Evaluation Technical Assistance Brief

Julia Alamillo, Bryce Onaran, Rebecca Kleinman, and Bevin Mory

Tracking Study Sample Members: Guidance for RPG Evaluations

Evaluations are critical for understanding whether services work as intended, but designing and executing an evaluation can be challenging. Some of the most common challenges involve enrolling enough participants (that is, sample members) in the evaluation and collecting data from them. Developing a system for tracking sample members can help overcome these challenges. Programs can use the tracking system to quickly identify problems and tailor solutions, thereby strengthening the evaluation.

This brief offers tips for tracking sample members during two evaluation activities: (1) enrollment and (2) survey data collection. It suggests ways to build tracking tools for each activity and gives examples of tools based on current and former Regional Partnership Grant (RPG) projects. It also provides guidance on how to use this information to inform and strengthen the evaluation. The brief concludes by highlighting the importance of collaboration among project partners—including program staff, evaluation staff, and staff at other agencies—when tracking sample members. With multiple partners in each RPG project, it is critical for all agencies to share responsibility for tracking sample members and to communicate regularly with each other about the tracking process.

To accompany this brief, the RPG team developed an Excel workbook with example logs to facilitate tracking study sample members during enrollment and data collection. The workbook is available here.

Tracking enrollment

Grantees can use tracking information on study enrollment to assess their progress toward the target sample size. By isolating each step in the enrollment process and observing where potential participants are dropping off, programs can improve the process. The processes for enrolling clients in the program and in the evaluation are linked, but they are not

Who should read this brief?

The Children's Bureau within the Administration for Children and Families at the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services funded this brief for groups that receive a Regional Partnership Grant or for other agencies that want to evaluate their programs. The brief covers strategies for tracking members of a study sample throughout enrollment and data collection. The brief is written with child welfare programs in mind, but it could apply to other program areas as well.

always identical. For some grantees, different project partners might be responsible for enrolling participants in the program and evaluation, or the program and evaluation could have different eligibility criteria. For instance, a program might offer services to families with children of all ages, but limit its evaluation to families with children above a certain age because of concerns about collecting data from very young children. Although the steps below primarily focus on enrolling participants in the evaluation, in many cases, they can also be applied to enrollment in RPG services.

Enrolling participants in the evaluation requires, at a minimum, identifying potential sample members, determining whether they are eligible for the evaluation, and getting their consent to participate in the evaluation.

First, grantees must recruit potential sample members through referrals, direct outreach, or other methods. Once a connection is made, the second step is to assess their eligibility for the evaluation, using criteria such as whether a caregiver has a substance use disorder or whether the age of the children in the family corresponds to the evaluation's requirements. Third, once people are deemed eligible, grantees must assess their willingness to participate in the evaluation. This is accomplished by obtaining their consent.[1] Some RPG projects may take the additional step of

Regional Partnership Grants and Cross-Site Evaluation

Children's Bureau

Mathematica
Progress Together

Box 1: Key terms

Program group: Study participants who can receive program services; known as the treatment group in certain kinds of studies.

Comparison group: Study participants who do not receive services from the program of interest, but may receive other available services; known as the control group in certain kinds of studies.

Consent rate: Proportion of eligible families who consent to participate in the evaluation.

Enrollment rate: Proportion of referrals or eligible families who enroll in the evaluation.

Response rate: Proportion of study participants from whom data are obtained. There might be different response rates for different data collection elements and/or study groups.

Study power: The likelihood that a study will detect an effect from a program when there is an effect to be detected. Put another way, the ability of a study to statistically measure differences.

Baseline data/data collection: Information collected at the start of an evaluation, before services begin.

Follow-up data/data collection: Information collected at a defined point following the baseline (for example, a certain number of months after baseline, or when services end for the program group) to assess whether outcomes changed over the course of services. Evaluations can have more than one follow-up data collection.

Attrition: Loss of study participants because they drop out or have missing data.

- Eligibility or reason for ineligibility (may be separate for program and evaluation, depending on the design)
- Notes field for tracking other information about the potential participant, such as level of interest in the program and evaluation

For potential participants who are eligible for the evaluation, the tracking tool should also include the following:

- Consent (may be separate for program and evaluation, depending on the design)
- Random assignment status (if applicable)
- Date enrollment completed

Other useful information can include the date of the initial contact, how the person heard about the program or evaluation (for example, referral source, direct outreach, or other methods), dates of follow-up contacts or attempts, and who is assigned to follow up with potential participants at each step. This last piece of information is especially important if multiple project partners are involved in the enrollment process. For example, some grantees might have child welfare caseworkers assess potential participants' eligibility for the program, and then have evaluation staff collect consent and randomly assign participants.

Whenever possible, it is best to have one point person or one organization determine eligibility and enroll participants. However, many RPG projects work across more than one organization. Therefore, using the enrollment tracker to list the person and organization responsible for each step helps ensure these steps are properly completed. Teams should assign a point person to regularly check the tracker and make sure all steps are being implemented correctly.

To keep the tracking tool up to date, grantees can use Excel or another management information system to track this information as soon as possible after the activity takes place. In addition, to ensure clients' confidentiality, grantees should take steps to keep secure all personally identifiable information (PII) (see Box 2: Protecting participant confidentiality, D'Angelo et al. 2016).

randomly assigning potential participants to the **program group** or **comparison group** (bolded terms are defined in Box 1: Key terms) before the participants' enrollment in the evaluation is complete. To minimize differences between these two groups, random assignment should be conducted after consent whenever possible.[2]

To track enrollment at each step, a tracking tool should include the following information at a minimum (Figure 1):

- Potential participant's name
- Contact information (phone number, email, address)

Figure 1. Recruitment and enrollment tracker

Name	Phone	Address	Eligible?	Date of Consent	RA Status	Enrollment Date	Notes
Gregory Dipietro	(831) 358-3750	185 E Bay St, Charleston, SC	Y	8/25/2017	Program	8/25/2017	
Dominick Mormon	(732) 462-1285	207 N Appleton St, Appleton, WI	N				
Eloise Aquino	(938) 222-5189	9650 Antler Creek Dr, Peyton, CO	Y	12/1/2017	Comparison	12/1/2017	

Grantees should regularly review the information in the recruitment and enrollment tracker to examine their progress toward enrollment targets and identify where prospective participants are getting stuck in the enrollment process. A funnel analysis (Box 3) can show where prospects are dropping off in the path from initial recruitment through enrollment (Avellar et al. 2017).

After identifying where they might be losing prospective participants in the process, grantees can use the recruitment and enrollment tracker to understand why. For example, if grantee staff see a large drop between the number referred and the number eligible, they can use the tracker to review why prospects were ineligible for the evaluation. In response, they could decide to remind referral sources about eligibility requirements to avoid recruiting ineligible people. The staff can also decide to expand the eligibility criteria to increase the number of prospective participants.

Not only will tracking recruitment and enrollment show progress toward target enrollment numbers, by calculating the **consent rate** and **enrollment rate**, grantees can gain a better sense of how much to "over-recruit" to reach their enrollment targets. Grantees often have to reach out to many more people than they expect to participate, sometimes exceeding the target by as much as 50 to 100

percent in order to reach it. By conducting regular funnel analyses, programs can reassess their recruitment targets and determine whether particular strategies are working.

Tracking survey data collection

Tracking participation in data collection helps keep survey **response rates** high. High response rates ensure a more accurate representation of the study sample and improve **study power**, so they play a key role in helping the evaluation demonstrate program impacts or changes in participants' outcomes over time.

Data collection for RPG can be particularly challenging. Individuals in the target population can have constantly changing life circumstances and contact information. They might also participate in many different services, and responding to data collection requests might not be high on their priority list. In addition, sometimes data need to be collected from more than one person that is part of the same case (see Box 4: Collecting data from case members). Carefully tracking study sample members at each data collection time point can help the project team keep them engaged in the evaluation.

The first step in collecting survey data is to contact people in the study sample. Some of them could already be in regular contact with program staff, which makes it relatively easy to inform them about upcoming surveys. However, others might not have regular contact with the program, possibly because they finished or dropped out of services, or because they were in the comparison group and were not eligible to receive services from the program. Grantees must find other ways of contacting these sample members, for example, by mail, email, phone calls, or text messages (if the participant gave permission to be contacted by text).[3] If these individuals receive services from or have regular contact with other project partners or organizations in the community, grantees might engage staff from these organizations to help by reviewing contact information or even by reaching out to sample members about upcoming data collection.

— 100 Referrals

— 80 Eligible

— 60 Consented

— 50 Enrolled
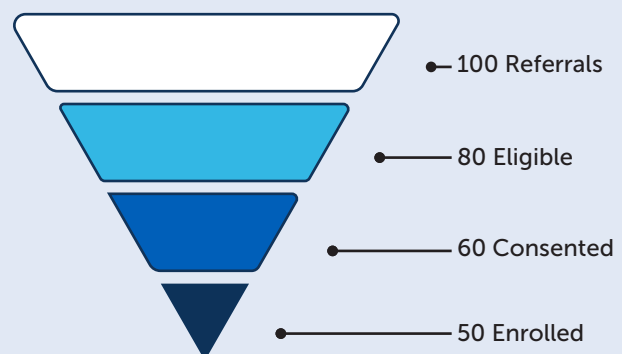
Box 4: Collecting data from case members

An RPG case is a family, household, or group of individuals enrolling in RPG services as a unit. Different case members may serve as reporters for different outcome domains. For example, if the child's biological or adoptive parent is not the child's primary caregiver, then the biological or adoptive parent will be asked to report on some outcomes while the child's primary caregiver will be asked to report on other outcomes. Every member of a case should be assigned the same case ID in addition to a unique individual ID in order to track case members in the data file and over time. Teams need to keep a crosswalk of case and individual IDs.

To improve the likelihood of contacting study sample members, grantees should maintain a log of participants' contact information, collected at enrollment and updated regularly throughout the study. For each participant, this log should include, at minimum (Figure 2):

- Name
- Phone numbers
- Email
- Address
- Preferred method of contact
- Whether permission to text was given
- One or two alternate contacts (contact information for close friends or relatives who can reach the participant if necessary)

In addition, this log can be used to track all attempts to contact the participant. By documenting information about how and why the contact was made and what the outcome was, the project team can learn which contact attempts are most likely to be successful. Important information to include for each contact attempt includes:

- Date and time
- Purpose for outreach (for example, survey reminder)
- Contact method (for example, phone or text)
- Outcome (for example, spoke to participant or left voicemail)

After a participant has been contacted, the next step is to administer the survey or to schedule survey administration for a future time. To monitor progress on each round of data collection (**baseline** and **follow-up**), grantees should carefully track whether each participant has completed the survey. This information should be kept separate from the contact log so it can be easily shared with project partners without compromising participants' PII. To protect PII, participants should also be assigned a unique ID number that can be used in the tracking tool in place of their names. For each client, the data collection tracking tool should include (Figure 3):

- Participant ID number
- Study group (program or comparison group)
- Status of each round of data collection (baseline survey and follow-up surveys), including the date each survey was completed, the mode of data collection, and the estimated date of upcoming surveys

Regularly reviewing the data collection tracking tool has several benefits. Grantees can determine which clients are or will soon be ready for data collection (that is, whether it is time for a follow-up survey). It can also help program and evaluation staff identify ways to improve the data collection process. For example, tracking the mode of data collection, such as in person, by phone, or online, could help determine the best way to administer the survey to clients in the future.

Figure 2. Contact log

Name	Phone	Address	Email	Preferred Method	Permission to text
Gregory Dipietro	(831) 358-3750	185 E Bay St, Charleston, SC	specprog@camcast.net	Phone	Yes
Eloise Aquino	(938) 222-5189	9650 Antler Creek Dr, Peyton, CO	johndo@verezon.net	Phone	Yes
Katie Buhl	(509) 868-6614	522 W Main St, Lebanon, TN	jaarnial@msg.com	Phone	No

Note: Contact log should also include contact information for one or two additional contacts.

Figure 3. Survey response tracker

Participant ID Number	Study Group	Baseline	6 Month Follow-up
1065aa	Program	Complete, (1/15/20), In-Person	Complete, 7/15/20, Phone
4232lk	Comparison	Complete, (1/15/20), In-Person	Not complete
8753xg	Program	Complete, (1/15/20), Phone	Complete, 7/15/20, Phone
3639km	Program	Complete, (1/15/20), Phone	Complete, 7/15/20, Phone

The data collection tracking tool can also be used to review response rates on surveys by calculating the proportion of the initial evaluation sample who provided data. High response rates strengthen the study's power to statistically detect impacts and help provide an accurate representation of the sample's experiences, attitudes, and behaviors. For evaluations that include both a program and comparison group, it is important to calculate their response rates separately to monitor differences in **attrition** between the two groups.

Importance of collaboration across partners

The RPG program emphasizes collaboration across partners, and this collaboration also matters when it comes to tracking sample members. Below are six tips for coordinating with partners to track sample members.

1. Ensure all partners have permission to collect and review client data. Because multiple partners can play a role in collecting or reviewing participant data, include language in consent forms authorizing the program to share data with staff at partner organizations, including the evaluator or other service providers. PII should only be shared with project staff whose roles demand it.

2. Consider the technological capabilities of all partners. Organizations can differ in their access to or familiarity with different hardware or software. Individual staff members' ability to use this technology could also vary. When designing tracking tools, grantees should consider the capabilities of all users and establish a process that everyone can use successfully with minimal training.

3. Develop a participant flow diagram. Although it can be a good idea for staff at one organization—usually the organization in charge of the evaluation—to take the lead on monitoring all tracking activities, staff at different organizations will likely need to share responsibility for tracking different activities. For example, program staff could be responsible for tracking recruitment and enrollment, and evaluation staff could be responsible for tracking survey data collection. At the start of the project period, grantees should develop a participant flow diagram that describes each partner's responsibility for monitoring participants' progress in the evaluation and how data will be shared (Figure 4). This participant flow diagram can be included as part of a formal data sharing agreement.

4. Set targets for each activity. Working with partners to establish realistic targets for enrollment and survey completion rates is critical for measuring progress on each evaluation activity. In addition to setting targets for the overall evaluation period, it can be helpful to break these down into smaller targets that can be reviewed regularly, such as monthly or quarterly. Monitoring progress toward these targets will help keep all partners accountable for their role in the evaluation.

5. Plan ahead for version control issues. Partners should think carefully about the best way to pass documents and enter data across organizations to make sure it is clear to everyone involved which version of each tracker is the most up to date and to ensure that data are entered properly. Using well-defined procedures and secure, password-protected network drives or folders that everyone can access can prevent people from circulating multiple versions of the same tool. In the same vein, standardizing open data fields (for example, by using drop-down menus instead of open text fields) can help improve consistency across users. Excel and other management information systems also allow users to lock certain fields so they cannot be changed without permission.

6. Schedule regular meetings. Meetings can include trainings on how to collect tracking information, or they can be recurring staff meetings as the evaluation gets underway. During these meetings, consider sharing information on progress toward targets, enrollment trends, characteristics of sample members, survey response rates, and effective strategies for enrollment, so all partners are informed about how the evaluation is going and can contribute to discussions about how processes can be improved.
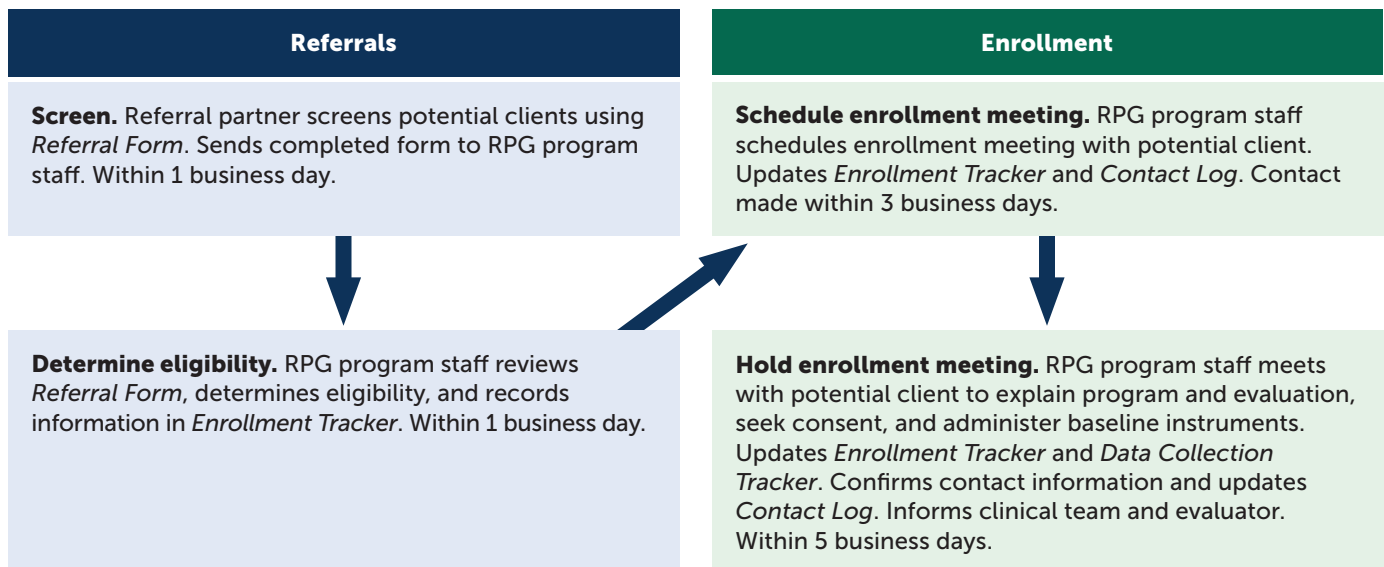
The bottom line

A successful evaluation relies on an efficient system for tracking sample members from the time they are recruited through to the end of data collection. This is especially true for RPG project teams, because evaluation activities often involve collaboration across multiple partners. To be effective, the tracking system must involve a collaboration among program staff, evaluation staff, and staff at other service providers. The strategies in this brief can help grantees strengthen their evaluations and ultimately improve outcomes for children and families.

> ### Box 5: Collecting baseline information
>
> For randomized controlled trials, we recommend collecting baseline data after consent, but before random assignment (that is, assess eligibility > collect consent > administer baseline > conduct random assignment). This order ensures that random assignment does not affect sample members' responses on the baseline survey or their decision to complete the baseline survey. If baseline data are collected after random assignment, participants' responses could be influenced by how they feel about the results, such as whether they are assigned to their preferred group. If sample members decide not to complete the baseline survey because they do not like their assignment, they would still have to be included in the evaluation (that is, they would need to be tracked, have follow-up data collected, and be included in the impact analysis) in order to preserve random assignment.

Figure 4. Participant flow diagram: Enrollment process-information to include

Referrals
Screen. Referral partner screens potential clients using *Referral Form*. Sends completed form to RPG program staff. Within 1 business day.

Enrollment
Schedule enrollment meeting. RPG program staff schedules enrollment meeting with potential client. Updates *Enrollment Tracker* and *Contact Log*. Contact made within 3 business days.

Referrals
Determine eligibility. RPG program staff reviews *Referral Form*, determines eligibility, and records information in *Enrollment Tracker*. Within 1 business day.

Enrollment
Hold enrollment meeting. RPG program staff meets with potential client to explain program and evaluation, seek consent, and administer baseline instruments. Updates *Enrollment Tracker* and *Data Collection Tracker*. Confirms contact information and updates *Contact Log*. Informs clinical team and evaluator. Within 5 business days.

ENDNOTES

[1] Obtaining voluntary informed consent is a legal requirement for all federally funded research involving human subjects. Informed consent means the researcher discloses appropriate information to a potential research participant so that he or she can decide whether to take part in the study. A consent form explains the nature of the potential participant's involvement in the study and ensures that his or her rights are explained and respected. The form also describes the potential risks and benefits of participation and gives people the option of declining to participate. More information can be found at https://www.hhs.gov/ohrp/regulations-and-policy/guidance/faq/informed-consent/index.html.

[2] If potential participants are randomly assigned before consent, there may be differential consent in the program and comparison groups. For example, those in the comparison group might be less likely to consent because they are disappointed about not receiving the RPG services.

[3] Permission to text should be given during the consent and enrollment process. First, it is a different form of communication from what participants might expect. Second, participants might be charged for receiving texts (thought texting is now so widespread that charging issues have become uncommon). Third, some people could be sharing their phones and not want others to see information that might be sent in a text.

REFERENCES

Avellar, S., K. Borradaile, and D. Strong. "Tips for Enrolling and Retaining Evaluation Participants." Data Collection Technical Assistance Brief, No. 4. Washington, DC: Mathematica, 2017.

D'Angelo, A.V., J. Crowley, L. Maul, and D. Strong. "Collecting Sensitive Information and Encouraging Reluctant Respondents." Data Collection Technical Assistance Brief, No. 2. Washington, DC: Mathematica, 2016.