



Choosing An Evaluator

What you need to know to ensure your program is performing effectively.





WHY EVALUATION MATTERS:

Treatment courts spend hundreds of hours each year focused on addressing the needs and successes their participants. Important decisions are made each week in staffing and the courtroom that have long-term impacts on lives and program outcomes. One of the more critical, yet often overlooked and undervalued, tasks that a treatment court must engage in is the selection of an evaluator. Research shows treatment courts that review data and use program evaluations to make operational modifications have almost twice the reduction in recidivism compared to programs that do not. The use of evaluation also leads to greater cost savings and confirms for courts what works in order to align with national best practice standards. With such significant reductions in recidivism correlated with the use of an evaluator and a standing data review process, teams must take the time to carefully consider the scope of work, selection, and use of an evaluator on their team.

TYPES OF EVALUATION:

It is important teams understand there are generally three main types of evaluation completed within treatment courts:

- › **Process evaluation:** This type of study often involves review of policies and procedures, surveys, focus groups, and court and staffing observation to answer the question: Is the program maintaining fidelity to the model and adhering to the established policies and procedures?
- › **Outcome evaluation:** This type of study generally involves the collection and analysis of various types of data, as well as seeks to determine if participants are successfully completing the program and treatment. It answers the important question: Does the program reduce recidivism?
- › **Cost-benefit study:** This study is more technical and relies on various financial assessments to determine the costs and savings of the program.



PROGRAM NEEDS:

With this foundational understanding, teams should ask the following questions before selection of an evaluator:

1. What type of evaluation do we wish to complete and why?
2. What does our funder require that we evaluate?
3. What data sources do we have in order to support this process?
4. Do we have the administrative support to complete this task?
5. What type of evaluator do we wish to employ?
 - a. **Independent and external:** We supply them the data, allow access to materials, processes, and policies and procedures, and they conduct analyses.
 - b. **Independent and internal:** Employed by the larger agency or possibly a state agency. For example, some treatment courts may be evaluated by their state's supreme court, office of the court administrator, or equivalent.
 - c. **Internal:** Employed by the program or project being evaluated. This person is experienced in evaluation and holds a special position on the team as internal evaluator. This position **should not** be absorbed by other treatment court team members (e.g. the coordinator).

In addition, teams should consider if they wish to have an evaluator that serves as an active team member, often referred to as a *participatory evaluator*. This person (either external or internal) helps guide the development of the program and policies and procedures, and assists the team in using data to inform decision-making and change.

QUESTIONS TO ASK THE EVALUATOR:

Selecting an evaluator is a task that treatment court programs should carefully consider. Questions to ask of the potential evaluator include:

1. What prior treatment court or similar criminal justice program evaluation experience does the evaluator have? The evaluator should be asked to submit sample reports and peer-reviewed publications related to prior studies.
2. What *types* of program evaluation have they completed before? Have they completed a process evaluation, outcome evaluation, or cost-benefit study? Again, ask for sample reports. It is important that if the evaluator will be conducting an outcome study, they have the technical skills to complete various statistical analyses, including running correlations, chi-square, and varied types of regression modeling (at a minimum).
3. Is your evaluator willing serve as a *participatory evaluator*? In other words, are they willing to work with the team to help develop the program's goals and objectives? Are they knowledgeable enough to share "best practices" with the team during development phases so operations align with national standards? Are they willing to assist the team with moving the findings from the evaluation into practice changes? Do they have experience related to these practices?



LOCATING AND USING AN EVALUATOR:

External evaluators can be located within private and non-profit organizations, as well as universities. In the university setting, most relevant experience can be found in the departments of psychology, education, public health, criminal justice, political science, and sociology.

In addition, teams can work with statewide coordinators to locate available evaluators. City and county grant offices often have a list of evaluators available for hire.

Depending on the budget for the evaluation, it is important to recognize the person/firm hired does not need to be local in order to effectively complete the evaluation. Teams can use Zoom, Microsoft Teams, and other platforms to encourage evaluator participation.



This project was supported by Grant No. 2019-MU-BX-K004 awarded by the Bureau of Justice Assistance. The Bureau of Justice Assistance is a component of the Department of Justice's Office of Justice Programs, which also includes the Bureau of Justice Statistics, the National Institute of Justice, the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, the Office for Victims of Crime, and the SMART Office. Points of views or opinions in this document are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the official position or policies of the U.S. Department of Justice.