

Original Article

Evaluation Proposal: Nonprofits Serving Autism Communities

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ABSTRACT

This proposal reimagines peer review and performance audit processes through a counseling-informed and culturally responsive lens. While grounded in established evaluative methodologies, including the logic model, government performance criteria, and organization behavior, this proposal integrates relational dynamics and cultural context into nonprofit organizational oversight. The project integrates narrative inquiry and thematic analysis to assess nonprofit capacities, social justice engagement and service delivery for marginalized populations. By embedding culturally attuned protocols, the proposal advances participatory accountability and ethical responsiveness for community service. The proposed peer review can be an instrument of transformation when rooted in counseling insights for both organizational compliance and care of their constituents.

INTRODUCTION

The U.S. Government Accountability Office (GAO) defines program evaluations as a systemic inquiry conducted per schedule or other determination to assess how well a program is meeting its objectives, and reasons for success or shortcomings. The GAO assigns program measurements to establish a program's accomplishments and progress meeting its pre-established goals. The Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) advises that evaluations entail a systemic investigation of merit or significance of programs. The CDC regards program evaluations as an essential component of community health and developmental integrity.

The logic model serves as a useful tool to evaluate organizational actions and outcomes [1,2]. The model requires a theory of change and an understanding about linkages with resources, activities and outcomes. A unique component of the logic model is expected production from: resources (staff, funding, equipment inputs); activities (e.g., training and delivery of services); outputs (materials and number of participants services), and outcomes (e.g., expected benefits - short and long-term) [3].

Additionally, performance audits and program evaluations have been shining achievement for the U.S. Government Accountability Office (GAO), which expanded its oversight to include program evaluations since the 1970s. These evaluations assess government and nongovernment programs and operations for 1. Economy and efficiency; 2. Cost savings and possible areas of fraud or waste; 3. Compliance with laws and regulations; and to recommend management and/or program improvements [4].

Finally, counseling standards and techniques should inform nonprofit leaders whether their programs and operations are culturally responsive and aligned with neurodiverse-affirming principles. The evaluation should include competencies to examine institutional barriers and deficit-model approaches that have excluded the autistic community from advancements. These assessments might identify institutional norms that restrict reasonable accommodations [5], or pedagogies and training applications

that fail the inclusion and promotion of neurodiverse youth [6].

Organization Focus

This program evaluation proposal is specifically directed towards nonprofit organizations which provide services for autism populations in Maryland (MD). Some nonprofit organizations have achieved attention for their contribution from groups such as Great Nonprofits (GNP). The GNP platform allows the public to both share their experiences with exemplary organizations and shape perceptions about where investors can share their time, talents, and resources. In this pursuit, nonprofit organizations can showcase their mission and community efforts for neurodiverse individuals.

Recognition from Great Nonprofits should reflect public records that disclose specifications about their efficiencies and effectiveness. In this context, nonprofit record-keeping practices should include formal feedback on client and community satisfaction or dissatisfaction. This proposed evaluation provides information on conducting a program evaluation for nonprofit organizations engaging in providing support to the autism community. In this regard, the audit or peer review will assess the client's overall impact, identify systemic weaknesses in internal operations and programs; and provide recommendations to improve community outreach initiatives. This program evaluation will provide accountability to the organization's staff and stakeholders and provide actionable recommendations to enhance performance and transparency. Fundamental goals of the evaluation are to:

- Assess the nonprofit's impact and outreach efforts
- Identify internal control gaps and operational weaknesses
- Improve community engagement, particularly with autistic individuals, caregivers, educators, police and first responders
- Develop accountability mechanisms for stakeholders and the community.

Program Overview

Who are the 501c(3) nonprofit organizations that might be peer-reviewed or receive a local audit? How might the entity be organized? What essential documents are required to establish internal procedures, mission and functions. Participants will be invited to complete the *Nonprofit Capacities Instrument* [7], for a self-assessment of the organization's strengths and areas to build capacity. This validated tool assesses organizational strengths and capacity-building needs across key domains such as leadership, resource development, stakeholder engagement, and strategic planning. This assessment offers a data-informed foundation for future growth options and funding applications.

Stakeholders

The CDC advises that program evaluations cannot be conducted away from or without consideration of stakeholder input. These individuals may have something to gain or lose from services provided by organizations. This program evaluation team will interview key stakeholders, such as the leadership, staff, Board of Directors and clients. A strategic component of program evaluations are the people served and/or affected by the nonprofit's programs. These individuals are often the intended beneficiaries of the organization's efforts, especially autistic community members and their families. Another group of significant stakeholders constitute caregivers, educators, volunteers, local police, donors and community partners.

Evaluation Team: Composition and Competencies

Government standards for audits and evaluation state that persons assigned to perform such duties should collectively embrace competence for the required tasks (GAO, 2003). Nonprofits provide specific services for autism spectrum disorder individuals, a vulnerable and often marginalized population. DSM-5 states that autism is characterized by impaired or abnormal progression in communication and social contact with others [8]. Symptoms of autism can range from being nonverbal, having delayed speech responses, erratic body motions, to unusual social skills [8]. Given the complexity of ASD and the vulnerability of the population served, the evaluation will be selected based upon the following qualifications and competencies:

- Subject matter expert on the complexities of autism spectrum disorder in public and social settings. These qualities are found in various professional disciplines, e.g., counseling, psychology, social work, and special education.
- Community representatives who can speak to the lived experiences or advocate for members of the ASD community (e.g., caregivers and family members).
- Auditor, evaluator, or financial specialist who are familiar with nonprofit governance and program evaluation methodologies.
- Cultural competencies, including bilingual capabilities, which might be needed depending on family, community and social nuances within Maryland neighborhoods.

ASD is characterized by differences in communication, social interactions, and behavioral patterns, which may include nonverbal expression, delayed speech, repetitive movements, and atypical social engagement. [8,9]. Evaluators must be trained to interpret these traits and behaviors with neurodiversity-affirming contexts and avoid deficit-based assumptions and practices.

The evaluator-in-charge will ensure that team members have experience of working with nonprofit organizations. The evaluation team will have quantitative and statical competencies to employ sampling, administer surveys, and analyze data, as needed.

Data Collection and Assessment Methods

The evaluation will employ both formative and summative approaches

to assess the effectiveness of nonprofit programs serving the autistic and neurodiverse communities. Formative evaluations will support ongoing improvement efforts during various phases of initiative, while summative probes will assess outcomes and impacts at designed intervals. Collection methods will include surveys and questionnaires; semi-structured interviews and focus groups; observations; document reviews and analysis of reports, correspondence, and training materials. Special attention will be placed on identify a nonprofit organization's protocols and procedures through determining the following.

- **Prior Audits, Peer Reviews, or Evaluations:** Public records will indicate whether the organization received an independent evaluation or audit [10].
- **Criteria to Evaluate Impact: Criteria to assess impact will include:** the number of community residents impacted by the nonprofit annually; number of police, first responders, educators, and community members trained annually; number of autism people enrolled in programs; community events and conferences where the nonprofit disseminates information about autism or its outreach efforts; gifts, awards, and contributions received annually.
- **Standards of Performance Success:** Instruments that can evaluate a nonprofits success include surveys, questionnaires, feedback, and other tools to measure the achievement of program goals and objectives. For example, surveys might yield information that fewer ASD individuals had negative encounters with police. Identifying data might be included in the number of autistic people that were handcuffed or the use of force by police responding to service calls.

Data Management: Evaluation Inquires & Internal Controls

The evaluation will include planning strategies to determine and assess the organization's internal controls, i.e., day-to-day procedures that ensure accountability of services. GAO defines internal controls as the processes and procedures used by a nonprofit to ensure the integrity of its operations. Internal controls are often assessed to ensure the organization is following local laws and regulations. Internal controls are also areas where evaluators can detect management shortcomings and areas for improving operations (GAO, 2024). Initial interviews found: 1. No formal feedback systems or tools to determine efficiency or effectiveness, e.g. surveys or training evaluations; 2. No prior independent reviews or audits; and 3. No systems to capture client satisfaction or outreach feasibility.

Probable recommendation for these operational deficiencies: 1. Develop or incorporate standardized reporting instruments; 2. Schedule routine internal and external assessments; and 3. Increase transparency of operations, e.g., community meetings, stakeholder engagement, and outreach awareness.

Logic Model and Sample Questions

The logic model serves as a useful tool to evaluate organizational actions and outcomes [1,2]. The model offers an understanding of change theories and linkages with resources, activities and outcomes. A unique component of the logic model is expected production from: resources (staff, funding, equipment inputs); activities (e.g., training and delivery of services); outputs (materials and number of participants services), and outcomes (e.g., expected benefits - short and long-term) [3]. Sample questions and logic:

1. What were the projected costs for staffing, training, technology, and physical space?
[Logic: Initial planning efforts and indicators of hidden or underestimated costs to operate.]
What efforts are directed toward funding sources (grants, donations, public contracts) and sustainability?
[Short- and long-term viability and stakeholder buy-in considerations]
2. How does the organization assess and adapt its outreach strategies to

ensure engagement with schools, emergency responders, law enforcement and neurodiverse communities?

[Logic: To evaluate responsiveness and intentionality of outreach]

3. What mechanisms exist for determining client needs and internal protocols; describe processes to incorporate feedback from staff, volunteers, and community stakeholders and amend operations?

[Logic: Evaluate whether the organization structure supports iterative and participatory governance.]

4. What planning efforts were devoted to responsive delivery of service for Black and Latino ASD Clients?

[Logic: Considerations of organizational staffing in providing input internally and program development for clients, as well as, historic systemic barriers, language access, and efficient outreach.]

5. What systems are in place to collect, analyze, and respond to feedback from educators, first responders, and community members?

[Logic: Centers internal controls for responsive feedback and accountability while probing the integrity of record keeping and data transparency.]

All evaluation/audit findings and recommendations will be discussed, and comments will be included in the final report. The evaluation of this organization should occur in regular intervals to assess its progress meeting objectives and goals, as well as adhering to open recommendations. The evaluation can also be used to acquiring (future) grants, and fulfill state and federal nonprofit organization laws, regulations and requirements.

GAO standards recommend tests of alleged evidence to ensure sufficiency and relevance for evaluation findings and recommendations. These tests should at a minimum assess the methods of data collection, relevance of information obtained, e.g., to the organization's mission and outreach, sources and dates of evidence. Other matters of importance:

- Verifiable data?
- Can the evidence be measured?
- Can surveys or instruments to gather data assess limitations?

The outcomes of these questions and tests become the dissemination of reporting, strategic plans, operational and administrative training, as well as public website disclosures.

Counseling Concepts & Cultural Underpinnings

The integration of counseling, ethics and cultural competencies is essential when evaluating programs that serve neurodivergent populations. The Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP, 2009) outlines standards that promote advocacy, equity, and systemic change. These competencies are particularly relevant when addressing institutional barriers that affect autistic individual livelihood. Further, the American Disabilities Act (ADA) (1990) mandates reasonable accommodations and protections for individuals with neurological and intellectual disabilities in schools, places of employment, and areas accessed by the general public [5]. However, to date, autistic individuals continue to face disproportionate harm in schools, workplaces, and public encounters [11].

The following standards provide a framework for evaluating whether nonprofits are culturally responsive and aligned with neurodiverse-affirming considerations. These principles are derived from CACREP standards: 1.: Understanding the role of the nonprofit organization to advocate for neurodiversity through eliminating institutional barriers (2.F.2.c); 2. Understanding the dynamics of power and privilege in neurodiverse relationships (2.F.2.e): 3. Develop strategies to advocate for people with neurological and intellectual disabilities (2.F.3.h): and 4. Promote client understanding of accommodations and access to community-based resources (2.F.5.k).

Auditing Nonprofits Serving Marginalized Communities

Statistically, people on the autism spectrum are more likely than the general public to have adverse contact with the police [12,13], estimated that negative law enforcement experiences are 7 times more probable for autistics than their non-autistic counterparts. [14], offered that ASD persons may also be victimized by police because of odd movements or unorthodox social conduct. [15], proposed that ASD individuals are at their greatest risk of being targeted by police when they are triggered or disrupted by changes in their routines. Flashing lights and/or sirens on police cars may send someone on the spectrum to alter their direction or become dysregulated [12]. Consequently, these types of behaviors can be perceived as suspicious or criminal by the police [12].

Evaluators should ensure that nonprofit interactions include questions about police engagement, and community safety in their racial, ethnic, and linguistic identities. Consider theoretical frameworks that encompass how race, neurodiversity and disabilities intersect in the organization's service delivery models [16]. Finally, evaluators should encourage culturally grounded communication, with cultural humility when obtaining comments and feedback from clients regarding their interactions in schools, workplace, police and in public spaces. [16], conducted a study demonstrating Black children targeted by law enforcement officials. In a sample of 13 Black parents, who were raising at least one autistic teenager, the researchers found that all the autistic children had prior interactions with police. Further, the majority (12 of 13) of the parents feared future law enforcement encounters with their teens [16]. This research and its findings provide justification for nonprofit organizations to include social justice strategies in their community awareness efforts, especially police training in recognizing and approaching ASD individuals [17-32].

Conclusion

Nonprofit organizations serving autistic and neurodiverse communities must embody all the fundamental leadership, internal controls, and accountability standards required for successful operations, as well as understanding, commitment, and cultural responsiveness to a unique client-base. The later qualities demonstrate dedication to transformative change. Without formal evaluative processes, such as peer reviews and performance audits, organizations risk operating without strategic insights for the marginalized population you serve. These organization qualities will also ensure validation needed to sustain and expand, in alignment with community needs.

Peer reviews and performance audits offer critical benefits for operational strengths and refinements in internal controls for sustainability. These processes also enhance transparency, build stakeholders and community engagement, while positioning the organization to secure future funding and garner public trust and accountability. Leadership and staff should receive ongoing training to address operational needs and enhance awareness of public perceptions and institutional barriers that occupy ableism-cultural biases. Training should sensitize staff to forces to resist inclusion of the neurodiverse community in schools, workplaces, and public systems. Finally, peer reviews and performance should be scheduled on a regular basis and embrace the opportunity to become better stewards in all areas of its mission and functions. By embedding culturally-attuned practices into evaluative protocols, this proposal advances participatory accountability for the ASD community.

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