# PATHFINDER

## EVALUATOR EDITION

A PRACTICAL GUIDE
TO ADVOCACY EVALUATION

Innovation Network, Inc. | Commissioned by The Atlantic Philanthropies

# Introduction

**We define advocacy as "a wide range of activities conducted to influence decision makers at various levels."**

**This definition intentionally includes not only traditional advocacy work like litigation, lobbying, and public education, but also capacity building, network formation, relationship building, communication, and leadership development.**

## What is this Guide?

As evaluators, we need to keep in touch with the field. We need to stay current and knowledgeable about trends related to the topics we evaluate. Advocacy evaluation is one such trend. A growing number of funders and nonprofit organizations are engaging in advocacy strategies to meet their missions—and advocacy activities, just like other program activities, need evaluation to be their best.

This guide is an introduction to advocacy evaluation from the evaluator's perspective. It is not a detailed how-to. Reading it won't mean you can go out and evaluate advocacy work single-handedly. But it will give you a sense of what is involved in advocacy evaluation and what the differences are between advocacy evaluation and other program evaluation.

## Advocacy Evaluation: A Growing Field

The advocacy evaluation field is nascent, but has gathered strength over the past few years. For example, at the 2005 American Evaluation Association conference ("AEA"), there was only one session devoted specifically to advocacy evaluation. In 2007, an AEA Topical Interest Group formed around advocacy and policy change. At the 2009 AEA conference, there will be fourteen advocacy and policy change sessions.

Innovation Network has been involved in the advocacy evaluation field since 2005. We have performed a number of advocacy evaluations, and we want to share what we've learned. We have found that our approach—learning-focused advocacy evaluation—results in an evaluation design that yields the type of information funders and advocates need. It helps advocates understand their progress long before a visible, public success. It generates information that advocates can use to strengthen decision making. And learning-focused advocacy evaluation challenges and advances many of the traditional conceptions of evaluation and evaluators.

Compared to other work undertaken by nonprofits and funders, advocacy presents unique challenges—in both its implementation and evaluation. Some examples of those challenges include:

- **Time frame.** Many advocacy campaigns—or even components of an advocacy campaign—take longer than the duration of a grant award to come to fruition. Trying to meet reporting requirements, advocacy organizations may overstate their ability to accomplish a "big win"—e.g., a new immigration policy, a cleaner river, an improved foster care system—within a single grant period, even though such a "big win" may take decades to attain.
- **Need for sustainability.** Advocacy organizations need to be sustainable over the life of an issue, which, as noted above, can be decades or more. This kind of sustainability requires strong infrastructure and robust capacity—qualities that will keep an advocacy organization viable for as long as it takes to achieve its ends.
- **Contribution, not attribution.** Proving attribution can be costly and difficult. Instead, in the field of advocacy, understanding *contribution* yields useful information without alienating partners or unnecessarily depleting resources. Also, advocates may not want to be the one to "own" an advocacy win, as attributing wins holds the potential of damaging alliances with like-minded organizations.
- **Documenting progress.** Since advocacy's long-term goals are relatively far into the future, advocates need interim measures of success. These serve as milestones to show whether work is on track, informing advocates on progress and helping them share success stories on the way to the "big win."

Since advocacy work is different, it makes sense that the way we evaluate it differs, too. In advocacy, we need to focus more on the journey than on the final destination. Advocates need good information along the journey to make good decisions—such as choosing the right path, rather than simply knowing they haven't reached their destination. Learning-focused advocacy evaluation does just that.

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# Eight 8 Steps

## to Learning-Focused Advocacy Evaluation

### 1 Evaluation Purpose

**What/who are the driving forces behind the evaluation?**

For any evaluation it is important to know who ultimately initiated the request for the evaluation. In the nonprofit sector there are two common answers: the funder, or the nonprofit organization itself. And if it was the funder who asked for the evaluation, it is best to proceed slowly and considerately to ensure all parties support and engage with the evaluation.

**Who is the intended audience?**

**How will the findings from this evaluation be used?**

Regardless of who asked for the evaluation, you need to clarify with the advocates and/or funders the identity of the evaluation *audiences*—and there could easily be many. Possible audiences include advocates, advocates' stakeholders, funders, funders' stakeholders, the media, a local community, or the general public.

**Clarifying who will receive evaluation findings and how the findings will be used is important to the design of the evaluation plan.**

Once you have identified who will see some part of the evaluation findings through the discussion of audience, you can begin anticipating and planning for how the evaluation findings will be used—e.g., for program improvement and communications. Clarifying who will receive evaluation findings and how the findings will be used is important to the design of the evaluation plan.

# 2 Roles and Responsibilities

### What are the power dynamics among all involved parties?

To conduct a successful evaluation, you need to work with funders and advocates to clarify roles and responsibilities. In an ideal evaluation, evaluators, advocates, and funders would all have complementary and contributing roles. Clearly, the evaluator brings the evaluation expertise. But the distinction between contributions of advocates and funders is often less clear. Observe and navigate the relationship between the funder and advocate to arrive at an understanding of power dynamics, leadership, and authority within their relationship with each other.

### Who should be part of the evaluation workgroup?

### How often should the workgroup convene/ communicate?

Next, turn your attention back to embedding a learning focus in the evaluation. Facilitate the development of an evaluation workgroup, and build members' evaluation capacity. Draw on advocate and funder staff to create a well-rounded team. Work with the evaluation workgroup side-by-side throughout the planning, evaluation, and analysis processes. Empower the group to be partners in leading the evaluation, and especially in using evaluation data for decision making. You should convene and connect with the workgroup often (twice a month, monthly, or quarterly depending on your specific situation), and plan for systematic, regular communication.

**The value you add is the precious data collected by the evaluation, analyzed by you, and piped into the feedback loop—critical information advocates can use for decision making.**

### What degree of proximity will allow you to maintain reasonable objectivity while bringing you close enough to become a trusted advisor?

In most learning-focused advocacy evaluations, over time the evaluator comes to be seen as a trusted advisor. Do your best to maintain objectivity in regard to what is or isn't working, but open yourself to the idea of commenting on strategy effectiveness or progress assessments. The value you add is the precious data collected by the evaluation, analyzed by you, and piped into the feedback loop—critical information advocates can use for decision making.

# 3 Theory of Change

### What are the ultimate goal(s) of this initiative?

### What are the outcomes along the path to the intended goal?

Evaluators (obviously) play a key role in the mechanics of creating program plans, logic models, theories of change, data collection instruments, and other pieces of an evaluation. Learning-focused advocacy evaluation is no different. Using your evaluation expertise and experience, focus those involved in the process to document a robust, strapping theory of how to move from Point A to Point B. Embed in that conversation a discussion of strategies and interim outcomes. Once a theory of change has been created, scrutinize the connections between the status quo (or "Point A"), strategies and activities, interim outcomes (more about that below), and ultimate victory ("Point B"). Are the connections logical?

Use your impartiality to question assumptions. One of the biggest assumptions we've found in advocacy is about assessing progress. Often, there is agreement on Point A and Point B. But agreeing on these basics doesn't necessarily mean agreeing to what success will look like along the journey. What interim outcomes will signal success before the final victory is reached? For example, if advocates undertake a media campaign strategy to achieve environmental policy reform, will success be signaled by earned media, changing public opinion, or new decision makers drawn to the cause?

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### Is there alignment and agreement among advocates (and funders if involved)?

If you are working with advocates who have a funder with a theory of change (or similar document), a beneficial next step is to reflect on the relationship between the two theories of change (that of the advocate and that of the funder). Checking for alignment at the outset is easier than overhauling evaluation plans in the thick of the evaluation.

Once the theory of change is confirmed, be ready to modify it as the advocacy work progresses. For the most part, advocacy occurs in a highly complex environment resulting in a theory of change that evolves over the life of the engagement. Actively seek feedback on changes to the theory of change. You want a relevant, up-to-date guide steering the evaluation, even if that means you start and end the evaluation with a very different model.

# 4 What to Measure

## Which external changes will the evaluation measure?

In the previous step we discussed how the theory of change process helps advocates describe what success looks like. Consider these ways of talking about success and defining interim outcomes:

- **Build support/allies.** Advocacy work is often grueling and long-term. Assess advocates' ability to gain strength by working with others. Do they enter into partnerships and coalitions if it makes sense? Are they developing new generations of leaders? Are they recruiting individuals and organizations with specialized skills, such as media strategy, web strategy, research, or grassroots organizing?
- **Read/react to opponents.** Sometimes, a cause has clear opponents—for example, environmental advocates versus industrial interests, or pro-life activists against pro-choice activists. But there are other kinds of opposition that are less obvious. For example, one organization may be working on public school reform, and another may be working on environmental reform, but they are both trying to get face time with the same legislator or donations from the same community. The environmentalists may ideologically support public school reform, but they need to put their issue first. Advocates need to be aware of all of their opponents, not just the obvious ones. Your evaluation should help advocates define their opponents, anticipate their moves, and work to minimize any negative effects of their work.
- **Read/react to the climate.** The climate (in a political, social, and economic sense) influences advocates' ability to be successful. In a favorable climate, advocates can make larger strides. In an unfavorable climate, success may simply be maintaining the status quo, or limiting the impact of opponents' work. Assess advocates' awareness of the changing environment and their readiness to take advantage of "opportunity windows"—periods in which the environment is aligned in their favor and they are more likely to achieve success.
- **Make progress with decision makers.** Once advocates have identified decision makers for their issue, assess their ability to attract support. Begin by working with advocates to define decision makers' current level of support for (or opposition to) the issue. Are they unaware, opposed, neutral, supportive, or a champion? Get advocates to set targets for how they will grow their support base—such as informing people about an issue if they are unaware, or making a supporter into a champion.

Including an assessment of these types of changes as part of the evaluation will bring new strength to decision making and strategy.

## Which internal changes will the evaluation measure?

All of the changes discussed above are external. To be effective for the long term, advocates also need to build and measure their *internal* capacity. Learning-focused advocacy evaluation assesses internal changes such as increased staff capacity, lower staff turnover, or strengthened internal communications and knowledge sharing, etc. Because of internal improvements in the organization's capacity, advocates can have the strength to see their cause through to the end.

## What is the evaluation timeline through the next few months?

In addition to *what* you plan to measure, also think about *when* you should measure. Are there time-sensitive events for which you need to be prepared to gather information? Are there times like strategy meetings or board of director meetings when the campaign will need specific data for decision making?

Integrate all of this information—assessments against the theory of change, the external changes you plan to measure, the internal changes you plan to measure, and any important deadlines—into your evaluation plan.

# 5 Methodology and Data Collection

### What evaluation methodology will meet advocates' needs?

The purpose of learning-focused advocacy evaluation is to generate timely, high-quality information for decision making. Having up-to-date data enables advocates to learn about their work, make more informed decisions, and be more likely to achieve success. Evaluation designs such as summative, quasi-experimental, and experimental designs—while they work very well in some contexts—are less suited to advocacy work. We recommend evaluation designs structured to collect and produce information during advocacy work. We have found that formative and developmental evaluation designs produce valuable information within acceptable timeframes. To quickly recap these two methodologies:

- Formative evaluation is conducted as a program or effort is implemented. The evaluation assesses program results against a program plan agreed to at the outset. The purpose of formative evaluation is to evaluate actual versus expected: to inform future iterations of the work, or to know to adjust strategy to achieve expected results.
- Developmental evaluation holds particular promise for the fast-paced world of advocacy. Coined by Michael Quinn Patton (1994), developmental evaluation seeks to "provide feedback and support developmental decision making and course corrections along the emergent path." ("Developmental Evaluation," Evaluation Practice 15 (4): 311-320). Developmental evaluation is distinguished by its flexibility in complex contexts. It is most suitable in contexts—like advocacy—that have many moving parts, and in which outcomes and pathways to success are unclear. It accepts that progress *toward* a goal may be the only measure of success, particularly in the short term.

### What data collection approaches best fit the evaluation?

### How can you improve the data already being collected?

### What new data will you need to collect?

Once you have chosen an evaluation design, decide how to collect data. Consider what data advocates collect already, and strengthen those systems to be more systematic and rigorous. Next, review what new data you will need, as identified by the theory of change and evaluation plan. What will it take to get the data collection system up and running, and to maintain it? Are these demands feasible given the resources, evaluation timeline, and advocates' time constraints?

We commonly describe evaluation data in two categories:

- Monitoring and Tracking refers to ongoing, systematic data collection, such as media tracking and meeting tracking. This type of information is helpful for generating trend data to gauge longitudinal progress. Most advocates are already collecting similar types of information, and the evaluation should seek to build on and strengthen existing systems.
- Telling the Story adds the context. If media tracking reports that an organization is getting more earned media, you can review a sample of media articles, analyzing the changes in the media portrayal about the organization and its issue over time. What has changed? What has remained the same? Linking seemingly disparate pieces of information allows others to understand the complexities of the environment and work, and the choices made along the way.

Using these two types of information together paints a more vibrant and clear picture, illustrating not only the what, but the how and why of an advocacy approach. And as the advocacy evaluation field advances, additional data collection approaches are being developed. Evaluators are craving methods that are faster, more powerful, and harness the promising potential of technology—and there are several people and organizations answering the need.

## 6 Analysis, Reflection, and Data Use

### How fast can you turn around data to advocates?

### What level of data analysis by the evaluator would best support decision making by the evaluation workgroup?

As discussed above, an evaluation workgroup is a great way to support learning-focused advocacy evaluation and embed evaluation capacity within organizations. A crucial task for the workgroup is to analyze data. If the data aren't being analyzed and acted upon, they are basically worthless. So, foster a culture of curiosity; encourage the evaluation team to regularly review incoming evaluation data as part of strategy meetings. Incumbent on you, the evaluator, is the obligation to rapidly hand over fresh data ready for meaningful analysis and application.

Depending on the experience of the team you're working with, prepare an initial analysis of the raw data. By presenting data to advocates in a readily digestible form, you can help them more quickly begin to form their own theories and draw conclusions. Encourage advocates to discuss the implications of the findings—both on strategies and on the overall progress of the advocacy work.

As the name implies, learning-focused advocacy evaluation is about *learning*. Learning, or new knowledge, often leads to change. As advocacy strategies change, work to keep planning documents (theory of change, evaluation plan, etc.) in synch with the work.

**If the data aren't being analyzed and acted upon, they are basically worthless—so foster a culture of curiosity.**

## 7 Communications and Reporting

### How can the reporting schedule support learning?

Compared to other activities that nonprofits and foundations conduct—activities like after school programs, health clinics, or financial education, for example—the timeline of advocacy work is incredibly variable and unpredictable. Instead of tying reporting to a fixed schedule, we recommend promoting a flexible reporting style. This approach better captures and conveys what is actually happening, and it better supports learning. In the real world, we know it's not always possible to have a completely flexible reporting schedule, but do your best. A little flexibility is better than none.

In addition to formal reports, build in time and resources for ad hoc reporting. If an "opportunity window" opens and advocates kick into high gear, be able to support them. Have the agility to report on unexpected activities. Structure the evaluation around advocates work, rather than trying to shoehorn their work into your evaluation plan. It may sound like it will make your work more challenging (and it may), but it will also increase the value of your work.

## 8 Checking the Big Picture

### Do your responses for Steps 1 – 7 support each other?

Once you've addressed each of these sections (Evaluation Purpose through Communications and Reporting) go back and review your notes and thoughts. Reflect on the evaluation purpose you identified: Will your subsequent choices support that purpose? Is the theory of change logical and realistic? Are you striking a balance between ideal data collection—everything you'd like to collect—and the realistic—the most valuable and powerful data necessary for decision making and learning? Do you have a plan for how to analyze and use the data that have been collected?

If anything seems out of line, don't hesitate to modify the evaluation. If anything seems awry during the course of the evaluation, bring it to the evaluation workgroup for consideration. The advocacy work will inevitably change over time, and so too should the evaluation.

**Structure the evaluation around advocates' work, rather than trying to shoehorn their work into your evaluation plan.**

## Learn More

Evaluating advocacy work is a challenge—we can't deny that. As evaluators, our work can help advocates do their work better, and help create positive change in the world. We hope this guide has shown you some new ways of thinking about advocacy evaluation, and encouraged you to take up the challenge.

Read about Innovation Network's advocacy evaluation work:
**www.innonet.org/advocacy**

Innovation Network maintains an online database of evaluation tools and resources, including more than 130 resources for advocacy evaluation. Free registration is required.
**www.innonet.org/resources**

***Pathfinder: A Practical Guide to Advocacy Evaluation***

This is the Evaluator edition of the Pathfinder series. Tailored editions for advocates and funders are also available on our website.

The following Innovation Network staff contributed to the Pathfinder series:

Johanna Morariu
Ehren Reed
Kathy Brennan
Andy Stamp
Simone Parrish
Veena Pankaj
Lily Zandniapour

The Pathfinder series was designed by:
Lynne Smyers, SmyersDesign.com

innovation network

TRANSFORMING EVALUATION FOR SOCIAL CHANGE

INNOVATION NETWORK, INC.
202.728.0727 *phone* • 202.728.0136 *fax*
www.innonet.org • info@innonet.org