

# PLAN IMPLEMENTATION TOOLKIT

## Evaluation Guide



Evaluating the implementation of a local plan can help planners, public health advocates, and other community members better assess progress and spot opportunities to support community health goals.

Evaluation can support local plan implementation by:



**ASSESSING**  
community  
readiness



**MEASURING**  
progress toward  
long-term goals



**PINPOINTING**  
strengths &  
weaknesses



**UNDERSTANDING**  
the lasting  
impact



**SUPPORTING**  
strategic resource  
allocation



**PRIORITIZING**  
community health  
investment

Evaluation need not be complicated to have a positive impact on the implementation of local plans. Even simple evaluation techniques can help maximize impact and build support for local plan implementation activities that tangibly improve the health and wellbeing of local communities.<sup>1</sup>

## When and How Evaluation Can Support Local Plan Implementation

Evaluation can be a helpful tool at any point during the local plan development and implementation process, moving beyond its common use as a tool to retrospectively assess the impact of an activity after the fact.



## Types of Evaluation\*

**Formative Evaluation** At its earliest point in the plan implementation process, **formative** evaluation can be useful to assess whether or not a community is prepared to work in a certain area by assessing existing resources, the political climate, economic conditions, and other relevant community variables. Formative evaluation can be used to break down a specific community health goal into specific activities and assess the availability of and need for additional community resources to conduct these activities.<sup>2</sup>

**Process Evaluation** After the implementation activities have begun, **process** evaluation measures can help a planner, public health professional, and community partner track the progress toward and the quality of specific action items. For example, individuals helping implement a local plan may want to record the total number of interactions with community members as a means of assessing community engagement over time. Additionally, it may be helpful to know the number of community-member interactions during which community health resources were discussed.<sup>3</sup>

**Outcome and Impact Evaluation** Finally, when evaluating the impact of medium- to long-term results of implementation activities aimed at improving health, **outcome** and **impact** evaluation can help assess the relationship between the activities performed and community health. Of these, most health advocates engaged in local plan implementation will use **outcome** measures to evaluate their work, looking for the recent effect their activities have had on the program participants.

For example, a local plan may include a specific long-term goal to increase multimodal connectivity and identify the development of a comprehensive trail network with connections to key destinations as an implementation strategy. Comparing maps of the development of the trail network over time could be used to evaluate the implementation of this goal.<sup>4</sup>



\* Adapted from: CTR. FOR DISEASE CONTROL, Introduction to Program Evaluation for Public Health Programs: A Self-Study Guide, <https://www.cdc.gov/eval/guide/step1/index.htm>; CTR. FOR DISEASE CONTROL, Types of Evaluation, <https://www.cdc.gov/std/Program/pupestd/Types%20of%20Evaluation.pdf>.



## Plan SMART

When developing specific action steps to implement a local plan, using Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, and Timely (SMART) implementation measures can help facilitate evaluation of these efforts. Additionally, routine monitoring of local plan implementation activities can help identify unintended consequences sooner, enabling those involved in the development and implementation of local plans to be more responsive to community needs and avoid causing harm.

## Creating Evaluations that Work for Your Community

There are many tools and resources available to communities interested in evaluating the implementation of their local plan. While these resources provide a general approach a community can take to evaluate local plan implementation, each community's approach to evaluation should reflect the community's context, resources, and goals.

Communities seeking to use evaluation to inform and improve the implementation of local plans can:<sup>5</sup>

- 1 Determine what resources are available to record important information about progress in achieving the plan goal.
- 2 Identify the key plan implementation steps to evaluate.
- 3 Identify the key community members and stakeholders who have been involved in or may be impacted by the implementation activities of the local plan, including local nonprofits, educational institutions, funding entities, public officials, and others.
- 4 Gather information on the potential impact of plan implementation activities from the general community, key stakeholders, or specific groups or populations who may be impacted (both positively or adversely).
- 5 Keep an eye out for unintended consequences of plan implementation activities. This information may come through informal, anecdotal feedback provided while gathering information about plan implementation activities.
- 6 Review the information gathered to identify trends, gaps, successes, and areas for additional attention.
- 7 Prepare an evaluation report to inform the local planning process and community engagement strategy going forward.
- 8 Share evaluation results with community members and stakeholders who have been involved in or may be impacted by the implementation activities of the local plan, including local nonprofits, educational institutions, funding entities, public officials, and others.



## Applying an Equity Lens to Plan Evaluation through Choice Points

The Choice Points framework\* can be used to intentionally apply an equity lens throughout the local plan implementation and evaluation process. Choice Points uses five questions to determine whether a step in a project or process is a Choice Point, and if so, offers guidance on how to approach making decisions in that step to ensure equity is being addressed in a mindful way. The questions/guidance are as follows:

- 1 **Identify a Choice Point:** What are points of opportunity to make or influence a decision that may affect equitable outcomes?
- 2 **Assess Impacts:** What are the impacts of current decisions and actions that may be unintentionally reinforcing bias, barriers, or inequities?
- 3 **Generate Options:** What are some alternative action options that could produce different outcomes? (Try to generate several of them.)
- 4 **Decide Action:** Which option will generate the most leverage, momentum, or gain towards advancing equity and inclusion?
- 5 **Change Habits:** What reminders or “equity primes” can be structured into your routine practices and protocols to make equity an ongoing priority and habit? What relationships, supports, incentives, or accountability measures could help?

\* Terry Keleher, *Advancing Equity*, RACE FORWARD: CTR. FOR RACIAL JUST. INNOVATION (2012), <http://www.buildinitiative.org/Portals/0/Uploads/Documents/resource-center/community-systems-development/3B%2012%20Advancing%20Equity%20Choice%20Points%20Questions.pdf>.

Health advocates and others interested in using evaluation to support work implementing local plans should connect with local agencies with expertise in evaluation when they have questions. Depending on the context, a local public health agency, a state or local chapter of the [American Evaluation Association](#), or another evaluation-focused organization may serve as an accessible resource for addressing evaluation concerns.

## What to Watch Out for When Evaluating

Despite the value evaluation can bring to local plan implementation, there are a few pitfalls or challenges that can impact the accuracy of the evaluation.

### 1 Inaccurate measurement

Data is only as valuable as the confidence that can be placed in it. Clear definitions and consistent collection across organizations over time are central to maintaining accurate measurement.<sup>6</sup>



**Challenge:** If one measure of the process of implementing an action is to talk with 10 public officials per month, one organization may define a meeting as only a sit-down meeting while another may consider shaking hands at a public event a meeting.



**Solution:** Discuss measurement definitions up front and talk regularly with the individuals recording information used in your evaluation to address emerging questions and concerns.

### 2 Valuing measurability over meaning

There can be a tendency to value or overemphasize quantifiable data over qualitative data when evaluating the effectiveness of a policy or program. At the same time, not all meaningful work will be easily measurable or quantifiable. Reflecting upon what is important and making sure to not lose sight of it, especially if it is something not easily captured in a quantifiable assessment, is important for long-term impact. Adding an accompanying qualitative or narrative section when evaluating the implementation of a local plan can help maintain focus on key factors that are hard to quantify.<sup>7</sup>



**Challenge:** A community seeking to increase active transportation may focus on distributing educational materials that promote the benefits of active transportation over discussions with community leaders, as the quality and impact of community member discussions may be less easy to capture despite their relative impact.



**Solution:** Include community outreach and focus group activities as part of plan implementation to more fully engage with community members around different plan goals. Assess the impact of these community-level activities as part of the evaluation through case studies and interviews with community members about how their attitudes and practices with active transportation have been impacted by different plan implementation activities.

### 3 Overstating causal relationship

It can be hard to accurately understand the relationship between a given action and a given outcome in the real world—that is, outside the context of a fully randomized and controlled experiment. This is particularly true for many community health issues like health inequities and chronic disease because they are influenced by many factors at once and it can be hard to disentangle the effect of one from another. Evaluating the implementation of a local plan may mistakenly attribute the effect of external forces to the implementation action by ignoring these external factors, arguing that the implementation action had a positive effect when it could have, in reality, had no effect at all.<sup>8</sup>



**Challenge:** An organization that launched an affordable housing campaign in 2006 and observed lower housing prices in 2008 would overstate their influence if they claimed their campaign spurred housing affordability without discussing the impact of the recession in dramatically reducing national housing prices.



**Solution:** Add caveats or a discussion of the societal, economic, and environmental factors that may be causing the events you observe when evaluating the impact of plan implementation activities.

### 4 Performance gaming

Evaluation efforts can be vulnerable to disingenuous efforts to make one's performance appear better than it is. Whether it is performing the bare minimum required, selecting the easiest activities, or outright manipulating the data or how it is collected, efforts to increase the accountability and performance of policies and programs can be reduced to a "race-to-the-bottom" where the quality of a policy or program erodes as a result of competition increasingly based on quantity or efficiency rather than quality or innovation.<sup>9</sup>



**Challenge:** An organization that wants to increase local fresh food consumption decided they wanted to counsel community members on the value of eating fresh and local food. If "counseling" is intended to be a meaningful discussion with a community member, but staff are measured based on the number of people they counsel, an individual may be gaming the performance metric if they count an interaction where they briefly mention local produce.



**Solution:** Continuous assessment of and planning for ways in which data collection may be shortcut or manipulated may prevent or reduce performance gaming.

## 5 Different objectives

Stakeholders from distinct points of view may have different beliefs about what measurements of local plan implementation indicate progress toward improved community health. Recognizing these differences and accommodating as many perspectives as possible in evaluation efforts is important to maintain broad engagement and confidence in local plan implementation and the evaluation results.<sup>10</sup>



**Challenge:** Public officials and community members may have different definitions of success for a community health initiative on active transportation, despite sharing similar broad goals. For example, the public official may want the initiative to be implemented on time and under budget, while community members may prefer that the project is implemented with significant community engagement and with the least inconvenience made to their current commuting routes.



**Solution:** Recognize and make a list of all objectives, and develop a plan for how to feasibly track progress toward these goals identifying measures that will be meaningful to different stakeholder audiences.





## Evaluation Tools

There are a number of different tools that a community could use to evaluate the implementation of its local plan. This section provides information on three helpful tools that may provide particular benefit to planners and public health advocates aiming to improve the effectiveness of local plan implementation through evaluation.



### Logic Models

Logic models can help communities consider how existing resources have a larger impact on the community. They can prompt communities to consider their preparedness for performing a given activity (formative evaluation), how one might assess the success of different stages of a given activity (process/outcome), and what external factors may hinder or help progress toward a goal (formative). Each identified activity and result in the logic model could serve as indicators of implementation progress. The [Community Toolbox](#) has more information and resources on developing logic models.<sup>11</sup>



### Gantt Charts

Gantt charts can be used to support process evaluation by tracking progress toward and completion of key activities associated with implementation actions. Activities and those responsible for carrying them out are listed on the left-hand side with markings along a timeline indicating the weeks or months during which these activities are planned to take place and by which they should be completed. [Gantt.com](#) provides a history of this tool's development and access to free resources to build a Gantt chart.<sup>12</sup>



### Linking Datasets

Linking datasets, like local plan implementation activity tracking and community health survey data, may provide anecdotal evidence of the impact of local plan implementation on community health. The University of Minnesota hosts the world's largest database (IPUMS) of individual- and household-level data on topics including health, well-being, physical activity, and food access. Recording the amount and timing of implementation activities alongside measurements of the community's health drawn from these surveys can help evaluate broad progress toward improved health. At the same time, care should be taken not to overstate the causal connection between local plan implementation and changes in community health, as myriad other changes may have taken place in the community over any given time period. The [University of Minnesota's IPUMS \(Integrated Public Use Microdata Series\) database website](#) has more information about the content of the national and international surveys they host.<sup>13</sup>

## Evaluation Resources

### General Resources

The American Evaluation Association's [summer evaluation institute](#) provides in-person training on evaluation techniques and how they can be adapted to meet diverse needs.

[Community Commons](#) provides public access to thousands of meaningful data layers that allow mapping and reporting capabilities regarding a range of community health indicators.

The [Community Toolbox](#) provides more detail on the purpose of evaluation in the community health arena, common challenges, and principles to community-engaged evaluation practices.

The W.K. Kellogg Foundation's [Step-by-Step Guide To Evaluation](#) provides guidance on how to select the evaluation method that best serves a given program in a specific organizational or community context. This resource also examines how to incorporate diverse voices when developing an evaluation plan.

The [Basic Guide to Outcomes-based Evaluation for Nonprofit Organizations with Very Limited Resources](#) provides a guide to building evaluation practices for organizations and communities with limited capacity to collect and analyze data.

### Minnesota Evaluation Resources

The [Minnesota Evaluation Studies Institute \(MESI\)](#) is an interdisciplinary training institute for evaluation studies at the University of Minnesota. MESI provides high quality, practical training in program evaluation for people new to the field and for those who are practicing professionals.

The [Minnesota Evaluation Association](#) is the Minnesota affiliate of the American Evaluation Association. The Minnesota Evaluation Association provides Minnesota evaluators with information on local evaluation events, links to evaluation resources, and opportunities to connect with evaluators across the state.

While focused on improving health through publicly reporting health care information, resources from the [Minnesota Community Measurement](#) may be useful in evaluating community health goals included in local plans that are tied to the health care sector.

## Local Plan Implementation Toolkit

This resource is one of several included in a toolkit intended to help those seeking to improve health through local community planning efforts. It can be used separately or in conjunction with other toolkit resources. The Local Plan Implementation Toolkit includes the following resources:

- [Local Plan Implementation Overview](#)
- [Local Plan Implementation Worksheet](#)
- [Increasing Access to Healthy Food: Linking Planning Goals & Implementation Actions](#)
- [Implementing Local Plans: Identifying and Working with Community Partners](#)
- [Local Plan Implementation Evaluation Guide](#)



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statewide health  
improvement partnership

## Endnotes

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