphasis on sustainability planning.

Unanticipated Consequences

Occasionally in non-profit work unanticipated consequences of programming may arise. In an effort to address a need for healthy foods in low-income communities, the client created programming to provide free access to fresh fruits and vegetables on a bi-monthly basis. But while participants express appreciation for the food, they also clearly exhibited an increased reliance on the food. Survey data showed a large portion of participants both consume and purchase more fruits and vegetables, but a significant portion only reported an increase in consumption and not purchasing. This reliance on the programming to maintain participant healthy behaviors indicates an area for the client to consider when changing and developing programming.

Evidence-Based Programming

The lack of clear objectives for the larger initiative indicated a significant challenge for the client in conducting and evaluating their programming. A clear articulation of a hypothesis related to their approach would be a substantial improvement in the further development of programming. In addition, research and partnering to identify and utilize evidence-based programming would increase the effectiveness of programming and improve evaluation efforts.