Formative Evaluation of the OSWER Community Engagement Initiative

Fact Sheet

November 2013

Introduction

In December 2009, EPA's Office of Solid Waste and Emergency Response (OSWER) announced the Community Engagement Initiative (CEI) to enhance OSWER headquarters and Regional offices' engagement with local communities and other stakeholders, and to help stakeholders meaningfully participate in decision-making processes related to the cleanup and reuse of contaminated sites. OSWER envisions highly effective community engagement becoming a standard business practice across all of its programs.

OSWER requested a formative evaluation for the CEI. The CEI is comprised of 16 actions that affect many aspects of OSWER's work. The evaluation focuses on Action 7 and Action 13A, which address improving technical assistance (TA) and information dissemination (ID), respectively. Furthermore, this evaluation focuses on Superfund, RCRA Corrective Action (CA), and Brownfields programs within OSWER. The goals of the evaluation were to establish a baseline of current practice, to establish a baseline of current community satisfaction with EPA's TA and ID practices, and to consider the feasibility of potential measures for tracking TA and ID moving forward.

Evaluation Questions

1. What are the requirements and drivers for community involvement within the Superfund, RCRA Corrective Action, and Brownfields programs?

2. What is the baseline of current OSWER TA and ID activities, with respect to:

   a. Frequency of practice and program-to program variability?

   b. Proportion of communities that receive formal assistance through Technical Assistance Grants (TAG), the Technical Assistance Services for Communities (TASC) contract, or other formal program?

   c. Selection criteria and on-the-ground process for accessing TAG and TASC (for Superfund and RCRA CA only)?

   d. Community assistance that is provided outside of formal programs (including helping to set up community advisory groups and providing ad-hoc assistance)?

   e. Areas of unmet TA or ID need?

3. How can Superfund community involvement plans (CIPs) be used to improve technical assistance and delivery of information?

   a. Does every site have a CIP?

   b. What information is available on the implementation of CIPs?

   c. Are CIPs revised over time?

   d. Do CIPs, as they are currently used, ensure effective TA and information delivery throughout the life of the project? Why or why not?

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4. What is the baseline of customer satisfaction with OSWER TA and ID activities?

5. What measures can be used to assess the effectiveness and tangible outcomes of OSWER TA and ID activities across the lifecycle of site planning, remediation, and reuse?

6. How can these measures be used to improve OSWER TA and ID activities?

Evaluation Methods

IEc reviewed existing documentation from the following sources: documentation of community engagement requirements; site inventory data for cleanup programs; performance measurement resources (for Questions 5 and 6); and existing satisfaction interviews.

IEc conducted 46 interviews with EPA HQ and regional contacts from Superfund, Brownfields, RCRA CA, as well as state RCRA CA contacts in Arkansas, California, Illinois, Missouri, New York, and South Carolina. IEc also conducted satisfaction interviews with contacts from community groups that had received technical assistance through the Superfund TAG program, and analyzed these data in conjunction with previous satisfaction interviews of service recipients conducted for the TASC contract. IEc conducted a thematic analysis of interview data, and synthesized interview data with information gleaned from the document review as applicable, to develop evaluation findings.

Key Findings

High-level findings from the evaluation include the following:

- The EPA Superfund and Brownfields programs appear to have robust systems in place for delivering technical assistance and information to communities, including clear mandates and guidance, formal programs and mechanisms for delivering technical assistance, and adequate levels of EPA staffing and resources.

- RCRA CA appears to be meeting its mandate of providing information dissemination to community groups as required. However, in comparison to the Superfund and Brownfields programs, RCRA CA lacks many inputs helpful in ensuring the delivery of technical assistance to communities, including a lack of: regulatory mandates; adequate resources and staffing at EPA and state agencies; and up-to-date, program-specific guidance. Unmet community needs appear to be higher within the RCRA CA program than other programs, and satisfaction with technical assistance provided by states to communities under RCRA CA was rated lower on average by interviewees than for the other two programs.

- Compared to the other programs, it is more difficult to characterize the needs of RCRA CA communities nationally, and to track progress in meeting those needs, because the program is largely delegated to states, and EPA currently lacks mechanisms for collecting community engagement data from states. Thus, if EPA were to conduct regular tracking of measures of unmet needs and customer satisfaction, the Agency would need to work with states to implement a data collection system. In contrast, existing data collection systems employed by Superfund and Brownfields could potentially be augmented to track suggested measures.

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