



# “Compassion, pleasantries, and hope”: A process evaluation of a volunteer-based nonprofit



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## ABSTRACT

As funders continue to emphasize the importance of documented results, nonprofit organizations must work to complete program evaluations that are both valuable and feasible. The purpose of this paper is to document a practical process evaluation of a southeastern nonprofit, a local Meals on Wheels. Using a mixed methods approach, we sought to answer four evaluation questions: (1) What are the essential program components, as identified by key stakeholders; (2) To what extent are volunteers implementing the identified essential components as intended; (3) What is the level of volunteer satisfaction with the program; and (4) What suggestions do stakeholders have for improving the program? Our findings indicate that most aspects of the program were implemented as intended, but inconsistencies occurred when volunteers were unsure of their assigned duties. In addition, volunteers had high levels of satisfaction and specific suggestions for improvement. From these results, we developed a conceptual model of factors contributing to quality of implementation and volunteer satisfaction that may be generalizable to other volunteer-based nonprofits. Specifically, we identified three factors that helped to facilitate satisfaction and performance: *leadership*, *social contact*, and *fulfillment*. Finally, this process evaluation demonstrates the feasibility of developing and implementing evaluation tools in similar organizations.

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## 1. Introduction

According to the Urban Institute, there are an estimated 2.3 million nonprofit organizations in the United States, a number that increased by 24% from 2000 to 2010 (Blackwood, Roeger, & Pettijohn, 2012). These organizations provide a diverse range of services, accounted for 9.2% of all salaries and wages paid in 2010, and in 2011, contributed over \$800 billion to the US economy (Blackwood et al., 2012; National Center for Charitable Statistics, n.d.). Given the significant social and economic impacts of these organizations, evaluation of the services provided by nonprofits has continued to grow in importance. In fact, several funders require nonprofits to conduct evaluations of their services (Carman, 2007; Hendricks, Plantz, & Pritchard, 2008; Behrens & Kelly, 2008 as cited by Carman & Fredericks, 2010).

Despite these requirements, program evaluation poses significant challenges for many nonprofit organizations. When surveyed, leadership of over 300 nonprofits in New York and Ohio listed not enough time (75%), staff (61%), and funding (45%) as barriers to performing evaluations (Carman and Millesen, 2005 as cited by Snibbe, 2006). A more recent national survey of 501(c) 3 public charities ( $n = 546$ ) revealed similar results, with respondents noting limited staff time (71%), insufficient funding resources (61%), and limited staff expertise (39%) as barriers to evaluation (Innovation Network Inc, 2012). Given these challenges, developing both feasible and useful evaluations is essential for fostering the evaluation capacity of nonprofit organizations.

The purpose of the current research was to design a practical process evaluation that addressed stakeholder interests and could be implemented by a partner nonprofit on a regular basis (once every two years).

*Process evaluation* allows for the assessment of implementation fidelity, or the extent to which a program was implemented as planned, and provides potential explanations for how and why outcomes are (or are not) achieved by a program (Saunders, Evans, & Joshi, 2005). Our evaluation partner was a local Meals on Wheels (MOW) organization located in the southeast region of the U.S. See

Abbreviations: MOW, meals on wheels; MOWAA, Meals on Wheels Association of America.

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INPUTS	ACTIVITIES	OUTPUTS	SHORT-TERM OUTCOMES	IMPACT
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Volunteers</li> <li>▪ Staff</li> <li>▪ Board of Directors</li> <li>▪ Money</li> <li>▪ Time</li> <li>▪ Food</li> <li>▪ Facilities</li> <li>▪ Materials</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Train volunteers</li> <li>▪ Deliver meals</li> <li>▪ Conduct safety checks</li> <li>▪ Provide human connection</li> <li>▪ Provide clients information regarding additional resources</li> <li>▪ Conduct Board meetings</li> <li>▪ Recruit volunteers</li> <li>▪ Build partnerships in the community</li> <li>▪ Fundraise/Solicit donations</li> <li>▪ Recruit Board members</li> <li>▪ Assess eligibility of potential recipients</li> <li>▪ Conduct intake and exit interviews</li> <li>▪ Prepare meals</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ # of volunteers trained</li> <li>▪ # of clients served</li> <li>▪ # of connections established</li> <li>▪ # of board meetings conducted</li> <li>▪ # of volunteers recruited</li> <li>▪ # of meals prepared</li> <li>▪ # of new clients</li> <li>▪ Amount fundraised /solicited</li> <li>▪ # of community partners</li> <li>▪ # of board members recruited</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Improvement in self-reported nutrition</li> <li>▪ Reduced feelings of social isolation</li> <li>▪ Increased feelings of social support (emotional, informational, and tangible)</li> <li>▪ Increased self-reported ability to live independently</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Increased Quality of Life</li> </ul>

Fig. 1. Meals on Wheels (MOW) logic model.

Fig. 1 for a logic model, or visual depiction of MOW's inputs, activities, outputs, and intended short-term outcomes and impact.

As with most MOW programs, this agency relies primarily on volunteers to implement services; therefore, it was important to assess how program components were being implemented across volunteers before assessing the outcomes associated with the organization's services. For example, variation in how much time volunteers spend visiting with clients could affect clients' self-reports of social isolation and social support, two outcomes of interest for the organization. By performing a process evaluation of the program, key stakeholders could determine which areas of program implementation should be enhanced or modified, with the ultimate goal of increasing the quality and effectiveness of services offered to clients. We were also interested in volunteers' satisfaction with their experience with the program, as well as their suggestions for how the program could be improved.

Our process evaluation focused on four questions:

- (1) What are the essential program components of MOW, as identified by key stakeholders?
- (2) To what extent are volunteers implementing the identified essential components as intended by the mission statement, protocols, and key stakeholders?
- (3) What is the level of volunteer satisfaction with the program?
- (4) What suggestions do stakeholders have for improving the program?

## 2. Methods

We used a mixed-methods approach to address the four evaluation questions. Specifically, this evaluation relied on key informant interviews ( $n = 5$ ), two volunteer surveys ( $n = 34$ ;  $n = 44$ ) and structured field observations ( $n = 9$ ).

### 2.1. Study context

The mission of the Meals on Wheels Association of America (MOWAA) is to combat senior hunger through empowering "community programs to improve health and quality of life" (MOWAA, 2014a). The MOWAA is comprised of over 5000 local Senior Nutrition Programs, including both congregate meal services and home-delivery programs; the provision of these services would not be possible without dedicated volunteers, who number two million in programs across the country (MOWAA, 2014b).

Our evaluation focused on a local MOW organization. This volunteer-based nonprofit is committed to providing meals and social connection to its clients, with over 75% of clients aged 65 and older. Founded in 1976, the local nonprofit relies on volunteers to deliver hot, nutritious meals to homebound residents every Monday through Friday. In 2013 alone, the organization's more than 120 volunteers served over 28,000 meals. With this number projected to rise to 40,000 meals by 2015, stakeholders at the organization were interested in evaluating the implementation (process evaluation) and effectiveness (outcome evaluation) of the program. This paper focuses on findings of the process evaluation.

### 2.2. Participants

We conducted this process evaluation in partnership with the organization's leadership. Participants of the key informant interviews included one staff member, one current board member and volunteer, one former board member and volunteer, one volunteer, and one client. Only volunteers who delivered meals were shadowed for observations, while surveys were distributed to all volunteers who arrived at the MOW office. In total, we estimate that over 50 individuals participated across all data collection activities. As all surveys were completed anonymously, we are unable to provide the exact number of total participants, though

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