



Mental Health
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Roots of Hope

A Community Suicide
Prevention Project



Roots of Hope Case Study

Measurement and Evaluation

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Measurement and evaluation guiding principle: **Measure outcomes and evaluate interventions to determine their effectiveness and inform future innovations.**

INTRODUCTION

The **Measurement and Evaluation** guiding principle is about generating meaningful insights through focused planning and design. Be sure your design has adequate resources so the required data can be collected and synthesized. Also allow adequate time for measuring and evaluating the results to validate their usefulness and inform and/or help refine the overall project.

Project leads identified three key themes in connection with this principle:

- 1. Gather feedback to continually improve** – Three keys for effective measurement and evaluation include starting early, having a clear purpose, and getting the right expertise.
- 2. Assess effectiveness, show impact, and share results** – Use quantitative and qualitative data to gain insights, learn what's needed, and demonstrate your project's impact on local suicide prevention efforts.
- 3. Reframe to challenge assumptions** – Understand how the way we talk about suicide can affect change.

This case study offers examples of how local project leads applied these principles, along with the insights they gained and the recommendations they thought future Roots of Hope communities might adapt, according to their needs.

ABOUT THE CASE STUDIES

Roots of Hope is a Canadian community-led suicide prevention model. It draws on strengths and expertise within communities to design and implement tailored local initiatives. Using a collaborative approach across many sectors, it seeks to reduce the impact of suicide in each participating community.

We developed Roots of Hope with experts and communities from across Canada and around the world. Its five pillars and 13 guiding principles provide a framework that each community can adapt to their own needs.

The seven Roots of Hope case studies in this series reflect the wisdom and experience of project leaders from Early Adopter communities across the country, who represent diverse populations in a range of urban, rural, and remote settings. The series focuses on what project leads found to be effective in tailoring and implementing Roots of Hope in their communities. While each case study highlights up to three guiding principles, every project leader interviewed stressed the collective value of all 13.

The work to create and test something new is very different from implementing a proven program. We would therefore like to acknowledge Early Adopter project leads for their courage and willingness to pilot a new approach with us. We would also like to thank them for so generously sharing their wisdom and insights, which will make the work of future communities easier and more effective.



GATHER FEEDBACK TO CONTINUALLY IMPROVE

Insight #1 Develop your evaluation process and design early

Project leads emphasized the importance of thinking about their measurement and evaluation strategy early on. For one lead, “The depth and breadth of the evaluation of this work was the biggest challenge.” Those who didn’t focus on this guiding principle at the outset of the implementation process felt that it “should have been brought forward earlier” and noted that it was especially difficult to ask partners to invest time giving input on it as the project progressed.

Another project lead who recognized the value of stories and insights from community members wanted to make sure these were captured in the project evaluation. Realizing that careful planning would be necessary to do that, some respondents said they keep two kinds of questions at the top of their mind: “How are we going to get the data and the information?” and “How might we do the evaluation and gather input in more user-friendly ways?” Investing this kind of time on finding the most effective design and process for your evaluation will help prevent teams from losing data collection opportunities and insights later in the project.

Insight #2 Be clear about the focus of your evaluation

One of the most important aspects in designing and planning the evaluation and measurement process is to be clear about its focus and purpose. As one project lead noted, “To do evaluation well, there’s lots to consider with respect to targeting specific population groups.” Which subgroups, for example, do you want to include in the evaluation? Also essential is having a clear focus on the scope and number of partners your project will involve. In addition, as one project lead recognized, you sometimes “need to think differently about the evaluation process. If we had picked one or two activities to evaluate deeply, it might have given us more useful data.”

The decisions related to an initiative’s evaluation will in turn inform the data you collect – what kinds as well as where and how to obtain it. One local project chose a range of audiences and methods. They used surveys to get input from the general population and community service providers as well as interviews to collect ideas and feedback from stakeholders and people with lived and living experience. This mixed approach provided them with a rich source of information to achieve their main goal of sustaining a long-term funding commitment from their city council.

Evaluation results are not just useful for demonstrating its impact to funders and other community partners at the end of a project. They can be equally important for marking and celebrating success. As one project lead said, “To retain folks doing this work, both we and the community sometimes need to see positive progress.”



Insight #3 Dedicated expert evaluation is valuable

Several project leads saw value and challenges when using dedicated experts in their evaluation and measurement process. For some, having a skilled and knowledgeable evaluator solely for research was very helpful. As one project lead shared, “I don’t think I knew enough about what and how to evaluate work that is organic and unfolding.” Access to a provincial program evaluator every two weeks allowed her team “to think about what we needed to know and learn when planning projects.” She felt that this was “invaluable” because it enabled them to “explore and better understand Roots of Hope together.” It also ensured that evaluation remained a high priority. “I think this is an essential partnership for each part of the project.”

“By working with the evaluator, I learned to think about what we needed to know and learn when planning projects.”

For another respondent, a strong relationship with a knowledgeable evaluator helped them effectively evaluate their work as it progressed and expand their measurement and evaluation design to “include the involvement of lived experience and cultural appropriateness.”

Some project leads without access to a dedicated, full-time evaluator found this part of the project difficult. As one respondent observed, “There’s a tension between evaluation and implementation with community-based work. To expect the people who are designing and implementing Roots of Hope to also lead the evaluation is just not realistic.” Securing access to a strong evaluator who has experience with dynamic and evolving projects was strongly advised.

Any challenges that arose between project teams and evaluators occurred as a result of differing expectations or poor fit. Examples given by project leads included evaluators that either “lacked subject matter knowledge” or had no sense of a project team’s limitations. These kinds of situations sometimes created gaps between what an evaluator wanted to measure and what was “realistic or possible for those implementing the project to measure.”

Based on these insights, it is clear that access to evaluators with the necessary skills and experience could be a tremendous asset to local Roots of Hope projects.



ASSESS EFFECTIVENESS, SHOW IMPACT, AND SHARE RESULTS

Insight #4 Evaluation results can be used in many ways

Many project leads recognized the true value of evaluation and measurement in seeing how its findings were being used, identifying several ways that these were helpful to their work:

- Providing input to inform initial planning and priority setting, needed changes as the plan unfolds, and important information for future iterations of the project.
- Revealing a specific need or area of focus that can be addressed to improve service delivery. One project lead provided the following example: “Our health authority has a shared Mental Health and Addictions Information System with a Suicide tab. Through our evaluation and reflection, we discovered that clinicians providing care off-site could not enter information for remote clients, which was an important piece of data missing from the system. This led to a decision to give all these clinicians access to electronic tablets, so they could more quickly input suicide risk assessments/interventions for remote clients into the health information system.”
- Demonstrating the impact of an initiative. To continue building community awareness and the progress being made to address suicide, it is essential to confirm the effectiveness of Roots of Hope’s community-led approach, sustain and attract the commitment of strategic partners, maintain momentum and inspiration among those involved, and communicate regularly with the community.

- Providing evidence (through data and Roots of Hope stories) that initiative leads and strategic partners can use to secure long-term support and renewal beyond a project’s initial iteration.

It’s important to make sure that evaluations are ‘user-friendly’ and incorporate the voice and stories of community.

Project leads identified three other considerations to be aware of when sharing evaluation results:

- The power and value of a user-friendly approach, which includes the voices and stories of community partners and participants
- The dilemma that arises when communicating an initiative’s successes and insights; namely, that some partners and community members may interpret these as a sign that the issue of suicide has been “fixed,” so the program itself or suicide prevention as a community priority are no longer necessary. One project lead called this a paradox of evaluation: “If you get suicide prevention right, nothing happens – but no one worries about what doesn’t happen.”
- The ways to we might use the results of all evaluations. As one project lead said, “We need to take the learnings from local Roots of Hope communities and identify what it reveals about needed policy and systems change strategies.”



REFRAME TO CHALLENGE ASSUMPTIONS

Insight #5 How we talk about suicide can affect change

How we frame the issue of suicide with stakeholders and the public is another highly relevant factor. A few project leads noted that it's important to consider how we frame and talk about the issue of suicide, given that it influences how and what people may consider possible. Examples of opportunities to reframe are captured in the following quotes:

- “Opioids are seen as a huge crisis, and it’s estimated that 30 per cent of opioid deaths are due to suicide. In contrast, data tells us that approximately 11 Canadians die every day because of suicide – a number that has remained relatively unchanged for 30 years – but it is perceived as a chronic long-term issue, not a crisis.”
- “Suicide is closely coupled with mental health and addiction . . . but they are not the only reasons. This thinking reduces the focus on other factors that contribute to suicide and feeds a narrative that we can ‘fix’ suicide with a pill.”
- “What if we saw a suicide attempt as a ‘teachable moment’ and/or a prime opportunity to reframe suicidality, not as a failure or weakness but as a moment for change? What if, as Thomas Joiner observed, we acknowledged that, ‘Suicide

is not the domain of the weak’? What would be possible if people who attempt suicide were viewed as individuals who have the strength to overcome the strongest life force, [including] the desire to make their lives better?”



CONCLUSION

The measurement and evaluation guiding principle is essential for the creation of a robust Roots of Hope project and should be designed and implemented early and throughout its lifespan. It can be made particularly effective by gaining access to a skilled evaluator who is comfortable working with dynamic and evolving projects.





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