



*A literature review on this topic revealed the following practices to be evidence based and effective. The intention of this review is to substantiate best practices in HVRPs with research findings in the professional workforce development literature, such as they exist and are relevant to the HVRP population. Where research is limited or not directly about veterans or homeless populations, inferences were made to inform HVRP practices.*



**WHAT  
WORKS?**

Research at  
Your Fingertips

## MEASURING OUTCOMES: THE EVIDENCE

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“Outcome oriented” is a term used to describe an individual or organization that focuses on results rather than the process used to produce a product or deliver a service. Getting-To-Outcomes (GTO) is one model intervention that builds practitioner capacity to plan, implement, and self-evaluate evidence-based practices with homeless veterans (Chinman 2012). An HVRP is outcome oriented. This means the program cares about its results and uses data to inform program decisions and activities. Because HVRPs serve veterans experiencing homelessness, they are concerned about employment and housing. Key employment outcomes include job placements, job retention, wage increases, benefits, and earning credentials. In addition, HVRPs are concerned that enrolled veterans improve their housing situation and leave homelessness. Consequently, outcomes, particularly entry into permanent housing options such as permanent housing, permanent supportive housing, and independent (unsubsidized) housing, are important outcomes, along with permanent housing retention (thereby avoiding a fall back into homelessness).

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A range of strategies and activities are available to support the use of outcome data and measurements to inform program operations. Although to date there has been no specific research evidence about the outcome orientation of HVRPs, the results are readily apparent because programs routinely, at the minimum, collect and report data about employment outcomes. It has been difficult to find any literature about how an HVRP uses that data to make operational decisions in its program. For example, although wage data is collected, there are not reports describing an HVRP that discovers its clients are making within 10 percent of minimum wage and uses that piece of information to launch efforts to secure jobs with higher starting wages.

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As an example of how outcome data could be used, if an HVRP monitors its data and discovers that women veterans represent only 3 percent of its participants annually, it would be good practice to instigate targeted outreach to increase the number of women veterans experiencing homelessness who are served (at least comparable to their representation in the homeless veteran population). At the same time, programs often encounter numerous challenges when they launch evaluation or outcomes measurement projects. This brief presents a review of recent research about strategies for conducting outcomes measurement and developing evaluation capacity.

### **Strategies for developing evaluation capacity.**

There are many approaches to evaluation capacity, but common themes include having the resources needed to conduct high-quality evaluation activities, having an organizational culture that values evaluations, and having the ability to use or apply evaluation results (Danseco et al., 2009; Naccarella et al., 2007). Evaluation capacity can be developed through a wide range of activities, including in-person training, technical assistance, interactive evaluation development tools, and instructional materials (Naccarella et al., 2007). Evaluation capacity is best built through multi-pronged approaches, with each approach being tailored to the stakeholders it targets (Danseco et al., 2009; Naccarella et al., 2007).

**Challenges related to making evaluation internally meaningful.** Evaluation activities must be both *feasible* (or sustainable) given the available resources, and *useful* (or relevant) to the program or organization's goals (Danseco et al., 2009). Programs can benefit greatly from evaluation activities targeted toward internal development and improvement. Yet many programs are hesitant to conduct such evaluations, as they require resources that may not be available and are not part of external requirements (Kirsch et al., 2005).

Another challenge is the timing of outcomes measurement. It is often conducted reactively, in response to accountability requirements. But when it is conducted proactively, it can be used to build community and stakeholder interest and investment in service programs (Astramovich & Coker, 2007;

Astramovich & Hoskins, 2013). It also helps when the specific information conveyed and the way it is conveyed are both tailored to stakeholders' interests and needs (Astramovich & Hoskins, 2013).

In many service settings there may be resistance to adopting new service models, including nationally recognized or evidence-based practices. Program evaluation can help in this situation, provided it is used to look at whether the new service model is associated with the outcomes the program hopes to achieve. This approach can demonstrate the model's usefulness to the local program, which can in turn engage more reluctant practitioners in the program evaluation process (Astramovich & Hoskins, 2013).

### **Challenges to securing buy-in / Collaboration and relationship-building as strategies for success.**

Evaluation capacity requires stakeholder "buy in" (Naccarella et al., 2007) and a sense of ownership for program evaluation (Kirsch et al., 2005). Yet staff are often not easily engaged in evaluation and outcome measurement (Astramovich & Coker, 2007). Part of the reason for this is that providers need to focus on services—resources are often scarce and the demand for services is often high. This can make evaluation seem more like a way of holding staff accountable than a tool to help them work more efficiently and effectively. Also, high rates of staff turnover can make it difficult to maintain improvements in evaluation capacity (Naccarella et al., 2007).

It takes participation and communication to develop an evaluation culture in a program or organization (Kirsch et al., 2005). Stakeholders need to be involved in all phases of the evaluation, from identifying evaluation goals and deciding on the methods to developing plans for using and reporting results (Perkins et al., 2005).

Staff also view outcome measurement and evaluation more positively when the evaluation process is collaborative and provides opportunities for professional development (Astramovich & Coker, 2007). By serving as role models and mentors as the evaluation ramps up, supervisors support evaluation buy-in and reduce anxiety among direct care staff (Astramovich & Hoskins, 2013). These approaches also work at an organizational

level. Organizations that have similar needs and interests can support one another in planning and launching evaluations and using the results of these activities (Danseco et al., 2009).

**Framework development as a foundation for outcome measure selection.** As important as outcomes are, evaluation and performance measurement should also incorporate participant and program factors. Also, programs may want to measure intermediate changes that are thought to lead to key outcomes. It helps to develop a comprehensive framework or theory for how the program works, as programs can use this framework to identify contextual variables and intermediate changes that better represent how the program really works (Bishop & Vingilis, 2006). This strategy also helps programs define and refine their service goals and objectives, which in turn makes the evaluation process a smoother one (Astramovich & Coker, 2007).

## HVRP Reports

Through the evaluation of employment programs, one can learn what works and what doesn't work and make improvements accordingly. Key to making useful program evaluations is the availability of a well-described set of interventions that are used in the program. For example, LePage and colleagues (2013) developed a written manual of their vocational services program model and then measured whether or not justice-involved homeless veterans who participated in the program got hired. Another VA project used a manualized intervention for developing an implementation strategy to increase adoption of evidence-based practices used in VA homeless programs and to further examine efficacy of MISSION-Vet in HUD-VASH. This project has important implications for program managers, policy makers, and researchers within the homelessness field (Smelson et al. 2015; Ellison et al. 2011).

**The VOA and Goodwill reports are best practice examples of an outcome orientation and practice in HVRP.**

There are no research reports of HVRP program evaluation in any peer-reviewed journals, but there are two evaluation reports about HVRP in the field. One is a doctoral dissertation (Campbell 2010) that chronicles the HVRP administered at Goodwill Industries of Lower South Carolina. This report represents a best practice in measuring and analyzing program outcomes and making recommendations likely to lead to better outcomes. The report describes the parent organization and the operating approach of the program, which is centered around four phases—including a Placement and Follow-Up phase.

The other report is a study conducted by Wilder Research for the Volunteers of America (VOA) on its own cohort of 12 HVRPs across the country (Evans and Gerrard 2013). Like the report on Goodwill, the VOA report is a best-practice example of an outcome orientation and practice in HVRP. The report, by an external evaluator, takes stock of the organizations HVRPs performance over a multi-year period, identifies critical outcomes, analyzes those results, and makes recommendations for program improvement. An impact evaluation of the entire portfolio of HVRP grants was conducted and final results are expected in the fall of 2016. The purpose of the evaluation was three-fold: to document the types of services and support offered by the grantees; to identify potentially promising practices or models; and to conduct a statistical analysis of administrative data collected by the grantees and other data on job placement and other outcomes of interest (Michaud 2016).

## Summary

An outcome orientation is important to quality improvements in an HVRP. Conducting a program evaluation, or some kind of review of program data, should be done on a regular basis to inform program operational practices. Although HVRP does not have a common set of characteristics or an agreed-upon set of fidelity measures, programs should include a description of their program model when evaluating program results. More evaluation and research are needed specifically about HVRPs.

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