# Evaluation & Learning Overview

Approach

Denver residents informed the areas we should fund and we continue to engage with those doing the work to help us define success. We have not prescribed a specific set of evaluation rules, methods, or metrics for grantees. Instead, we ask grantees to evaluate their own work in ways that are meaningful to them, to provide evidence useful for learning and improving their own efforts, and to share insights that can be communicated back with the Denver community to increase understanding and inform future strategy around mental health and substance misuse in Denver.
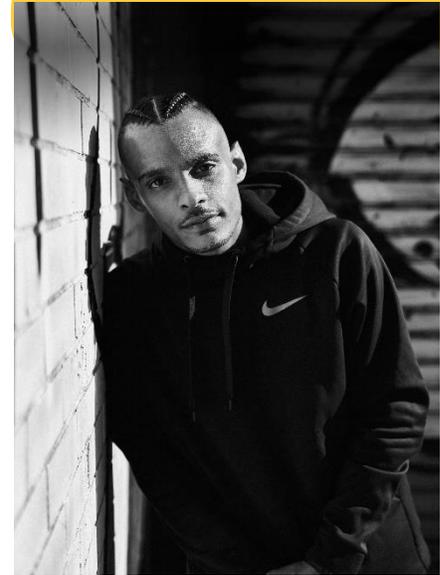
Expectations

From an evaluation standpoint, we ask grantees to:

- **Have a clear path in mind.** Although we do not require specific activities or outcomes, we do expect grantees to have clearly thought through what they plan to do and what they hope this will achieve. These activities and outcomes should be measurable in ways that can help Denver taxpayers see the value of how their dollars were spent. If you have good ideas but haven't decided on specific measures, that's ok. We can work with you.

- **Link evaluation to the impact goals of the funding priority.** Denver residents gave us guidance on funding areas to prioritize and are continuing to provide guidance around what grantees should work towards achieving. This information is being used to create each funding area's Call for Proposals. Your evaluation must show a connection between your work and one or more of the goals specified in the Call for Proposal. For example, evaluation for Alternatives to Jail grants should in some way help us better understand what it takes to: 1) reduce incarceration of those with mental health/substance misuse issues, 2) reduce recidivism for those with mental health/substance misuse issues, and/or 3) increase community resources and supports that meet people where they are for help in recovery and healthy living for previously incarcerated Denver residents with mental health/substance misuse issues.

- **Propose evaluation that matches organizational capacity and interest.** In the spirit of equity, we recognize meaningful evidence comes in all forms and organizations have varying levels of capacity to support evaluation efforts. For some grantees, rigorous quantitative methodologies will be important. For others, written narratives and photographic storytelling will make the most sense. We recognize and support diverse approaches to evaluation and encourage grantees to build evaluation that will be useful, meaningful, and right-sized to their organization.

- **Help us promote, and speak to progress on, the Foundation's values.** We are looking to fund work that can help us promote our values through its implementation, evaluation, and learning. Please refer back to our Funding Framework for a list of our values. Look for ways to promote these values in the evaluation approach.

- **Commit to being a learning partner.** We want grantees to participate in learning as part of evaluation. We don't expect grants to be completely successful all the time. We do expect grantees to be willing to talk through their challenges, learn, and adapt their work to improve their outcomes. We'll help create time and space for learning with grantees using their evaluation as the foundation of discussion. We also hope grantees will help us learn from their experiences as a grantee to help improve future grantmaking and grantee supports.

Requirements

We know time is valuable and implementing work is the priority. We are doing our best to make sure evaluation and learning will be useful and focused on putting grantee work at the center.

Expected Activities

Evaluation Frameworks

After a grant has been awarded, grantees work with their Program Officer and the Evaluation and Learning team to co-design an evaluation framework the grantee will implement. This framework identifies the grant's activities, outcomes, and data collection strategy. It also supports grantees in defining how the evaluation will be used for learning and decision making within their organizations and what will be shared back with the Foundation across the grant lifecycle. These frameworks are living documents that can adapt and change as grantees implement and learn from their own evaluative work.

Learning Check Ins

Grantees will also participate in learning check ins with their assigned program officer every 3 to 6 months, depending upon the size and/or the complexity of the work. These meetings will be time to discuss your evaluation and progress to date and will focus on learning to help with adapting and improving work moving forward.

Yearly Progress Report

Each year grantees will participate in a progress update with their program officer. This update will ask grantees to reflect on overall progress to date, important learning, contexts and conditions impacting their work, and planning for sustainability. As part of this report, we will ask for a budget summary and some demographic/geographic information related to the project's implementation.

Additional Activities

Foundation Feedback

Periodically, we may ask grantees to evaluate us and our support of their work. We want to make sure we're doing our best and grantee perspectives are key to our own learning. This will either be a short survey or a phone call, most likely with our Evaluation Director or a hired consultant.

Learning Cohorts

We want to support our grantees in building their networks and reducing siloed approaches to addressing mental health and substance misuse. We will be reviewing grant applications and evaluation plans to identify applicants working toward similar outcomes. These grantees may be offered learning cohort opportunities designed to share progress and learnings with each other, as well as support learning together to explore larger-scale evaluation and learning questions of specific interest to the cohort.

Resources

Emergent Learning

As a Foundation, we use and promote the principles and tools of Emergent Learning. Below are resources that explain and show examples of this approach. We'll use these tools for learning check ins and partner with you to support this type of learning in your work.

- Emergent Learning Website
- Emergent Learning Framework

Evaluation Planning

Struggling with thinking through your path and plan? Here are resources that can help you map out your ideas. A logic model or theory of change is not required but can help if you're feeling stuck on how to turn your idea into a plan of action.

- Evaluation Planning Guide
- Logic Model Workbook
- Evaluation Toolkit

Creative Evaluation Tools

We encourage data collection that will be most relevant and meaningful for your project. Below are links to some innovative resource examples that might help expand your thinking on ways to assess progress & impact.

- Creative Evaluation Toolkit
- Storytelling Approaches
- Photovoice