

Program Evaluation Guide

Module 1: Introduction to Program Evaluation



**DEFENSE CENTERS
OF EXCELLENCE**

For Psychological Health
& Traumatic Brain Injury

Table of Contents

Overview of the Program Evaluation Guide.....	1
Purpose and Use of the PEG	1
What’s New to the PEG	1
How to Use the PEG.....	2
Who Should Use the PEG	2
What the PEG Provides.....	2
When to Use the PEG	2
Where to Use the PEG	2
Definitions	2
Program Evaluation Overview	4
Evaluation Timeline and Institutional Review Board (IRB) Review	5
Program Evaluation Approach	5
Composition of the Evaluation Team	5
Phase Descriptions.....	6
Benefits of Program Evaluation.....	6
Key Takeaways.....	7
References	8
Selected Resources for Additional Study	8

Introduction to Program Evaluation

Overview of the Program Evaluation Guide

This Program Evaluation Guide (PEG) is developed and published by the Defense Centers of Excellence for Psychological Health and Traumatic Brain Injury (DCoE). Program evaluation is an important part of the DCoE [mission](#) and helps military program administrators and leadership assess and improve service quality and outcomes. By making program evaluation an inherent part of everyday program activities, we create a culture of effectiveness to better build a sustainable, efficient and well-integrated continuum of prevention and care services for military members, their families and veterans.

The first edition of the PEG, published in July 2012, provided a standardized approach to program evaluation for psychological health and traumatic brain injury (TBI) program leaders. This version of the PEG (2nd Edition) has been updated and revised to reflect the most current needs of psychological health and TBI programs. This edition of the PEG is organized as a series of modules containing content specifically designed for use by program administrators or other staff members tasked with internal program evaluations as part of their duties within Defense Department psychological health and TBI programs. This PEG is designed for those who have limited prior knowledge and experience with the conduct of program evaluation activities.

Purpose and Use of the PEG

This PEG is one part of a collection of trainings, toolkits and support services offered by DCoE to assist personnel at the program level in developing their capabilities to conduct internal program evaluation activities. The PEG is designed for use in coordination with other training materials, such as DCoE's program evaluation and improvement webinar series, references provided in the PEG and webinar series, consultation with experts and other resources that may be available to program personnel.

The modules in this PEG are not intended to serve as a substitute for formal coursework on evaluation methods, statistics or data management. In addition, because the PEG is intended for use by a wide variety of programs, it will not provide specific guidance to programs on best practices for clinical or non-clinical services. Finally, the PEG is not intended as a manual for how evaluators who are external to a program should conduct their activities. However, the information herein will generally be useful in helping program personnel become more familiar with the evaluation process and consequently more effective in responding to external evaluation initiatives.

What's New to the PEG

New to this version are several features designed to increase usability, including:

- More focused content designed for program administrators and staff conducting internal evaluation activities
- Revised and simplified content to meet the needs of users who may have limited experience or knowledge of program evaluation
- Clear definitions of key terms and elimination of jargon

- Revised worksheets and templates focused on specific tasks within the evaluation process
- Self-referencing, module-based structure that allows the PEG to be used either as a whole or in component parts only

How to Use the PEG

Evaluation is an important process for ensuring that psychological health and TBI programs maintain a high level of quality, appropriate funding levels and accessibility to the service members, veterans and families who need them. DCoE has provided the modules in this PEG to encourage the use of program evaluation in order to generate information for use by program administrators and leadership to make decisions about programs.

Who Should Use the PEG

This PEG is specifically designed for program administrators and other staff who have been tasked to conduct evaluations of their own programs. It is intended for use by a broad range of individuals with varying skills and experiences. In addition, it is focused on program evaluation strategies that apply to a wide range of clinical and non-clinical programs. Lastly, the PEG's explanation of evaluation principles and processes, specific guidance, recommendations and examples are geared toward users who are internal to the program.

What the PEG Provides

The PEG provides detailed steps for the execution of an internal evaluation and the reporting of evaluation findings. It is organized in a sequence of modules that follow steps in the evaluation process from start to finish. Some users may wish to review the entire PEG, while others may benefit from more focused review of just a few modules. In addition, each module provides resources for additional information such as detailed appendices, articles, books and relevant websites. Moreover, the PEG includes stand-alone templates that can readily be used for specific steps in the evaluation process.

When to Use the PEG

The PEG is designed to support evaluation of new and pre-existing programs. For new programs, this PEG will assist in developing the structures and processes that facilitate evaluation. For programs already in existence, this PEG will assist in refining program structures and processes or in developing new structures and processes that were not initially included in the design and execution of the program.

Where to Use the PEG

The PEG is written to facilitate the evaluation of psychological health and TBI programs that are funded by or exist within the Defense Department. As such, numerous examples are provided that are specific to those types of programs, although the general concepts in the PEG may be applicable to a wider array of programs. For the purposes of this PEG, psychological health and TBI programs have specific and unique definitions, which are provided below with other key definitions.

Definitions

The following definitions are provided to clarify key terms and to distinguish between evaluation and other processes or procedures in which programs may be involved for internal or external purposes. Definitions have been adapted where necessary for relevance to program evaluation.

Program: An organized set of activities, interventions, or interactive efforts, managed in a coordinated way and directed toward a common purpose or goal, supported by a set of resources, to achieve a specific and intended result (adapted from Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC], 1999; Government Accountability Office [GAO], 2011; Project Management Institute [PMI], 2013; Weinick, et al. [RAND Corporation], 2011).

Project: A temporary, time-limited organized set of activities, interventions, or interactive efforts, managed in a coordinated way and directed toward a common purpose or goal, supported by a set of resources, to create a unique product, service, or result (adapted from CDC, 1999; GAO, 2011; PMI, 2013).

Psychological health program: A program that provides active services, interventions, or other interactive efforts to support psychological health, as well as care for service members (and their families) who are experiencing issues such as posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), anxiety and depression. This includes both clinical and non-clinical programs and services that address psychological health for the Defense Department. Activity focuses on improving psychological health providing a wide array of activities focused on prevention or resilience, education and training, stigma reduction, improving access to care or otherwise reducing barriers to obtaining care, and treatment. It includes all relevant clinical issues, such as depression, PTSD, substance use, suicide prevention, general psychological health, as well as non-clinical issues that are often addressed by mental health professionals, such as deployment-related issues, domestic violence, families and children, post-deployment and community or family reintegration, relationships, resilience, spiritual concerns, and stress reduction.

Traumatic brain injury (TBI) program: A program that provides active services, interventions, or other interactive efforts managed in a coordinated way and directed toward a common purpose or goal to support TBI, as well as care for service members (and their families) who are experiencing symptoms or issues associated with TBI. The program includes both clinical and non-clinical programs and services that address TBI and are funded by the Defense Department. Clinical services include screening, diagnosis, assessment or treatment for TBI. Non-clinical services include care coordination, vocational and educational retraining, community and family support services or education and training for beneficiaries and/or providers.

Inspection: An official visit to a program site to ensure that rules and regulations are being followed and things are in their proper condition (adapted from Merriam-Webster, n.d.). Inspections are commonly carried out to examine the degree to which a program or site is in compliance with a set of standard safety, privacy and related regulations.

Audit: A complete and careful examination of a program's records and/or accounts (adapted from Merriam-Webster, n.d.). Audits are frequently carried out to ensure appropriate billing for services and that programs have accurate reporting mechanisms regarding their service type and use by participants. Audits may result in recommendations for reducing costs; eliminating fraud, waste, and abuse of authority; strengthening internal controls; and achieving compliance with laws, regulations, and policy.

Accreditation: Accreditation is a process carried out by an external body that assures the general public that an institution or a program has clearly defined and

appropriate objectives and maintains conditions under which their achievement can reasonably be expected (adapted from American Psychological Association Commission on Accreditation, 2014).

Monitoring: To observe or check the progress or quality of a program over time, as in monitoring progress toward achievement of specific targets (adapted from Merriam-Webster, n.d.). Monitoring may include ongoing data collection and analysis to ensure (a) that a program continues to engage in the right activities to achieve its objectives, or (b) that a program is making changes in the right direction to improve upon its activities or results.

Program evaluation: An individual systematic study conducted periodically on a regular or *ad hoc* basis to assess how well a program is working. The process involves the collection, analysis and interpretation of data to determine the outcomes and effectiveness of a program, adherence to mission, and identification of areas in need of improvement, as well as, opportunities for growth (adapted from DCoE, 2012; GAO, 2011).

Program effectiveness: The impact of a program; specifically, the determination if the program itself is causing the observed outcomes or whether the outcomes are due to external factors (adapted from DCoE, 2012; Office of Management and Budget [OMB], 2004).

Program efficiency: The measure of key outcomes or benefits of a program against the costs involved in producing these effects. Degree of efficiency is reflected in the answer to the question, “Does the benefit of the program to its participants warrant its costs?” (adapted from DCoE, 2012).

Based on the above definitions, program evaluation is unique in that it focuses on a program’s effectiveness in meeting its stated mission, goals and objectives. Program evaluation can be contrasted with other processes (e.g., inspections, audits, and accreditation) that generally focus on whether a program follows a standard set of rules and regulations.

Program Evaluation Overview

Program evaluation is a fundamental process that should be incorporated into the design of every program and included in its day-to-day activities. Evaluations provide useful insights into how the program is functioning and help to identify structures and processes in need of improvement. Evaluations also assess whether the program is achieving its intended effects as well as whether the program is producing any unintended effects on participants. With this in mind, evaluation can be used throughout all phases of a program’s life cycle from planning to implementation to outcome assessment and continuous process improvement efforts.

When designing and conducting a program evaluation, it is important to consider four key factors: utility, feasibility, accuracy and ethics.

- An evaluation effort should have high utility; that is, it should produce valuable information that can be used to enhance the program’s ability to meet its mission.
- Evaluations should also be feasible, or realistic, given the time, resource or other constraints that are imposed on those responsible for conducting the evaluation.

- It is essential that evaluators seek a high level of accuracy and take measures to ensure that conclusions are justified and impartially reported.
- Finally, an evaluation should be conducted in accordance with ethical and legal requirements, and safeguards should be used to protect the welfare and privacy of participants and others involved in the evaluation.

Evaluation Timeline and Institutional Review Board (IRB) Review

The size and scope of an evaluation will vary widely from one program to another, and as such, evaluation timelines should be designed based on the specifics of the individual evaluation. One specific issue that may substantially increase the length of an evaluation is whether review by an IRB is required. IRBs determine whether the evaluation will be classified as research and require more thorough review and approval procedures. They are established to monitor risks to participants in research studies, which are defined by Title VII of the Code of Federal Regulations as “the probability and magnitude of harm or discomfort anticipated in the research are not greater in and of themselves than those ordinarily encountered in daily life or during the performance of routine physical or psychological examinations or tests.” An IRB may review the evaluation design and determine that it does not qualify as research (i.e., grant “non-research” status to an evaluation), in which case the IRB will grant an exemption to formal IRB monitoring. When questions exist about whether a program evaluation needs to be submitted for approval or exemption, it is best to seek guidance from an appropriate IRB point of contact (e.g., U.S. Army Medical Research and Material Command, U.S. Navy Bureau of Medicine and Surgery, or equivalent).

Evaluations generally fall into three distinct categories: formative, process and summative. These categories are reviewed in greater detail in other modules where relevant. Below, a general approach to program evaluation is provided that involves systematic collection and analysis of program information to determine if the program has been effective. This approach is applicable to nearly any program, regardless of its characteristics, the specific type of evaluation or the program’s phase of development.

Program Evaluation Approach

The phase-based evaluation approach depicted in Figure 1 is designed for use in internal evaluation processes across Defense Department psychological health and TBI programs. These phases and steps are applicable to all programs, although the specific details (e.g., measurement and analysis strategies) will vary as a function of program type, target population, evaluation questions and other factors.



Figure 1: Program Evaluation Approach

Composition of the Evaluation Team

Often, a program administrator or other designated staff member will be solely responsible for carrying out an evaluation effort. However, when evaluations are large in size and scope

and/or if staff members with relevant skill sets are available, a team approach is recommended. As such, references are made below to an “evaluation team” while acknowledging that this may in fact be a single individual. Additional details about team composition are provided in other modules.

Phase Descriptions

The three phases of DCoE’s program evaluation approach are described below:

- **Preparation:** The evaluation team initiates the evaluation process by first clearly defining the program’s mission, goals and objectives, and creating a program logic model explaining the program’s structure, processes and intended outcomes. Preparation continues by reviewing prior evaluations and program needs, developing evaluation questions and then selecting an evaluation design and strategies for collecting and analyzing data tailored to the program.
- **Execution:** The evaluation team carries out data collection procedures followed by coding and data storage. This may include quantitative or qualitative methods or a combination of the two. Data analysis, synthesis and interpretation are then conducted to determine the results of the evaluation.
- **Feedback:** The evaluation team develops a written evaluation report and other appropriate communications based on the findings of the evaluation. These communications are then provided to key stakeholder groups. Together, program administrators and leadership determine actionable recommendations for program improvements, and the evaluation team works together to measure progress toward those recommendations.

Additional details about these phases and the steps that fall within each phase are provided in the modules that follow. The modules that compose the PEG are organized sequentially, such that modules follow the steps outlined above in Figure 1.

Benefits of Program Evaluation

While program evaluation may require a considerable effort in the short term, its value to the maintenance and development of a program in the long term can prove invaluable. Without timely and accurate knowledge of how a program is functioning, it is nearly impossible to determine whether a program is effective and is worth the cost of maintaining it, especially when other viable options may be available. As such, it is important to keep in mind the potential benefits of program evaluation:

- Program evaluation provides insight into programs by assessing a program’s use of resources, its activities, its outputs and whether it is indeed achieving its intended outcomes.
- Program evaluation assists program personnel in identifying barriers to achieving successful outcomes as well as areas for targeted program improvement.
- Program evaluation can be used to refine program practices, assist with making more efficient use of resources, help to improve participant satisfaction, and improve service access and quality.

- Program evaluation can be used to maintain accountability by documenting successes in reaching key objectives and comparing a program's costs to its benefits.
- Program evaluation can support readiness goals by supporting data-informed decisions that make the system of prevention and care more effective.

Key Takeaways

- The PEG is designed to assist individuals at the program-level to develop and/or refine the skills needed to conduct evaluations of their own programs.
- Program evaluation focuses on a program's effectiveness in meeting its stated mission, goals and objectives.
- Evaluations vary widely in size and scope and may be carried out by a single individual or using a team-based approach.
- DCoE's approach to program evaluation includes three phases (Preparation, Execution and Feedback) and seven steps, which are described in detail in the modules that follow.

References

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Selected Resources for Additional Study

- Administration for Children and Families, Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation (2010). *The program manager's guide to evaluation* (2nd ed.). Retrieved from U.S. Department of Health and Human Services website: <http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/opre/resource/the-program-managers-guide-to-evaluation-second-edition>
- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Program Performance and Evaluation Office: <http://www.cdc.gov/program/>
- DCoE Program Evaluation and Improvement Webinar Training Series: http://www.dcoe.mil/About_DCoE/Program_Evaluation/Resources_and_Training.aspx
- Minnesota Department of Health, Quality Improvement Toolbox: <http://www.health.state.mn.us/divs/opi/qi/toolbox/>
- University of Kansas, Community Toolbox: <http://ctb.ku.edu/en>