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Informing Policy on Volunteer Service through Agency-based Evaluations

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Informing Policy on Volunteer Service through Agency-based Evaluations

This working paper describes the evidence-based policy making process. We focus on what information is needed to inform policy development and decision-making on volunteer service and then how this information can be most effectively disseminated to policy makers, outlining a range of specific strategies. Existing volunteer service research is used as illustration. Implications are drawn for the capacity of agency staff to implement the research methods and strategies that are discussed.

Key words: *evaluation; evidence-based policy; civic service; volunteer service*

There are many potential outcomes of agency-based evaluations of volunteer service programs. Evaluation studies provide the opportunity for program administrators to meet funder expectations; learn how to strengthen programs and improve services; and demonstrate that service programs yield positive outcomes. In this paper, we consider how evaluation studies can be used in an evidence-based policy process to best shape policy on behalf of volunteer programs. There is a growing movement toward evidence-based policy making in this country and around the world. Evidence-based policy is an approach the puts the best available evidence at the center of policy discussions. This is in contrast to opinion-based policy that relies on untested views of people (Segone, 2007; Nutley, Walter, & Davies, 2007).

It is important to acknowledge that there is not enough good evidence to support a solely evidence-based approach and even if there were, the judgments and opinions of the policy-makers will always be important. The process of conducting scientifically-based evaluation and the process of making policy are quite different (Dodson, Brownson, & Weiss, 2012). If we think of research and evaluation as neutral in tone, it is important to remember that policy-making is not. Policy-making is personal – in as much as a negative experience may counteract a compelling data-driven positive argument. Policy-making is emotional – an impassioned constituent voice may outstrip expert voice (Fitch, 2010). Policy-making is situational – an inopportune fiscal and/or social climate may close off attention to compelling data (Vance, 2009). And policy-making is political – this is not a dirty word; it is a fact of life. Therefore, at this point in time, an evidence-<u>informed</u> process may be the most appropriate goal for agencies hoping to introduce evidence into the policy process.

Clearly, informing the policy process with agency-based evaluation is not easy. Even the best executed studies with the most compelling findings may fail to enter into the decision-making process for all the reasons noted above. In this paper, we offer ideas about how volunteer service program staff can maximize the chances of evaluation data being used in the policy process. We answer the following questions: What information is needed to guide policy development and decision-making around volunteer service, and how can this information be disseminated most effectively to policy-makers?

What information is needed to guide policy development and decision-making around volunteer service?

We embrace a broad conception of evidence, including both qualitative and quantitative data. From case examples to experimental, longitudinal evidence, all can be useful to the policy development and decision-making process, though perhaps in different ways. The policy process is marked by phases (Segone, 2008). In each of these phases, particular questions, designs, and methods are applicable.

Identify a policy issue. Data can identify issues that might be addressed through a policy intervention. For example, emerging data in the late 1990s documented the increasing number of older adults entering retirement and the increasing trend toward volunteering (see for example, the reports of the Independent Sector). At the same time, program evaluations were documenting the possible effects that volunteerism could have on older adults. Studies suggested that volunteerism might promote physical activity, reduce depressive symptomology, and create new social networks. Data from agencies like OASIS (Morrow-Howell, Kinnevy, & Mann, 1999) and Experience Corps (Fried, Carlson, Freedman, et al., 2004) made the case that older adults could meet the person-power needs of non-profit organizations while experiencing positive effects on their well-being. Thus, a compelling policy issue—the engagement of the increasing number of retired adults for the benefit of society as well as themselves—was identified. How can national and community volunteer opportunities be increased for this population?

Inform effective policy approaches. Descriptive data again pointed to models that might most effectively engage older adults. Programs like Environmental Alliance for Senior Involvement, Family Friends, and Hope Meadow offered non-profit models for involving older adults in programs aimed at pressing community problems. Descriptive data also documented public models like Foster Grandparents and Senior Companion. In preparation for the 2005 White House Conference on Aging, there was a series of "town hall" meetings on the potential of volunteering by older adults (Morrow-Howell, 2006). Program models and their potential were shared with public officials and White House conference delegates. The process leading up to the Kennedy Serve America Act also utilized a similar data gathering and "town hall" approach to solicit input on older adult volunteers. Testimonies were provided by agency staff and volunteers, describing program models and outcomes experienced. These activities contributed to major initiatives in late-life volunteering being included in the Serve America Act.

Monitor policy implementation. The shift in program evaluation to performance measurement and management has helped to monitor the implementation of policies. More nonprofits have established implementation studies to track who is involved in their programs, both as service providers (volunteers) and service recipients and what those individuals do in the programs. The logic model and reporting process required by the Corporation for National and Community Service has helped to institutionalize this process for grantees. While these sorts of implementation studies are often seen as requirements of funders, collectively they inform whether a given policy strategy is being implemented as planned and if not, why not.

Most data collected by agencies falls into this category of monitoring implementation. Most agencies not only keep track of the numbers of service hours or clients served but they also monitor the extent to which volunteers and clients are satisfied or the extent to which expectations are met.

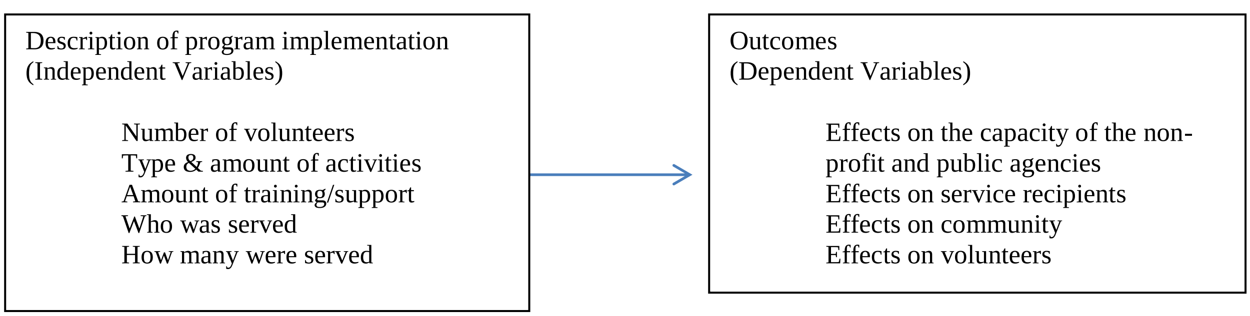
For example, in a national evaluation of Experience Corps, data was collected from sites around the country regarding the volunteers' experience with the students and the teachers and the extent to which they felt adequately trained and supported in their work (see Research Briefs on Experience Corps posted by the Center for Social Development, Washington University).

Moreover, documentation of what is actually implemented is a necessary prerequisite for any impact study. No outcomes can be assessed until we know *what* is being implemented, at what level, and by and for whom. In the language of social science, this information operationalizes the independent variable—volunteer service—without which, no lines to anticipated outcomes (dependent variables) can be drawn.

Assess policy outcomes. From the implementation evaluation, the groundwork to assess policy outcomes is laid. This essential step in the policy decision-making process informs whether the policy had the intended effects. The effects can be viewed from multiple stakeholder perspectives: the funder including government, foundations, or individuals; the organization as the host; the volunteers as the agent of change; and the individuals or larger community with whom the volunteers worked. The effects can be studied through a range of designs and methods. Data collected on Experience Corps through a pre-posttest design has demonstrated that the program is effective in improving reading skills of students and that the volunteers experience positive gains in their own well-being (Lee, Morrow-Howell, Jonson-Reid, McCrary, & Spitznagel, 2010; Hong & Morrow-Howell, 2010).

Figure 1 demonstrates the importance of implementation data in assessing policy outcomes. Both types of information are critical to the evidence-based policy process.

Figure 1. Information about program implementation and program outcomes that informs the evidence-based policy process.



How can this information be disseminated most effectively to policy makers?

It is often not easy to get information from agency evaluations into the policy discussion. In fact, most evidence produced by volunteer service agencies has likely not made it into policy discussion. It takes effort on the part of the agency to cultivate the relationships, develop the products, and look for the opportunities to get evaluation findings into the policy discussion.

The question of timing. One of the challenges to the utilization of evaluation data is timing (Segone, 2008; Dobson et al., 2012). An agency usually undertakes an evaluation for its own purposes on its own schedule, and this process may not be in sync with the current interests or timing of the policy discussions. Even the strongest and most convincing evaluation data may be irrelevant in certain social or fiscal environments. This means that the agency must stay in tune with policy processes through vigilance --- in terms of being aware of current debates and legislative actions and being ready to take advantage of opportunities that arise. Often, it means that agencies may need to use their data to introduce an issue or idea and make an argument as to its importance (this relates to the first use of evaluation discussed above: identify a policy issue.) Finally, an agency can be responsive to a request from a policy-maker seeking information to understand an issue or make a case. Often the agency does not have the exact data to satisfy the request or potentially does not have data that are respected by policy makers. However, past experiences or existing studies in the literature can be utilized to construct an argument that may be useful to the policy-maker. The goal is to be as responsive as possible to such requests.

The importance of on-going relationships with policy makers. In all cases, no matter what the circumstances, one of the keys to successfully introducing evaluation data into policy discussion is having established relationships with the potential users of the evaluation data. Thus, agency staff must identify, get to know, and stay in touch with potential users of evaluation data.

This raises the question: *Who* can use agency-based information on volunteer service programs to shape policy? With *whom* should an agency develop relationships? *Who* is the target of agency efforts to inform policy? The list can be long, but figuring out this list is worthwhile. Key entities and people must be identified so that on-going relationships can be established and cultivated. The list includes both the legislative (US Congress, state legislatures and local city/county councils) and the executive branch (agencies, divisions, and departments). This is complicated further by the fact that divisions and departments of government each have their own cultures and set of practices. Making legislative policy is different from making administrative policy. Agency staff must have a good knowledge and understanding of their key policy partners and their inner workings in both areas.

The relationships developed must be mutually beneficial, and they must be nurtured. Agency staff members can do this through expressing interest in the wider agenda of the policy makers, going to their events, inviting them to agency events, sharing newsletters, getting to know key staff, etc. In sum, there must be ongoing interaction between those evaluators producing the evidence and policy-makers using the evidence (Nutley et al, 2007).

Agencies can also consider an on-going relationship with an academic institution as part of their policy-informing process. Agency-academy partnerships can be fruitful, especially when the relationship is experienced as mutually beneficial. Agency personnel can benefit from the expertise of academics in evaluation and report-writing and academics can benefit from publishing reports of evaluation processes and outcomes that are based on real-world agency experiences. In terms of the policy process, an academic partner can provide the authority of an independent evaluator and boost the reputability of evaluation data. However, the agency must remain closely involved in the evaluation process and retain ownership and agency staff members must be involved in taking the data to the policy-makers.

Getting evaluation data into the policy process. As the prior section suggests, relationships are the firm foundation for communicating any kind of information; but the information needs to be presented in the most useful way (Dobson, Brownson, & Weiss, 2012). Present evidence shows that only about a quarter of materials that get into policy-makers hands is actually thoroughly read. Thus, information must be presented very purposively. Presentations that are useful to policy-makers share several characteristics.

- It is <u>short.</u> This is in direct contrast with most evaluation studies. Footnotes, references, limitations of studies, detailed high-level statistical measures, etc. should be minimal in any information to policy-makers.

- It is <u>true</u>. The necessity of being brief does not take away the need to be absolutely scrupulous about data presentation. Whatever is presented in summary form must be easily relatable to the details of citations, notes, sources, etc.

- It is <u>concise</u>. Headings and bullets that enable scanning are helpful. Findings should be highlighted in some way to draw the eye.

- It is <u>visual</u>. Photographs, simple charts and graphs that illustrate evaluation findings are often valuable substitutes for narrative.

- It is <u>local.</u> Fitch (2010, p.) writes: "How do you influence legislators who don't represent you? You don't". Data applying to constituents is essential.

- It involves <u>stories.</u> A two-sentence anecdote about a volunteer who has made a difference in a community is more likely to be quoted by the policy-maker than the specifics of evaluation data.

Information can be presented in a variety of formats. The vehicles created for policy-makers to use are many and varied. With the above characteristics in mind, they can take many forms.

- <u>Fact Sheets</u> – These are best kept to one-page and are often bulleted. They are useful to engage the policy-maker's interest. They should always include contact information for staff follow-up if the policy-maker wants to know more.

- <u>Executive Summaries</u> – Evaluation reports will often have this kind of section as a matter of course. If it is short and readable, there is no need to reinvent it and the credibility of its actually being part of a report adds value.

- <u>Policy Briefs</u> – These documents are one to four pages in length and generally call for an action on the part of the policy-maker. Requested actions can include, among others, voting in a particular way, co-sponsoring legislation making certain changes in existing legislation.

- <u>Working Papers</u> – Generally longer and more detailed than policy briefs, these may be useful as follow-ups to fact sheets.

- Full Reports – At various levels of the process and depending on the goal, full evaluation reports are appropriate. All the prior points on data presentation apply, especially making the data and key points visual and clear.

Contact with policy-makers may be electronic or person-to-person. Regular mail is no longer ideal for communication with Congress due to security measures that delay it, but it can be used selectively with other policy-makers. When person-to-person contact is possible, information is best delivered by a constituent with personal involvement in the program who is articulate and can be well-schooled in evaluation data.

- Volunteers working in service programs and/or beneficiaries of the volunteers' work (e.g., youth who are taught, seniors who receive meals) who live in the district of the policy-maker's jurisdiction are ideally suited to take this on. There is a role for evaluators in hearings and briefings, but they are seldom the best first communicators.

- Program board members can also be very effective spokespersons. Continuing to apply the constituent criterion, these individuals, who also share a personal stake in volunteering, may have the advantage of also being community leaders, perhaps involved in business. They may know the policy-maker and may fit Fitch's 2010 definition of "knowledgeable acquaintances," who often are carefully listened to by policy-makers (p. 27).

- The only downside of program staff being the messengers of research findings is that they can be perceived as self-interested. In spite of this, if they also are constituents or can relate data specifically to the policy-maker's area of jurisdiction, their wealth of day-to-day knowledge and illustrative stories can be invaluable.

Whoever delivers testimony using evaluation data, it is critical that these spokespersons be well trained and rehearsed. They must know, in at least general terms, the evaluation questions, the methodology to gather the data and why it was chosen, and the findings. There is a natural tension to make the most of the findings to put the program in the most favorable light possible. At the same time, it is absolutely critical to stay true to the findings. Spokespersons should be aware of this tension and coached not to misuse or misinterpret the data. On the other hand, their greatest value may be to bring genuine passion and commitment to their testimony. It is often wise to have the persons most familiar with the methodology and evaluation available at the meeting or hearing to answer technical questions that may arise.

There are several other things to consider in disseminating evaluation data to policy-makers. First, remember that for every view that a policy-maker hears, she/he also hears opposing views. Those opposing views may also have data to support them. Familiarity with these alternative ways of thinking is important and interactions with policy-makers should assume that the policy-maker is aware of them and may be sympathetic to them. Preparation for interaction can be strengthened by thinking about how to present evaluation material in ways that highlight contrasts and give the policy-maker reasons to value what is being presented, without belittling those with other points of view.

Second, consider natural allies with who joint efforts can be established. While an agency may wish for a solo performance, a town meeting on the subject of older volunteers as community resources can include reports on more than one program. Policy-makers invited to respond at such gatherings will learn about a variety of programs that may complement each other. They may also see the process of collaboration among agencies as a positive in itself and transfer that positive feeling to the participants.

Third, learn to "map your economic and political footprint" (Fitch, 2010). Given the importance of constituent tie-in, it is useful to know where volunteers, beneficiaries, board and staff members live, work and spend money and who represents them in both areas. It is often possible to put together a much stronger case by broadening who can be legitimately defined as constituent.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the world of agency-based evaluation has changed dramatically in the last 20 years. Collecting and managing information about social issues, program implementation, and outcomes attained is near standard. Utilizing that information to inform the policy development and decision-making process is the next phase of evolution. The quality and utility of that information provides evidence upon which to identify potential policy issues, to select approaches to those issues, and then monitor how those issues are affected by those approaches after implementation. However, the manner in which that information is conveyed must reflect the political process and context for decision-making. This paper identifies a number of strategies to enhance the chances of use and impact of agency-based evaluations. It is worthy of note that the ability to collect quality information or to influence an evidence-based policy process is based on agency capacity. Staff must be trained in both evaluation and policy processes in order to successfully inform policy.

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