Evaluation and Practice

Advocacy Evaluation: Challenges and Emerging Trends

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Devising, promoting, and implementing changes in policies and regulations are important components of population-level health promotion. Whether advocating for changes in school meal nutrition standards or restrictions on secondhand smoke, policy change can create environments conducive to healthier choices. Such policy changes often result from complex advocacy efforts that do not lend themselves to traditional evaluation approaches. In a challenging fiscal environment, allocating scarce resources to policy advocacy may be particularly difficult. A well-designed evaluation that moves beyond inventorying advocacy activities can help make the case for funding advocacy and policy change efforts. Although it is one thing to catalog meetings held, position papers drafted, and pamphlets distributed, it is quite another to demonstrate that these outputs resulted in useful policy change outcomes. This is where the emerging field of advocacy evaluation fits in by assessing (among other things) strategic learning, capacity building, and community organizing. Based on recent developments, this article highlights several challenges advocacy evaluators are currently facing and provides new resources for addressing them.

Keywords: *advocacy; evaluation design; public health laws/policies*

➤ INTRODUCTION

Devising, promoting, and implementing changes in policies and regulations are important components of population-level health promotion. Whether advocating for changes in school meal nutrition standards or restrictions on secondhand smoke, policy change can create environments conducive to healthier choices. Such policy changes often result from complex advocacy efforts that do not lend themselves to traditional evaluation approaches (Fagen, Reed, Williams Kaye, & Jack, 2009). Thus, it is important for health promotion practitioners to understand state-of-the-art approaches in the emergent and quickly developing advocacy evaluation field. To build this understanding, we are

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joined by a current cochair of the American Evaluation Association's (AEA's) Advocacy and Policy Change Topical Interest Group (TIG), David Devlin-Foltz, and his predecessor, Ehren Reed. Together, we highlight several challenges that advocacy evaluators are facing and provide new resources for addressing them.

The tools traditionally used to evaluate health promotion programs are often not appropriate for assessing the impact of policy advocacy. They lack the flexibility that advocates need when responding to fast-moving changes in the policy climate, and a misplaced emphasis on inventorying outputs rather than assessing outcomes could mean that actual success is overlooked. For example, evaluation of health promotion service delivery may appropriately rely on measures such as vaccinations given, clinic visits recorded, or presentations delivered. However, counting outputs such as visits to policy makers or fact sheets mailed is necessary, but not sufficient, to understand the potential impact of an advocacy effort. These measures may tell us little about the advocate's influence on the policy maker's attitudes and actions.

Moreover, policy change processes rarely, if ever, go as predicted. A key policy maker champion may lose his or her position or be embroiled in scandal, or a change in the economic climate may suddenly mean that a funding request becomes unrealistic. Conversely, a news report—for example, about new diabetes prevalence figures—can propel a legislative proposal into the headlines and make its passage possible. Advocates (and their supervisors, boards, and funders) need to be willing and able to respond quickly. Rigid logic models and work plans—though often useful in evaluating other kinds of initiatives—can hinder advocacy evaluation and limit the effectiveness of the advocacy efforts themselves.

Advocacy evaluation emerged in response to these gaps between traditional evaluation approaches and the particular assessment strategies necessary for meaningfully evaluating policy change efforts. The AEA Advocacy and Policy Change TIG was launched in 2007 and has already attracted nearly 800 members. A week of posts on the AEA's January 2012 aea365 blog demonstrated the diversity of the field and the challenges still ahead (AEA, 2012). The following are highlights of these challenges and early lessons learned.

► CHALLENGES AND EARLY LESSONS LEARNED

Strategic Learning Requires Trust

Advocacy evaluation works best when approached from a learning perspective. That is, evaluators and advocates should share an understanding that advocacy is complex and usually unpredictable. As such, evaluation should be seen as an ongoing process aimed at adjusting strategy. This approach requires collaboration—and trust—among evaluators, advocates, supervisors, boards, and funders—ideally from the project's beginning. Such a strategic learning focus requires a willingness to reexamine assumptions and alter strategy, objectives, and benchmarks along the way. Advocates and evaluators can learn together about what works and what does not. With trust in place, advocates are more likely to tell their supervisors or funders when things go differently than expected.

Learning Together Can Mean Evaluating "Developmentally"

In a recent departmental article (Fagen et al., 2011), we provided an overview of developmental evaluation that emphasized (a) tight integration between evaluators and program staff, (b) data use for continuous program improvement, and (c) the need for strategic and methodological flexibility in advocacy evaluations. We discussed an example from the Illinois Caucus for Adolescent Health's (http://www.icah.org/) evaluation of its school board sexuality education policy change project, where the evaluation team conducted frequent check-ins with program staff to enable strategy adjustments. Noted evaluator Michael Quinn Patton used the term *developmental evaluation* first in 1994, but the surging interest in advocacy evaluation makes this approach more relevant than ever (Patton, 2011).

Developmental evaluation is particularly valuable when applied to changing field conditions, which often characterize advocacy efforts. Rapid changes in the funding available for some health interventions, or in their political acceptability, can—and should—drive changes in advocacy strategy and therefore in evaluation techniques. For example, the Aspen Institute's recent evaluation of advocacy for increased access to family planning in Tanzania has adjusted its indicators to align with a new focus on district-level policy changes as a result of shifts in the Tanzanian federal government's budget and policies.

Define Meaningful, Measurable, and Manageable Benchmarks

Planning carefully and tracking change along the way is the purpose of traditional evaluation logic models. But logic models can give the false impression that advocacy proceeds along a linear and logical track. Advocates know better. Short- and medium-term objectives can help advocates determine if they are on the

right track and make adjustments when events take unexpected turns. However, advocates sometimes forget to distinguish between what can be measured and what is worth measuring. Tracking the number of meetings with a health official or legislative staff is necessary but not sufficient to tell us that we are persuading anyone to create positive policy changes. When evaluators look at proposed measurable objectives, they must ask themselves and their clients the "so what?" question. That is, Will achieving this objective tell us something we really need to know?

Assess Advocacy Capacity as Well as Policy Impact

Policy change is unpredictable and sometimes outside the control of even the most powerful and persuasive advocacy efforts. But advocates can control and assess their progress in building internal capacity to influence change. For example, advocates can measure (a) the number of constituents who act on requests to contact a key policy maker or (b) the number of times key policy makers return phone calls or actively seek the advocate's counsel. Although advocacy capacity is only a means to a policy end, it is measurable, within the advocate's control, and it matters. Klugman (2011) reminds funders as well as advocates that fully implementing and protecting a policy change can require building long-term capacity:

> A policy win can be overturned and needs vigilant monitoring and advocacy for implementation. This means that funding and organizing advocacy should seldom be undertaken as a short-term proposition. It also suggests that the building and maintenance of organizational and leadership capacity is as important as any other of the outcome categories in enabling success. (p. 146)

Track Contribution, Not Attribution

Because of the complexity of advocacy and policy change efforts, it is rarely possible to attribute change to one specific actor. Seeking to do so will usually lead to an inaccurate conclusion. Perhaps worse, it can undermine the advocacy goal. Why? If only one group in a coalition gets the credit for a policy win, everyone will claim it. That can erode harmony within a coalition. Health promotion practitioners should not claim sole credit, and their supervisors and funders should not insist on proof of attribution. Instead, all key stakeholders should look for meaningful evidence of a contribution to the desired policy change. Thus, advocacy evaluation should emphasize contribution, not attribution (Mayne, 2008).

The advantage of foregoing claims to attribution is demonstrated by The Strategic Alliance (http://preventioninstitute.org/strategic-alliance), a loose collaboration of 14 groups in California promoting structural changes that facilitate healthy eating and physical activity. Member organizations often act individually to pursue specific policy changes such as limitations on sweetened beverages or junk food in schools. But members sometimes act collectively under the Alliance name, as they did in advancing a 10-point plan to combat childhood obesity in 2005. In these cases, individual member organizations cannot attribute change to their own efforts. However, the increased credibility that the larger Alliance brings produces greater likelihood of policy success to which all can claim contributions.

➤ EMERGING TRENDS AND TOOLS

Over the past 3 years, the advocacy evaluation field has seen the entry of many new actors from traditional evaluation firms, academia, strategic communications organizations, and government relations firms, among others. Collaborations and competition have generated new resources and approaches that show promise for answering difficult advocacy evaluation questions. The following are highlights of these emerging trends and tools.

Integrating Planning and Evaluation More Closely

One of us (DDF) directs the Advocacy Planning and Evaluation Program (APEP) at The Aspen Institute (http://www.aspeninstitute.org/policy-work/apep). The program title reflects a commitment to making a strong advocacy plan the basis for effective evaluation. APEP worked from a menu of advocacy options called the "Composite Logic Model" (Coffman, 2009) to create its web-based Advocacy Progress Planner (The Aspen Institute, n.d.). The tool takes an advocate through a series of planning steps to produce a logic model and accompanying measurable benchmarks for both capacity building and policy change. The Advocacy Progress Planner has helped advocates on four continents design and assess their efforts to promote change on a broad range of issues. For example, Paris-based Equilibres et Populations (http://www.equipop.org/) used the Advocacy Progress Planner for internal strategic planning as it considered ways to promote more French government funding for contraceptives in countries with significant unmet family planning needs. Similarly, Gender Action (http://www.genderaction.org/) has used the Planner to devise a forthcoming effort that will promote changes in World Bank policies regarding access to reproductive health care.

Measuring Advocacy Capacity

The Advocacy Progress Planner drew on earlier work by the Alliance for Justice (http://www.afj.org/) that emphasized the importance of measuring advocacy capacity at every level of an organization before deciding to launch—or fund—an advocacy effort (Alliance for Justice, n.d.-a). The Alliance for Justice tools provide (a) foundations with a guide for assessing their readiness to fund advocacy and (b) potential advocacy grantees with a similar set of worksheets for assessing their own capacity. Both tools ask, for example, whether governing boards are familiar with the relevant internal revenue service guidelines and ask users to articulate a clear advocacy objective. The Alliance for Justice will release an improved, web-based tool for advocacy capacity assessment later this year.

Assessing Community Organizing

Advocacy efforts can sometimes be associated too narrowly with high-level experts influencing high-level policy makers. That can be the right approach for a technical health policy issue. However, some issues will not move without a demonstration of power at the community level. Organizing community action can take patient, long-term efforts that require specific evaluation approaches. Foster and Louie (2010) provide an excellent overview of the corresponding evaluation challenges and note two fundamental differences between advocacy (more broadly) and community organizing (more specifically): organizing involves (a) a bottom-up versus top-down approach and (b) an intentional focus on leadership development that needs to be reflected in the outcomes assessed by advocates and evaluators. Relatedly, the Alliance for Justice has created a clearinghouse of resources for evaluating community organizing efforts (Alliance for Justice, n.d.-b).

Measuring "Movements"

Many advocates and advocacy efforts characterize themselves as part of a movement. But what does that mean? How do we know when intermittent or scattered public pressure becomes a movement? Masters and Osborn (2010) developed a framework that can help answer these questions and guide advocates along a path toward genuine movement building. The emerging California Convergence (http://www.california convergence.org/) of advocates for policy changes that promote healthy eating and active living plans to assess its progress using indicators based on this framework. Their long-term plan includes broad consultation to build consensus and careful development of local leadership, communications expertise, and fund-raising capacity. Movements should be built to last for the long haul and measured against different indicators than a one-off, time-limited campaign.

Measuring "Champion-ness"

Many advocates work hard to target policy makers and create champions who will support their issues. But can advocacy create a champion? Can it make a champion more supportive? In 2009, APEP began developing and refining a tool that helps advocates track progress as policy makers develop (or not) into champions (Devlin-Foltz & Molinaro, 2010). Table 1 shows a generic champion-ness scorecard for a Member of Congress. The scores reflect a hypothetical client's judgments about which actions or traits are most significant, ranging from 1 to 5, where 5 is the most important.

Other organizations and evaluators have addressed the challenge of measuring champion-ness in different ways, but the basic approach is this: Define the specific actions or messages that characterize support for the desired policy change and prioritize or grade them by how significant they are. Determine as best you can which of these traits a policy maker has demonstrated and track progress toward more highly valued traits. Resulting changes in the champion score should reflect more of the actions or traits that you value. As the figure suggests, APEP's client placed some value on Members of Congress *expressing interest* in their issue—in this case, funding for maternal, neonatal, and child health promotion. The scorecard offers more points for actions that reflect a Member's willingness to *engage others* in talking and thinking about the issue. It offers the most points for actions that actually *advance policy change*, such as sponsoring legislation or speaking in support of it.

► CONCLUSION

The advocacy evaluation field is progressing. However, none of the challenges it faces have been fully addressed. Indeed, rapid changes in the policy and political context mean that approaches to advocacy evaluation require frequent reassessment and recalibration. For some of us, the biggest challenges in advocacy evaluation remain the ones that drew us to this field originally: How can we know what makes the most significant difference to policy change under which circumstances? Is cultivating champions a worthwhile approach? Does developing organizational capacity for advocacy predict future policy wins? As the field develops further, we look forward to a time when more and better advocacy evaluations

Categories	Activities	Base Scores
1. Demonstrates Interest		
Events	Has attended an event on X POLICY ISSUE or a related issue	1
	Expressed interest in attending relevant event (e.g. via press or informal outlets)	1
Membership	Current board membership or volunteer activities related to an issue of interest to the Y ORGANIZATION	1
	Assumed prominent leadership position that requires work on X POLICY ISSUE or a related issue	2
2. Promotes Awareness and Understanding		
Media	Contributed comments consistent with Y ORGANIZATION objectives to social media such as Twitter, Facebook, or online blog	1
	Was interviewed by national or international media and made comments consistent with Y ORGANIZATION's objectives	3
	Wrote op-ed or provided commentary in national or international news source, print or online, that is consistent with Y ORGANIZATION's objectives	2
	Issued or signed on to a press release, paid ad, or other media piece in alignment with Y ORGANIZATION's objectives	2
Public Speaking	Has spoken favorably about a related issue to the press	1
Network Building	Formed new partnerships or alliances that support X POLICY ISSUE or a related issue	2
	Built support for X POLICY ISSUE and other related issues among diverse, non-health communities	3
Events	Spoke about X POLICY ISSUE or a related issue at an event	3
	(Co-)organized events related to X POLICY ISSUE or a related issue	4
3. Advocates Improved Policy and Practices		
Promotion	Issued call to policymakers to address X POLICY ISSUE or a related issue	3
	Advocated for more funding from international bodies or agencies for X POLICY ISSUE or related issue	4
	Signed letter or message addressed to policymakers advocating for X POLICY ISSUE	2
	Met with policymakers or high-ranking officials to raise awareness about issues consistent with Y ORGANIZATION's objectives	5
	Publicly announced initiatives or campaigns consistent with the goals of the Y ORGANIZATION	4
	Held or organized convenings or conferences with policymakers to raise awareness about policies or issues consistent with Y ORGANIZATION's objectives	5
	Urged influential agency officials to promote policies consistent with Y ORGANIZATION's objectives	5
	Formed own initiatives and/or projects on X POLICY ISSUE	5

TABLE 1 Sample Generic "Champion-ness" Scorecard Tool for Tracking the Activities of Federal Policy Makers (1 = *least important*, 5 = *most important*)
SOURCE: Adapted from Devlin-Foltz and Molinaro (2010).

produce more and better answers to questions such as these.

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