



EVIDENCE TOOLKIT

# Chief Evaluation Officers

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## What you need to know about chief evaluation officers

- *Chief evaluation officer* (CEO) is one term for a federal official responsible for coordinating evidence-building efforts and encouraging high-quality, independent evaluations across a federal agency's offices to institutionalize a culture of building and applying evidence.
- CEOs may have different titles and sit at different organizational levels within departments, but they should adhere to common principles.
- Building on the recommendations of the Commission on Evidence-Based Policymaking's [final report](#) and the [president's fiscal year 2019 budget](#), the president's [government reform plan](#) directs agencies to "designate a senior official responsible for coordinating the agency's evaluation activities."

## What is a chief evaluation officer?

A CEO coordinates, promotes, sponsors, and builds capacity within a federal department to help the agency understand and conduct evaluations and use the results to improve policies and programs. A CEO's role is not necessarily to direct or centrally control all evaluations in a department but rather to encourage high-quality evaluation.<sup>1</sup>

Officials filling the CEO function may not all have the same title and may be at different organizational levels. Some CEOs may be located at the departmental level; others, such as the CEO of the Administration for Children and Families at the US Department of Health and Human Services (who is a Deputy Assistant Secretary), are located at the subagency level.<sup>2</sup> All CEOs, however, have a key role to play in ensuring that evaluation offices meet high standards of rigor and independence. As stated in the Commission on Evidence-Based Policymaking's [final report](#), "Particularly in very large or decentralized organizations, departments may have multiple centers for evaluation, which could be coordinated by a Chief Evaluation Officer."

The [president's fiscal year 2019 budget](#) recommends that agencies have "designated evaluation officials and offices."<sup>3</sup> The president's [government reform plan](#) formalizes this recommendation into a directive, stating that "OMB intends to ask Federal agencies to: Designate a senior official responsible for coordinating the agency's evaluation activities, learning agenda, and information reported to OMB on evidence."<sup>4</sup> The plan notes that an agency's designated official "must have expertise and experience

<sup>1</sup> Andrew Feldman, "The Role of a Chief Evaluation Officer: An Interview with Demetra Nightingale, Chief Evaluation Officer, US Department of Labor," *GovInnovator*, episode 42, March 23, 2014.

<sup>2</sup> Demetra Smith Nightingale, "The Essential Features of a Strong Federal Evaluation Office," *Urban Wire*, November 1, 2017.

<sup>3</sup> US Office of Management and Budget, "Building and Using Evidence to Improve Government Effectiveness," in *An American Budget Fiscal Year 2019: Analytical Perspectives* (Washington, DC: US Office of Management and Budget, 2018).

<sup>4</sup> Executive Office of the President, *Delivering Government Solutions in the 21st Century: Reform Plan and Reorganization Recommendations* (Washington, DC: Executive Office of the President, 2018).

in program evaluation, which is a different skill set than performance [and] statistics.” It elaborates that “One approach that has worked well in some agencies is to create a centralized independent evaluation office and designate a senior career official to lead this office who is given lead responsibility for evaluation at the agency.”<sup>5</sup>

CEOs often work with agencies to develop *learning agendas*, which are sets of prioritized research questions and projects that would help answer them. Learning agendas can be used to prepare evaluation plans that specify the studies and activities that will be initiated in a planning period (e.g., annually or biannually). A department-wide learning agenda can help coordinate the different types of research and evaluation within agencies.

Another responsibility of CEOs is to determine how to connect research and evaluations with performance management. Evaluations can help determine how best to measure a program’s performance and identify factors that are associated with performance measures. Evaluation experts can help performance managers determine which performance measures are best or most appropriate to use, how to add outcome measures to the output measures they use, and “how to build more knowledge about whether an agency’s performance measures are correlated with impacts.”<sup>6</sup> Greater communication between the two functions also often helps identify future studies that can be useful to the performance management system.

CEOs may oversee dedicated funding from Congress that can be allocated to evaluation activities. In agencies with the authority to set aside evaluation funding, those funds are transferred into the evaluation office. Alternatively, agencies may receive funds appropriated for evaluations (as is common for large discretionary grant programs). In any case, evaluation offices are charged with using this funding to build evidence for an agency.

More broadly, CEOs are also charged with institutionalizing a culture of building and using evidence in departments. This requires having professional staff with evaluation and analytic training, developing strong relationships with operating agencies to ensure the studies are relevant to programs, and creating an environment that encourages individuals and offices to learn from each other.

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<sup>5</sup> Executive Office of the President, *Delivering Government Solutions in the 21st Century: Reform Plan and Reorganization Recommendations*.

<sup>6</sup> “Primer: Strengthening a Learning Culture at the Department of Labor,” US Department of Health and Human Services, Indian Health Service, accessed May 30, 2018, <https://www.ihs.gov/dper/evaluation/evaluationresources/primer/>.

## What should chief evaluation officers consider as they build their agency's evaluation capacity?

Effective federal evaluation offices should have several core characteristics that CEOs in turn can guide and promote:

- **An evaluation policy statement.** A formal statement governing the conduct of research and evaluations that emphasizes independence, rigor, relevance, transparency, and ethical evaluation practices. Having a formal statement ensures that all administrators and staff understand and agree with the role of evaluation.
- **Independence.** The office must operate without bias or undue political influence. This can be ensured with a “clear separation between evaluation activities and responsibility for program operations and policy development.”<sup>7</sup>
- **Procedures for integrity and quality control.** To ensure the integrity of evaluations, they should incorporate privacy and human subjects protections; use a learning agenda to prioritize what gets evaluated; incorporate technical peer reviews of evaluation designs; and guarantee the release of final reports.
- **Guidelines for methodological standards.** Methodological and analytic standards should be in place that can serve as a resource for both internal and external evaluators.
- **Transparent dissemination procedures.** All completed evaluation reports should be released, and registries of evaluations, reports, and public use data files should be maintained and made publicly available.
- **Awareness of relevance and political context.** An evaluation office should have a sense of “how to make sure evaluations are relevant to policymakers, program administrators and staff, and relevant to the political priorities of the current administration and leadership. If evidence and evaluation activities are not relevant, then the studies and their findings become marginalized in the government.”<sup>8</sup>
- **Professionally trained technical evaluation staff.** A department’s evaluation office should be staffed with experts with advanced technical skills who are able to design, monitor, and oversee evaluation projects.<sup>9</sup>

Every agency has specific needs and constraints that may affect its approach to developing these core characteristics, and each must recognize and adapt to that context while strengthening its capacity for evidence building and use. These variations mean that evaluation departments, including the role of their CEOs, will likely exhibit some differences across the agencies of the federal government.

<sup>7</sup> Demetra Smith Nightingale, “[The Essential Features of a Strong Federal Evaluation Office.](#)”

<sup>8</sup> Demetra Smith Nightingale, “Making Evidence Relevant to Government: The Role of Evaluators and Researchers” (Washington, DC: Urban Institute, 2017).

<sup>9</sup> Demetra Smith Nightingale, “[The Essential Features of a Strong Federal Evaluation Office.](#)”

## How have federal agencies implemented the role of chief evaluation officer?

### US DEPARTMENT OF LABOR

The US Department of Labor (DOL) has had a CEO since 2010. As described in its [evaluation policy statement](#), the office is guided by principles including rigor, relevance, transparency, independence, and ethics, as conveyed by the Commission on Evidence-Based Policymaking's report and consistent with [the principles and practices for federal statistical agencies](#). The Chief Evaluation Office is an independent unit housed within the Office of the Assistant Secretary for Policy.

Each operating agency in DOL updates their learning agenda annually in consultation with the Chief Evaluation Office. The evaluation office subsequently compiles all the agendas and priorities within them and prepares a departmental evaluation plan in line with their budget for evaluation activities. The agencies receive dedicated funding from Congress, and DOL's Secretary has set-aside authority, meaning that the Secretary can set aside 0.75 percent of operating funds for evaluations.<sup>10</sup> The set-aside funds are transferred to the Chief Evaluation Office and can be used for evaluations throughout the department.

Findings from evaluations must be interpreted in a way that nonevaluators can understand and use. At DOL, as administrators develop their annual agency budget proposals, they are encouraged to work with the CEO, who can help draft "evidence justifications" for their budget requests. The Chief Evaluation Office also maintains the [Clearinghouse for Labor Evaluation and Research](#), which features evaluation reviews and ratings of the quality of each study (based on established guidelines) as well as "short syntheses of accumulated research on topics that are relevant to agencies."<sup>11</sup>

### ADMINISTRATION FOR CHILDREN AND FAMILIES, US DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH AND HUMAN SERVICES

The Administration for Children and Families' (ACF) evaluation activities are organized within the Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation (OPRE). OPRE's mission is to advise "the Assistant Secretary for Children and Families on increasing the effectiveness and efficiency of programs to improve the economic and social well-being of children and families." In this case, OPRE's Deputy Assistant Secretary holds the role of CEO. [ACF's evaluation policy](#) promotes principles similar to those in DOL's policy.

Working with ACF's program offices, "OPRE coordinates performance management; develops and oversees research and evaluation projects to assess program performance and inform policy and practice; and works to improve ACF data." It does this by providing guidance on performance measurement; research and evaluation methods; and statistical, policy, and program analysis.<sup>12</sup> In

<sup>10</sup> Andrew Feldman, "[The Role of a Chief Evaluation Officer](#)."

<sup>11</sup> Demetra Smith Nightingale, "[Making Evidence Relevant to Government](#)."

<sup>12</sup> "OPRE Fact Sheet," US Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation, last reviewed April 11, 2017 <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/opre/fact->

contrast to some agencies, evaluation activities and performance management are housed together within OPRE. Naomi Goldstein, Director of OPRE, [noted](#) that combining performance management and evaluation approaches is valuable because evaluations that use administrative data (collected through performance management) can produce quick and inexpensive results.

OPRE administers funds provided by Congress that are typically tied to specific ACF programs, such as Head Start; Temporary Assistance for Needy Families; the Maternal, Infant, and Early Childhood Home Visiting Program; and others. OPRE uses these funds primarily for competitively awarded evaluation grants and contracts.

#### INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION SCIENCES, US DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

The Director of the Institute of Education Sciences (IES) is the [CEO](#) for the US Department of Education. As the department's "independent research arm," IES provides statistics, research, and evaluation services. In addition to conducting evaluations of federal education programs and policies, IES provides data on the health of the country's education system, conducts surveys and research on how education policies can be improved, and funds the development and testing of new education approaches. IES also provides training in statistical and research methods. The office funds predoctoral and postdoctoral training programs as well as database training for working statisticians and researchers.

The [Director of IES provides a biennial report to Congress](#) reviewing the institute's grantees, those grantees' projects, and the work of each of its research centers (which include the National Centers for Education Research, Education Statistics, Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance, and Special Education Research).

The National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance's mandate is to conduct impact studies of promising education programs and policies. It also aims to "promote the adoption of rigorous evaluation designs and methodologies in federal and non-federal education evaluation studies" and provide technical assistance on evidence-based research.<sup>13</sup> Like CLEAR at DOL, the National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance maintains the [What Works Clearinghouse](#), which reviews existing research on different "programs, products, practices, and policies in education."

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<sup>13</sup> "About Us," Institute for Education Sciences, National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance, accessed May 30, 2018, <https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/aboutus/>.

## Where can I learn more?

- Episodes of the *GovInnovator* podcast feature interviews with [Demetra Smith Nightingale](#), former Department of Labor Chief Evaluation Officer, and [Naomi Goldstein](#), Director of the Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation in the US Department of Health and Human Services's Administration for Children and Families.
- [Results for America's 2017 Federal Index](#) highlights agencies with strong evaluation and research capacities.
- "[Building Evidence Capacity and Culture in Federal Agencies](#)," an Urban Institute brief by Demetra Smith Nightingale and Molly M. Scott, presents key concepts and recommendations for improving federal evidence capacity, including discussion of the role of CEOs.
- The National Academies' "[Principles and Practices for Federal Program Evaluation: Proceedings of a Workshop—in Brief](#)" captures the proceedings of their 2016 workshop on the subject.



BROOKINGS



With support from the Laura and John Arnold Foundation, researchers from the Urban Institute, Brookings Institution, American Enterprise Institute, and the Pew-MacArthur Results First Initiative have formed the Evidence-Based Policymaking Collaborative. The Collaborative brings together researchers from organizations across the ideological spectrum to create tools to support evidence-based policymaking at the federal level. The Collaborative's work is assisted by an Advisory Group consisting of stakeholders throughout the evidence-based policymaking field. The opinions expressed in this brief do not necessarily reflect the views of all members of the Evidence-Based Policymaking Collaborative or its funder.

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