



CASE STUDY | EVALUATING COMMUNITY EFFORTS: A VIVO STORY

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There are several organizations and municipalities focusing their efforts on neighbourhoods. But how do they know their efforts are making a difference when there are many factors, people and programs involved? How do they show funders what they have done is making a difference? Vivo has spent time looking at their own evaluation efforts and have come up with some great ways to evaluate their community change work.

WHO IS VIVO?

Vivo is a charity that uses a number of platforms to accomplish its mission, including operating a regional recreation facility and community hub for over 130,000 residents in North Calgary. The organization has a 25-year head lease with the City of Calgary to steward this 185,000 square foot space, which acts as a living lab for healthier generations in the heart of this community. The City of Calgary owns the property and building, and Vivo operates and runs the recreational programs, services and spaces. Vivo's programs encourage individuals to take ownership of their health, get active, learn skills and connect with the community. To achieve this, Vivo has adopted an *everybody plays* approach allowing all Calgarians access to social connection, recreation and play opportunities.

Vivo has 5 core values that lead their activities:

About the Organization

Vivo is a charity on a mission to raise healthier generations in Calgary and beyond. Their roots are in north-central Calgary where they create local, evidence-based solutions that help individuals to be healthier and more active at home, school, work and play. Their solutions are shared with others across the city, province and country to help shift public recreation, and to help other organizations become supportive environments for health.

- **IMPACT:** They focus on things that matter. They help kids be active, families get healthy and communities be strong.
- **CURIOSITY:** They love questions that stimulate imaginations and thinking. Being curious leads to new learning, wisdom and action.
- **COURAGE:** They encourage everyone to explore, embrace the unknown and take risks. Being bold helps create the new and different.
- **TOGETHER:** They work with bright minds, big hearts and clever hands. Their doors are always open to those who share their passion.
- **CONNECTION:** They believe everything is linked and must live in balance. They see strength in diversity, potential in challenges and magic in solutions.



Vivo has realized that they have a role to play in bringing community together to co-create the solutions and experiences offered by recognizing the gifts and assets that exist in the community.

In 2017, Vivo participated in two community projects that allowed them to understand and deepen the connection with the community that they serve. The first project was Creating Coventry – a project establishing a new model for community-driven planning, creating connections and helping communities advocate for change. The next opportunity came when a local developer, Brookfield Residential, approached Vivo to partner together on its new community in North Calgary – Livingston. The two are working together to co-design services and amenities with residents. This is a long-term commitment to measure the impact of this work on lifestyle and wellbeing over the next five to ten years.

Conventional evaluation techniques typically focus on individual programs and services and are carried out by external experts. Evaluation practices from the private sector are narrowly concerned with “operational” and “return on investment” of their organization rather than the perspective of outcomes for the entire community. This case study will outline how Vivo has been able to evaluate their community efforts and demonstrate change in their community.

EVALUATING NEIGHBOURHOOD WORK

One of Vivo’s core values is Impact, which means they focus on things that matter. So, how do we know what we’re doing is achieving the difference we want to make? In 2012, the organization made research, innovation, and evidence a cornerstone of their operations in order

to answer just that. Vivo took this a step further in 2018 when they re-organized their programs and services underneath their Innovation Portfolio.

Vivo has explored many different tools for evaluation. One that they keep coming back to is systematic observation. Vivo uses this method because it is validated, rigorous, customizable and simple enough that anyone in the community can become a part of the research team.

Systematic observation has allowed the research team to gather information about who is using the play spaces in and around our neighborhoods. Vivo collects data on the level of physical activity, the type of social interactions, the time of day parks are most popular, the gender balance, what kinds of play is happening and the age of participants by category (child, teenager, adult etc.). They compile thousands of data points to identify trends and make recommendations about optimal use and underutilization. Systematic observations have also been used with structured programming indoors and provide insightful information about the role of an instructor in working with their participants.

The customization of systematic observation is its greatest strength. Variations of the original protocol are constantly being developed which allows the researcher to adapt the procedures to meet the individual needs of the project. There are dozens of articles (see link below) that have been published supporting the reliability and validity of the methodology. Measurement tools using the systematic observation protocol are completely free and available through the [Active Living Research \(ALR\) network](#). All necessary recording sheets and a detailed procedural handbook is also available on the ALR website.

Vivo also uses a number of qualitative and quantitative research methods including wearable devices, surveys, interviews and focus groups. Accelerometers (think Fitbit) have provided robust results that identify the estimated energy burned by participants. The objectivity of wearable devices allows the research team to compare the actual movement behaviors to the perceptions of the participants. As expected, there is often a poor correlation between how much a person

“Vivo began this journey when we asked – “So what?! How do we know what we’re doing actually helps raise healthier generations? We’ve been on an adventure to answer this ever since. It’s easy to get caught up in doing everything rather than the right things and our research and evaluation helps keep us honest in this. Evolving to become an evidence-based organization with innovation at our core has been a humbling journey of failing forward and obsessively learning from our mistakes and successes. We also believe it has made us stronger, more focused and better prepared to work in the networked and value-based economy of our future.”

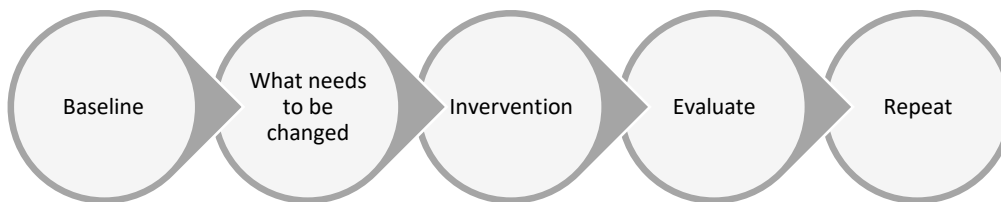
*Cynthia Watson, Chief Evolution Officer
(CEO), Vivo for Healthier Generations*

thinks they're moving (active) and their actual energy expenditure. By compiling large amounts of physical activity data collected over a week to ten days, Vivo has been able to identify behavioral trends in children, youth, and adults. This technology has been used successfully in formal recreation programming, everyday living and in a workplace setting to monitor sedentary behaviour.

Qualitative research methods allow Vivo to fully understand what the quantitative data is telling them. It helps them tell the story of their participants in a more complete way. Providing statistics has been vital in building evidence-based decision-making, but often helps identify problems and not solutions. By using a mixed or blended style of quantitative and qualitative information, Vivo is narrowing in on the 'why' and not settling for just the 'what'.

EVALUATION PROCESS

Over the last six years, Vivo has repeated a similar process within their organization, in their community and with other partners to measure the change their work is making. This five-step process has been repeated across a wide range of programs and environments and on a wide range of budgets.



Baseline. In order to understand where you're headed, you need to have a clear picture of the current state. In 2015, Vivo set out to establish a baseline of parks and green spaces in north-central Calgary by using systematic observation to capture the current usage in eight spaces. They wanted to understand how people use these environments prior to Vivo or other community partners making any changes in them either physically or through programming. Vivo has now repeated this process in over 20 other parks and green spaces throughout Calgary giving a richer understanding of what's actually happening in these locations.

What needs to change? Baseline data can often be surprising and can challenge our own assumptions. When Vivo performed a baseline in 2013 of its own programs, they found that participants were only moving 38% of the time. Through baseline data and other evidence, including input from your community, start identifying what you want to shift.

Intervention. Based on what you've learned thus far, what are 2-3 things you'd like to try and shift? How can you design an intervention that helps you explore these? Interventions can be brief one-hour experiments or last months. Try to find one you can live rather than designing the perfect one. This is an ongoing process. Brookfield Residential, one of Vivo's partners, started to

add more outdoor furniture to their developing community after feedback from their residents in their baseline.

Evaluate. Is your intervention making a difference? What indicators are you looking at to know the shift you're hoping to make is occurring? In Haysboro, Calgary, their shift to a natural playground, that was created with the community, saw an increase of 83% in usage from the baseline observations. This helped them create a strong case for Phase II of the development of this space.

Repeat! What shifted or didn't shift since the baseline? Is your evaluation giving you the information that you had hoped? This work is all about evolution rather than an end-point. After one summer of operation in the community, Vivo's Play Ambassador team evaluated the qualitative interviews and systematic observation data to identify three big shifts they needed to make ahead of next summer. They'll be taking these learnings forward into their next big idea, the Gen H Play Project. To dive deeper into the learnings read their [Play Ambassador Report](#).



LESSONS LEARNED

Evaluating community work is not an easy task. There are so many moving parts and not one person or program alone can make a difference.

- **Progress vs. Perfection**
 - It's more important to start measuring rather than worrying about measuring the perfect thing. It's a muscle that you build, which means you need to train it.
- **Leverage Your Partnerships**
 - None of the above would be possible without relationships. Faculty and students of all levels from local institutions like Mount Royal University and the University of Calgary have been critical to advancing this work over the last six years. Nearly 50 students have expanded their learning and contributed to this research in that time.
 - Vivo has gained a richer understanding through sharing common data among like-minded partners. There are lots of data collectives popping up all over Canada that can help with this.
 - Vivo recruited volunteers through their local Community Association's Seniors Group who were looking for meaningful ways to give back and stay involved in their community.
 - Partnerships can also be a great way to scale what you're learning and have a larger impact. Vivo was lucky to work with many diverse partners on each other's evaluation initiatives and it has made them all stronger.

- **Make It Relevant**
 - It starts with people power. Make sure that your evaluation is making a change that your community cares about. Find ways to engage partners and your community.
 - If an evaluation is done and it's never used, why bother. Ensure that what you are evaluating and how you communicate this is relevant for your key internal and external audiences. This is called it making it 'streetable'. Don't be afraid to experiment with tools like live video to do this. As part of Creating Coventry, Vivo was required to do a Facebook live report every weekly meeting and ended up with over 2,000 views and additional participation in that project.
- **Prepare for a Culture Shift**
 - Becoming an evidence-based organization can be a shift. Finding your own process and definition of what evidence means is also part of this exploration. Once you start measuring and using this evaluation to make decisions, you'll notice a ripple effect across the work you do.
- **Don't Forget to Document**
 - Time flies and we all seem to have less of it. Try to build in an easily maintainable process of documenting projects like this in your organization. Capture the key milestones, decision criteria, changes, photos, video etc. along the way. You'll thank yourself later, especially as you try to bring other partners from inside or outside your organization into the process.

CONCLUSION

Organizations are realizing that making change in the community requires collaboration, partnerships, and a new way of working together. You need to open our minds and imaginations to experimenting with new ways of evaluating our efforts, exploring how to measure outcomes, developing simple ways of tracking community activities, and using the results to think outside the box to allow for innovation.

This case study is one example of how an organization evaluated their community efforts. It demonstrates that evaluation does not have to be complex and that systematic observation is an example of a simple and easy way to evaluate community change efforts. We are hoping more groups will be encouraged to evaluate their efforts, experiment with evaluation, and share results with partners in order to build better strategies and deeper community impact.



Creating Coventry Co-creation

SOURCES

- [Evaluation is Our Generational Work - Report Card](#)
- [Meaningful Connections – Vivo 2017 Annual Report](#)
- [Research and Innovation – Creating Coventry Project](#)
- [Vivo Website](#)
- [Tamarack Institute Website](#)
- [Active Living Research \(ALR\) network](#)