Department of Family and Consumer Sciences

Understanding Evidence-Based Community Health Programming in Extension

August 2025
***Lydia Hoskins**, Extension Specialist*
***Lauren Woods**, Extension Agent, Knox County, TNCEP*

Evidence-based community programs help Extension do more than just educate—they position us to deliver real-life solutions. When we employ strategies backed by credible research, we strengthen our ability to improve public health outcomes, foster community trust and steward resources effectively. As Extension educators, we play a critical role in adapting evidence-based models to local contexts, delivering them with fidelity and evaluating their effectiveness. This is how we ensure our work is impactful, trusted and responsive to the dynamic needs of the communities we serve. It is also how we bring scientific credibility to the table and contribute to sustainable change where people live, work and learn.

What Is Evidence-Based Programming?

Evidence-based programming (EBP) refers to programs and practices that are backed by rigorous research and have demonstrated effectiveness through evaluation. These practices are not just theoretically sound—they are practical tools that have been tested and refined in real-world settings. In public health and Extension alike, they represent the gold standard in program design and delivery. Tools such as randomized control trials, health surveillance systems and program evaluation are used in many fields to provide evidence to support practical interventions.

Domains of Evidence-Based Practice

- **Medical Field** – Informed by randomized controlled trials, meta-analyses and clinical practice guidelines.
- **Public Health** – Guided by population-level data, surveillance systems and epidemiological studies.
- **Extension** – Built on applied research, program evaluation and research-informed community education strategies.

What Does Evidence-Based Look Like in Extension?

In the context of Extension, EBP means:

- Identifying priority needs using local data and community input.
- Translating public health research into programs that are culturally and contextually relevant.
- Delivering programs that are proven to work and adjusting them to fit local circumstances without compromising core components.
- Collecting and using data to demonstrate effectiveness, build trust and secure future investment.

What Counts as Evidence?

Evidence is the body of facts or information that supports the validity of a claim or action.

- **Quantitative evidence**
    - Community Health Needs Assessments (CHNAs): Identify priority health concerns, service gaps and barriers to care.
    - County Health Rankings and Roadmaps: Offer standardized indicators such as obesity rates, physical inactivity, clinical care access and mortality rates.
    - Social Determinants of Health (SDOH): Data on education, income, housing, transportation and food access help target upstream factors that influence health behaviors and outcomes.
    - Program metrics: Pre/post surveys, attendance, knowledge gains, behavior change indicators and return on investment.
    - Includes incidence, prevalence, morbidity, and mortality rates for chronic and infectious diseases, helping target high-risk populations and guide resource allocation.
    - Epidemiological data (e.g., disease prevalence, risk factors, health disparities).

- Qualitative evidence provides insight into program relevance and can influence policy, increase buy-in and support funding efforts.
    - Participant success stories demonstrate individual or family-level impact.
    - Focus groups and interviews reveal cultural relevance, perceived benefits, barriers, and areas for improvement.
    - Stakeholder and partner testimonials and community feedback support engagement, funding, and local relevance.

In program planning, pre-program data may indicate needs or gaps, while post-program data reflects outcomes such as behavior change, knowledge gain and return on investment.

As Extension professionals, we are uniquely positioned to interpret and integrate multiple forms of evidence, ensuring programs are both effective and adaptable while remaining true to their original intent.

What Informs It?

The Foundations of Evidence-Based Programming

Several core elements guide effective evidence-based work in Extension:

- **Fidelity** – Delivering a program as similar as possible to the way it was designed, to ensure it is effective. Maintaining the integrity of key program components that contribute to effectiveness.
- **Implementation** – Applying evidence-based strategies to delivery with integrity in a way that respects community context, culture, and logistics.
- **Evaluation** – Systematically assessing program outcomes, participant satisfaction, and process indicators to modify, maintain, or improve program delivery and impact.
- **Dissemination** – Sharing both negative and positive findings and lessons learned to scale successful interventions and support collective impact.

Why Evaluation Must Be Continuous

Evaluation is not a one-time task—it is a continual process that helps us:

- Ensure programs remain aligned with objectives.
- Respond to changing community dynamics.
- Inform stakeholders and funders.
- Make data-driven improvements for greater impact.

Dissemination and implementation science further allow us to examine how programs can be adapted effectively while preserving what makes them successful. This is particularly important in Extension, where every community is different, and a "one size fits all" approach rarely works.

Resources for Evidence-Based Programming Planning

- CDC's Evidence-Based Practice Guidelines
- USDA/NIFA Program Planning Tools
- Extension Foundation Impact Collaborative
- National REACH Center and SNAP-Ed Toolkit

References

Brownson, R. C., Colditz, G. A., & Proctor, E. K. (Eds.). (2017). *Dissemination and implementation research in health: Translating science to practice* (2nd ed.). Oxford University Press. doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780190683214.001.0001

Tolley, E. E., Ulin, P. R., Mack, N., Robinson, E. T., & Succop, S. M. (2016). *Qualitative methods in public health: A field guide for applied research* (2nd ed.). Jossey-Bass.

UTIA.TENNESSEE.EDU

Real. Life. Solutions.™

D265B 12/25 25-0477 Programs in agriculture and natural resources, 4-H youth development, family and consumer sciences, and resource development. University of Tennessee Institute of Agriculture, U.S. Department of Agriculture and county governments cooperating. UT Extension provides equal opportunities in programs and employment.