**Evidence Based Policy**

**Quote:**

“What does it mean […] to create ‘evidence-based initiatives?’ It means that the administration strives to be as certain as possible that Federal dollars are spent on social intervention programs that have been proven by rigorous evidence to work.” [Haskins, R and Margolis, G., *Show Me the Evidence: Obama's Fight for Rigor and Results in Social Policy,* Brookings Institution Press, 2014.]

**Intro**:

Evidence-based policy helps to achieve greater impact per taxpayer dollar by focusing resources on what works. Evidence-based approaches are a framework that emphasizes assessing the efficacy of program by evaluating what’s working, where it’s succeeding, for whom, and under what circumstances. SourceThrough the use of data, performance metrics, and assessments, agencies can target their resources to invest in programs and initiatives shown to be the most effective while divesting from programs shown to have minimal or negative effects. Using existing evidence and also expanding the knowledge base can produce greater impact and advance important agency goals.

**Why:**

Taking an evidence-based approach to policy elevates the most efficient and cost- effective methods. Evidence-based strategies are a promising alternative to more informal or fragmented ways of assessing performance of Federal programs. Evidence-based policy strategies propose to routinely and rigorously use data and program evaluations to inform funding decisions. The approach contributes to growing the knowledge base of programs which have been validated, functioning as an important mechanism to continuously learn and improve. This collective knowledge can be leveraged by decision-makers and investors at all levels–municipal, state, philanthropic or private—to better inform decisions, improve performance, and increase return on the public’s investment.

**How:**

Strategies to implement evidence-based policies across the Federal government can be divided into three broad approaches. These approaches share in common an emphasis on producing additional evidence and understanding about the interventions funded:

1. Implementing a Learning Agenda

A learning agenda emphasizes that Federal employees and grantees understand how to apply evidence and data-based decision making and that they have the resources, capacity, and data needed to implement this approach. [[See call-out box below]](#_The_Learning_Agenda)

1. Creating or adapting existing grant programs to be evidence-based

This strategy can use various means (legislative, regulatory, or agency initiative) to include evidence requirements in Federal grant making and funding. Tiered-evidence grant making programs and directive evidence appropriations for replicating evidence-backed programs (such as the Teen Pregnancy Program) are an example of this.

1. Using public-private partnerships to achieve outcomes through evidence-based programs

This strategy focuses on ways in which the public sector can establish partnerships through programmatic means to increase investment in and support of evidence-based interventions. One example of this is [Pay for Success programs](#_PFS_-_Deliverable) (otherwise known as Social Impact Bonds).

How do you build a strong evidence-base for a program?

There are a variety of ways to build evidence of what works, including data collection, performance measurement, and program evaluation. Looking across Federal evaluation initiatives, [OMB identified five guiding principles](https://www.whitehouse.gov/sites/default/files/omb/budget/fy2017/assets/ap_7_evidence.pdf) that should inform evaluation policy:

* Rigor: Use the most rigorous methods that are appropriate to the evaluation questions and feasible within budget or other constraints. This applies to all forms of evaluation, not just impact evaluations. (Rigor comes up frequently when describing evaluations that are considered in a program’s evidence-base.)
* Relevance: The evaluation priorities will take into account legislative requirements, Congressional Interests, and reflect the interests and needs of other stakeholders, including the Administration leadership, the agency, the implementing program, and other partners and stakeholders.
* Transparency: Evaluation plans, ongoing evaluation work, and evaluation findings should be easily accessible, and should be released regardless of the findings.
* Independence: While stakeholders should actively participate in identifying evaluation priorities and questions, and assessing the implications of findings, the actual evaluation functions should be insulated from undue influence, and from both the appearance and actuality of bias
* Ethics: Evaluations should be conducted in an ethical manner and safeguard the dignity, rights, safety, and privacy of participants.

[“[Analytical Perspectives: Budget of the United States Government, Fiscal Year 2017](https://www.whitehouse.gov/sites/default/files/omb/budget/fy2017/assets/ap_7_evidence.pdf),” c. 7, p. 71-74, Office of Management and Budget, 2016.]

How do you define “rigorous” evaluation?

Evaluations should use the most rigorous design that is appropriate and feasible based on available resources and accounting for other constraints. Each type of evaluation method has its own protocol for ensuring high-quality implementation, data capture, and data analysis. A rigorous evaluation design will employ the best method to answer the questions posed and will implement the methodology in a high-quality manner. The Department of Labor notes:

*“*Rigor is required for all types of evaluations, including impact and outcome evaluations, implementation and process evaluations, descriptive studies, and formative evaluations. Rigor requires ensuring that inferences about cause and effect are well founded (internal validity); requires clarity about the populations, settings, or circumstances to which results can be generalized (external validity); and requires the use of measures that accurately capture the intended information (measurement reliability and validity).

[“[Department of Labor Evaluation Policy](https://www.dol.gov/asp/evaluation/EvaluationPolicy.htm),” US Department of Labor, November 2013.]

**Case Study:**

**Department of Labor**

**Summary:**

The Department of Labor has been one of the leading agencies to adopt a robust learning agenda approach. This approach has been multifaceted and resulted in a cultural shift towards staff and programs thinking strategically about both program’s evaluation and evidence but also how staff can use data and evaluation to meet their own learning and improvement needs.

**Introducing a Chief Evaluation Officer: DOL’s Experience**

Over the last six years, the Department of Labor (DOL) has made significant progress in institutionalizing a culture of evidence and learning. The Chief Evaluation Office (CEO), established in 2010, plays a critical role in developing and maintaining this culture within DOL. As a part of its primary responsibility to manage DOL’s evaluation program, the CEO focuses on a strong commitment to conducting rigorous, relevant, and independent evaluations. CEO is also committed to identifying and funding research and evaluation priorities established through a collaborative learning agenda process with DOL’s various agencies.

These agencies cover a broad range of topics, from employment and training programs to worker protection and enforcement activities. CEO plays an important role in initiating research that cuts across these agency and program silos. CEO also serves as an “honest broker” on evidence issues within DOL, and its work is not limited to implementing evaluations. CEO actively participates in the performance management and strategic planning processes of the Department, and disseminates the results of their evaluations in formats that enable use by programs and policy makers.

Some of the key capacities that DOL developed to support this work include:

* Hiring staff with expertise to strengthen the CEO’s capacity to manage rigorous evaluations of various methodologies. For example, using behavioral insights, CEO worked with Occupational Safety and Health Administration to implement a large random assignment study that identified an effective way to support establishments that have injury and illness rates above the national average.
* Launching the Clearinghouse for Labor Research and Evaluation (CLEAR), which makes research on labor topics more accessible to practitioners, policymakers, researchers, and the public more broadly, thus increasing the transparency and relevance of the Department’s evaluation efforts.
* Implementing a learning agenda process for the Department, in which CEO collaborates with each agency to identify key evaluation and research priorities.
* Securing the budget authority to set aside a portion of specified program funds (.75% in 2016) to support these evaluations.
* Creating a data analytics unit to support and complement agencies on their analytic needs and work; build data, statistical, and analytical expertise and capacity for the Department; and promote and innovate DOL administrative and public use data.
* Establishing an [evaluation policy](https://www.dol.gov/asp/evaluation/EvaluationPolicy.htm) to institutionalize and guide the Department’s evaluation efforts.

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| **Factors for Strengthening a Learning Culture at the Department of Labor**  Reflecting on key components that drove the Department of Labor’s learning agenda approach, former Deputy Secretary, Seth Harris, identified 7 key factors—leadership commitment, set-aside funding, establishing a learning agenda, creating a Chief Evaluation Officer and office, building relationships, and connecting performance with evaluations, policy development, and creating a clearinghouse of evaluation information:  **Commitment from leadership**. The commitment of the Secretary and Deputy Secretary to build a culture of evidence and learning has been critical. That includes their support for the role of the Chief Evaluation Officer (CEO) as an "honest broker" about evidence issues; the requirement from leadership that operating agencies create learning agendas; and top leadership's inclusion of the CEO in key policy and management discussions (e.g., agency performance reviews) so that the CEO is knowledgeable about leadership's priorities.  **0.5% set aside for program evaluation.** The DOL Secretary can set aside up to 0.5% of appropriated funds from funds from specific budget accounts for evaluation. Once set aside, these funds get transferred to the Chief Evaluation Officer's budget. Many of the agencies also have separate evaluation funds, so this (up to) half percent supplements those funds.  **Learning agendas.** Learning agendas are an important planning tool at DOL. Each operating agency within the Department (there are 15) is required to create a five-year learning agenda, which gets updated every year. The learning agendas highlight priority questions and/or priority studies that the agencies would like to have done. They may also convey themes for their upcoming evaluation efforts or analysis that might be needed. They draw on a range of learning tools, including rigorous impact evaluation (i.e., randomized controlled trials or well-designed quasi-experiments), basic analysis or research, and performance analysis (looking at factors that are associated with outcomes). Learning agendas are a catalyst for setting priorities for studies and for conceptualizing studies that need to be done. Evaluations that Congress has required of agencies are also included. Importantly, the learning agendas communicate and engage operating agencies to help focus the resources and services of the Chief Evaluation Office.  **Chief Evaluation Officer (and office).** The role of the CEO is to coordinate, encourage and build the capacity and understanding around evaluation throughout the department. As noted above, the CEO's budget includes appropriated dollars for use by the CEO for evaluation, which she can then allocate to advance agencies' learning agendas. The CEO role is not designed to direct or centrally control all evaluation at DOL, but rather to encourage good evaluation. By 2016 there were approximately 50 studies underway and 30 more being planned. In 2016, the CEO was converted to a career positon to provide stability and institutionalize it within the Department.  **Building strong relationships with operating agencies around relevance of evaluation.** The Chief Evaluation Office has worked to create strong and productive relationships with the operating agencies-particularly in terms of showing that evaluation can be useful to those agencies-in at least two ways. First, they have framed their office's work around a spirit of collaboration and learning, rather than emphasizing requirements. Second, the focus of the CEO, just like the learning agendas, is primarily on learning and performance improvement, not an "up or down" verdict on particular programs. That has helped build trust with the agencies around evaluation and to see the CEO's office as useful to them.  **Connecting performance and evaluation efforts.** Performance and evaluation efforts can sometimes be siloed within Departments. DOL has been able to build bridges between these analytical approaches (and between staff in each area). In particular, the CEO also sits in all quarterly performance reviews with agencies run by the Deputy Secretary. In most meetings, there is often some discussion of evaluations underway. The CEO also provides input and assistance about existing or proposed performance measures, including identifying ways to add outcome measures or build more knowledge about whether an agency's (or program's) performance measures are correlated with impacts. That, in turn, can lead to updates to the agency's learning agenda.  **Departmental evaluation policy statement.** [The statement posted on DOL's website in 2014](http://www.dol.gov/asp/evaluation/EvaluationPolicy.htm) presents the principles that guide DOL's planning, conduct, and use of program evaluations. It emphasizes a commitment to conducting rigorous, relevant evaluations and to using evidence from evaluations to inform policy and practice. The statement also addresses the topics of rigor, relevance, transparency, independence, and ethics in the conduct of evaluations.  **Clearinghouse of evidence-based approaches.** DOL's [Clearinghouse for Labor Evaluation and Research (CLEAR)](http://clear.dol.gov/) is designed to make research on labor topics more accessible to practitioners, policymakers, researchers, and the public more broadly so that it can inform their decisions about labor policies and programs.  Source: [Harris, S., “[Innovation Exchange 2015](https://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ods/evidence/innovation-exchange-2015-innovation-guide.pdf),” p. 15, Department of Education, July 10th, 2015.] |

Source: [“[Analytical Perspectives: Budget of the United States Government, Fiscal Year 2017](https://www.whitehouse.gov/sites/default/files/omb/budget/fy2017/assets/ap_7_evidence.pdf),” c. 7, Office of Management and Budget, 2016.]

**For more information**, contact[Dr. Molly Irwin](https://www.dol.gov/asp/evaluation/MollyIrwin.htm), Chief Evaluation Officer, chiefevaluationoffice@dol.gov

**To Learn More:**

[Visit the Department of Labor’s Evaluation website](https://www.dol.gov/asp/evaluation/)

[Read the Department of Labor’s Evaluation policy](https://www.dol.gov/asp/evaluation/EvaluationPolicy.htm)

[The Role of a Chief Evaluation Officer: An interview with Demetra Nightingale, Chief Evaluation Officer, U.S. Department of Labor](http://govinnovator.com/demetra_nightingale/)

**Next Steps/Checklist:**

**Relevant Policies:**

**Additional Resources:**