Wisconsin Evaluation Collaborative

Serve Wisconsin: Evaluation Report

Prepared by Nicole Bowman and Annalee Good | December 2019

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Report Information

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About the Wisconsin Evaluation Collaborative

The Wisconsin Evaluation Collaborative (WEC) is housed at the Wisconsin Center for Education Research at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. WEC's team of evaluators supports youth-serving organizations and initiatives through culturally responsive and rigorous program evaluation. Learn more at http://www.wec.wceruw.org.

Introduction to the Study

The Wisconsin National and Community Service Board (WNCSB), or Serve Wisconsin (SW), is the State Service Commission for the state of Wisconsin and is funded through a Federal Commission support grant from the Corporation for National and Community Service (CNCS) and matching funds from the State of Wisconsin. SW was founded in 1994 (Serve Wisconsin, 2017) and has an organizational mission to "…promote service, provide training and allocate resources to programs that enrich lives and communities through service and volunteerism" (SW website, 2018). Since 2015, the Wisconsin Evaluation Collaborative (WEC) has provided evaluation technical assistance (TA) and capacity building services to SW and SW programs (grantees). WEC is housed in the Wisconsin Center for Education Research (WCER), which is housed within the School of Education at the University of Wisconsin-Madison (UW).

In 2018, SW asked WEC to review the utilization and impact of evaluation technical assistance (TA) and support services for to the AmeriCorps programs being implemented in Wisconsin. Training and support from both WEC and SW have been included in this study to better understand the value, use, and areas of development for TA to AmeriCorps grantees. The study reviewed technical assistance data from participants who engaged in WEC or SW technical assistance sessions from July 1, 2015 through June 30, 2019. Nicole Bowman, PhD, was the evaluation's Primary Investigator (PI) for the study. She worked with Ms. Jeanne Duffy, the Executive Director of Serve Wisconsin, and two SW staff members. Additionally, Annalee Good, PhD, Co-Director of WEC and co-PI helped with the study conceptualization, administrative supports, and contributed to the report findings. Further discussion about this report or a copy of this report may be obtained through Ms. Jeanne Duffy.

Designing and Implementing the Serve Wisconsin Evaluation Study

The goal of the SW evaluation study is to understand how technical assistance from SW and WEC has been utilized and its impact to SW funded AmeriCorps programs. Technical assistance, as defined and prioritized by SW and WEC staff, includes the Commission Investment Funds (CIF) guidance/definition, "Technical assistance should be designed to strengthen subgrantees' ability to collect and utilize programs and build evidence. Activities may include developing or refining logic models, data collection systems, developing and testing data collection instruments, conducting evaluability assessments, developing evaluation plans and conducting evaluations, and evidence review processes." The SW technical assistance study also incorporated the purpose of the CIF funding and performance areas defined by CNCS (National and Community Service Act, 1990). SW has prioritized CNCS performance area #3 (Strengthen the subgrantees' ability to conduct high quality evaluation to improve programs and build evidence) CNCS priority performance area #2 (Improve the Commission's capacity to design, deliver, and measure the effectiveness of training and technical assistance).

Utilization-focused (Patton, 2008 and 2013) and culturally responsive (Casillas and Trochim, 2015; Hood, Hopson, and Kirkhart, 2015) mixed-method design was created to allow areas of inquiry to include specificity of programming area, context of the community in which the program was being implemented, and the ability to choose study participants that represented diversity in program size, geographic location, and demographics of the community in which the program was being implemented i.e. race, ethnicity, gender, age. The SW evaluation questions developed for this study are:

1. **What evaluation technical assistance services were most utilized by SW and programs (grantees)?**
2. **Which evaluation technical assistance services were most impactful with SW and programs (grantees) relative to building capacity and skills for producing their own higher quality evaluations to improve programs and build evidence? (Note: Using CIF Priority Performance Area #2 and #3 and using CNCS definition/guidance on technical assistance noted earlier)**
3. **Were there aspects of the evaluation technical assistance services that were insufficient, fell short, or left gaps? How can technical assistance services be improved?**
4. **Did technical assistance services result in any noteworthy. but unintended positive or negative, consequences that were not previously defined by SW or CNCS?**

Data collection was carried out in several phases. Question #1 was addressed between winter 2018 – May 2019 and represents the study's first line of inquiry. Reviewing key documents, attendance records, internal software and other meeting notes, and centralized calendars from both SW and WEC required significant human resources. Five staff members were tasked with finding, coding, and analyzing these documents from July 2015 – June 2019 to produce a SW and WEC technical assistance database (excel document). This database is on file with Serve Wisconsin. This was a critical foundational document that helped provide a big-picture overview of the types of technical assistance offerings, participating organizations, and repeat participants of technical assistance sessions.

Next, questions #2 and #3 were addressed by reviewing key documents (grantee reports), evaluation data from technical assistance sessions, and by providing a survey

(May – August 2019) to any participant utilizing technical assistance activities. In May 2019, the SW evaluation study survey was distributed online to 149 participants who attended at least one TA session between 2015-2019 using Survey Monkey (online survey software). The participant database was developed using attendance and registration information that SW and WEC provided. This 26-question survey asked questions around three areas: building capacity and skills related to gathering and using evaluation data for conducting local evaluations; building an evidence base; and improving program management. The survey instrument is on file with Serve Wisconsin. When the survey closed in August 2019, 51 people completed the survey, a 34.2% response rate. A full report of the Survey Monkey survey data and a survey summary report is on file with SW. Information from this second area of inquiry informed the final area of inquiry, the fall 2019 SW participant interviews.

Finally, question #4 was addressed through key informant interviews. There were 11 in-depth interviewees chosen because they were the "highest participators" (taking 5 or more TA sessions annually over the four years) of technical assistance sessions from across the years (2015 – 2019). This 18-question survey asked questions around three areas: background of the interviewee, impacts of technical assistance, and future AmeriCorps TA planning. In total, six of the 11 participated in interviews, a 54% response rate. Transcripts were typed (70 pages) and summarized into a report and is on file with SW. The interview instrument is on file with Serve Wisconsin. Together, these three areas of inquiry and the related data generated from the aforementioned instruments are the basis for the findings of the SW technical assistance study, which will be shared subsequently.

Study Findings

1. What evaluation technical assistance services were most utilized by Serve Wisconsin and programs (grantees)?

From April – July 2019, the Wisconsin Evaluation Collaborative (WEC) staff worked with SW staff to populate a "technical assistance to grantees" participant database. Hundreds of key documents, paper and electronic files, technical assistance survey and evaluation data, and participation records from an online webinar or program software were reviewed to gather data. During this time several quality assurance checks were done by SW and WEC research, technical assistance, and leadership team members to ensure consistency, accuracy, and comprehensiveness of the excel workbook participant data.

The TA workbook was built to track levels of TA as calculated by type of grant (planning, formula, competitive, and other). The category for "other" was determined by outreach or webinars that were done not related to a specific grant. TA was also coded by provider (SW, WEC, or Both). Type of training (face-to-face, webinar, or other – phone) was tracked along with the length, date, and topic area of each training. Individual participants and their organizations of employment were tracked by each year that TA was provided:

- First year of TA: July 1, 2015 – June 23, 2016
- Second year of TA: July 1, 2016 – June 30, 2017
- Third year of TA: July 1, 2017 – June 30, 2018
- Fourth year of TA: July 1, 2018 – June 30, 2019

From July 2105 to December 2018, a total of 256 hours (15,340 minutes) of TA was provided in 88 sessions offered by WEC and SW to Wisconsin residents. One hundred twenty-nine organizations and 283 participants (unduplicated count) attended these TA sessions during this timeframe. From 2015 – 2019, the number of participants in TA sessions and number of participating organizations increased by 36%

and 53%, respectively, on average over time. During this timeframe, one-to-one TA by WEC was offered 34 times, TA for competitive grants was offered 25 times, other TA was provided 18 times, and TA for formula grants was offered 11 times. From 2015 – 2018, types of TA services that were most utilized by participants were:

- 56% attending face-to-face TA sessions
- 34% attending webinar TA sessions
- 10% attending other TA sessions (phone TA and/or web TA one-on-one sessions)

TA sessions were offered on 19 different topics (unduplicated count). TA session topics included: disabilities, evidence and evaluation, financial, grant writing, grants management, membership, monitoring, National Service Summits (increase awareness of national service), new program staff, new program training, OnCorps, program development, program management, program application (AKA the RFP), recruitment (recruit new AmeriCorps programs), rules and regulations, trauma-informed care, and WEC one-to-one sessions. The TA session topics most frequently offered were:

- Program Application = 35% of TA offerings
- Evidence and Evaluation = 11% of TA offerings
- National Service Summits = 11% of TA offerings

From the summer 2019 SW survey, nearly two-thirds of respondents prefer a one- or two-day face-to-face workshop (60%) to one-to-one technical assistance phone sessions (29%) and online webinars (11%). Most respondents also prefer technical assistance sessions to be led by a **combination** of SW and WEC consultants (89%) to SW staff only (6%) or WEC consultants only (3%). When asked to explain this preference, many respondents shared the combination of expertise and perspective was essential to blend and balance the research with the administration and compliance of program requirements.

Participants in TA sessions were active in attending the SW and WEC offerings. The range for participants to attend TA sessions was between one and six times annually. Over the 2015 – 2019 timeline, 11 individuals participated in TA sessions five or six times annually. The TA sessions that participants most attended from 2015 – 2019 were:

- National Service Summits = 16.5% of total workshop participant attendance
- Grants Management = 13% of total workshop participant attendance
- Program Management and grant writing = 10% each of total workshop participant attendance

Interestingly, even though the TA session on trauma-informed care was offered only twice, it was well attended and counted for 5% of participation levels. Trauma informed care trainings were attended by SW staff and members (40-50 program directors) per the SW Executive Director. Consequently, the potential for future prospective attendees is high (hundreds of members). Trauma informed care was a high interest topic given there were several other sessions (e.g. new program staff, membership or membership management, evidence and evaluation) that were offered more frequently but had lower participant percentage attendance levels per topic area.

In summary, this quantitative data provides important information on participation and attendance rates, but participation is different from utilization. This study was conducted to interrogate how participants utilized the information, skills, and resources learned in the TA sessions to change how they work when administering and providing direct service through their AmeriCorps programming. Moving onto other findings, we will begin to better understand through survey and in-depth interview data what AmeriCorps program participants utilized in their work in the months and years after they completed the TA sessions.

2. Which evaluation technical assistance services were most impactful with Serve Wisconsin and programs (grantees) in terms of building capacity and skills for producing their own higher-quality evaluations to improve programs and build evidence?

From the SW survey (summer 2019), when asked about the **strengths** of the technical assistance sessions, respondents shared a variety of open-ended responses. Many appreciated both the individual expertise available and the time expended for personalized responses to their questions. Others enjoyed access to best practices and materials, as well as the opportunity to network. Some also appreciated the convenience of offering the sessions remotely and ability to fit the trainings in their schedule. Approximately two-thirds of survey respondents shared they are using performance measures (69%), meeting grant evaluation requirements (65%), and logic models (62%). Another half are also using grant basics (50%), navigating the program application (46%), and building an evidence base (46%). Less than half are using culturally responsive evaluation (42%) and program alignment (31%). Program alignment levels may be due to TA workshop participants already having program aligned applications. Frequency varied from "as needed" to "regularly". While all recipients had overwhelming praise for the utility and access of the SW technical assistance, interviewees noted the one-on-one phone (and email where available) technical assistance was most impactful. One interviewee remarked,

> "This one-on-one technical assistance has been a godsend in trying to put together these program applications, what they're looking for, what they want us to do."

Secondarily, interviewees mentioned the benefit of longer workshops with dedicated writing and reflection periods. Among these technical assistance formats, the opportunity to learn technical and nuanced details about rules and regulations, as well as developing logic models, were frequently cited as essential technical assistance topics.

When asked if technical assistance sessions helped their program **produce higher quality data**, interviewees shared a diversity of perspectives. Some noted the sessions allowed them to revise their phrasing, which resulted in better data collection. One interviewee noted,

> "I spent a lot of time using our free hours... revising our survey, editing questions so that it wasn't so long, and that we were actually getting answers from -- that match the evaluation questions that we had in the beginning. So we have lots better data now than we did before."

Some other interviewees shared they had not attended technical assistance sessions with a focus on data collection, or the scope of the training was at a high level. One interviewee shared the following,

> "We're looking for like pre- and post-surveys. And getting to assistance, and knowing what the right questions are to ask, or what's the best way to administer a pre-/post-survey based on what our program is designed at this time to do. I feel like when you're getting into specific components of that, I don't think we've gotten that level of help. But again, at a high-level general format, I think it was super helpful. Because we need that high-level information. But now that we're getting into the specifics, I am thinking no."

This specific and uniquely applied support for local programs is why the one-on-one TA is offered by SW through the WEC partnership.

When asking participants about how TA helped them to **strengthen their program evaluations and build a stronger evidence base to measure their impact**, interviewees shared their diverse experiences. For those who responded affirmatively, they credited the ongoing nature of the assistance with the opportunity to continue diving deeper

into the work. One interviewee shared,

> "What really seems to help me is the... concrete, the stuff in writing that's specific our program, that I can look back upon a year later, or even six months later, or three months later, or whatever the time is that I get back to it and kind of go okay this is where we were three years ago because I've got it sitting over on my table over there. And it started with the logic model, then it got developed a little bit more as a plan, and now it's kind of moving forward and getting more detailed and broader. Broader and at the same time more specific as it moves forward... from, I want to say from one paragraph to a page, to a couple pages, to like a chapter. So, it's growing you in the right direction, and that's really what benefits me. Because not only can I look at it and reflect upon it but it's also something that I can share with others and say this is what we're talking about, this is where we're headed. And it's specific to our program."

For those with less positive experiences, suggestions of structural challenges with the funding agency started to arise around this set of questions. One interviewee shared,

> "CNCS puts us into this box. And the hosts like, have great ideas, but their ideas don't necessarily fit into the AmeriCorps box. And next thing you know, you're...trying to figure out how you can make everything work together. And just trying to explain to the host site, and even the members in some situations, about 'this is why we have to collect what we're collecting. This is why we have to do what we're doing, because we have this mold that we have to fit to receive our funding,' but yet still trying to meet the needs of the community. It's like trying to make everybody happy, and sometimes you can't make everybody happy."

This insight into the restrictive nature of CNCS requirements about evidence, evaluation design, reporting requirements, and growing their evidence base was a source of frustration which will be discussed further in the discussion and recommendations section of the report.

Most survey respondents were able to share ways in which the technical assistance sessions helped them **build capacity**. Many appreciated learning program basics such as recruitment, enrollment, and other general knowledge. Many respondents also appreciated the theory of change and logic model exercises. Others shared that it improved the efficiency of their implementation and streamlined their focus. Some also suggested that it improved their data collection, while others found it improved their evaluation techniques and understanding the impact of their programming. Most interviewees noted the technical assistance sessions have led to increased capacity, skills, and competencies. One interviewee shared these sessions help in "looking forward into the future to really make sure that we're continuing to grow and not just sort of maintain where we are." Others commented on improved member management and better service tracking. Two interviewees also noted the addition of third-party evaluators to complement the SW technical assistance, resulting in utilization of external evaluators as a component they viewed as a strength and support necessary to their programming.

Interviewees offered a range of examples when discussing more specifically examples of when technical assistance had **changed or impacted their programming**. For some, they again noted their logic models and overall evaluation plans as they organized and strengthened the content to align it with their actual program operations. Other interviewees shared such exposure to the rules and regulations referenced above both increased their confidence in helping their own program participants, but also allowed them to do so more efficiently and effectively. More specifically one shared,

> "[Technical assistance] really helps us clarify for our members and partners what is allowable, whereas they're interested in being as specific as possible, and not being general, because when we're general, we miss opportunities to help the community."

Respondents were asked to **rate** the impactfulness of technical assistance in helping them use data to inform program improvements on a scale of 1-8, with 8 being least impactful. Navigating the program application, culturally responsive evaluations, and grant basics scored highest at 3.2, 3.8, and 3.9, respectively. Meeting grant evaluation requirements was rated at 4.7, building an evidence base at 5.0, and program alignment at 5.2. Logic models and performance measures rated lowest at 5.6 each. Many respondents shared ways in which the technical assistance sessions helped them feel more comfortable and skilled in conducting high quality evaluations. Many shared that evaluations were not in their skillset nor an area of their professional comfort, but access to experts and time to ask personalized questions made a large difference. However, even given this, many respondents are hoping for more training and consultation time. Some others suggested they were now comfortable with the level and would hire out additional evaluation work if necessary.

Respondents were also asked to **rank** the impactfulness of technical assistance from 1-6, with 6 being least impactful. Governing documents and fiscal duties/reporting requirements scored highest at 2.9 and 3.0, respectively. Monitoring was ranked 3.5, systems training at 3.9, and national service criminal history checks at 4.0. Member management ranked lowest at 4.3. Some survey respondents were also able to share ways in which the technical assistance sessions helped them **gather data** and build local evidence. Some respondents shared the utility of new resources, while others shared the sessions helped them refine existing tools. Some others also shared the sessions helped their focus, goals, and objectives. Most respondents shared that they use national service criminal history checks (80%) most often among program management technical assistance. Approximately half also use member management (56%), monitoring (52%), systems training (48%), fiscal duties/reporting requirements (48%), and governing documents (48%). Frequency varied from as needed to regularly.

The participants overwhelmingly shared the value, use, and impacts of TA at the sessions and afterwards in their workplaces. Behaviors changed initially, and some behaviors were sustained for years after TA sessions. A number of interviewees commented about the initial excitement and engagement that follows an initial technical assistance session. One remarked,

> "There is an immediate sense of pride in our version of AmeriCorps...and how that plays an important role in the state for...who traditionally has access to service, and what systemic structures help more people have access to being in service."

Another commented on the power of supportive colleagues and networks to share their program experiences with,

> "I really think we are like a true dysfunctional family in that we're all going through everything together, and we're experiencing similar struggles, or if somebody is struggling in that one area, somebody else is most likely struggling in that area too, and hopefully they survive, and they can give tips and tricks of how you can keep the ship afloat in a certain area."

In terms of more sustained behavior, several interviewees shared their increased confidence about rules and regulations, processes, evaluation, and more – with continued attendance over time. One interviewee shared,

> "[The technical assistance events] give you a good base, and then you go back the next year, and you're like okay, I can stand on the base I built last year, and I can just reinforce that knowledge that I got, so yeah, definitely, I would say they sustain understanding and increase understanding over the years."

Some interviews also referenced the continual utility of examples and resources, especially around building their logic model. One even noted that this knowledge was transferred to other federal projects. In many instances, survey respondents and interviewees also shared that they were able to train others at their workplaces or support new staff that to help onboard them with all the complexities of running an AmeriCorps program. More than two-thirds of survey respondents shared feedback of their

gratitude for TA service and supports. For example, one comment was,

> "Rarely do you see a group SO COMPLETELY focused on the success of someone else."

In summary, as TA participants reflect on the many years of participation in TA sessions, there is strong evidence of their deepened understanding for the topics and content as applied to their local context. They write better proposals, have refined their logic models, built a stronger evidence base, and have competency in program evaluation as a result of TA offerings and ongoing supports.

PROGRAM SPOTLIGHT: PARTNERS FOR AFTER SCHOOL SUCCESS (PASS)

PASS serves youth in Dane County through academic tutoring and afterschool programming with the goal of supporting school engagement and academic learning. PASS is run by Dane County Human Ser-vices in partnership with 13 community-based agencies. In addition to participation in TA workshops, webinars and 1:1 consultation, PASS also engages WEC as its external evaluator. PASS is an effective illus-tration of how AmeriCorps programs in Wisconsin are growing in their capacity to use evaluation to-ward program improvement. It has made critical shifts in both programming and performance measures based on evaluation findings that have brought better alignment across program design and efforts to build an evidence base. For example, through an evaluative process of testing, refining, and aligning outcomes and indicators to its theory of action, PASS has also been able to move up the evidence con-tinuum from "evidence informed" to "evidence based" as it has shown consistent and statistically sig-nificant positive impacts on an important measure of school engagement (school attendance) with the youth it serves.

3. Were there areas that the evaluation technical assistance services fell short or left gaps? How can technical assistance services be improved?

From the SW survey (summer 2019), approximately two-thirds of respondents indicated they did not have challenges or frustrations during technical assistance sections (63%). However, for the remaining one-third of respondents who did have challenges or frustrations, many cited insufficient time for questions or related to the session's format and having to digest very dense content. Some shared that too generalized or vague content was an issue, or that they faced logistical challenges due to contract terms. Some others suggested scheduling and travel were also issues.

When asked whether technical assistance sessions helped them and their staff design and implement stronger program evaluations, interviewees shared experiences that might offer insights on how to address TA participant needs. For those who responded about how it took time to build capacity, stories of alignment for both evaluation plans and data collection came to light. One interviewee shared,

> "Previously, a lot of our outcomes were technically outputs and it was just kind of a hot mess, and so our evaluation and what we get out of that is -- it's very in line now."

Interviewees stated how they grew over time and the more technical assistance they received, the more comfortable they felt about moving into new evaluation areas or more deeply into current areas (e.g. basic logic model over time has more detail, changed with data and implementation information, etc.). For those who felt their programming remained stagnant, interviewees remarked they needed additional perspective and expertise regarding capacity building, sometimes at a more specific or ongoing level than the current SW technical assistance arrangement would permit. Being, "face-to-face" or "having more time with seasoned grantees to work on real projects or evaluation challenges" (versus a more basic logic model or evidence base 101 training) was remarked on by high participators (ex. those TA participants attending sessions 5 or more times annually) as something they would have liked more of.

Survey respondents shared a variety of ways technical assistance sessions could be improved. Many respondents shared they would prefer more group activities, conversations with peers, or opportunities for networking. Others suggested more use of virtual technology such as web-conferencing would be appropriate and preferred. Several respondents also requested more time with the experts. A few also suggested the consultants needed additional guidance on AmeriCorps program requirements to improve the accuracy of their guidance. Additionally, more information and training on program basics including enrollment and retention was suggested. Use of more in-person or virtual connections, networking and making local connections outside of Madison, and connecting with stakeholders, including other AmeriCorps grantees more regularly would be a welcomed infrastructure of support. Some also suggested more assistance to support low-income members, those with disabilities, populations needing trauma- (or healing-) informed programming, and understanding how to better address negative program feedback.

Looking to future improvements and new content areas, survey respondents shared many recommendations such as greater diversity and collaboration of speakers. Other respondents echoed the videoconference and interactive suggestions so networking and more personalized feedback could be received. Some requested detailed information on financials for non-financial people, timelines, and step-by-step instructions. Others requested specific topics such as inclusion auditing, sustainability, and living allowances. Another requested more information on applying research to make strategic decisions across their programming. Technical upkeep such as removing old documents from BaseCamp was also suggested.

4. Did technical assistance services result in any noteworthy but unintended consequences that were not defined by Serve Wisconsin or the Corporation for National & Community Service noted earlier?

The value of TA and utilization of TA provided interesting responses from participants when asked about "use" and "value" of TA as separate areas of inquiry. The value of TA was about what "interested", "was important", or "of interest or benefit" to learn about as part of the overall TA experience. Related to the value of TA was what participants actually "used" in their professional settings after TA sessions were attended (e.g. TA workshop or webinar offerings) or after TA supports were received (e.g. what was learned in one-on-one TA). Hence the difference in "value" and "use" of TA provided an interesting shift in the evaluation data that was communicated by the study participants. For instance, when survey respondents were asked which areas of **grant technical assistance** are most valuable – even when used less often – responses shifted. Most respondents found meeting grant evaluation requirements to be most valuable at 70% (versus 65% initially). Building an evidence base scored higher here (65% versus 46%), while performance measures rated lower (52% versus 69%). Logic models scored significantly lower as well (30% versus 62%). One-third or less of respondents found value in culturally responsive evaluation (35% versus 42%), grant basics (26% versus 50%), navigating the program application (22% versus 46%), and program alignment (17% versus 31%). Approximately one-quarter of respondents shared additional feedback on the value, use, and impacts of the grant technical assistance. While many expressed the overall utility of all sessions, a number also pointed out the essentialness and value in culturally responsive evaluation. Approximately one-quarter of respondents shared additional feedback on the value, use, and impacts of the program management technical assistance. Many commented on the rules and complicated nature of the programming. Others were grateful to have had technical assistance available generally to navigate the process.

TA design was an aspect of the study on which participants shared their views. Interviewees were asked if technical assistance had met their expectations. Some suggested limiting workshops to two days instead of one and providing a structure that allowed for deeper dives for high participating teams. When asked about specific topics and supports, one interviewee suggested offering levels of technical assistance between introductory topics for those new to the assistance and more applied learning of the TA content specific to their actual projects. Increases in one-on-one time for the participants to allow for community-centered and contextually responsive supports were often cited. Others asked for more time in TA sessions, more survey tools and instruments, and training on member mental health as well as critical thinking processes.

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High participators in TA sessions remarked in survey and interview data that they would feel validated by seeing their growth over time. Participation in logic models or building an evidence base TA session more than once really helped them learn, apply, modify, and deepen their learning. They could reflect on the cycle of applied learning as they were able to go to TA sessions, test it back home, and repeat the process. This is a message that could be shared with others to encourage deeper and more contextualized or experiential learning. Consequently, some of the interviewees also remarked that because they

were high participators, they grew frustrated not being able to move themselves along the evidence base continuum. Help and supports at the CNCS level (sharing our findings and grantee perspectives), as well as at the local level by helping TA participants to move them along the continuum would add value.

Last, participants reflected on how SW and WEC TA sessions are good medicine, providing some more "intangible" supports to their work . Overwhelmingly, TA participants continue to share their gratitude for the time and energy given by the SW and WEC staff to be responsive to participant's needs and give professional and effective supports through TA offerings. Some even spoke candidly about how the technical assistance relieved ongoing anxiety in their positions. One shared,

> "You guys have been so helpful over the years, and it's such a great resource to be able to have those one-on-one calls and training from you guys, and that makes me feel a lot better knowing that somebody else is helping us sort of dig through all this information from the corporation because it can kind of get overwhelming."

Perhaps even more emphatically, another shared,

> "It's just been a godsend having you guys around and having this technical assistance available. I know the first time when the program applications really got changed to this evidence-based information, and all this technical mumbo jumbo that I did not understand. I was having panic attacks over it. Once you guys got involved with the technical assistance side, it was amazing. It just brought a lot of clarity to a lot of confusion that I had."

In summary, the time spent was a valuable investment to develop not only the human resources but the capacity and effectiveness of the organizations supporting the implementation of AmeriCorps programming.

Discussion & Recommendations

In summary, **there was strong evidence across the multiple data sources demonstrating TA sessions were utilized, impactful, and helped build capacity for AmeriCorps programs in Wisconsin for strengthening programming, evidence bases, and evaluation capacity**. Having a TA baseline with three years of comparison data for quantitative data will help SW and WEC to continue monitoring trends in participation of TA by type, topic, and stakeholder group. This TA database should be maintained as a living document that helps guide related development and decision-making. Continue ensuring that questions around the key metrics (CNCS, CIF, or SW) are included on any one-to-one, webinar, or face-to-face instruments being used for TA. Use of a simple curriculum map could also help SW and WEC organize TA offerings under several key design concept areas per CNCS or CIF performance metrics, definitions or other guidelines. The bottom line is that gathering, storing, mining and using data takes intentional infrastructure, resources, and human capacities for upkeep so data is comprehensive, valid, and trustworthy.

Next, the investment in doing this study and the creation of survey and interview instruments that are aligned to the CNCS definition of TA, the Commission Investment Funds (CIF) priority performance metrics required of SW provide a strong foundation to this study. The flexible design also allowed for state SW leadership to ask AmeriCorps in the Wisconsin context. **Collectively these questions give a well-rounded design to produce useful and different types of data that can be used for TA, organizational improvement, and program development for the future.** Consider also using the CNCS or CIF performance metrics areas to analyze grant proposals, grant reports, and other key documents generated by SW. Continuing to review the TA data at a deeper level and repeating use of TA evaluation study methods and instruments every three years is standard evaluation practice. This organizational operational design will likely continue to yield strong insights from the data offered by TA participants because you will have comparable data sets over time. Additionally being able to share TA insights with the SW Board for strategic planning and development activities, to provide insights regarding TA to other state directors or regional training providers and offering a statewide systems TA evaluation design to CNCS leadership would help shape future discussions more comprehensively and locally driven around evaluation policy, reporting requirements, and evidence based practices.

Related to the systemic design for statewide evaluation of TA with local programs, **it is important to continue discussions about what counts as evidence**. Currently an unintended consequence or finding were

that many of Wisconsin's TA participants are currently frustrated with not only what counts but how to move their program on the evidence based continuum currently offered by CNCS in the RFP and related performance metrics documents, within the OnCorps reporting system, and as seen with the literature, models, and instrument gaps within the existing CNCS knowledge network, impact or strategic documents, and newsletter, tutorial, or conference offerings. For example, "We are frustrated because we don't know how to get a stronger evidence base as CNCS defines it. We know we are having a local impact but what CNCS counts or has us report on is very limiting which impacts how we feel as program staff." So not being able to move programs along the evidence base continuum of CNCS and the evaluation theories and designs used often do not meet the cultural, community, or other diversity that exists within programs in Wisconsin and the stakeholders participating or being served. Help and supports at the CNCS level (sharing our findings and grantee perspectives), as well as at the local level by helping TA participants to move them along the continuum would add value. Identifying resources for a deeper study, capacity building, and/or development in this area would be a thoughtful recommendation for SW leadership to share with other state or CNCS leaders that would address an existing gap in supports, literature, and capacities that programs need.

Lastly, **this state-level study may also be designed in the future to enable more nuanced perspectives based on geographic region, grantee type, size of organization, etc.** All these extra design components for future studies will deepen the developmental changes in curriculum / topical content, instructional design, and types of TA support that is most beneficial to the diverse populations that AmeriCorps programs in Wisconsin serve. Information from these studies could also inform how other states study TA and would likely contribute to state or regional directors and CNCS knowledge base (instruments, methods, design, logic models, evaluation plans, study findings, etc.). Currently there is low or no literature and examples regarding intersectionality, race/ethnicity, low socio-economic status, intergenerational trauma, disability, orientation, homelessness, addiction, mental health, etc. that diverse and high need populations currently served by AmeriCorps programs need and could benefit from.

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