For the past several months you have been conducting an impact evaluation at a multi-site, community-based residential program for the mentally ill. Thus far the data suggest that, in terms of client outcomes, none of the four program sites is performing significantly better or worse than any of the others. At a process level, however, you have reason to believe that all is not well at one of the sites. Several staff members at this site have complained bitterly to you (an external evaluator) about Spud, the site director. To put it mildly, Spud is viewed as seriously deficient in his managerial skills. In describing their situation vis-à-vis Spud, the staff members have used words and phrases such as "unsupported," "intimidated," "unfairly treated," "ineffectively supervised," and "highly stressed." In the opinion of the complainers, it is only the staff's high level of dedication to the clients' welfare that "keeps this place afloat." And as one staff member put it, "the price that ends up being paid for all this is burnout and high turnover among the staff; it's just not right!" Indeed, the turnover rate at this site does appear to be slightly higher than the rates at the other three settings. Moreover, in your dealings with Spud you have found him to be a bit interpersonally "stiff," especially when compared with the other site directors.

Today, three staff members from this site have paid you an unannounced visit at your university office. Having been informally chosen to represent the site's staff, they implore you to "tell it like it is to the higher-ups" when you present your evaluation findings to the administrators who oversee all of the sites. They claim that their concerns will never be taken seriously by administrators until an "outside expert" like yourself lends them some credibility. It should be noted that most of the direct-service staff throughout the agency are relatively young (i.e., in their 20s), with undergraduate degrees in the social sciences or social work.

As the staff representatives are making their case to you, your thoughts keep returning to the fact that the agency has hired you to do a client-focused outcomes study, not a process evaluation encompassing staff-management relations. In reality, you have not collected any systematic data on staff-management relations at the four sites. As you wonder to yourself about what would represent an ethical course of action to follow in this situation, your reverie is interrupted by a staff member's plea: "You're our only hope; we're desperate!"