

Evidence and Innovation Podcast Transcript

Speaker: Mark Small

Hi and welcome to the Findyouthinfo.gov podcast series. Today we will be hearing from Mark Small, a professor of psychology at Clemson University about the implementation of evidence-based programming in communities. We hope you enjoy.

Hello my name is Mark Small. I am a professor at the Institute on Family and Neighborhood Life at Clemson University in South Carolina. I am here today to talk about evidence-based programming and innovation.

I want to share with you my experiences over the past 25 years in working with community groups on how to implement programs that are effective for children, youth, and families who are in trouble or at-risk. Typically what we have found is that there are five threshold questions that are good to reflect upon before making any adventure in evidence-based programming, or any adventure really in community programming.

The first question is, are you ready? By readiness I mean are you individually ready and/or is your organization ready in terms of having the capacity to address the problem. There are a lot of instruments out there in which you can assess organizational readiness or organizational capacity but the answer really lies in to whether you feel confident enough that you yourself have the skills necessary and your organization has the resources necessary to really address a community problem. I encourage you to seek out those instruments and administer them to yourselves personally or organizationally to see if you're ready. Again the first question is are you ready and that requires some reflection.

The second question is related, are you alone in addressing the problem? Most communities have several nonprofit organizations and several social community institutions that are addressing community-wide problems. And so it is very likely that you are not alone in how it is you are addressing this problem. It is very likely that there are others who have been working on this problem for some time and it's incumbent upon you to try and find out who the other players are. It's like being part of an Avenger's Marvel team. You want Thor and all the other Avengers on your side in addressing the problem. No one can do it alone so I encourage you to think about how it is you are partnering currently with other organizations with the community, how does your addressing parts of the problem that may overlap with others.

The third question is do you really know what the problem is? When I say, "Do you really know what the problem is?" I mean do you really understand what it is you are trying to do, what change you are trying to accomplish? In terms of crime there's crime prevention, there's treatment for victims of crime. There's a lot of ways you can go about addressing problems of crime. It's important to think about how it is you are narrowly defining what it is you are going to tackle. Nobody is going to solve the problem of poverty or crime or illiteracy. Those are not problems that can be solved. They're not like math equations. They can be addressed and approached in a lot of different ways.

The fourth question to ask is whether or not you have considered evidence-based approaches. The evidence-based movement has been going on for some time now and the idea behind evidence-based programming and evidence-based approaches to problem solving is that there are people who have looked at similar issues and/or have looked at the same problems that you have and tackled them, and

evaluated them, and found them to be effective. They found their way of doing things to be helpful. So if you want to start addressing a community problem it's helpful not to reinvent the wheel, it's helpful not to go about trying something so innovative without relying on the experiences and wisdom of other people who have been successful elsewhere. So I encourage you to use evidence-based approaches, to look at the registries but I also encourage you not to be overwhelmed or just take them off the shelf and use them as-is. The biggest issue in terms of using evidence-based programs is how faithful to remain to them. Fidelity is an issue with evidence-based programming. You are necessarily going to have to deviate from what they did because you don't have the exact circumstances of the evidence-based program. This will require sometimes some data collection, sort of operationally defining it. You are much more likely to be successful if you have a very narrow description of the problem you are going to address.

What works is a very interesting and important question but it may not be the most relevant question for you. The most relevant question for you is what works for you? That is, how is it that you are going to decide which evidence-based program best fits the needs of your community and your organization. That requires some discernment on how these evidence-based programs have been found effective. What populations they used, what resources they had, what organizational capacity existed at the time of success and to figure out how it is you can replicate that in your own community.

The fifth question is how are you going to know that you have been successful? I always encourage program evaluation and evaluation to be done at the very beginning of the project because everybody wants to be able to say that they were successful. They want to be able to tell funders that they were successful, they want to be able to tell program staff that they have been successful, but most importantly they want to be able to tell the constituency the beneficiaries of their efforts that they were successful and that requires evaluation. Evaluation starts at the very beginning in terms of documenting what it is you are doing. Whether you are being a hundred percent faithful to an evidence-based program or deviating a little bit, you are going to need to be able to tell others how you are successful so that ultimately you can be successful for your beneficiaries but also other people can learn from your work as well. I think if you answer those five questions thoughtfully, discern fully, in collaboration with others you are much more likely to make a difference in your community. Thank you.

This podcast is a production of the Interagency Working Group on Youth Programs.