Request for Information (RFI):
Establishing a Government Effectiveness Advanced Research (GEAR) Center

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Submitted by:

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Please note that the views reflected in this response are those of the individuals in their personal capacity, not their organizations. They may also be working with others in preparing separate responses to the RFI as well.

Response:

As members of the federal public management community, we are enthusiastic about the prospect of the GEAR Center and appreciate the chance to provide our input. We are particularly encouraged by the possibility that the Center could:

- Harness the **best thinking from academia, industry, government practitioners and nonprofit think tanks** to help tackle important operational and strategic challenges facing the Federal government and, more broadly, to strengthen a culture within government of learning and improvement.

- Emphasize a **"test, learn and adapt" approach** by using pilot programs as the main way to test new and innovative public management strategies on a small scale, learn if they work, and scale up successful strategies. The Center's use of pilots would raise the profile of a more experimental approach to public sector reform, where the focus is on testing what works—including testing different options. This new way of doing business would replace the current broken system, where government decision makers often guess the right approaches, issue RFPs and draft laws and regulations to implement them; consulting firms respond to those RFPs; and academic researchers produce theories about what will work—all without conducting pilots to learn if those approaches are effective.

- Enable and encourage **policy schools** to increase the relevance of public management research to practical, timely and important questions of policy and practice. Those schools play a vital role in public sector knowledge creation, but the connection between practical federal challenges and academic insights could be greatly strengthened.

- Be relevant not only to the **federal level**, but also to **state and local governments** facing similar challenges. For the early focus areas in the RFI – strengthening skills of the federal workforce and commercializing government-owned data – innovative state and local governments are already pioneering new approaches and could contribute knowledge and provide testbeds for pilots relevant to federal agencies. Involving state and local governments as partners in early focus areas could lay groundwork for future intergovernmental collaborations to better focus on results—for example, testing new approaches that allow for more flexibility of federal rules *and* more accountability for outcomes and impact. The Center's structure could allow for a future focus on ways to increase the return on investment from federal programs implemented at the state and local levels.

- Be **sustainable into future administrations**, if there is enough involvement and commitment by entities outside of government to keep the Center nimble and effective and ensure financial sustainability.

In short, the Center has the potential to lead a process that generates valuable insights and tools to help government, in the near-term and into the future. A key question, then, is what structure would be most likely to achieve that, including achieving the five points above.

We believe there is no existing "best model" that OMB can simply replicate to create the GEAR Center. There are examples that provide insights and lessons, including the National Academy of Medicine, DARPA, HUD's Research Roadmap, the network of researchers that make up the Jameel Poverty Action Lab (JPAL), the IRS annual research conference, and the Association of

Federal Enterprise Risk Management (AFERM), but none offer a complete model for the Center. Instead, something new and innovative will need to be created.

Our suggestion, for that new and innovative approach, is the following:
<u>Governing council</u>

A GEAR Center governing council should include federal representatives such as the OMB Deputy Director for Management and a senior official from GSA. The federal representatives, after consultation with other federal agencies, would establish the research priorities that are most relevant to the federal government. In other words, the federal representatives would set the federal learning agenda that would guide the priorities of the GEAR Center. Non-federal representatives on the council would include researchers, data scientists, former federal officials, and current or former officials from innovative state and local governments that are tackling modernization challenges similar to those facing the federal government.

<u>Collaborative body (for each focus area)</u>

For each focus area (e.g., workforce upskilling, data commercialization), a GEAR Center collaborative body would help refine the research questions, determine the best research methods to answer them, identify what data and analytical tools are available, and identify the best options for generating useful and actionable findings and solutions quickly. It would involve government representatives, researchers, data scientists, industry experts and nonprofit thought leaders with expertise relevant to specific GEAR Center priorities.

The collaboration would run facilitated roundtables and other events to refine the research questions, similar to a process the IBM Center for the Business of Government runs every few years to develop its research agenda. Another example from which to draw is the Urban-Brookings Tax Policy Center, which works with the IRS each year to plan its annual IRS research conference. (IRS officials set the research priorities and highly qualified researchers are invited who can address those priorities.) The issue identification or refinement process might also draw from the GAO High Risk List.

<u>Research hubs</u>

Once the issues and research questions are refined and finalized for that round (rounds might be every few years or more frequently, depending on the resources available), the governing council would solicit bids for a GEAR Center research hub for each issue selected. As a hypothetical example, if one of the issues chosen by the governing council related to federally owned data, XYZ University might be selected because of its leading expertise on data issues and the non-federal resources it can attract for the initiative.

Importantly, bids for research hubs would need to describe how the hub would bring together researchers, data scientists, industry experts and nonprofit thought leaders in developing and implementing pilot programs to test out new approaches to tackling the selected issue.

In other words, hubs would involve a number of sub-contracts or partnerships that draw in diverse expertise to carry out the work. That might include research and evaluation work by academics and implementation support from consulting firms in order to carry out projects quickly and successfully. Particularly useful approaches might include:

- Soliciting bids from consulting firms (who may choose to involve academic researchers) or from academic centers.
- Use GSA's Office of Evaluation Sciences (OES), which charges fees to help cover costs, to have an OES researcher or OES team design and implement a test.
- Enter into an IPA agreement or MOU with a specific academic researcher/team to help design and evaluate the innovation.
- Some combination of the above.

Funding

Funding for the research hubs would be a blend of federal dollars, philanthropic contributions, fees to be part of a focus area collaborative body, and potentially contributions from state and local governments. The Center could offer consulting firms and other vendors an opportunity to provide sponsorship in return for benefits such as public recognition of their support.

Levels of vendor sponsorship could be set, with greater recognition for higher levels of support. To strengthen the perceived legitimacy of the effort, all individual members should pay dues, on a scale from federal agencies (the lowest cost membership) up through academics and non-profit think tanks (medium cost) and for-profit vendors (highest cost).

We hope our suggestions for the Center are useful to the OMB design team and we would be happy to provide any further assistance as needed.