

Overview of Program Evaluation

Evaluation is one of the most important, yet one of the most neglected, aspects of volunteer driver program operations and service delivery. It is said that without undertaking program evaluations, it is impossible to determine best practices. For most professionals, the prospect of embarking on an evaluation process, or worse yet, being evaluated by outsiders, is not a positive experience. Sadly, evaluations often are seen as time consuming, expensive, and a generally negative experience. In truth, a good evaluation should not be excessively time consuming or expensive, and it definitely should not be a negative experience.

A program evaluation can provide a means for systematically investigating the effectiveness of social interventions. The TurnKey Kit includes instruments and materials for embarking on a very limited volunteer driver, staff, and consumer focused evaluation. These evaluation tools will enable the administrators of a volunteer driver program to gather information from riders, drivers, and staff to provide the opportunity for feedback and new ideas so as to make informed decisions to improve performance.

Evaluating the Purpose, Design, and Result

In thinking about the broader agendas for evaluating a volunteer driver program, a variety of additional topics might include:

- need for the program
- design of the program approach
- program implementation and delivery
- program impact or outcome
- program efficiency (cost efficiency)

In the event the administration or staff of a volunteer driver program wants to undertake this broader evaluation, it would be helpful to try to answer the following ten questions.

1. What is the special older adult mobility problem that the volunteer driver program addresses? Who does the problem affect, and how does it affect them?
2. What is it about the problem or its affect that justifies organizing this volunteer driver program?
3. What are the goals of the volunteer driver program in addressing the problem of mobility for older adults?

4. What interventions or actions can be taken to address the problem and how does the design and implementation of the volunteer driver program address the problem? Are the interventions or actions of the program appropriate or should other interventions or actions be considered?
5. What other transportation systems and services are addressing the same problem, and does the volunteer driver program duplicate or complement these activities? What can the volunteer driver program do if it is duplicating the activities of others?
6. What populations are targeted for mobility or transportation intervention? Is the volunteer driver program addressing these populations, and if so, how? Should it consider limiting or expanding its target populations?
7. What is considered an appropriate standard for implementation of a transportation program? Are the volunteer driver implementation efforts appropriate; if not, how can its implementation efforts be improved?
8. Are the actions being undertaken to implement the volunteer driver program attaining the desired goals or benefits? If not, should the sponsor consider altering the goals or altering the operations of the program?
9. How much does it cost the sponsor to undertake the volunteer driver program? Are the costs reasonable in relation to its benefits to the target audiences?
10. What actions can the sponsor take to strengthen the volunteer driver program so that it meets goals for impacting its target audience?

Evaluating Program Operations and Outcome

An evaluation of a volunteer driver program also might focus on the implementation, operation, outcome, and efficiency of the program. Implementation addresses how the program is put into operation. Operations identify if the program is being conducted as planned. Outcomes measure the impact of the program in meeting the predetermined needs and efficiency, while focusing on the program's ability to produce the desired effects at a reasonable cost. Several topics and related questions that might be addressed in an operations and outcome evaluation are as follows:

Program Implementation

- What clientele are served?
- What services are provided?
- What are the best delivery systems for the services?
- How can the program identify, recruit, and sustain the intended clientele?
- How should the program be organized?
- What resources are necessary and appropriate for the program?

Program Operations and Service Delivery

- Are administrative and service objectives being met?
- Are the intended services being delivered to the intended persons?
- Are there needy and underserved persons the program is not reaching?
- Once in service, do sufficient numbers of clients complete service?
- Are the clients satisfied with the services?
- Are administrative, organization, and personnel functions handled well?

Program Outcomes

- Are the outcome goals and objectives being achieved?
- Do the services have beneficial effects on the recipients?
- Are some recipients affected more by the services than others?
- Is the problem and/or situation the services are intended to address improved?

Cost/Efficiency

- Are resources used efficiently?
- Is the cost reasonable in relation to the magnitude of the benefits?
- Would alternative approaches yield equivalent benefits at less cost?

Regardless of the evaluation approach selected by a volunteer driver program, it is important to remember that evaluation is about discovery. It is about what works and doesn't work, about the impact of services on staff, drivers, and especially on older adult customers. It offers the potential for positioning community leaders, boards, and staff, to take the next steps in planning for undertaking actions that will improve the program and its impact on its customers.