Author’s response to reviews

Title: Evaluability Assessment of “Growing Healthy Communities,” a Mini-grant Program to Improve Access to Healthy Foods and Places for Physical Activity

Authors:

Christiaan Abildso (cgabildso@hsc.wvu.edu)
Angela Dyer (aadyer@mix.wvu.edu)
Shay Daily (shay.daily@maine.edu)
Thomas Bias (tbias@hsc.wvu.edu)

Version: 1 Date: 16 May 2019

Author’s response to reviews:

A response was submitted as a supplementary material file "Response to reviewers' comments." It is also copied here (though without formatting)

-----------

May 16, 2019

RE: Revisions to manuscript PUBH-D-18-04629

Dr. Szunyogova:

We greatly appreciate the feedback received and have taken the opportunity to revise the manuscript referenced above. We would like to thank the reviewers for their helpful comments and we certainly feel the manuscript has been improved due to this feedback. The specific changes to the manuscript are detailed below, point-by-point for each reviewer. The revised manuscript has been submitted using track changes in Microsoft Word. Please note, that minor grammatical changes have been made as well to improve sentence structure or readability. These edits are scattered throughout the document and easily noticeable in track changes mode in Word.

Thank you!
Reviewer 1: Paula Silva:

The review process of the paper entitled Evaluability Assessment of 'Growing Healthy communities', a Mini-grant Program to Improve Access to Healthy Foods and Places for Physical Activity, has set some questions despite the relevant work developed by authors.

Evaluability Assessment "is a method for examining a program (or a proposed program) to assess its structure, to determine the plausibility of the program achieving intended goals, the evaluability of those goals, and the utility of implementing further evaluation of the program" Smith (1989, p.11). Yet "…by itself it is not adequate as an evaluation. It does not have a sufficient standard of evidence to demonstrate effectiveness or describe implementation. However, it is valuable to identify programs that are unlikely to be effective in their current form, as well as those that show promise to address societal needs. It can assist program planners to adjust their activities and resources to achieve objectives, or to adjust their objectives in light of program reality" (Leviton, Khan, Rog, Dawkins, & Cotton, 2010).

Research is needed in order to provide further guidance on how to conduct an EA, which is the model more appropriate for conducting it, and the known facilitators and challenges that may arise during the process.

The careful analysis of this paper has put some doubts about the design of the manuscript and even its nature. The purpose of the manuscript is clear, "...to conduct an Evaluability Assessment of a pilot mini-grant program to determine if this program was ready for evaluation and identify any changes needed for future implementation and evaluation that could also inform similar programs" (p.5). Therefore, the main question is if we can consider this description of an evaluation process as a study… Honestly, I do not feel comfortable to make that decision…I will leave that decision to the editors.


Response: Thank you for this very thoughtful review of the manuscript in context of the works of Smith and Leviton et al. and with respect to the stated purpose of the work. Reviewer 2 had similar comments that we have addressed by further clarifying our purpose as two-fold (page 5) – “to (a) determine if this program was ready for evaluation and (b) identify any changes needed for future implementation and evaluation that could also inform similar programs.” Our
Discussion section (pages 14-16) has been substantially revised to more clearly present our findings with respect to those two purposes, briefly that (a) this program was not ready for outcome evaluation due to limited time and organizational capacity – necessitating a focus on process evaluation only; and (b) changes to this and other similar programs by the funding agency (i.e., provision of evaluation resources or hiring a central evaluator) are needed to allow for outcome evaluation of similar mini-grant programs.

Reviewer 2: Thomas Schmid

1) This is a well written and carefully conducted evaluation of "Growing Healthy Communities" my primary suggestion is to reemphasize the purpose of the evaluation and clarify your findings under your purpose statement. Page 2 lines ~26-32

Response: Thank you for this very thoughtful comment. We have addressed by further clarifying our purpose as two-fold (page 5) – “to (a) determine if this program was ready for evaluation and (b) identify any changes needed for future implementation and evaluation that could also inform similar programs,” and substantially revising the Discussion section (pages 14-16).

2) My interpretation of your findings is that #1 --"is the program ready for evaluation" is no and your main discussion focuses on # 2—" inform similar programs".

Response: Thank you for this “big picture” review. We have revised the purpose to more clearly state this two-fold focus, and have also substantially revised the Discussion (pages 14-16) to more clearly present our findings with respect to those two purposes, briefly that (a) this program was not ready for outcome evaluation due to limited time and organizational capacity – necessitating a focus on process evaluation only; and (b) changes to this and other similar programs by the funding agency (i.e., provision of evaluation resources or hiring a central evaluator) are needed to allow for outcome evaluation of similar mini-grant programs.

3) In the abstract lines ~41-46 I found it hard to understand the meaning of your categories such as Organizational Capacity and if collaboration, limited time and measurement integration were sub set of capacity. Latter in the manuscript this is clarified. But, I still do not understand your category "measurement integration". (see also page 13) If word limits are an issue in the abstract there issues can be further clarified in the body of the paper.

Response: Excellent point. A parenthetical statement was added to the abstract “…reflecting other key themes (described in detail in the manuscript)” In addition, the paragraph on page 13 about “measurement integration” was revised to add a sentence defining this category more
clearly: “Although important, health outcome evaluation was not integrated into the grant timeline or trainings for the local organizations that were not traditionally focused on measuring health outcomes.”

4) Page 6: "Evaluability assessment” - Your expansion of the definition/terms for EA to include Exploratory and Pre-evaluation is useful and helps explain how your work is not tightly bound by traditional EA methods/conclusions. I did not find clear response to the questions you posed in this section

Line ~41 "These challenges include stakeholder disagreement, lack of understanding of logic or theory of change (of the target program) unrealistic program goals and unclear outcomes. You outline some of these evaluation goals in the section on EA assessment steps 1-10 Page 7-8, but it is not clear to me how much of these are included in your results/conclusions. Was you goal to address/answer these questions? If so please clarify in the results and or discussion section.

Response: Another insightful comment, thank you. The revisions of the Discussion section on pages 14-16 include enhanced integration of these challenges, which our results support. Specifically, that the local organizations didn’t understand health-focused goals/theories, and thus scrapped measurement of them when timelines were tight and organizational capacity was limited.

5) Page 9 - Line 24 if possible please provide a brief explanation for "content saturation".

Response: The text was amended to add “lack of novel information” – determined by the interviewer - as the definition of content saturation.

6) Conclusions - Is your primary suggestion that future mini grant programs should build in technical assistance around evaluation via a central entity (external evaluator)? I believe it is also important for the grant making entity or their client to determine the level of evaluation appropriate to the investment. Outcome evaluation for many of these programs is likely more expensive than the actual intervention. As one colleague, told me, do process evaluation -always, outcome evaluation --selectively and when cost effective. Some guidance to the reader on how these decisions should be made would be helpful.

Response: Excellent points. Key points were added to the Discussion, specifically on page 15, to suggest that these agencies rightfully focused on process evaluation and that similar mini-grant programs should be focused on process evaluation during the grant period: “The second purpose of this study was to inform the implementation and evaluation of this and other programs. Due to
the factors noted in the previous paragraph, any evaluation of GHC or similar mini-grants should focus on process evaluation to assess activities accomplished during the grant period, such as linear feet of trail constructed or square feet of community garden plots built. There will be a delayed effect on behavioral outcomes, such as physical activity and fruit and vegetable consumption which could be measured in subsequent years. Critical, however, is capturing baseline outcome measures at the inception of the grant against which subsequent measures could be assessed.”

We appreciate your prompt and thorough review of the manuscript.

Sincerely,

Christiaan Abildso, PhD, MPH