

Ten things to know about program evaluation and the Calgary Homeless Foundation

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The [Canadian Evaluation Society \(CES\)](#) recently invited me to speak on a panel discussion. I was asked to speak to how my organization, the Calgary Homeless Foundation (CHF), views program evaluation.

The CES [defines evaluation as](#): “the systematic assessment of the design, implementation or results of an initiative for the purposes of learning or decision-making.”

With this in mind, here are 10 things to know about program evaluation in general and specifically its role at CHF:

1. **Formal program evaluation typically has a [logic model](#).**^[1] In order to build the logic model, evaluators interview staff with direct knowledge of the program being evaluated. They also do a lot of readings—those readings include funding agreements and any reports that led to the genesis of the program being evaluated. The process of producing the logic model should be iterative, with multiple drafts

and a feedback process involving program staff. Eventually, both the evaluators and program staff should agree on the logic model's content.

2. **Some program evaluators learn on the job, while others have formal training.** There are at least three ways to obtain program evaluation credentials in Canada: 1) there are several diploma and certificate programs offered by members of the [Consortium of Universities for Evaluation Education](#); 2) the CES offers non-credit courses through its [Essential Skills Series](#); and 3) evaluators can receive credentials via the [CES Credentialed Evaluator program](#).
3. **How 'arm's length' program evaluators *should* be is often the subject of debate.** In Canada's federal government, most evaluation is done internally. Having said that, when the federal government does evaluation internally, it often outsources many of the specific tasks (e.g., survey administration, the facilitation of focus groups, etc.).
4. **There are advantages to having program evaluation done externally.** Those advantages include: 1) capacity (perhaps no in-house staff have comparable levels of expertise, including expertise pertaining to data analysis); 2) perspective (that external person might be able to guide the conversation in a way that insiders, who might have designed the program, might not think about it); and 3) independence (i.e. the avoidance of bias).

5. **There are advantages to having program evaluation done internally.** An external evaluator won't understand the program when they begin the evaluation and will take time to learn; by contrast, when a program evaluation is done internally, all basic information about the program under evaluation is known by evaluators up front. Put differently, when you pay an external person to come in and evaluate your program, your staff have to explain the program's basics to the external person—and while this is happening, you're paying both your staff and the external person! Another advantage of doing program evaluation in-house is that it builds capacity—i.e. staff get to know their work better.

6. **Like many non-profit organizations, the Calgary Homeless Foundation typically (CHF) chooses *not* to use external program evaluators.** One major reason for this is cost.

7. **CHF uses a logic model for the housing programs that it funds.** This logic model was built 'in house' via a process led by a CHF staff person (namely, my colleague Janice Chan). Our logic model begins by outlining the major contributing factors to homelessness. It then lists the major inputs required to successfully house persons who are experiencing homelessness. It then discusses outputs (e.g., number of clients housed within a given time frame), outcomes (i.e., housing stability) and impact (namely, more client independence). This logic model is presented below.

**ASSUMPTIONS
OR INFLUENTIAL
FACTORS**

There are **3** major contributors to the size of a city's homeless population:

- **Macroeconomics**
- **Public Policy**
- **Local Resources**

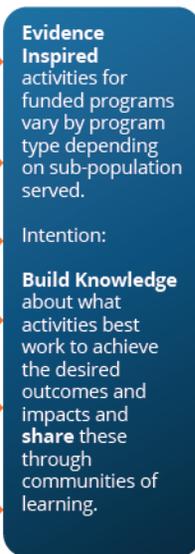
This model is based on CHF's role as funder.

Housing First is an effective approach for providing housing stability for most people experiencing chronic and episodic homelessness.

INPUTS



ACTIVITIES



OUTPUTS



OUTCOME



IMPACT



8. CHF's performance indicators are linked to the CHF's logic model. CHF's

performance indicators^[2] and quarterly monitoring of performance by programs it funds are linked to the logic model presented above (put differently, there's ongoing monitoring against our logic model). That said, our performance indicators are only one *part* of our overall performance measurement. With our overall evaluative process, we also ask the following questions about programs that we fund: Has the program in question been providing us with good financial reporting on time? How collaborative have program staff been?

9. CHF contracts (for the programs we fund) contain explicit information about

our performance indicators. Indeed, contracts spell out expected performance by that funded program on those indicators. Funded programs are expected to achieve

outcomes that are 10% greater than their cohort's average the previous year. (Click on this [link](#) to see the template version of the program outline section of one of our typical contracts; see pp. 10-11 of the template for information on performance indicators.)

10. **Some programs funded by CHF have their own logic models.** One reason for this is that CHF isn't always that program's sole funder. Likewise, CHF funds some non-housing programs (e.g., outreach, prevention) for which this logic model isn't a neat fit.^[3] In such cases, we develop arrangements (and funding contracts) that seek to reconcile this tension.

In sum. Program evaluation is an important tool to demonstrate performance and efficiency. Whether an internal or external approach is adopted, the outcome can provide important information to guide funding and programming decisions.

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