



## Designing Evaluations for What Communities Value

August 27, 2014

This meeting is an opportunity to explore ways to elicit community needs and to consider innovative approaches to evaluate interventions intended to meet those needs. The overall goal of this meeting is to catalyze a conversation about re-envisioning how we evaluate community health initiatives using designs that better match their purpose, advantages, and realities. Ultimately, we will be asking how a shift in evaluation approaches can produce knowledge that will generate support for communities to better create health.

### Background

Health is the product of many behaviors, situations, and relationships that lie outside of the domain of the health sector. Yet this doesn't always align with where we spend our health dollars. Health can be created by anyone and in any setting, yet we currently put most of our money behind clinicians and the health care industry, or behind public health professionals and relatively narrowly defined public health interventions. These are important avenues to health, but, as our predominant investments, may detract from supporting other kinds of people and programs that have the potential to impactfully create health in the settings of everyday life.

#### **How can we generate support for creating health in communities?**

To start to expand the way we invest in health, we need to explore at least two things:

##### *Understand more completely what we mean by "health"*

How can we better understand what people and communities see as "health" and what motivates us to make changes to improve our health? The concept of health is situational, cultural, and difficult to fully grasp. Our current conceptions of health capture part of the story, but not all of it.

Within the health sector, "health" often means that disease is absent or well-managed, and that the government, employers, private insurers, or other payers are saving in health care costs. But not everyone sees health this way. People often value health because it is a means to other things: caring for family, enjoying friends and hobbies, succeeding at a job, living long enough to see grandchildren grow, or concentrating in a classroom. These things become a part of what it means to be "healthy" or "well."

How do we understand the health of a town based not just on exercise rates or prevalence of diabetes and hypertension, but on how cohesive it is and the kinds of social supports it offers? Will a new fitness center be valuable if it increases opportunities for exercise but uproots existing informal meeting places and disturbs social cohesion? Can a diabetes prevention program increase its chances of success if it takes advantage of a community's already strong informal organizing processes and supports? Can



programs be inspired by a drive to not only improve health measures but also contribute to other things the community values?

*Understand what works to help create “health”*

We will also need to understand how initiatives intended to improve health contribute or detract from individuals, families, communities, and cultures. If we can uncover and demonstrate the benefits of investing more in the people and actions that can contribute to creating health, can we garner the support and investment needed to enable communities to thrive?

To do this, we need to explore better ways of evaluating community interventions. Too often community health initiatives are evaluated using an adapted version of methodologies that have been optimized for biomedical interventions. But this is a mismatch for the realities – and the advantages – that come from community initiatives. Community initiatives are not single interventions – they are complicated, multicomponent efforts, intended to achieve long-term outcomes, that rely on the actions of many and are closely tied to the distinct context of each community.

The strength of an evaluation lies in careful design. Evaluators have access to a wealth of evaluation approaches, techniques, and methodologies, each with different advantages and disadvantages, and must piece together the components that will provide rich opportunities for learning. There is no perfect design that will serve every purpose, and any evaluation must make strategic design choices to best match what are often multiple objectives and audiences.

Evaluations need to be credible, rigorous, affordable, feasible, and matched to the needs of those who will use the findings. To accomplish this, evaluators of community interventions need to grapple with several design challenges, such as:

- How to fully engage the community and what they need and value in the intervention design, implementation, and evaluation, including in interpreting and using evaluation findings
- How to broaden the scope of what endpoints indicate effectiveness and value, including reliable and meaningful proxy measures and intermediate outcomes
- How to understand the effectiveness and value of an intervention not just by whether an outcome was achieved but also how it was achieved
- How to take advantage of variability rather than trying – and often failing – to control it (e.g., variability among communities, variability in how implementation turns out in reality)
- How to be equipped for unexpected changes to the intervention and to recognize unexpected effects – positive or negative (not just to account for and control for them, but to understand and take advantage of them)
- How to understand the causal contribution of an intervention that is implemented through the collective actions of many and in the context of varied and uncontrollable influences, and how to recognize value and effectiveness even when singular attribution of causality is not possible or necessary



- How to generate and use evaluation findings for continuous or iterative intervention adaptation and improvement
- How to meet different stakeholder needs for different kinds of information

The meeting will introduce a comprehensive way of approaching evaluation design and highlight some of the available options that can help with these challenges and accommodate the complexity of community initiatives.

## Meeting Goals

During this meeting, we hope to accomplish the following:

**1. Share community perspectives on creating health.** A large part of the meeting will consist of listening to and working with members of an example community to illustrate ways of ensuring that interventions and evaluations are consistent with their aims. Some parts of the agenda focus on one community's perspective to illustrate the nuance and differing perspectives within multiple representatives from one location. In the discussions and structured breakout, other participants will contribute perspectives from multiple locales, yielding a broader frame of reference for what emerges from working across multiple communities.

**2. Share approaches to designing evaluations that involve communities.** This meeting will focus on the process of designing an evaluation, including determining who will be influenced by the results of an evaluation, the questions that need to be answered, and how to answer them. The meeting will be an opportunity to learn about and discuss some examples of robust evaluation approaches, many of which are used successfully outside the health sector but have not yet been as widely adopted for health interventions. This meeting will not delve into the details of specific methodologies, focusing instead on a road map to help select among methodologies with different comparative advantages to get the best fit for different kinds of evaluation aims. The meeting will highlight that there are multiple good practices in evaluation design that can be applied to community health initiatives, rather than a single best practice or ideal design.

**3. Foster connections among people who want to think differently about health evaluation.** We hope that this meeting connects people who have the collective insight and influence necessary to forge new pathways in health evaluation.

**4. Explore ideas for future related topics to explore.** If new evaluation designs are to become well-accepted and lead to smarter investments, what will interested participants need to learn about and do next?

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The Creating Health Incubation Group is a group of organizations trying to figure out how to make creating health from within communities the norm. This meeting relates to their broader aims of aligning health interventions with what communities value, and sharing new ways of implementing, evaluating, and supporting community-led interventions.

HICcup is a non-profit sponsoring The Way to Wellville, a national competition to find five communities to compete over five years for the greatest improvement in five measures of health and economic vitality. During this competition, HICcup hopes to understand and document how these communities set about to create health. This meeting on evaluation will inform their evaluation framework and be informed by their on-the-ground work in U.S. communities.