Intro:

Welcome to the NCJA podcast. Listen to lively discussions with a variety of guests about promising criminal justice practices and programs worth taking a closer look at. Hear interesting ideas from around the country on a variety of important and timely topics and learn how you can adjust or adapt your Byrne JAG grant program for improved success. Thanks for joining us. We hope you enjoy.

Allison Badger:

Welcome to the NCJA Podcast. My name is Allison Badger and I am the director for NCJA's Center for Justice Planning. I am so excited for today's podcast. We will be dipping our toes into the program evaluation world and discussing what to expect when working with an evaluator. I am thrilled to be joined by our very own Elisa Nicoletti. Elisa is a brand new program manager here with us at NCJA and I will pass it to you, Elisa, to tell us a little bit about yourself and your background.

Elisa Nicoletti:

Sure. Hi Allison. Thanks so much for having me. So yes, I'm Elisa Nicoletti and I do work here at NCJA Center for Justice Planning. Prior to that I worked in a variety of capacities across the criminal justice reform space in New York City. I started out in direct service work. I started working in court at an alternative to incarceration organization as an advocate for adolescents who were facing prison time. And that was a great way to learn about the operations of the court system and it also introduced me to a host of programming available to individuals who were just as involved. And so after I worked there for a couple of years, I started to wonder whether this program was really accomplishing what it really set out to do and I got an opportunity to work on an evaluation of a pilot project that that organization was running and it was fantastic. It was a jail diversion program that targeted individuals with high numbers of misdemeanor arrests who were also diagnosed with severe and persistent mental illness. So working on this project really got me hooked on evaluation. So I went to grad school, came out and then began working in program analysis and evaluation. And so I've worked on some light internal program analysis and also done some longer term larger scale evaluations that involve multiple sites and longer study follow-up timeframes.

Allison Badger:

Awesome. And that right there is why we are so lucky to have you on the team. Many SAAs and funders in general have put such a strong emphasis on evaluating the public safety programs that they're supporting, which we all agree is really a good idea, but understanding the nuances is really, really important.

Elisa Nicoletti:

Yeah. I couldn't agree more and I think I enjoy this work so much, not only because I really believe that data has the power to tell stories and it also has the power to help us make better decisions. I love learning from others and hearing people's experiences and I really learned so much over the years from people who have run these programs and people who participate in them. I think it's an incredible privilege, so I'm happy to be here.

Allison Badger:

Awesome. Let's start with doing some quick level setting. What is program evaluation? Are there different kinds of programmatic evaluation and if so, would you mind talking us through that?

Elisa Nicoletti:

Yeah. That's a great place to start. So when I typically think about program evaluation, it can be pretty broad, but I like to break it down into four different types. Really three main types and one type that I think of as a bonus or an add-on. So first would be a process or implementation study. And this study shows whether a program has been implemented as it's designed. So did it happen and did it happen as it was supposed to happen? Next are outcome studies. And these studies try to show the effects on the target population by looking at progress made towards the program's goals. So you're looking at how the participants are doing after they go through the program, like where they are. The next major type of study is an impact study. And an impact study looks at the program's effectiveness in meeting its main goal by comparing outcomes of program participants to some comparison group that did not get the program. So what you want to know is how the people in the program are doing relative to how they would have been doing had they not gotten the program.

And then the fourth kind, which I refer to again as a bonus or an add-on is a cost study or a benefit cost study in some cases. So a cost study can show how much an intervention actually costs and a benefit cost study is typically only happening if there was also an impact study and it can help determine if the benefits of providing the intervention outweigh the cost of the intervention. And so this study can be helpful for funding decisions, really assessing the value of a particular intervention.

Allison Badger:

Thank you for breaking that down. I think we often lump all of this together into buzzwords and so it's really important to hear these key differences. Much like everything else in our space in criminal justice evaluation is not a monolith. So would you mind breaking it down even further and just maybe using an example so we can picture it in real life?

Elisa Nicoletti:

Yeah. Sure. Sure. So let's say we've got an alternative to incarceration organization. They're running a program designed to reduce recidivism among adolescents. So this program theorizes that providing program participants with say, access to school supports a weekly cognitive behavioral therapy or CBT program and paid internship opportunities will ultimately reduce recidivism due to the youth's engagement in these positive pro-social activities and changes in thinking stemming from the CBT. So if we're looking at a process or implementation study that would look at who was entering the program, the characteristics of these participants, and whether the stated services like the school supports the CBT group, the internship opportunities were offered, who staffed them, who was utilizing them? It's an overview of what the program looks like and whether it functions as it was designed to.

An outcome study could look at how participants utilize these services. So the frequency with which program participants use the services, what the program participants thought about the quality of the services, what participants feel they're getting from the services. It could include measures of post-program outcomes like rearrest or probation violations, stuff like that. An impact study could look at recidivism trends among the program participants across time and compare those to the outcomes of a comparison group, whether it's a real comparison group through a randomized control trial, an RCT or through a regression where you can control for things so that folks can be as comparable as possible. The benefit cost study might look at how much this program costs to run compared to any calculated savings yielded from recidivism reductions.

Allison Badger:

Thank you so much for taking us through a live example so we could all really relate to that. Why is programmatic evaluation necessary? What's the ultimate importance and value from it?

Elisa Nicoletti:

Yeah. That's a good question. I think program evaluation is incredibly useful because in the most general terms it can help us better understand a particular program or intervention. So when you evaluate a program, you have the opportunity to really dig in and learn about the nuts and bolts of a program. We can learn how it functions, the characteristics of who it serves, how well it's implemented, how good the program is at achieving its desired goals, what individuals participating in the program are getting out of it and sometimes they can help us understand the cost of doing something.Hhow much an intervention costs compared to doing business as usual? Ultimately I think that evaluation is incredibly useful because it allows us to understand the value of a particular intervention and that then can shape funding decisions and ultimately policy and can really impact people's lives. Allison, I'm wondering if you could describe how you see evaluation fitting into the strategic planning process in a broad way?

Allison Badger:

That's a great question. We talk about evaluation a lot in the strategic planning process. Generally we say that a good strategic plan shows where you are now, where you want to be, what specific policies, practices or programs or other activities that will be implemented to get you there and then are we following our designed roadmap and achieving our expected results? That latter part is where the evaluation comes into play the most. So did the priorities and investments that you set out to support actually work and should you continue to support them? That's something that's really important when it comes to public safety because there's so many stakeholders out there doing such great work, limited resources and you really want to be able to support those ideas and programs that are working the best.

We encourage all states to consider program evaluation in their planning process in addition to the typical activity reporting. Most states collect the traditional activity reporting, reporting on goals and objectives, PMT data, that's performance measurement data. The narrative progress reports that a lot of states require. Those are the activity reports which are also very important, but I think it's not necessarily investigating its effectiveness in a scientific way. So a combination of both activity reporting and evaluation is really key to a successful strategic plan. So thanks for asking that question. And if a program wanted to be evaluated, do you have any tips on where or how to find evaluators and what to look for in a partner for evaluation?

Elisa Nicoletti:

Yeah. Yeah. That's a good question. I think in terms of what to look for in a partner, it's really important to work for a program to work with a partner that you feel comfortable with you being as a program. Have conversations, learn about what work the evaluator has done previously and whether or how it aligns with your own program area. I've heard from program directors and know from my own experiences that it's so much easier on program staff when an evaluator has direct experience working in their sector. When they feel like they have a really good grasp on the context in which the program is operating. I think it's also very helpful to be as clear as you can about the goals you have for the evaluation. What the program wants to learn and whether that could fit into the budget and timeline that they're working with.

You also want to be sure that you're in agreement on what deliverable you would like. What's going to be the most helpful to you, whether it's a lengthy report, maybe a five-page brief or a very

straightforward one pager. Maybe a logic model is what you're looking for. So I think agreeing on that and also making sure you're really comfortable with your evaluation partner from a program perspective is really important.

Now in terms of finding an evaluator, I think it's a good idea for programs and funders to try to network and build relationships with evaluators over time. Look out for evaluators at conferences or trainings that are relevant to your program area. Also, program leadership should ask around to other programs that are maybe similar to theirs or that are in the same broad area, see who they've used and how it went. Even social media like LinkedIn can facilitate this to some extent. Just following organizations that are in your program area and seeing what they're up to. That can really lead to some interesting resource sharing.

Allison Badger:

That's really great advice. I know a lot of states partner with their statistical analysis centers and universities in their states. I have heard to some degree that these projects can be costly and that regularly the indirect cost rates can be really high, which makes states feel like they're not getting the bang for their buck. So I was just wondering if you had any insight on that.

Elisa Nicoletti:

Yeah. There's some truth there for sure. Universities may be less costly than large evaluation organizations or research institutions. Universities can often use grad students to support the work. They have less overhead. They've got professors who are motivated to conduct research. And I think if the evaluation goals fit is right, then that could work pretty nicely. Sometimes a professor may have their own internal theories about how something works and may want to test that out on a program. So I think again, clear communication upfront about the goals of an evaluation can help ensure that each party feels good about what is ultimately learned from the evaluation.

Also, while universities may be less costly, oftentimes research or evaluation firms have funding or can secure funding to evaluate programs that interest them and that align with their areas of study. A lot of times evaluation firms are working to build a body of evidence around a particular issue or an intervention so they may be interested in evaluating relevant programs and this is I think another reason that networking can be very valuable. Allison, so before we get into the specifics of program evaluation, I'd love to hear more of your thoughts on how SAA's can support programmatic evaluation.

Allison Badger:

Yeah. Absolutely. We've actually been talking about this a lot lately with the increase in SAA's supporting more grassroots organizations. So these smaller groups really love the idea of having their work evaluated. It gives them credibility, it allows them to have more sustainable options in the future. So we've been talking a lot about this particularly in our equity and public safety committee and the idea that an SAA could offer evaluation services to some of the programs they support is something that feels really exciting for both the subaward and for the SAA. Like a win-win. The subaward gets to prove their worth and the SAA gets to know that what they're supporting actually works. And so we have seen a lot of states do this with larger project. For example, Washington State recently did an evaluation of their multi-jurisdictional task forces and found it extremely helpful to understand the breadth and scope of work that's being done in those programs.

And so we really think it's a great idea for states to offer evaluation either through TTA training and technical assistance, maybe with your statistical analysis center or even funding specifically to support a

partner to do the evaluation. It could be a really great investment for the states to make that benefits both parties involved. And so we're talking a lot about this in our equity committee and we do plan to have some guidance around this. I think we'll probably talk about this a little bit later in the podcast just around making sure you're considering the equity components in evaluation, but it's really a really great idea for states to consider supporting this with their federal and state dollars.

Elisa Nicoletti:

Yeah. Thank you. That's super important. It's really resonating for me because oftentimes data collection and reporting efforts can be burdensome to program staff. And so for SAA's to consider providing resources to support these activities would just be tremendous. On a related note, if SAA's fund multiple programs that have similar goals, it would be useful to have these programs collect data on similar metrics so that they could eventually potentially be looked at together or comparatively.

Allison Badger:

That's a really good point because we do know a lot of states do have related project. So we've discussed the potential SAA role, but let's move into how programs can prepare for an evaluation because it can seem like a daunting task, so would you mind just diving into that a little bit?

Elisa Nicoletti:

Yeah. Sure. So first I think it's important that program leadership starts talking internally to staff about the evaluation before it happens. Some program staff will be involved in evaluation activities in one way or another, likely as part of data collection efforts, and they should really know what's going on so that they don't feel nervous or guarded. You don't want staff to hear about the evaluation for the first time when the researcher is asking them if they'd like to take part in an interview or when the researcher asked to talk to them about their management information system where the data's kept. So the evaluator can help and often the evaluator does try to help develop some communication that program leadership can then share with their staff to help explain the purpose and the goals of the evaluation along with prospective evaluation activities that may involve the staff. So I think it's always helpful to have a warm handoff from the program staff to the evaluator.

And then after a nice warm handoff, so to speak, the program works in partnership with the evaluator to support the data collection activities. And this is really where the bulk of the collaboration or the interaction happens. So depending on the evaluation plan, there might be quantitative data. That's data that's numerical. Or qualitative data, which is descriptive data. It can be observed and recorded, but it's not numerical, or there might be both. So if the evaluation plan included some quantitative data collection, the program should expect that someone from the evaluation team will meet with them to go over what data the program has, how it's collected, and by whom and how it's stored. And so then they'll make a plan for data sharing. The frequency, encryption, all of that stuff. And the evaluation team will work with the right staff to make sure that they understand what each of the variables capture.

So once the data is shared with the evaluation team, the team will likely do some preliminary data checks to see how complete the data are and flag anything that's off. This is an ongoing relationship. So it's rare for program to share its quantitative data with the evaluator, and then that's the end. Usually once the evaluation team starts combing through the data, they might see things that prompt additional questions or the need for additional clarification. And it's really important that that relationship has been set up between the program and the evaluator. The evaluator can go back and reengage with the

program staff to get clarification so that the evaluator can get it right. Everyone wants this to go well. Everyone wants it to be an accurate depiction of what's happening in the program.

If the evaluation involves qualitative data collection, the program can expect the evaluator to arrange some in-depth interviews or focus groups with the targeted group of people who are well positioned to share their experiences about the program. Depending on the focus of the evaluation, this could include program staff, whether it's leadership or line staff roles, program participants or other stakeholders. Sometimes potentially funders or other partners. These interviews and focus groups are typically recorded after everyone has consented to that, then they're transcribed. Evaluators transcribe them because it's incredibly useful to have that accurate record of what was said. But it also allows researchers to use data analysis software to help pull relevant themes out of these interviews. Sometimes there could be many, many, many interviews, and it's just a really nice way to have everything together and be able to code everything.

Observations are another source of data, and so observations can play a really meaningful role in certain situations. An evaluation plan might call for observations if the evaluators think that it could really help understand how an intervention works in practice instead of on paper. There could be times where you might observe a peer support group, things like that, that are harder to get at without seeing them. Another benefit of interviews and observations is that they often provide a richness and a context to the quantitative findings. So they can help fill in some gaps in knowledge. For example, if you're looking at a program that runs a cognitive behavioral therapy program and the quantitative data that's collected says that individuals in a group are regularly attending group but they're not progressing forward in the curriculum and the evaluator might wonder why this is happening. So sitting in on a group session might help illuminate what's going on. Perhaps you sit in on the group session and you realize, okay, so everyone is present and accounted for, which aligns with the quantitative data, but some people have their heads down or are not very engaged, so this could offer an explanation for why participants aren't moving forward in the curriculum as one might expect given their attendance. Surveys are also a tool for helping an evaluator understand how common an outcome or experience is, what the average is among participants as a whole.

Allison Badger:

I love what you said about the observations because one thing we have even thought about in our own internal training evaluation components has been how many folks drop off Zoom webinars halfway through or how many folks have their cameras on? And it's just really interesting to be able to feel a difference when everyone has their cameras on and they stay through the entire webinar versus just showing the number of participants that we had. Would you mind just telling about how long you think it prepares for an evaluation?

 Elisa Nicoletti:

Sure. So overall, the data collection process really varies depending on how much data are being collected and the nature of the evaluation. It really can be anywhere from a couple of months in a brief process study to multiple years in a study that involves really long follow-up timeframes. But the bulk of the interaction between the program staff and the evaluator will be during the data collection phase.

Allison Badger:

That's awesome. I think probably there are many programs out there that haven't been evaluated before or at least formally evaluated, and so they might want to know what to expect from the process

and the SAA's might want to know what to expect from the process so they can clearly communicate that with their programs. And so would you mind talking a little bit about that and how it might be confused with other processes such as monitoring or auditing?

Elisa Nicoletti:

Yeah. Certainly I can see how folks who haven't been through the process of an evaluation could be a little bit confused or unsure about what it's going to be like. So I tend to think of an evaluation as a genuine opportunity for learning with the goal of a better understanding of a particular intervention or a program. The goal isn't to find errors like an audit. Similarly, it's different than monitoring, so there might be some overlap in terms of data that's collected that you might use for monitoring or an audit. But the purpose or goal of an evaluation is very different. I think when we think of monitoring, it implies that if someone is looking for things that are right or things that are wrong, whereas for me, an evaluation really seeks to understand and unpack information without that judgment. Also, the products of an evaluation are different than those of an audit.

There's a wide range of deliverables that can stem from an evaluation. And again, these are meant to arrive at a deeper understanding of the program. And so the deliverables are directly connected to the type of the evaluation and the nature and extent of the data that's collected. Sometimes producing a logic model is sufficient to meet the program's needs. Other times showing is better than telling, and the evaluator could produce maybe a video showing how the program works. Sometimes a really robust and lengthy report that details all study components, methods, outcomes, recommendations is put together. Maybe a one-page summary of the key findings and recommendations is created. But the goal in an evaluation is for these products to be useful to the program.

Allison Badger:

I think that's a really great point because we often encourage states to look at models that have shown success and are evidence informed and thinking about examples. Specialty courts or problem solving courts have been evaluated to such a lengthy degree we know they work and so we feel good about supporting them. And with this growing body of new programmatic work in community violence intervention and wanting to understand how they work, why they work, what components are important, I think it's really, really a key point in our field. And along similar lines, not knowing the evaluation process I imagine can create some misconceptions about the role and the function and the experience of an evaluation. I'm sure you yourself as an evaluator has been on the receiving end of some of these misconceptions. So would you mind just talking about some of those that you have felt or seen or heard?

Elisa Nicoletti:

Yeah. Definitely. I think that really the biggest misconception that program staff have about evaluations is that somehow the evaluators are going to dig up dirt and they get a little bit nervous about this. It can make them feel really vulnerable. The truth is the people who run these programs care very deeply about their program and also about the individuals that their program serves. So they've invested a lot into these programs and really having an outsider, someone who's seen as an outsider come in and poke around can feel scary for them. Folks might worry that worst case scenario, if something negative is brought to light in the evaluation, it could really impact their funding. Maybe they would lose their funding and nobody wants to lose their program that they care so much about because of an evaluation.

In order to help calm the nerves of program leadership, there is some responsibility on the part of the evaluator here, and this is where the fit is really important.

I've heard from program leadership that they really prefer to work with evaluators that they feel get it. That they have a baseline understanding of the work that they do. They want these evaluators to be culturally competent in their space. And that can really help the organization build some trust with the evaluator. Another thing I'll add here is that I think that by agreeing to take part in an evaluation, a program is automatically demonstrating to funders that they are committed to being held accountable to running the best, most effective program that they can. They're showing this willingness to undergo a deep dive of learning and understanding about how their program is working. I think that funders should look at this willingness to be evaluated positively and not penalize programs by pulling the funding if the evaluation doesn't produce the expected outcomes. I'd argue actually that doing just the opposite would better serve everyone.

Evaluations can provide information on how to modify and improve the program, and implementing these modifications may require additional funding. So funders can offer support for the program to make these adjustments to strengthen the program and increase the likelihood of the program that are meeting its goals. Another misconception that I think folks have about evaluation is that it's going to be really intrusive and overly burdensome. And for sure there will be some program staff time dedicated to working with the evaluators, but a good evaluator will be really thoughtful and respectful with the staff's time and try hard to minimize interruptions to their work. I think it's helpful to reframe this concern in terms of the positives and evaluation can bring. It really is an opportunity and not a liability.

Allison Badger:

Everything you just said really, really resonates because we do this a lot in government. We use data to justify more funding all the time. And there is this growing sense that evaluation can be a weapon and particularly against smaller groups that don't have tons of staff. They don't have all the data needed. And so reframing this to seem as an opportunity is really great. And that brings me to our last discussion point, which is the importance of evaluation but not glossing over the fixation of how evaluations and the rigor of these evaluations can result in inequitable outcomes when it comes to grant funding, budgeting and administration. And I mentioned this earlier that we're talking a lot about this in our equity committee and how larger groups or government agencies, they have this data readily available. They have all of this at their fingertips to show. And so when they apply for funding, it looks wonderful on paper.

And so what programs we might be missing in particularly grassroots programs that really have been doing the work for years that are not regularly getting funding because we are hyper fixating on these evaluations language like best practice rather than evidence informed? I just think it's important that we end our conversation talking about that and why it's so important that we don't gloss over that and that SAA's and funders consider that when they use the language like evidence-based or when they consider whether or not to fund an evaluation for a smaller program.

 Elisa Nicoletti:

This is incredibly important when we think about equity and evaluation. You really made some good points. There definitely is this data resource paradox where programs feel that they need funds to go get good data, but they can't get the funds unless they already have good data. And so that's definitely a problem. In the most ideal situation, evaluation planning and the financial support is built into a program's development. They happen simultaneously. But this definitely does not happen all the time.

Because evaluation isn't always necessarily built into a program plan it's important that funders consider continuing supporting programs that are willing to put the lessons learned from an evaluation into practice in spite of these early evaluation findings. I think that taking a long view and having it be an iterative process can lead to developing really strong programs. But programs definitely need support to get there. They need support to build on data or to develop data systems so that they can start to accumulate some data. They just need support to do that.

The other thing that always comes up in evaluation is this issue of rigor. So I do think it's a common misconception that only the most rigorous evaluations are worthwhile and that evaluations aren't worth doing if it's not the most rigorous on the evaluation spectrum. The gold standard randomized control trial and these robust multi-site evaluations with significant follow-up periods produce massive value and they do contribute significantly to existing bodies of research across different areas. But to your point, they can be really costly and many small programs just do not have the funds or other supports that are required to take on that evaluation.

It's important to note that a lot can be learned from smaller, less costly evaluations like process or outcome studies. Also, it can be a little creative here. And for many programs I think it makes sense to think of program evaluation as something that can be done in stages, so it's less costly upfront. So maybe first you get an evaluator to come in and take a look at your MIS, your management information system, and they look at what data you're collecting so that they can make recommendations for what else to collect to set the program up for a more robust evaluation further down road. You can learn really useful things with just a quick look at a couple key measures. Like you can know if the program is getting the right target population or are they really providing the services they say they are. After that a second stage might be a process study that's more in depth to learn about participation and engagement. So a program really can build on that data collection as they go. Again, setting themselves up for a potentially larger evaluation down the road. And so this again is also where I'm going to plug the relationship building for the evaluator because it's just good to start working with them at an early stage. And again, evaluation firms may have funding or be able to get funding to do an evaluation. So programs setting themselves up with some relationships from the start could really be useful.

On this note for programs that don't have an evaluation component built in from the planning process, programs really shouldn't begin an evaluation until they're operating at a stable state and have some time to get the early implementation bugs sorted out. So there is this push for evaluation, but evaluating a program too soon is not helpful either. So it's just something for everyone to keep in the back of their mind that you really want to wait until a program is in a stable state before you start that evaluation. The other thing I want to say here about these very small programs is that oftentimes these programs really have fantastic qualitative information from their participants on their experiences in the program. In my experience, the people running the programs and the people experiencing the programs are the true experts. Hearing their experiences can really teach us a lot. And so finding a way to elevate those perspectives and to recognize the value in those perspectives even informally, is just really important and something that is doable for even a very small CBO with limited funding. So hearing the voices of the participants in the program and validating that, and believing that information and taking it for what it is that is valuable information.

That's my take on that. But I do think that if program funders are insisting on pushing stringent and rigorous evaluation requirements on programs, then there really should be sufficient financial support for them. Otherwise, we'll keep having this equity issue where the smaller nonprofits and CBOs that have historically been underfunded are going to continue to be left out of this space. And this could be in spite of them having some really beneficial programming. Ultimately the goal of evaluation is to figure

out what works so that we can share that knowledge and spread good practices. So in my opinion, it is in everyone's best interest to be as inclusive as possible in the range of programs large and small that can be evaluated. And often that just means providing support.

Allison Badger:

I love what you said there. The key point you said about having a stable state and making sure that the programs are operating in a stable state. We saw a lot of this have an impact when COVID hit and programs that were mid-evaluation or beginning evaluations and then COVID hit and everything changed and nothing was stable. And you just simply couldn't draw any conclusions from that because of that environment. And these programs need time. They need time to build the data, they need time to build the outcomes. And lastly, I'll just say, just to piggyback on what you mentioned, the people running the programs and the people in the programs are the experts and should be consulted regularly around determining what you're evaluating because what a state partner might think is important is maybe not the mission of the goals that this program seeks to accomplish. And so making sure that voice is at the table regularly from the beginning, helping to set those measures is just crucial.

This has been such a wonderful conversation and I hope our listeners have gotten a lot out of this. I want to just plug Elisa. Now we have her on staff, so we have staff expertise in this space. So if you are considering program evaluations, please, please reach out and thank you so much Elisa for this conversation. It was really, really wonderful. I learned a ton and keep listening to the podcast.

Elisa Nicoletti:

Oh my gosh. Thank you so much for having me, Allison. I had a great time chatting and yes, I'm happy to chat with anybody about this anytime. I do love the work. So thanks again for having me.