

Health Equity Zones

Evaluation & Learning Guide

This guide provides an overview of the evaluation of the selection process and offers lessons learned for local and state government agencies interested in implementing a participatory action evaluation approach. It was drafted by community members and Department of Health staff, who have co-created the initiative together over the last three years.

Written by
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Published October 2024



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Publication Number

141-179

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Participatory Action Evaluation Approach

The Health Equity Zones (HEZ) Initiative's participatory action approach to evaluation means those involved in the initiative develop the evaluation and use the findings for collective action. Participatory action evaluation shares principles with community-based research and popular education methodologies, in which individuals are recognized as both experts in their own experience and active participants in creating social change.

Our approach to evaluation centers community knowledge and self-determination, catalyzing action, and embedding the practice of reflection, dialogue, and learning into all aspects of the initiative.

Evaluation Team

The HEZ Evaluation Team was formed during the initiative's development phase to evaluate the selection process for Washington's first Health Equity Zones. The team includes community members from the Community Advisory Council and Community Workgroup, and DOH HEZ staff who support their leadership. The Evaluation Team met every other month from 2022 through 2024 to gather, analyze, and review data. Members reflected on what it looks like to meaningfully support community leadership to create evaluation questions that would drive data collection and measures of success (see Appendix A).

Evaluation Questions

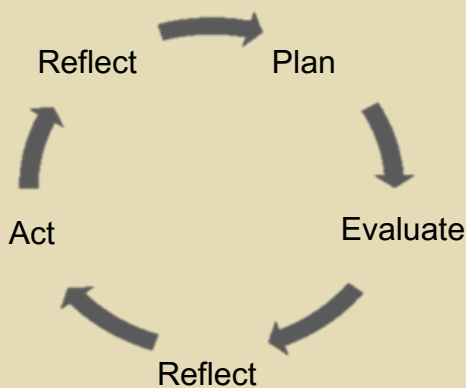
- Is participation in HEZ accessible and inclusive for community members?
- Does HEZ center communities most impacted by inequities?
- Does HEZ support community decision-making and ownership?
- Does HEZ establish and strengthen connections and relationships?
- Does HEZ change systems, structures, and practices that perpetuate inequity?
- Is HEZ responsive and accountable to community feedback?

Zone Selection Evaluation

Through surveys, interactive reflection activities, and key informant interviews, the Evaluation Team assessed community engagement and participatory decision-making strategies used in zone selection and identified strengths and improvement areas. Members also engaged in skill-share trainings on various topics such as interviewing techniques and thematic analysis. They used an iterative cycle to analyze and review data, share results, and direct action on improvements.

Participatory Action Evaluation Cycle

Our participatory action evaluation cycle involves five steps: plan, evaluate, reflect, act, and reflect. It is guided by the values of collectivity, reciprocity, dialogue, and praxis.



Collectivity: Shared commitment to collaboration.

Reciprocity: Mutual learning and exchange of ideas.

Dialogue: Deepen understanding through open discussion.

Praxis: Reflection and action go hand in hand.

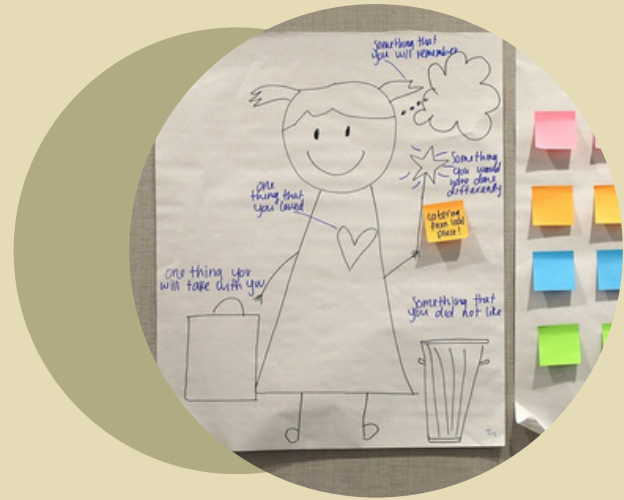
Data Walk

In 2024, the Evaluation Team convened the Community Advisory Council and Community Workgroup to share back the results of the two-year evaluation of zone selection and identify key recommendations or actions to improve the HEZ Initiative. Members designed an interactive Data Walk activity, in which participants rotated through topical data stations to reflect on the findings. The Data Walk promoted collective problem-solving as groups discussed areas of improvement and contextualized the findings by sharing their interpretations of why an outcome occurred.

Following the Data Walk activity, participants reviewed key recommendations drafted by the Evaluation Team, based on the findings and used stickers to indicate whether they agreed or disagreed with a recommendation. The group used consensus-based decision-making to reach decisions on changes to recommendations. These recommendations were then included in the HEZ Five-Year Strategic Plan.

Data Equity Principles

Our participatory approach to evaluation shifts decision-making to communities by engaging communities at each stage of the data life cycle. Through co-creating the HEZ Initiative over the last three years with community members and together reimagining the role of data in advancing equity, we have identified the following principles to guide our approach:



Recognize that data collection is socially constructed and reflects the biases and priorities of those who gather it.

Center the experiences of communities excluded, harmed, or oppressed by data systems.

Uplift community strengths and assets through data.

Value all forms of knowledge as data, including stories, oral histories, cultural teachings, and ancestral wisdom.

Leverage data to transform systems, create social change, and build community power.

Respect participant consent and autonomy to decide how their experiences are represented or included.

Support data sovereignty through community ownership and governance of data.

Hurdles & Learnings

Throughout the process of co-creating the HEZ Initiative and health equity zone selection process, staff experienced several moments that led to important learnings and points of reflection. The examples included below show hurdles we experienced along the way as well as the learnings that came from staff and community partner reflection.

TIME INVESTMENT

Engaging community members in the evaluation process is a long-term commitment. Establish a shared understanding of timeline and commitment, regularly check in about pacing and capacity, and offer less time-intensive engagement options.

Time Investment Example

The Evaluation Team led a six-month interviewing project. Members developed the interview guide and protocol, conducted interviews, and completed a thematic analysis. They formed an analysis subcommittee to review and code data and then report back the results to the full group for discussion. This allowed those with an interest in data analysis to participate at a meaningful level, while others who did not join the subcommittee could still provide input.

“We want to hear as many community voices as possible, so we have to be clear about the time commitment and capacity. Then community members can decide if they want to be part of it.”

- Community Advisory Council Member

POWER DYNAMICS

Assembling an evaluation team that represents different groups can introduce power dynamics among participants. Affirm the knowledge and expertise of each team member, use facilitation and training to support collaboration and inclusion, and provide multiple avenues for input.



Power Dynamics Example

Members of the Evaluation Team participated in a skill-share training on interviewing. The goal of the training was to encourage members to share their knowledge and expertise with each other. Between community and staff participants, there was reciprocal learning where community members shared about the importance of confidentiality and how to build trust in interviews and staff shared about institutional review boards and ethics requirements.

“The interview analysis process was confusing at first and then became clearer, it felt like teamwork. Everyone was contributing their own skills.”

- Community Advisory Council Member

DATA OWNERSHIP

Capacities and infrastructure may not be in place to facilitate community data ownership. Open a dialogue with community partners about their goals for data ownership and governance, ask how they want to be supported, and communicate transparently about how data that are gathered will be used, stored, and stewarded.

Data Ownership Example

The HEZ Indigenous Advisory Panel created the selection process for the Zone for Native Communities. The process invited Native communities from across Washington to complete a submission form. The form included a data sovereignty commitment statement that described how information in the forms would be used, protected, and stewarded to support submitters in self-determining what information to share (see Appendix B). It also referenced agency retention policy and public records law that govern the data collected.



Differences in resources and access to analytic tools can be a barrier to collaboration. Determine whether analytic tools are necessary for a project or if there are alternative options that are more accessible and sustainable for community partners. If analytic tools are necessary, identify financial resources that can be allocated to community partners.

ANALYSIS TOOLS



Analysis Tools Example

To analyze interview data, the Evaluation Team considered using Atlas.TI, a qualitative data software; however, the user-based licenses were a barrier to community members accessing the software. They wouldn't be able to sustain the cost of the software after the project ended. Instead of using software, members manually coded and annotated interview transcripts. To collaborate, the team coded in pairs and used mind maps to group themes.

“As staff, we often take for granted the software we have access. We shouldn't assume community partners want or need the same software for collaboration. It's important to ask – that's part of supporting data sovereignty.”

- Staff Member

PERCEPTION OF RIGOR

A participatory approach can be seen as less rigorous than traditional approaches. Articulate the value of participatory approaches with first-hand accounts from participants and counter false perceptions by documenting methodology and identifying measures with high communication power.

Perception of Rigor Example

The Washington Legislature mandates a report be completed every two years, detailing outcome measures that demonstrate project success. Our first report focused on the process of zone selection, using measures that underscore the impact of community leadership, such as outreach demographics that show the breadth of applicants and quotes from Community Advisory Council members that capture their experiences.


“Evaluation invites community feedback and reflection throughout the process and uses our experiences to change things for the better.”


- Community Workgroup Member


Community Partner Key Takeaways





The following key takeaways summarize community partner perspectives on evaluation and offer recommendations for how local and state government agencies can implement a participatory action evaluation approach.

 Involve community partners in the evaluation process as early as possible and at each step in the data lifecycle.


 Decide the evaluation structure together with community partners - co-create rather than pre-determine the process.

 Recognize that good things take time - participatory evaluation takes longer, but the end result will have more buy-in and community voice.

 Ensure collective decision-making throughout the process, especially regarding how data are collected and used to take action.

 Support collaboration among community partners where each person can contribute their expertise and more voices can be represented.

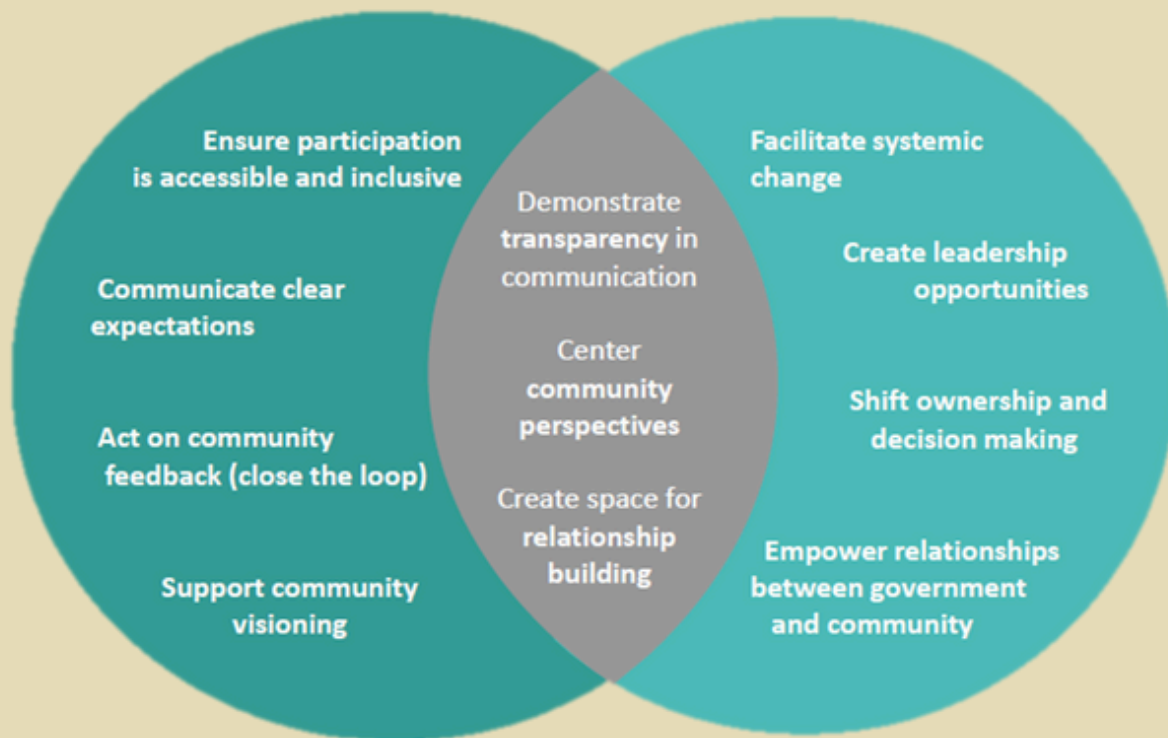
 Provide opportunities for in-person connection to gather and review data in more accessible and interactive formats.

 Use evaluation to consistently invite community feedback and hold space for reflection and learning together.

Appendix A

Evaluation Reflection Activity

What does it mean to meaningfully support community leadership?



Community Partner Perspectives

DOH Staff Perspectives

Appendix B

Data Sovereignty Commitment

The Health Equity Zones Initiative is committed to honoring the inherent rights of Indigenous Peoples to govern the collection, ownership, and application of their own data.

The following statements describe how the information provided in submission forms will be used, protected, and stewarded to support submitters in self-determining what information to share.

The information you provide in this submission form will only be used for the purposes of zone selection by a review panel of Native-identifying individuals. All submission forms will be stored securely using cloud services and protected by encryption. Information will be deleted one year after zone selection per state agency retention policy. As a state agency, we are subject to public records requests, which means information provided in submission forms could be made available to the public if it were requested.

To maintain transparency during the submission process, we will provide ongoing updates on the total number of submissions received. Submitters can choose to opt-in to share additional information for the purposes of collaboration with other submitters from the same community or geographic area. This is completely optional and will not affect your submission form review.