



The Children's Trust Policy on the Use of External Evaluators: Considerations for Evaluation Sub-contractor Agreements

Introduction

The Children's Trust aims to partner with providers to offer the highest quality services to improve the lives of children and families in our community, and also must be accountable to the public by demonstrating effective program results. It is critical for programs to include a strong evaluation plan for capturing successes in **program planning, implementation and outcomes**. An evaluation can encompass a wide variety of activities and services. Providers should be familiar with the tools available via SAMIS reports, trainings, and measurement/best practice toolkits provided by The Children's Trust and others. The Trust shares these resources to build evaluation capacity and improve programming; providers are encouraged to take advantage of these regardless of whether they utilize external evaluation services.

Funding requests for evaluation services are subject to approval by The Children's Trust evaluation staff. **All Trust-funded providers are expected to develop internal program evaluation capacity to fulfill basic contractual data collection and reporting requirements and ensure continuous program quality improvement.** The cost of evaluating the effectiveness of a program may include the purchase of measurement tools, as well as staff time for data collection, entry, management, analysis and reporting. Such costs will vary depending on the: primary purpose of the contract, program design and budget, sophistication of the evaluation methods, and specification of the final products.

The Children's Trust separately funds external evaluation of some of its major initiatives, and in these cases will not fund external evaluation services that would be duplicative of such efforts. In general, **evaluation costs for a contract with a primary purpose of direct service delivery will not exceed 5% of the contract and may be considerably less.** Contracting with an external evaluator is neither required nor prohibited, unless the use of the evaluator is a condition of the contract award. However, if external evaluation services will be sought, the following conditions must be met:

- ✓ primary contracted provider must have a clear and well-justified understanding of what is expected from the external evaluation, including the rationale for why such external services are more cost effective than using internal staff resources for this function;
- ✓ should not be duplicative of the standard tools and resources available through The Children's Trust SAMIS reports and calculations;
- ✓ a clear subcontract agreement must be specified (see below);
- ✓ evaluator should have experience with and work within a collaborative, participatory framework and actively involve program staff in the evaluation process to build the capacity of providers to use data for program improvement; and
- ✓ external evaluation resources should be used for functions that require specialized expertise rather than basic/routine tasks that internal staff can be trained to perform (ex., data collection of simple measures, data entry).

In addition, a final report must be prepared by the evaluator within the contract period and submitted to The Trust within 15 business days of completion of the report. Future funding for evaluation will not be approved without submission of the finished product for the prior year's evaluation. Final reports should detail evaluation results, including program performance in terms of both implementation and participant outcomes, and should offer the provider practical input and

recommendations related to program quality improvement.

An external evaluation subcontract may or may not include all of The Children's Trust contract reporting requirements. If it does not, be sure that the evaluator prepares any data needed to complete required reporting within contractual deadlines. Ideally, The Children's Trust end-of-year report and the evaluator's final report can be completed at the same time and submitted to The Trust together.

Role of the Collaborative, Participatory Evaluator

If engaged, an external evaluator should be versed in working within a collaborative and participatory framework that involves programs in the evaluation process. Provider program staff should be engaged, active participants who contribute to and obtain meaningful and useful findings. HOW evaluators interact with program staff as they conduct the planning, research, data management and analyses is key to successfully working within a participatory evaluation framework. In selecting an external evaluator, you should look for professionals who value this approach, and get a clear understanding of exactly how often they will meet with program staff to review and interpret performance data. An effective evaluator must be able to listen, negotiate, bring together multiple perspectives, analyze specific situations, and assist in developing a design with the evaluation team that will lead to the most useful information and final products.

Providers must think **before** contracting about the potential evaluator roles and relationships that make most sense given the agency/program situation, the purpose of the evaluation, and the questions attempted to be answered. Questions to be considered:

- ✓ Should the relationship with the evaluator be distant or highly interactive?
- ✓ How much control should the evaluator have over the evaluation process?
- ✓ How actively involved should key staff and stakeholders be in the evaluation process?
- ✓ What evaluation-related activities can be performed by program staff and by the evaluator?

Sub-Contractor Scope of Work

A sub-contractor scope of work should outline the specific tasks/responsibilities that are expected from the evaluator. In an evaluation, much of the work can be broken into phases. It is not uncommon for completion of each phase to result in one or more deliverables that are tied to payment. Carefully evaluate the proposed agreement, as well as written examples of previous work performed by the evaluator, before engaging in a contractual process with an evaluator to ensure the needs of your agency and stakeholders will be addressed. **Please submit the evaluation scope of work to The Trust for approval prior to execution.**

It is important when considering hiring an external evaluator to assess your organization's:

- Expectations – What is the purpose of hiring an external evaluator? Are you contracting externally because your organization does not possess methodological expertise or capability to perform an evaluation internally? Or, are you hiring an external evaluator to bring an "external" perspective to balance that of an internal perspective on appropriate outcomes and to ask evaluation questions that might not occur to program staff?
- Capacity – It is important to assess what portions of an evaluation your staff are able to perform internally. For example, using internal staff to perform data entry is likely more cost effective than having an external evaluator perform the function. External evaluators should be resources for building evaluation capacity within your organization.

Listed below are some common components of an evaluation. The list only includes the components that The Trust will fund an external evaluator subcontract to perform. This is not an exhaustive list, nor should every evaluation include each of these tasks. It is important to note as well, that costs associated with performing some of the tasks listed can be expected to increase with the complexity of the project.

Planning & Research Activities

- *Assessment of the Program* – An evaluator should be able to learn about a new program/organization rather quickly by developing a knowledge base that will be built upon during future work with program staff. If the evaluator is expected to provide recommendations for improvement for an organization or program then a brief amount of time may be spent assessing the current status/operations of programs.
- *Identify and/or Develop Measurement Tools* – It is important to note that many published curricula have evaluation tests available. If you are purchasing a curriculum for your program, ask the publisher if there are valid tests available for the population you will serve. Ask the publisher/author whether the test has been validated and if so, request the findings. If your curricula does not have tests or measures available, an evaluator may be able to assist you with finding valid and appropriate measures, or to thoroughly review the materials and design a measurement tool.
- *Training* – If the evaluator assisted your program by identifying or developing measures, then it is important that the staff be trained on how to properly administer them. Remember that upper-level staff (managers) may be trained and expected to train line staff. This will help to minimize the number of training sessions needed in the evaluator's scope of services.

Data Management & Analysis

- *Database Development* – Maintaining data on program participants and program outcomes is very important. Using electronic databases or spreadsheets are safe and effective ways to manage a program's data. If the costs for developing a database are not realistic for the program budget, consider building technical assistance into the budget. Perhaps program staff can develop databases or spreadsheets and the evaluator will simply review and provide suggestions for improvement. Ensure that the database aligns with The Trust data tracking system to avoid inconsistencies.
- *Data Analysis* – A key component of evaluation is statistical data analysis. This analysis may include information on participants (e.g., demographics, socio-economic information) as well as programmatic information (e.g., participation, impact, outcomes). Frequently, data analysis includes tables and charts (i.e., visual representations of data).
- *Summary Reports* – The amount of information contained in a summary report can vary quite a bit. Some reports will contain only narrative to support or explain the data analysis performed. Others may include: background information on the program; socio-demographic information on participants; analysis of findings including strengths, weaknesses and recommendations.

Evaluation Process – Key to Participatory Methods

- *Program Performance and Continuous Quality Improvement (CQI)* – Evaluators utilizing a collaborative, participatory approach should be eager to assist program staff in trending data to examine ongoing program performance. Participatory evaluation methods move beyond simply doing data analyses and report writing. Evaluators should be sitting down with program staff periodically to examine data and discuss their use on an ongoing basis to enhance programs.

Contract Components

Contracts should be expected with all sub-contractors. The body of the contract should outline the scope of work that is agreed to by the agency and the evaluator. **The Children's Trust research and evaluation staff must approve any evaluation consultant's scope of work/detailed evaluation plan prior to subcontract execution.** Generally, The Trust will not accept simply a letter of agreement with an external evaluator. A more comprehensive contract or memorandum of understanding (MOU) must be established that details the work being contracted, including the following:

Fee Schedules - The costs of evaluating the effectiveness of the program should be included in the proposed budget and justification, and may include purchase of instruments as well as staff/evaluator time for the tasks detailed above. Providers are encouraged to perform some evaluation-related activities by internal staff to avoid higher evaluation costs (e.g., data entry and management).

Each item/category within the scope of work should be accompanied by the fee for that work. If a problem arises and an adjustment to the scope of work is required, knowing the costs associated with every phase/component of the evaluation will enable the agency to be better informed and to assess the modifications to the contract.

Deliverables - Every phase/component of the evaluation should include contracted deliverables. Deliverables for the planning/development phase may include: program curricula, tests, assessments, databases. Most of an evaluator's time in a project will come during the beginning and end of an evaluation. However, if the evaluator is doing ongoing training or technical assistance with program staff, then a deliverable may include an *interim status report* of their time/effort with the staff/program. If the evaluator is going to either assist the program staff or take the lead on reporting requirements to The Trust, then it is imperative to include contractually required analyses to inform key questions and evaluation reports.

Deliverable Due Dates - Just as each component or phase of the evaluation should include contracted deliverables, every deliverable should include a target due date. This is a critical part of the contract. Establishing deadlines will help the agency and evaluator to discuss each party's expectations including specific dates for:

- ✓ data submission to the evaluator for analysis,
- ✓ drafts of the evaluation report to the contracting agency,
- ✓ ongoing reviews and trending of data and discussion of uses for program and performance improvement between evaluator and program staff,
- ✓ analysis of outcomes for reporting to The Trust, if applicable, and
- ✓ the final report to the contracting agency.