

Evaluation

What Is It and Why Do It

Volunteer driver programs should periodically assess and adapt their activities to ensure they demonstrate effectiveness and support their advancement. Evaluation is a process that, in the case of a volunteer driver program, undertakes a critical collection and analysis of the program's activities, characteristics, and outcomes. Its outcomes can help you make judgments about the program, about ways to improve its effectiveness, and/or inform future programming decisions.

TWO WAYS TO EVALUATE A VOLUNTEER DRIVER PROGRAM

An informal evaluation of a volunteer driver program will include an evaluation of needs and of implementation. An evaluation of needs will emphasize people who need the program, how great the need is, and what is being done to best meet those needs. An evaluation of implementation will examine the process of implementing the program to determine if it is operating as planned. This evaluation might focus on the number and type of passengers being served and of volunteer drivers and their satisfaction with the program.

A formal evaluation of a volunteer driver program will emphasize its outcome and impact. The evaluation of outcome will investigate to what extent the program is achieving short-term and medium-term changes in program participants (e.g., passengers and volunteer drivers) resulting directly from program activities. The evaluation of impact will determine broader and/or longer-term changes or impacts of the program on matters such as the health of the passengers, the ability to age in place, or on the involvement and impact on community in general.

IMPORTANCE OF A GOOD EVALUATION

A good evaluation of a volunteer driver program needs to: 1) address specific goals and objectives, 2) seek input and participation from all those involved in and affected by the program (riders, drivers, staff, and community members), 3) include both strengths and limitations of the program as well as successes and failures, and 4) be replicable so that one or several colleagues can conduct the evaluation and get the same results. This last outcome depends on the quality of the evaluation design and data collection methods.

EVALUATION AS A CENTRAL PROGRAM FEATURE

In order to ensure that evaluation is an integral part of a volunteer drive program, a variety of methods will need to be implemented throughout the entirety of the program. In other words, the program will be designed with evaluation in mind, data will be collected on an ongoing basis, and the data will be used to continuously improve the program. Such an approach to evaluation will have a variety of benefits: 1) understanding how to meet the needs of the target audiences of volunteers and passengers, 2) developing achievable and measurable objectives, 3) efficiently and effectively monitoring progress toward achieving objectives, 4) learning more about the program and its operations, and 5) increasing the program's productivity and effectiveness.

A THREE-PHASE METHOD

The concept and practice of evaluation will need to be built into and supported by the volunteer driver program. It can (and probably should) be coupled with strategic planning. It can be organized in three phases, each with specific steps for its preparation and implementation.

Step 1. Plan the Evaluation This requires setting evaluation goals and developing an initial evaluation design and process. It begins during the planning phase, requires the involvement of key planners, and includes clarification of the program, its rationale and what it is expected to achieve in the short and long term.

Step 2. Organize the Process This takes place during the implementation phase and includes plans for organizing and gathering key performance data.

Step 3. Undertake the Evaluation This takes place during the evaluation phase and requires collecting data, analyzing data, and reporting the results.

EVALUATION CAN START DURING THE PLANNING PROCESS

In conclusion, initiating evaluation planning while planning the volunteer driver program will help ensure that evaluation is built into culture of the program. During the planning phase, plans for evaluation can be coupled with overall strategic planning for the program. It also can help ensure that initial plans for evaluation have been developed for the implementation and evaluation phases.

It also can help ensure that evaluation is not something that is planned or initiated as a an afterthought that has little relationship to the overall organization and implementation of the volunteer driver program.

Note: Ideas for this paper were supported by MEERA (My Environmental Education Evaluation Resource Assistant). The section (How to Plan and Implement a Program Evaluation) and the three-phase method were inspired by the MEERA section on Planning and Implementing an EE Evaluation. Each of the three phases include eight important subtopics that can be easily accessed by the reader.