

February 2021

Community Solutions Fund Evaluation

Frequently Asked Questions

The Minnesota Department of Health (MDH) Community Solutions Fund (CSF) grant program staff have received questions from grantees regarding the evaluation of their funded projects. This Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ) document provides answers to those questions and other related questions.

Do we have to evaluate our Community Solutions Fund (CSF) project?

Yes. CSF grantees are required to conduct an evaluation of their CSF grant (page 7 of the Grantee Reference Guide). The CSF statute states that “grantees must report grant program outcomes to the commissioner” of Health (HHS, 2019 1st Special Session, Chapter 9, Section 107). It also states that the Health commissioner must “maintain data on outcomes reported by grantees,” and to “evaluate the success of the grant program and to build the evidence base for effective community solutions in reducing health disparities of children of color and American Indian children from prenatal to grade 3.”

The evaluation requirement, however, is not meant to meet statutory obligations alone. Grantees may use the results of their evaluation to track progress on grant goals and objectives, identify opportunities for improvement, inform future strategies and activities, and share successes and challenges with their stakeholders, funders, or elected officials and other decision makers (page 4 lists more evaluation uses).

What is the Preschool Development Grant (PDG) evaluation? What does our CSF evaluation have to do with the PDG evaluation?

Minnesota legislators appropriated \$1 million for the CSF program per year for three years. MDH was fortunate to receive additional funding of \$750,000 per year from the Minnesota Department of Education (MDE) out of its Preschool Development Grant (PDG) funded by the U.S. Department of Education (ED). Both funding sources meant a total of \$1.75 million per year available to CSF, allowing MDH to fund more grantees at a higher level.

The overall goal of the federal PDG is to support the kindergarten readiness of four-year-old children. It funds several state programs, including Minnesota’s, to expand access to preschool and to improve the quality of existing preschool programs. Minnesota’s PDG grant focuses on supporting families with young children prenatal to age 5 who are experiencing racial, geographic, and economic inequities so they can be born healthy and thrive within their families and community. The CSF is one of the components of Minnesota’s PDG grant.

Now where do CSF grantees come in? The PDG grant program has its own evaluation requirements. Because Minnesota PDG provides some funding to CSF, Minnesota submits CSF information as part of its evaluation report to the ED. MDE has hired School Readiness Consulting out of Maryland as its external evaluator. The evaluation information that CSF grantees will report as part of the state’s PDG evaluation

are yet to be determined; however, most likely they will be on grantee activities, including the number and characteristics of the children and families served. Since this information will already be part of the CSF annual reports, MDH can share this information with MDE so that grantees will not have to report them to MDE separately. School Readiness Consulting is planning to hold discussions with CSF grantees in order to gather more qualitative information from them such as how grant activities are being implemented, challenges they encountered and how they were overcome. But this is not likely to happen until 2023.

How much of our grant funding should we spend on evaluation?

The amount to be set aside for evaluation depends on the size and scope of your project. However, a common rule of thumb is 5-10% of the total project budget.

What qualifies as an evaluation expense?

If you have begun working on your CSF evaluation, then you are already doing evaluation! You can claim this as staff time under evaluation. Brief check-ins with your community participants to assess how they are doing and to ask about their needs qualifies as an evaluation activity because it is data collection. Summarizing what you heard from community partners and participants is data analysis, and is also evaluation. Sharing that information with your project team so that you can make decisions around adaptive programming strategies is evaluation learning. Other activities on which you can spend your evaluation budget include:

- Time spent on evaluation planning, including designing your logic model and/or evaluation plan
- Gathering stakeholder input into your evaluation
- Purchasing online tools to support your evaluation, e.g., Survey Monkey subscription, or mind-mapping or infographic software
- Subcontracting with professionals or community members to implement a short-term data gathering project
- Attending evaluation professional development opportunities such as trainings, classes or workshops
- Designing evaluation tools, including conducting online searches for evaluation tools and pilot testing the tools
- Conducting data gathering activities such as intakes, surveys, interviews, focus groups, storytelling, talking circles, etc.
- Expenses incurred when providing financial incentives to recruit participants (e.g., gift cards to focus group participants), or when serving food and refreshments or renting space, for an evaluation activity
- Taking notes during evaluation activities and processing the notes
- Transcribing interviews and focus groups
- Developing or getting support to develop an evaluation data system
- Entering, cleaning up, analyzing and interpreting data
- Hosting stakeholder discussions to help interpret your evaluation findings
- Summarizing your evaluation findings in the form of blogs, articles, reports or posters
- Presenting your evaluation findings to staff, board and other stakeholders or larger community

In certain situations it may be hard to distinguish between expenses incurred as part of evaluation or as part of regular programming. It is up to grantees to make this call as long as you do not invoice for the same expense twice.

Do we need to submit any evaluation documentation?

There are two evaluation documentations that grantees have to submit: 1) evaluation plan, and 2) annual report that includes an evaluation section.

According to the CSF Grantee Reference Guide (page 7), grantees are required to submit a draft evaluation plan within in the first 6-12 months of the grant and to submit an updated version whenever revisions are made. **Evaluation plans are due on June 30, 2021.** Grantees may choose to create other evaluation documents (e.g., theory of change, logic model, information dissemination plan) that would help them design an evaluation plan but **need only submit an evaluation plan**. However, we highly encourage grantees to share with fellow grantees other evaluation documents they develop (in addition to the evaluation plan) by posting them on our Community of Practice platform Slack.

The annual report is due July 31st of each year of the grant (page 9 of the Grantee Reference Guide). It contains an evaluation section where grantees will report information that MDH needs to meet the CSF statute's reporting requirements, and PDG evaluation requirements to MDE. Most likely this would include numbers served or reached, progress towards outcomes, and use of evaluation findings. When reporting progress towards outcomes, we ask that grantees refer to their evaluation plan. That is, report on what progress you are making towards the outcomes you specified in your evaluation plan.

Are there required templates for the evaluation?

For the evaluation plan, grantees may use whatever template they feel comfortable with, as long as it contains information on: 1) what things you are tracking to show that what you are doing is making a difference in the health of children prenatal to grade 3 (outcomes and/or impact), and 2) how the information will be collected (method). Any other information to include would be up to you. Design your evaluation plan in a way that would be most useful for you. Think of it as a plan for building a home. The architect works with the owner to create a plan, but others involved in the work such as the builder, electrician, plumber, bricklayer, carpenter, designer, etc., have to be able to understand and use the plan in order to do their job. It is important that all project staff, especially those who will implement the activities, are involved in the creation of the evaluation plan and understand their role in it. Two Evaluation Plan Examples are provided with this FAQ.

There will be an annual report template, however. Whether grantees will complete it online or submit it as an electronic document is yet to be determined. The template will be available in early May, giving grantees almost three months to work on their report. It will be self-explanatory but if necessary, MDH will schedule a brief webinar on how to use the annual report template. Individual technical assistance on the report will also be available to grantees.

Do we need to get Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval before we can begin data collection?

Only if your data collection is considered research and not evaluation. To know if you need to seek prior IRB approval, please refer to page 8 of the Grantee Reference Guide or ask your grant manager. Please note that regardless of whether you need IRB approval or not, and whether you will collect qualitative or quantitative information, it is considered good practice to go through an informed consent process with all participants. Please contact your grant manager if you need an example of a consent form.

Are there required grant outcomes?

MDH will ask grantees for basic project information such as the number and description of the children and families you serve and reach, but there are no required evaluation outcomes. Grantees choose their own evaluation outcomes or measures of success based on their project goals, as long as they fall under one or more goal areas specified in the CSF statute:

1. Early learning
2. Health and well-being
3. Economic security
4. Safe, stable, nurturing relationships and environments

What if we have documented grant outcomes in addition to those required in the annual report?

Grantees may choose to submit additional evaluation documentation as attachments to their annual report. Examples are an evaluation report prepared by a contracted evaluator or consultant, a survey summary showing the results for each survey item, or a focus group write-up. Grantees are welcome to submit these if it will help support the findings they reported in the annual report.

What if we do not finish the annual report by July 31?

We understand how sometimes things outside your control come up unexpectedly. If you are unable to make the July 31 due date, please contact your grant manager to arrange for a new submission date.

What do we do with our evaluation data aside from submitting them as part of the annual report?

There are many uses for evaluation data, and grantees are encouraged to make the most out of their evaluation efforts. Examples are:

- To demonstrate effectiveness of your project
- To demonstrate accountability to your funders and stakeholders that resources are well spent
- To identify ways to improve the project
- To aid in budgeting and to determine the best allocation of resources
- To determine changes in outcome levels between years or across multiple years
- To compare actual outcomes with intended outcomes, and identify reasons for the gap if any
- To support annual and long range planning
- To prioritize issues and focus areas in your project
- To promote and gather support for your project
- To identify partners for collaborations
- To apply for funding
- To identify training and technical assistance needs

What will MDH do with all the information in the annual reports?

MDH will aggregate and analyze all data from the annual reports and share the results with grantees and the Community Solutions Advisory Council. MDH will use the information to determine whether the grant as a whole is accomplishing its intended purposes of: 1) Improving child development outcomes as related to the well-being of children of color and American Indian children from prenatal to grade 3 and

their families; 2) Reducing racial disparities in children's health and development from prenatal to grade 3; and, 3) Promoting racial and geographic equity. The information can also help inform decision making at MDH around grant policies and practices.

Can we ask for support with our evaluation?

Absolutely! Evaluation technical assistance (TA) is available to all CSF grantees who want it. Based on the evaluation planning survey you completed in Fall 2020, we learned that there are grantees who are new to evaluation and who are experienced evaluators, and there are grantees who are doing the evaluation on their own and those who have hired external evaluators. But we also know that evaluation capacities and resources can change over time. Therefore, grantees may request for the optional TA any time.

Mia Robillos from MDH and Lucy Littlewolf Arias from MDE are available to provide one-on-one evaluation TA. Lucy is the evaluation contact for grantees working with American Indian communities.

And very soon, an evaluator specializing in Indigenous Evaluation will be joining PDG, and will be available to provide technical assistance to CSF grantees. An indigenous evaluation framework honors indigenous groups' unique traditions to promote healthy behaviors and wellness, and utilizes evaluation methods that value cultural ways of knowing and doing. For example, focus groups are conducted in a way that incorporate tribal practices such as storytelling. Or, success measures are chosen such that they reflect the physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual factors that shape individual and community well-being. This approach has wide applicability. CSF grantees are encouraged to conduct their evaluations within a framework that values and reflects the cultural values, practices, and norms of the individuals being served by their CSF project.

There is also limited support from MDE around programming (e.g., curriculums and community resources around early childhood development) and communications (e.g., graphic design and editorial reviews). Contact your grant manager if you are in need of these types of assistance.

We are interested in learning more about certain topics that would help our evaluation. Are there training opportunities in the grant?

Yes there are! Starting in summer 2021, School Readiness Consulting will offer (optional) training sessions on various evaluation topics such as centering equity in evaluation, collecting baseline information, taking effective documentation, stakeholder engagement, storytelling, and how to use your results to take action in order to improve the conditions for health in your communities. MDH can also hold additional trainings based on grantee needs and interests. You may let MDH know about these during check-ins with your grant manager, during evaluation TA sessions, and in your annual reports. And don't forget about your CSF peers who are subject matter experts in their own right! Feel free to use the community platform Slack to ask your fellow grantees for assistance and other resources.

Can we offer feedback to MDH or MDE regarding the evaluation requirements, the PDG evaluation, or the CSF grant in general?

MDH and MDE welcome your comments and suggestions! There will be a Comments section in the annual report. You may also let your grant manager know during check-ins or at any other time.

More questions?

Please contact your grant manager, Helen Jackson Lockett-El or Ramya Palaniappan, or evaluation TA providers Mia Robillos and Lucy Littlewolf Arias if you have additional questions about your evaluation. Contact Genelle Monger for questions about Slack. Their brief bios and contact information are below.

[Helen Jackson Lockett-El](#) (MDH)
helen.jackson.lockett-el@state.mn.us
651-201-5901

[Ramya Palaniappan](#) (MDH)
ramya.palaniappan@state.mn.us
651-201-4159

[Mia Robillos](#) (MDH)
mia.robillos@state.mn.us
651-201-5406

[Genelle Monger](#) (MDH)
Genelle.monger@state.mn.us
651-201-4159

[Lucy Littlewolf Arias](#) (MDE)
lucy.arias@state.mn.us
651-582-8740