

# THE IMPORTANCE OF EVALUATION, AND WHERE WE ARE NOW

(With apologies: longer and wonkier than usual, but important!)

“Evaluation is a systematic process to determine merit, worth, value or significance,” according to the American Evaluation Society. Evaluation has been important for SDMNY almost from the beginning, when we commissioned our first evaluation to assess whether the facilitation process we were developing really worked to empower individuals with I/DD, to engage and secure the commitment of their supporters, and to allay the concerns of families who might otherwise have sought guardianship. ([Click here for the report.](#)) We were buoyed by the results but also committed to continue to improve what we were doing, as confirmed by the second independent evaluation completed near the end of our DDPC grant.

Both those evaluations were aimed at determining the value and efficacy of our work with Decision-Makers and their supporters, and provided the evidentiary base for New York’s groundbreaking SDMA law. ([Click here for the law.](#)) Having created a process to enable the human right of legal capacity for people with I/DD, the question became how to “scale up” what had been a relatively small, volunteer-based pilot project into a service delivery system that could provide facilitation for everyone who wanted it, across the entire state of New York. OPWDD charged us to do just that through the implementation grant we’ve been working under for the past three years (Good News 12/17/21).

As you can imagine, the questions to be answered, the issues resolved, the structure to be imagined and tested were all very different from our charge, and what we learned, under our first DDPC grant. Our hope was to pilot a vision for what an effective, fiscally viable facilitation delivery system would look like and, in essence, to provide OPWDD with a kind of “turn-key” model that the successful applicant for a long-term contract could adopt, continuing the work SDMNY has done in an appropriate and effective organizational form. As we’ve reported, OPWDD has issued an RFP (Good News 5/2/25) and applications are now in. A new entity will take over our work in September, so it is critical that we not only have a model, but that what we originally imagined has been constantly assessed, adapted, revised, and tested over the three-year grant. This called for, and we have been fortunate to have engaged, a different kind of evaluation—not an assessment, however valuable, at the end of a project as to its “merit, worth, value or significance”—but a collaborative, ongoing relationship with skilled outside, independent observers who actively engaged with us to “figure out how to do the job.”

We initially met with a number of different professional and highly regarded evaluation organizations, but didn’t identify a good match until we found ourselves back at Hunter, at the Brookdale Center for Healthy Aging. Led by Director Dr. Ruth Finkelstein, Brookdale proposed a “Continuous Quality Improvement” evaluation, which sounded (and turned out to be) exactly what we needed.





*Brookdale Center for Healthy Aging at Hunter College*

Continuous quality improvement (CQI) is a structured, ongoing approach to evaluation that focuses on strengthening implementation through learning and iterating in real time. This evaluation method is best suited for programs like SDMNY that evolved over the study period. The evaluation team at Brookdale are relying on observations of meetings, review of different versions of documents, and interviews and focus groups with frontline staff and other stakeholders to identify issues, test changes, and refine processes as the work unfolds. They have also been providing biweekly feedback to project director Naomi Brickel to aid in the iteration process. Brookdale's implementation of CQI has allowed SDMNY to build a more responsive and adaptive program over time.

SDMNY Director Naomi Brickel describes the CQI process as “sometimes like building an airplane while you are flying it,” while lead researcher, christian gonzález-rivera, characterized it as a “real roll-up-your-sleeves” evaluation. There’s still more to do as the final data on both objective (How much time do mentors spend on each facilitation? How long does each facilitation last? How can these services be billed within the Medicaid system? etc.) and subjective (identifying the various roles played by facilitators and mentors; identifying strategies for real buy-in by all participants, etc.) issues are analyzed and turned into final recommendations.

We have found the process—and our wonderful evaluators—absolutely invaluable in the work of imagining, re-imagining, testing, revising, and finally constructing the model for a state-wide facilitation delivery system. Because of the evaluation, this model is infinitely better and more feasible than the vision with which we began. But it’s not only SDMNY that has benefitted. Of the time during which he has been immersed in our project, Christian says:



*christian gonzález-rivera*

“I knew virtually nothing about SDM when I first became involved in the project evaluation. Over the past two years, attending facilitator trainings, community of practice webinars, mentor rounds and many, many meetings with the SDMNY team and stakeholders, I have developed tremendous respect for the work SDMNY has done, and for its value in advancing the autonomy and dignity of people with intellectual and developmental disabilities as well as the promise it holds for other vulnerable groups. The concept of dignity of risk is now fully a part of my personal ethos.”

**THANKS TO BROOKDALE, THE SDMNY TEAM, EVERYONE WHO PARTICIPATED IN THE EVALUATION, AND HAPPY SUMMER!**