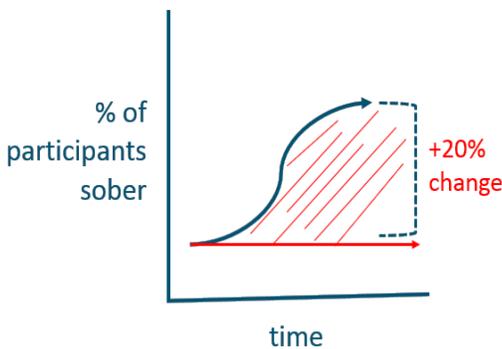


What is an impact evaluation?

Typical evaluations ask about the number of people served, number of staff members trained, and the total amount spent. While these output measures are important, they are often unable to answer what would have happened to the participants had the service not been available. Impact evaluations are valuable because they can answer both types of questions.

For example, let's say we are looking at a hypothetical opioid treatment program, HealthU. If we evaluated the program by simply comparing the percentage of sober participants before the program started to the percentage of sober participants after the program finished, it may look like the program had a large impact. In Figure 1 (below), it appears as though the opioid treatment program we are examining led to a 20% increase in sober participants.

Figure 1: HealthU impact on sobriety pre/post



However, this 20% change may be misleading. The participants of the program may have been impacted by other factors in the community. Many of them might have gotten sober with family or community support, even without HealthU. We call this the “business-as-usual” or comparison case.

Figures 2 and 3 (below) represent two different hypothetical scenarios. Both have the same blue line as Figure 1, but also have a green line to create a comparison of what would have happened had HealthU not been available.

Tracking both the people who participated in HealthU and those who participated in business-as-usual changes how we think about the program’s success. Figure 2 shows the impact on sobriety is smaller, though still positive. Figure 3, however, shows participants would have been better off without HealthU. In this way, an impact evaluation helps us understand a program’s actual effects on outcomes of interest. This information can be used by policymakers to improve the quality of Minnesota’s offerings.

Figure 2 and 3: HealthU impact on sobriety compared to business-as-usual



What makes a viable and valuable impact evaluation?

The legislature asked MMB to conduct experimental and quasi-experimental design studies to assess the causal impact of a subset of grants on outcomes of interest. Impact evaluations can be difficult and certain characteristics must be present to do them well. During the review and contracting periods, trained researchers will assess applications and may reach out to grantees to discuss information related to the categories below. This information will help us understand whether it is possible to do an impact evaluation. Categories of interest include:

Category	Description
State of the current research	What is the existing research? Would an evaluation of this service yield new information that is valuable to state decision-makers and the community more broadly?
Service description and mechanisms of change	Are the components of the service well-defined and is there a clear pathway leading from the services to the expected outcomes?
Outcomes and administrative data	What outcomes are important to measure? Do those measures have a meaningful relationship to the wellbeing of Minnesotans? Are there existing systems to collect data for this analysis? Is there data on a potential comparison group?
Primary data	Will it be necessary to collect new data for this project? If so, how will the data be collected? What measures will be used?
Feasibility of assessing causal impact	What research design is feasible? How would we create a comparison group? Do we have enough participants to expect to see an impact? What are the threats to validity? How long of a follow-up do we need before we can reasonably assess results?
Generalizability	What populations does this project serve? Can the proposed study population provide generalizable results to other groups?
Service maturity	How long has this service been offered by this particular provider and by other providers in Minnesota more broadly? Do we have historical data on past use? If not yet started, when would the service begin?