

The Budget Hearing Evidence Packet

How to prepare evidence for a county or city budget request when council members want to know if the program works

04

FOR

program directors, executive directors, public-agency managers, county administrators, and anyone presenting program evidence to elected officials or budget committees

INCLUDES

an evidence-packet assembly guide, a one-page summary template, a say/cannot-say table, and guidance on when to get help

The moment

The county budget hearing is in two weeks. Your program is on the agenda. A council member's aide called last Tuesday and said the member "wants to see evidence that the program works before voting to renew the funding."

You have three minutes of speaking time, a stack of data you have been collecting for years, and a knot in your stomach. The data shows real things – people served, services delivered, outcomes tracked. But does it show that the program "works"? That depends on what "works" means. Your presentation needs to make the distinction between "participants improved" and "the program caused the improvement" clear. You need to present what you know so that a decision-maker can use it, without either inflating the evidence or burying it.

Budget hearings can put evidence under a different kind of time pressure from a grant report or annual report. Elected officials may be weighing several funding requests, with different levels of familiarity with each program. Make the request and the evidence behind it clear early, then give readers a way to examine the detail.

The common mistake

The most common mistake is bringing too much. You have four years of data, a 20-page evaluation report, and a binder of participant stories. You want to show the council that you take evidence seriously. So you prepare a presentation with 14 slides, each one packed with numbers.

The council member looks at the first slide, glances at the clock, and asks: “So does it work or not?”

You were not ready for that question, because your evidence does not answer it in a single word. What you have is more nuanced than yes or no. But nuance does not survive a budget hearing unless you have prepared it to travel in a very small container.

The second common mistake is treating “Does it work?” as a question with only one meaning. It may concern delivery, participant experience, observed outcomes, or causal impact. If you have before-and-after data without a comparison group, you might say: “We observe promising results, but we have not tested whether the program itself caused them.” Follow that limitation with the specific results, coverage, costs, and remaining questions that bear on the funding choice.

Present the evidence in a way the decision-maker can act on. Some funding decisions require a stronger causal case than others; the appropriate standard depends on the stakes, available alternatives, and uncertainty. State what your evidence supports, what remains unknown, and why the request is reasonable given those limits.

What to prepare

Check the submission deadline and speaking limit first. Allow time to verify the numbers and rehearse. The evidence packet has three layers: a one-page summary for the written packet, a spoken presentation adapted to the time available, and backup materials for follow-up questions. The example below assumes three minutes of speaking time.

Layer 1: The one-page summary.

Prepare this as a document someone can use before, during, or after the hearing. It should make the funding request and its basis understandable without requiring the reader to hear your presentation.

The one-page summary should contain:

- **Program name and one-sentence description.** What you do, for whom, and where.
- **Scale.** How many people you served last year and at what cost per person.
- **Results.** Two to three key findings, stated in honest language with specific numbers.
- **Context.** One sentence on what the data does and does not show.
- **What comes next.** One sentence on what you plan to learn or improve.

Layer 2: The three-minute spoken presentation.

Structure it as three blocks of 60 seconds each:

- **First 60 seconds:** What the program does and who it serves. Use one or two numbers. Make it concrete – “Last year we provided 400 families with emergency housing assistance” is better than “We address housing insecurity in our community.”
- **Second 60 seconds:** What you observed. Pick your two strongest results and state them in one sentence each. Include the evidence level – “We observed that...” or “Among participants who completed the program and were reached for follow-up...” Do not try to cover everything. Two clear findings are better than six rushed ones.
- **Third 60 seconds:** What the program costs and what you are learning. State the cost per participant. Name one thing you are doing to strengthen your evidence. End with a specific, forward-looking statement: “With continued funding, we will serve an estimated [number] families next year and will add [specific measurement improvement].”

Layer 3: Backup materials.

Bring these in a folder. Do not present them unless asked.

- The full data tables behind your key findings
- Your follow-up rate and how you calculated your outcome numbers
- Any comparison context (districtwide trends, statewide benchmarks, national data on similar programs)
- One or two participant stories (with consent) for the council member who asks “Can you give me an example?”
- A one-paragraph explanation of what kind of evidence you have and what kind you do not, in plain language

A ready-to-use one-page summary template

Use this template to draft your summary. Fill in the brackets with your program's specifics.

[Program Name] [One sentence: what the program does, for whom, and where.]

Last Year

- Served [number] [people/families/youth] at [number] locations
- Delivered [number] [sessions/services/referrals]
- Cost per participant: \$[amount]

What We Observed

- [Result 1, stated honestly: “Among the [number] participants reached for [X]-month follow-up, [percentage] [specific outcome]. Our follow-up rate was [percentage].”]
- [Result 2, stated honestly: same structure.]

What This Means These results are [observed changes among participants / consistent with our program model / based on before-and-after data without a comparison group]. They suggest the program is [on track / showing promising early results / meeting its service targets]. We [have / have not] been able to test whether the program itself caused the observed changes.

What We Are Building [One sentence on how you are strengthening your evidence — e.g., “We are adding a 12-month follow-up and working with [partner] to develop a comparison group for next year’s evaluation.”]

What not to say

Instead of this	Say this
"The program works."	"Among [number] participants reached for follow-up, we observed [specific result]. We reached [percentage] of participants. This does not establish that the program caused the result."
"We saved the county \$2 million in avoided costs."	"We have not estimated county savings. Published cost figures may help build a scenario, but an estimate would also need evidence of outcomes caused by the program, costs actually avoided, and which budget would receive any savings."
"Every dollar invested returns four dollars in social value."	"We track cost per participant and the outcomes they achieve. Here are those numbers. We have not conducted a formal cost-benefit analysis."
"Without this program, these families would be on the streets."	"Among participants, we observed a [percentage] reduction in housing instability at follow-up. We do not have a comparison group to tell us what would have happened without the program."
"Exposed to this intervention, subjects demonstrated improved outcomes across all key metrics."	"Participants who completed the program showed improvement on [specific measures]. [Number] of [number] measures we tracked showed gains. [Number] were flat."

Notice the last row. If some of your results are flat, say so, and state who is represented in the results. This lets readers assess the findings together. As [Before-and-After Data](#) explains, reporting mixed results helps people judge what the evidence supports.

When to get help

- You are preparing for a hearing where the program's funding is seriously at risk, and you need someone to help you present your evidence in the strongest honest terms.
- A council member or budget analyst has specifically challenged your results or questioned your methodology, and you need to prepare a response that is technically sound and accessible to a lay audience.

- You have been asked to produce a cost-benefit analysis or a return-on-investment figure, and you are not sure whether your data supports one. (Often it does not, and the honest answer is to say what you can document rather than producing a number that looks precise but rests on shaky assumptions.)
- Your program is being compared to another program that claims stronger results, and you suspect the comparison is not apples-to-apples. You need help explaining the difference in evidence quality without sounding like you are making excuses.
- The hearing involves a new council or committee that has no history with your program, and you need to build the case from scratch rather than relying on an existing relationship.

Aim for a clear, honest, specific answer that respects both the evidence and the time available. Establish what the committee needs to decide and what standard of evidence it expects. As *Evidence Starts with a Decision* explains, the decision should guide the evidence work. Present the information needed to assess the funding request, with a clear route to the supporting detail.