

Promising Practices from Early Experiences with Developing Evidence-Building and Evaluation Plans

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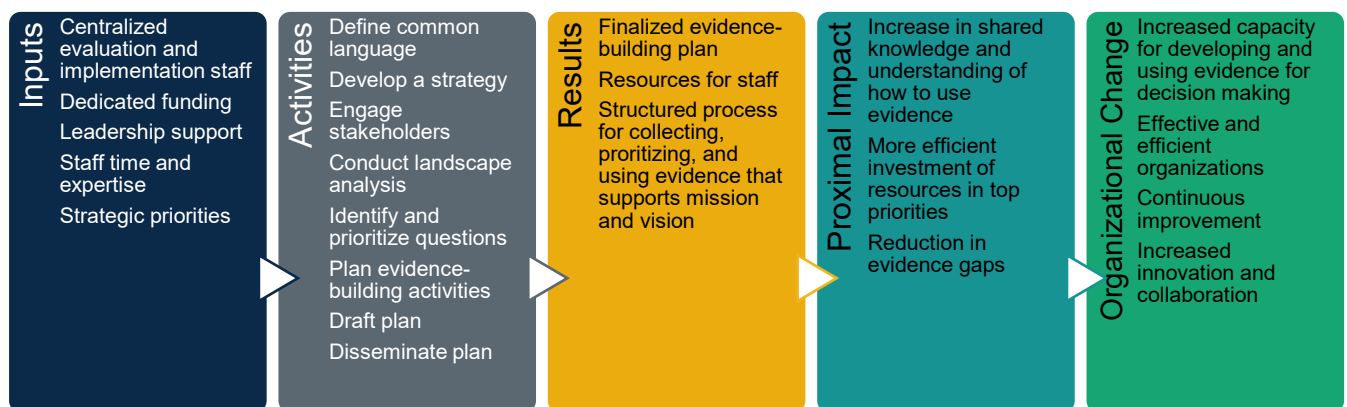
Overview

The creation of an evidence-building plan allows organizations to identify evidence gaps, determine priorities, and design an approach to developing needed evidence. When organizations develop an evidence-building or evaluation plan, they have an opportunity to strengthen the use of evidence within their organizations to promote improved evidence-based decision making and continuous improvement. Through a well-managed planning process that emphasizes stakeholder engagement, organizations can prioritize areas for evidence building, streamline resources, and make a persuasive case about the importance of evidence in running an effective organization that achieves its strategic priorities.

Key findings

- Establishing an organization-wide understanding of what constitutes evidence, as well as shared systems to manage the development and use of evidence, are foundational to evidence-building efforts.
- There are a number of widely used steps for developing evidence-building plans that may be adapted to fit an organization's needs: engaging stakeholders; conducting a landscape analysis; developing a plan to address the questions; forming and prioritizing questions; and publicizing and operationalizing the plan with activities.
- Evidence-building plans contain questions that are linked to strategic priorities, feasible to address, and likely to guide decision making.
- Organizations should rely on extensive internal and external stakeholder engagement to ensure that the evidence-building plan is incorporated into their systems and culture.

Model for developing evidence-building plans



I. Introduction

In recent years, government agencies and policymakers have prioritized accountability and the use of evidence for making policy and programmatic decisions. Agencies and organizations are able to foster the use of evidence most effectively when they have the culture and capacity to encourage improvement through continuous learning. The collection and analysis of credible evidence allows organizations to implement sound policies, monitor program delivery, test new innovations, and ultimately ensure that organizations are effective and efficient.

In 2018, Congress passed legislation that requires agencies to document their approach to collecting evidence that can inform programmatic decisions and policymaking. The Foundations of Evidence-Based Policymaking Act of 2018 (“Evidence Act”) requires federal agencies to develop an evidence-building plan (also called a “learning agenda”). Such a plan identifies high-priority questions that, if answered and acted on, would enable the organization to improve its performance. The implementation of such a plan can foster a culture in which staff and leaders learn from experience and can lead to improvements in decision making and performance through the use of evidence. In response to this requirement, many federal agencies have planned, developed, or implemented evidence-building plans. Some agencies may have had the required systems or similar systems in place already, whereas others are beginning efforts to implement them.

During the summer of 2019, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation (ASPE) sponsored a webinar series on the development of evidence-building plans. During this series, evaluation leaders from federal agencies shared their experiences in developing evidence-building plans with peers from other agencies. The webinar series will be archived and serve as a tool and resource for staff who embark on the development of this kind of plan in the future.

In this report, we present a framework for developing evidence-building plans and describe the experiences of evaluation leaders from eight federal agencies who delivered presentations in the HHS ASPE-sponsored webinar series from July to August 2019. The report summarizes the steps for developing evidence-building plans and highlights lessons learned for those interested in or currently developing such a plan. The report is organized into four sections: in Section II, we describe infrastructure and processes to support data collection and analysis, including the development of an evidence-building plan; in Section III, we describe the approaches that federal agencies participating in the HHS ASPE webinar series used when implementing their learning agendas, and lessons learned from these early experiences; and in Section IV, we conclude with recommendations for future work and exploration in understanding the use of evidence-based planning and approaches in federal agencies and other organizations.

II. Evidence building in public agencies and organizations

The use of evidence-building plans reflects growing recognition among government agencies that evidence is necessary to target resources efficiently, improve performance, and identify best practices (Nightingale et al. 2018). Before the Evidence Act, organizations¹ used a variety of approaches—both structured and unstructured—to learn from and make decisions based on evidence regarding their programs and activities. Many organizations have infrastructure and systems that provide this kind of evidence; the development of an evidence-building plan involves orienting these existing systems around a focused set of questions and priorities.

Literature review

As an initial step, Mathematica reviewed the literature to understand possible approaches to evidence building within a federal agency and the framework for developing an evidence-building plan. The literature provided important context for understanding the purpose, value, and planned steps of developing a plan, and, more important, the experiences of the webinar series presenters in operationalizing this model and implementing an evidence-building plan. We used a two-pronged strategy for our review. First, we searched databases containing peer-reviewed literature and a policy database containing references to the gray literature. We limited our search to references since 2017, the year before passage of the Foundations of Evidence-Based Policymaking Act of 2018. Second, we conducted a cited reference search on the initial sources we identified on this topic. Based on these two approaches, we identified and reviewed 10 sources of information, listed in Appendix A.

A. Role of evidence in improving organizational performance

Organizations need access to high quality evidence to understand the effectiveness of their activities and make programmatic decisions. The literature on evaluation and quality improvement contains a number of frameworks illustrating how evidence is collected, analyzed, and used to foster continuous organizational improvement (Kidder and Chapel 2018). For example, Figure II.1 displays a framework developed by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention for collecting and using evidence.

There are four domains in which organizations may gather evidence to understand how their programs are operating and make decisions and improve performance (Vought 2019). *Foundational fact finding* consists of foundational research and analysis, such as aggregate indicators, exploratory studies, descriptive statistics, and basic research. *Performance measurement* involves ongoing, systematic tracking of information relevant to policies, strategies, programs, projects, objectives, and/or activities. *Program evaluation* is the systematic analysis of a program, policy, organization, or their components to assess effectiveness and efficiency. *Policy analysis* involves the analysis of data, such as

Figure II.1. CDC framework for program evaluation in public health



¹ Throughout this report, we use the term “organization” to refer to both government agencies and nongovernmental organizations. By using “organization,” we are suggesting that evidence-building plans and related processes may be implemented in settings that may not be subject to the requirements of the Evidence Act.

general purpose survey or program-specific data, to generate and inform policy. This analysis may include estimating regulatory impacts and other relevant effects.

B. Characteristics of an “evidence-based” organization

Organizations that have the infrastructure and capacity to gather, analyze, and act on available evidence are in the best position to engage in evidence-based decision making. The effective use of administrative data and centralized evaluation offices are two key components of infrastructure for evidence-based planning (OMB 2017). *Administrative data* are collected by government entities for purposes of program administration, regulation, or law enforcement. These data can be underutilized yet valuable for evaluation and performance monitoring. Organizations can take steps to strengthen their systems and capacity for utilizing these data, such as standardizing federal and state records, and creating databases that support research and evaluation. In addition, organizations may have a *centralized evaluation office* that enables them to build and use evidence. Federal agencies with a centralized evaluation authority are more likely to use evaluation results in decision making (GAO 2017). These offices house staff who have specialized expertise for conducting evaluations. When evaluation staff work separately from program staff, they are in a better position to maintain independence and transparency. Centralized evaluation offices can play the primary role in developing and implementing evidence-building plans.

In addition, evidence-based organizations generally have a *culture* that supports continuous learning and understanding the effectiveness of their work (Scott and Oliver 2018). In organizations that support the use of evidence for program improvement, leaders and staff are more likely to ask and answer questions that identify effective programs and practices, improve or eliminate ineffective programs, initiate studies to evaluate the effectiveness of promising strategies, and search for cost-effective approaches to achieving high quality results (OMB 2017).

Finally, the use of evidence and evaluation in decision making requires *organizational staff capacity*. Scott and Oliver identify the following six domains related to staff capacity that organizations need to support the use of evidence:

1. *Leadership*, to achieve buy-in and agency-wide coordination
2. *Engagement*, to perform outreach and facilitate conversations
3. *Research*, to design and implement evidence activities
4. *Management*, to oversee the process and navigate federal government policies
5. *Publication and communications*, to draft the plan and disseminate evidence for different audiences
6. *Training and coaching*, to increase staff’s baseline evidence capacity and research competencies

Access to evaluations: Government Accountability Office reports

In a 2017 survey, the Government Accountability Office (GAO) found that the majority of federal managers either did not know whether an evaluation had been completed on any program or project in which they were involved (39 percent) or reported that no evaluation had been completed in the past five years (18 percent). Of those reporting they had access to evaluations, 54 percent believed that these evaluations contributed to improving program performance to a “great extent” or “very great extent.”

C. How evidence-building plans facilitate evaluation and decision making

According to Office of Management and Budget (OMB) guidance, evidence-building plans are “systematic plans for identifying and addressing priority questions relevant to the programs, policies, and regulations of the agency” that cover a four-year period (Vought 2019). For subagencies, operational divisions, and non-federal organizations implementing an evidence-building plan, the Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation (OPRE) more broadly defines an evidence-building plan as “a strategic approach for building an evidence base to inform decision making” that includes “learning questions that identify gaps in knowledge, learning activities to answer the questions, and learning materials to disseminate findings.” Federal agencies seeking to comply with the Evidence Act must include the following components in their plan:²

- List of policy-relevant questions for which the agency intends to develop evidence to support policymaking
- List of data the agency intends to collect, use, or acquire to facilitate the use of evidence in policymaking
- List of the methods and analytical approaches that may be used to develop evidence to support policymaking
- List of any challenges to developing evidence to support policymaking, including any statutory or other restrictions to accessing relevant data
- Description of the steps the agency will take to accomplish (1) and (2);
- Any other information as required by guidance issued by the Director

Although evidence-building plans have structured requirements under the Evidence Act (at least for federal agencies), organizations should adapt their plans’ approaches or formats to be effective for them, adjusting for the maturity of their current evidence-building efforts.

The value of evidence-building plans

The development of evidence-building plans can provide organizations with a roadmap for their evaluation and monitoring activities that otherwise may not be organized systematically. Although many organizations engage in evaluation and monitoring activities, a completed plan provides diverse stakeholders with the opportunity to take stock of the current evidence and infrastructure, align efforts around a set of priorities, and build a shared understanding of how evidence is collected and used for decision making within the organization. Some of the key benefits organizations experience as a result of developing and implementing evidence-building plans are as follows.

They increase the relevance of monitoring and evaluation for decision making.

Evaluations are valuable only when they have the potential to inform decision making (OMB 2017). Good evidence-building plans prioritize questions and activities clearly aligned with the organization’s strategic objectives and relevant to improving program performance (USAID LEARN 2018). When this alignment is established, organizational leaders and program staff are able to grasp how new evidence may contribute to decision making and program improvement.

² 5 U.S.C. § 312 (2018).

Although an organization may collect and analyze data on an ongoing basis, a plan helps evaluation staff to focus on data analyses and research aligned with agreed-upon priorities, thus reducing or eliminating activities not in service to the plan.

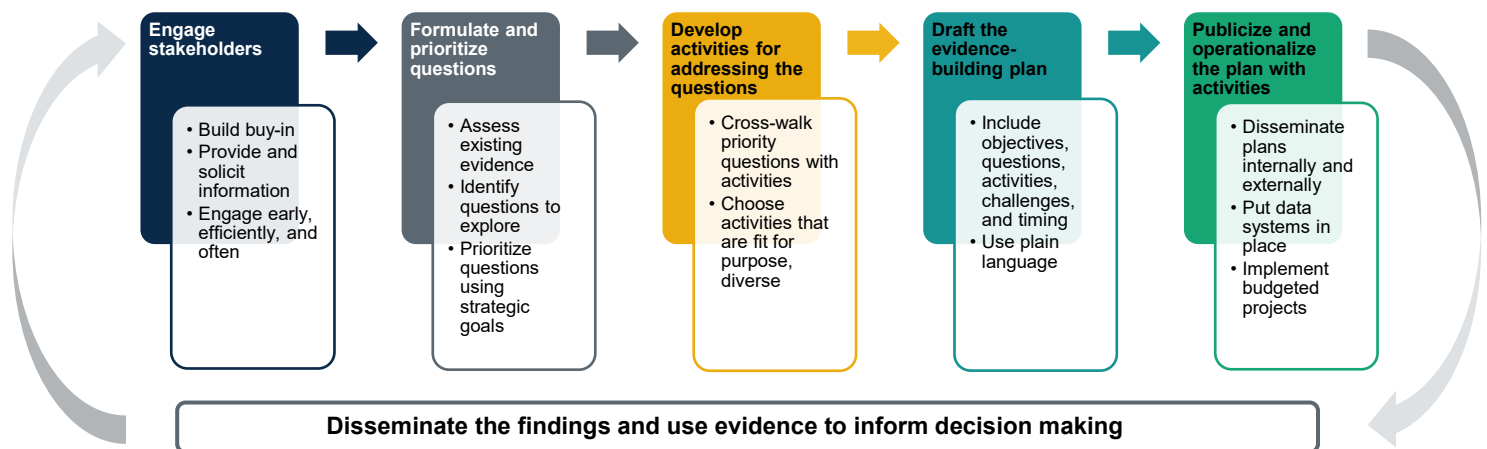
They support ongoing learning and course corrections. Evidence-building plans are designed to increase the availability of relevant evidence and data throughout programs’ development—from planning through implementation and evaluation. Plans promote data-informed decision making within organizations by guiding the generation of new information about what works. Having a systematic process in place for evidence building and use enables staff to efficiently learn what is working, what needs improvement, and implement course corrections as needed (Till and Zaid 2019). Furthermore, evidence-building plans focus resources on addressing information gaps that may prevent an organization from effectively mitigating risks (Vought 2019).

They set priorities for resource allocation. When they are developed through a stakeholder-driven process, evidence-building plans highlight the top areas on which an organization needs to focus its research and evaluation efforts. This focus enables organizations with limited resources to make strategic decisions about where to direct their evaluation funding. The recommended activities developed for the evidence-building plan can then be organized to fit within budget and program time frames (Nightingale et al. 2018). Last, this planning encourages the strategic sequencing of learning activities that may have implications that cut across departments or strategic priorities to build on each other’s findings for maximum impact (Till and Zaid 2019).

D. Process for developing and implementing an evidence-building plan

Although every organization may adopt a unique approach to developing an evidence-building plan, a number of common themes emerge among organizations’ strategies, as displayed in Figure II.2 and described below.

Figure II.2. Steps for developing an evidence-building plan



1. Engage stakeholders

Engaging stakeholders in creating an evidence-building plan serves three purposes: (1) *build buy-in*, (2) *solicit information*, and (3) *educate stakeholders* on both the process and evidence-building efforts. Evidence-building plans will lead change only when they are accepted by both frontline staff and organization leadership, which may include internal stakeholders, such as organizational leaders and program staff, and external stakeholders, such as researchers, grantees, and practitioners (Schupmann et al. 2018). For federal agencies, the Evidence Act identifies required stakeholders as the public, agencies, state and local governments, and representatives of nongovernmental researchers.

Organizations begin stakeholder engagement as an important early step in developing an evidence-building plan, but also conduct engagement regularly throughout the development of the plan. Program officers, leadership, and external experts all can be involved at the start of the process to identify and prioritize learning questions, and can provide iterative feedback on drafts. Strategies for gathering input include the following: individual meetings, group discussions, surveys, advisory groups, email outreach, convenings, requests for information, and public comments on a draft plan (Schupmann et al. 2018).

2. Formulate and prioritize questions

Organizations develop and prioritize high-level questions that address gaps in the current evidence base and reflect the needs of a large group of stakeholders (OMB 2017). When answered, these questions should have a major impact on agency performance (Vought 2019). Questions are evaluated on the distinct but related criteria displayed in Figure II.3, which are whether they are feasible to address, are likely to guide decision making, and have buy-in from stakeholders (Till and Zaid 2019). Questions may be linked to strategic objectives and priorities so leadership clearly understands how evidence developed by the organization contributes to their decision making and goals.

Figure II.3. Criteria for questions



This process begins with an assessment of evidence and resources within the organization’s primary areas of focus. Staff may conduct a review of available evidence to identify areas in which there are significant gaps in knowledge and unmet needs (Nightingale et al. 2018). This process can identify answers to potential questions in the existing evidence—clarifying where organizations need additional data versus literature reviews or meta-analyses (Vought 2019). These findings may be summarized in the evidence-building plan.

3. Develop activities for addressing the questions

Organizations then develop evidence-building activities that align with high-priority questions (Till and Zaid 2019). The President’s 2018 Budget describes evidence as coming from a variety of qualitative and quantitative sources, including “performance measurement, program evaluations, statistical series, retrospective reviews, data analytics, and other science and

research.” Organizations should choose the most rigorous methods feasible within their organizational setting to answer the questions (Nightingale and Scott 2018). Many complex and important questions must be answered using multiple data sources and approaches. Absent a single source of definitive evidence, evaluator staff may use complementary strategies to gather information.

4. Draft the evidence-building plan

Once organizations have selected their methods and data sources, they can push ahead with developing a draft of their evidence-building plan. According to OMB guidance, organizations should include the following elements in their learning agenda, though not necessarily under these headings:

- Which strategic goals and objectives the learning agenda will address
- Priority questions to be answered
- Activities that the agency will engage in to address priority questions
- Timing of learning agenda activities
- Potential data, tools, methods, and analytic approaches to be used to answer priority questions
- Anticipated agency-specific challenges and proposed solutions to developing evidence to support agency priorities

Stakeholders may be consulted to provide feedback on the draft plan, especially agency leaders and those responsible for implementation.

5. Operationalize and publicize the plan with activities

Once the plan is drafted and approved, organizations can begin the process of establishing data systems and data collection procedures in each area of programmatic operations. Organizations may assign responsibilities to those charged with carrying out the evidence-building activities, as well as those overseeing the efforts.

As a final step, organizations disseminate plans within and outside of the organization. By disseminating the plan within the organization, evaluation leaders can make a case for why the evidence-building plan is linked to important organizational objectives and decisions. Widespread dissemination will foster buy-in and encourage the use of evaluation to inform decision making among organizational leaders and staff. Organizations may publish all or a portion of the plan publicly to increase transparency and accountability, in adherence to their statutory requirements.

E. Using evidence-building plans to inform decision making

Operationalizing an evidence-building plan facilitates the generation of evidence that can be used to inform the organization’s work. Organizations must undertake a process of knowledge brokering to ensure that stakeholders, both inside and outside of the organization, are able and encouraged to access the data and apply the results to foster organizational improvement. Best practices for organizations in disseminating and applying evidence include the following:

Disseminating the evidence:

- Maximize the accessibility of available evidence to end users to promote its use in decision making (USAID LEARN 2018).
- Establish clear policies about how data and analysis will be shared, including reports, public-use data files, and monitoring data (Nightingale and Scott 2018). Specific steps may include publishing reports, circulating research newsletters, and developing an evidence-based clearinghouse, when feasible.
- Strive to ensure that results are useful and accessible to partners and communities impacted by the organization’s work. Organizations should tailor their approach to different audiences. Use different mediums, such as reports and infographics, websites and videos, and in-person events like communities of practice or summits (Kidder and Chapel 2018).

Using evidence to inform decision making:

- Hold regular meetings to address progress on evidence-building priorities. Federal agencies may integrate such meetings into quarterly Government Performance and Results Act (GPRA) reviews; however, organizations should determine the best method for their own context (Nightingale and Scott 2018).
- Use evidence to reinforce the organization’s budget requests and policy decisions. Note that for leaders to credibly use evidence for decision making, they may need to be educated about what conclusions can and cannot be drawn from the results, and the potential limitations of those findings.

III. Summary of webinar presentations

The webinar series consisted of eight webinars with individual or joint presenters (Table III.1). Mathematica compiled a list of potential presenters at the outset of the project, based on HHS ASPE staff’s knowledge of subject matter experts and a review of the literature. Given that the series was intended to have staff present on their experience in developing evidence-building plans, Mathematica worked with HHS ASPE staff to identify individuals with experience in leading evaluation efforts in the context of federal agencies. We reached out to presenters with diverse perspectives, representing agencies that varied in size and stage of implementation. In June 2019, Mathematica contacted presenters and asked them to schedule a date between July and August 2019 to deliver a 30-minute presentation. Based on an initial list of 20 potential presenters, we were able to secure presenters representing seven federal agencies and one private institution.

Table III.1. Webinar series

| Organization | Name of presenter | Title | Date |
|---|------------------------------------|--|---------------|
| U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) | Dr. Stacey Young; Dr. Laura Ahearn | Senior learning advisor and senior monitoring, evaluation, research, and learning specialist, Policy, Planning and Learning Bureau | July 16, 2019 |

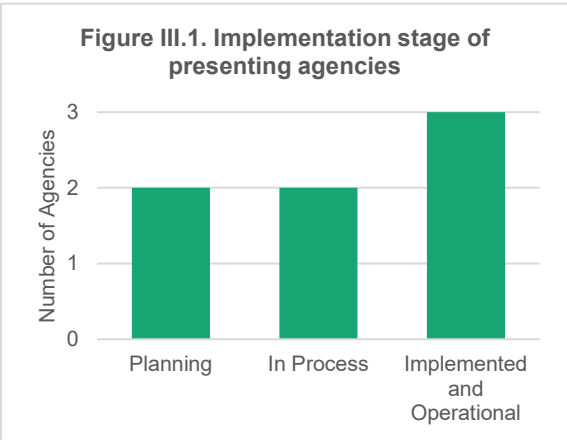
| Organization | Name of presenter | Title | Date |
|---|------------------------------------|---|-----------------|
| National Institutes of Health (NIH) | Dr. Marina Volkov; Dr. Ajay Vatave | Director; health science policy analyst, Office of Evaluation, Performance, and Reporting | July 18, 2019 |
| U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), Foreign Agriculture Service | Eleanor Morefield | Evaluator and team lead, Office of Capacity Building and Development | July 23, 2019 |
| Corporation for National and Community Service (CNCS) | Dr. Mary Hyde | Director, Office of Research and Evaluation | July 30, 2019 |
| National Science Foundation (NSF) | Cynthia Phillips and Rebecca Kruse | Acting chief evaluation officer; evaluator | August 8, 2019 |
| Small Business Administration (SBA) | Brittany Borg | Director, Division of Analysis and Evaluation | August 13, 2019 |
| Administration for Children and Families (ACF) | Emily Schmitt | Deputy director, Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation | August 28, 2019 |
| Urban Institute** | Dr. Demetra Nightingale | Institute fellow and former chief evaluation officer, U.S. Department of Labor | August 29, 2019 |

* The webinar by USAID was not a part of the HHS ASPE webinar series but rather delivered independently by the agency. USAID was included in the original list of organizations to invite for participation, and because the content of its pre-planned webinar aligned so closely with this series, we analyzed its information as part of this summary report.

** In her presentation, Dr. Nightingale spoke both to her previous experience as the chief evaluation officer at the Department of Labor and her professional expertise in the research and evaluation of social policies and programs. Reflecting her current position, Dr. Nightingale’s insights will be referred to as from “the presenter from Urban Institute” throughout.

A. Stage of implementation for agency presenters and attendees

Presenters represented agencies whose evidence-building plans are in process—typically at the information gathering or drafting stage—and those that have fully implemented and operational plans (see Figure III.1). Four of the presenters shared learnings from their experience in implementing evidence-based plans on different scales. The U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), Administration for Children and Families (ACF), and the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) have been implementing these plans on a smaller scale for subagencies or programs for several years; however, ACF and USDA have not yet developed an agency-level evidence-building plan, whereas USAID finalized its agency-wide plan in early 2019. The Small Business Administration (SBA) brought a long-term perspective, having developed its agency-wide plan three years before the webinar. The Corporation for National and Community Service (CNCS) and National Institutes of Health (NIH) are in the intermediate stage, having developed an outline or draft plan. Finally, the National Science



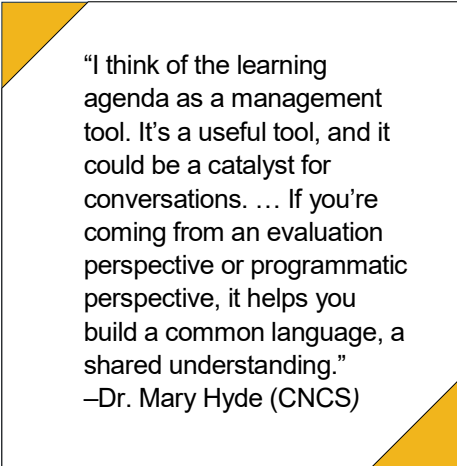
Foundation (NSF) is still developing its approach; its staff are currently piloting smaller-scale plans with the intention of creating a framework that can be scaled agency-wide.

The majority of attendees represented federal agencies that had not yet implemented evidence-building plans and were interested in learning from other agencies' approaches and strategies. Approximately 265 unduplicated individuals attended one or more live webinars. Close to half (47 percent) of attendees polled during the webinars³ described their agency as “planning to implement,” whereas an additional quarter (27 percent) described their agencies as “in the process of implementing.” Only 13 percent of attendees described their agency’s evidence-building plan as fully implemented. Attendees expressed the most interest in learning about how agencies structured their approach and processes for implementing evidence-building plans, followed by how agencies overcame barriers and lessons learned during implementation.

B. Organizations’ impetus and goals for developing evidence-building plans

During the webinars, presenters addressed their agencies’ impetus for developing an evidence-building plan. **Although the majority of agencies developed evidence-building plans to comply with the Evidence Act, most agencies also recognized it as a strategic opportunity to improve the use of evidence within their organizations.** A few agencies had developed evidence-building agendas before federal mandates; however, most began this process at the agency-wide level in reaction to, or anticipation of, the Evidence Act. Generally, evaluators saw the Evidence Act as an opportunity to improve on and formalize the work their organizations were already carrying out. NSF described the Evidence Act as “creat[ing] urgency to improve the inputs to evidence building.” The three goals that presenters cited most commonly when undertaking the planning process were the following:

(1) To create a shared language around evidence, research, and evaluation. Larger federal agencies, such as NIH, cited their size and complexity as a challenge when coordinating at an agency-wide level. Therefore, these agencies approached the evidence-building plan as an opportunity to hold conversations around what “evidence” means and what purpose it serves within their agencies. NIH described the plan as a bridge for creating a common understanding and framework for evaluation across its 27 institutes and centers. Presenters from NIH expressed hopes that the plan would spur critical conversations and relationship building between staff in siloed areas.



“I think of the learning agenda as a management tool. It’s a useful tool, and it could be a catalyst for conversations. ... If you’re coming from an evaluation perspective or programmatic perspective, it helps you build a common language, a shared understanding.”
–Dr. Mary Hyde (CNCS)

(2) To promote the use of evidence throughout the agency through culture change. Agencies undertook evidence-building plans with the intention of not only gathering evidence, but also encouraging its widespread use in decision making. NSF emphasized that the required

³ Results include attendees of the seven HHS ASPE-hosted webinars who responded to polling questions. These results reflect the answers of 207 duplicated attendees for the question on an agency’s stage and 372 duplicated attendees for the question on learning interests.

elements of evidence-building plans primarily focused on the collection, analysis, and synthesis of data—but decided to use the process to aim at the end goal of enabling staff to make more informed decisions. A few presenters explicitly described the end goal of these plans as a “culture shift.” CNCS set up the planning process to establish a shared understanding among staff that evidence can contribute to achieving its mission. Toward this goal, CNCS incorporated educational campaigns and strategies for knowledge mobilization into the development of its plans.

(3) To set agency-wide priorities. Most agencies also entered into the planning process with the intent of prioritizing different areas of research and evaluation. Given limited funds, agencies use evidence-building plans to develop a realistic pathway for addressing their highest-priority evidence gaps. For example, SBA requires project teams to submit proposals for conducting evaluations and uses the evidence-building plan to determine which evaluations should receive funding. As a result, the agency allocates funding towards projects that address its key questions.

C. Approaches to developing evidence-building plans

Before initiating their evidence-building plans, many agency leaders and evaluation teams decided on high-level strategy, including staffing, structure, and approach. In this section, we provide an overview of agencies’ approaches to their evidence-building plans before discussing their step-by-step processes.

Most federal agencies report that their evidence-building plans were led by centralized evaluation offices. Each agency featured in the webinar series has a centralized evaluation office, such as NIH’s Office of Evaluation, Performance, and Reporting; ACF’s Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation; and SBA’s Office of Program Performance, Analysis, and Evaluation. Staff in these offices have experience working in depth with different subagencies and programs on evaluation efforts. In these units, evaluation staff understand the priorities and activities of siloed departments, and are well positioned to develop comprehensive evidence-building plans. The presenter from Urban Institute noted that agencies may have different types of evaluation officers who function in different capacities. This position may be held by a chief evaluation officer who funds and directs evaluations with an independent, dedicated evaluation team. Other types of roles include coordinating chief evaluation officers, who provide expertise and coordination but have minimal funding or responsibility for conducting evaluations, and facilitating chief evaluation officers, who provide expertise and coordination but do not maintain full autonomy because of other responsibilities (for example, policymaking, budgeting).

A few agencies contracted out all or a portion of their plans to evaluation firms. Those who worked with contractors noted that this effort was collaborative, requiring active management from agency staff. For example, NSF’s Office of Evaluation and Assessment Capabilities within the Office of Integrative Activities is responsible for developing the agency’s evidence-building plan. This office leverages external contractors to support areas in which its internal team lacks capacity or specific expertise, including analytical and evaluative functions, technical assistance, strategic facilitation, and human-centered design. Regardless of whether the

staff were internal or external to the organization, presenters recommended assigning a dedicated project manager for the plan and building a diverse team with a range of skill sets, including cross-cultural competence.

Most agencies integrate the evidence-building plan into existing activities. Both CNCS and SBA tied their learning agendas to their strategic planning processes, a step that fostered efficiencies and greater alignment between their strategic goals and evidence-building priorities. CNCS integrated strategic planning, evidence-building planning, and budget formulation into the same streamlined process. In a similar vein, USAID and NSF used existing internal frameworks to guide their plans. USAID chose “self-reliance”—a central mandate for the agency—to guide its evidence-building plan. NSF piloted its learning agenda using its “10 Big Ideas,” an existing set of questions that drives NSF’s long-term research agenda and requires multisector collaboration within the agency.

Steps for developing an evidence-building plan

Several themes in webinar presentations referenced the steps agencies took in developing their evidence-building plans, which we highlight in the following section.

1. Engaging stakeholders

As an essential first step, agencies identify stakeholders and determine their roles in the development of the plan. Agencies vary in what type of stakeholders they engage. Universally, presenters identified agency leaders as key stakeholders because their buy-in and feedback on strategic goals are essential to the plan. Although NIH focused on evaluation staff as its primary stakeholders, the majority of other agencies consulted with subject matter experts and project staff. NSF recommends creating a toolkit for stakeholder engagement across the evidence-building plan, articulating how and by whom the information in the plan will be used before beginning engagement. While agencies identify participants and roles early in the process, stakeholder engagement is conducted across all steps in creating an evidence-building plan.

Agencies use different methods of stakeholder engagement to capture input and feedback at different stages. Organizations use common methods to solicit feedback, including interviews, surveys, conferences, consultations, webinars, and roundtables. The type of activities conducted may depend on the evidence plan’s stage of development. USDA provides a good example of how stakeholder engagement evolves: its team began by convening a roundtable of subject matter experts from both inside and outside of the agency to shape the first draft of the plan. USDA’s team used the input from this conversation to develop draft questions, on which the subject matter experts then provided feedback. Next, the team workshopped the draft questions with the stakeholders implementing the programs—key practitioners and program staff—to ensure the questions’ relevance. Last, the team presented the final evidence-building plan to all stakeholders through a webinar, soliciting feedback to improve the plan and process in future iterations.

The presenter from Urban Institute noted that the Department of Labor incorporated input from federal stakeholders, such as Congressional committees and OMB, by retaining a log of their questions submitted to the agency throughout the year. These logs provided a good indication of priority topics without the need to invest in direct outreach.

Regardless of the methods used, presenters emphasized that **communications with stakeholders should be frequent, informative, and transparent.** Agencies use these stakeholder engagement opportunities wisely so participants feel their investment in the process is worthwhile. Regarding transparency, NIH suggested that a process with plenty of opportunity for iterative feedback is important in ensuring that agency-wide stakeholders with different priorities buy in to the plan and accept the outcome.

“Make those communications and engagements count. They should be informative. Those are opportunities for your stakeholders to understand, ‘Hey, these people are using my time well. I’m able to give some feedback. I’m able to understand what the process is.’”

–Dr. Ajay Vatave (NIH)

2. Conducting a landscape analysis

Most agencies conduct a systematic review of existing research and evidence-building efforts within and outside of their agencies. These “landscape analyses” include literature reviews on potential topics of interest, reviews of internal resources, summaries of past and ongoing evaluations, and/or other forms of environmental scans. USDA’s consultant teams conducted “intervention mapping” on their programs—comparing projects’ current activities to their expected activities, based on their theories of change. Agencies reported that conducting a landscape analysis enabled them to identify what they currently know and what remaining gaps exist. Later on, this analysis helped them prioritize questions. SBA found it essential for the evidence-building staff to be well versed on the programs and any relevant research before entering into the question development process with program staff.

3. Forming and prioritizing questions

Agencies use top-down or bottom-up approaches to identify questions, depending on their broader strategy. Agencies that used a top-down approach developed high-level questions based on the agency’s mission and/or program objectives. For example, CNCS deconstructed its mission statement and key program goals to develop a set of “evergreen” questions that would remain relevant to its programming in perpetuity. More common was a bottom-up approach, in which evidence-building staff solicited questions from stakeholders—program staff, subject matter experts, and evaluators—through surveys, meetings, and interviews. Some agencies allow questions to bubble up naturally, whereas others guide these conversations with preliminary questions. Staff then compile the results into a series of high-level questions, using information from the landscape analysis and leadership input.

Many agencies develop detailed sub-questions to accompany the high-level questions. Because the high-level questions are often broad or cross-cutting, agencies develop sub-questions that suggest specific areas of inquiry. SBA’s 2019 “Enterprise Learning Agenda” uses

strategic goals rather than high-level questions. The agency’s detailed research and evaluation questions provide examples of how to build the evidence base to advance that strategic goal. For example, SBA pairs the strategic goal, “Support small business revenue and job growth,” with questions such as, “What methods promote SBA lending and build lender capacity?”

Agencies find it valuable to develop criteria for prioritizing learning questions. When prioritizing a potential set of learning questions, agencies find it valuable to apply criteria for inclusion. These criteria may include whether the questions are relevant to decision making and program improvement, are utilization focused (rather than abstract), and address important gaps in evidence. In compliance with the Evidence Act, federal agencies prioritize questions that address what decision makers need to know to improve their policies and programs. In many agencies, staff or leaders rank questions based on their alignment with the agency’s strategic priorities. At NSF, evaluators led a more in-depth, three-part prioritization process: (1) articulating a theory of change for the organization, (2) developing a short-term decision roadmap that connects anticipated milestones to decision moments when evidence would be most useful, and (3) using the theory of change and decision roadmap to develop and prioritize questions.

4. Developing a plan to address the questions

Agencies present a diverse array of evidence-building activities to address the questions in their plans. These activities enable the agency to operationalize their evidence-building plans. Agencies reported planning for a variety of evidence-building activities, from rigorous impact studies to qualitative research with staff who operate programs. For evaluators to gain buy-in from stakeholders on these activities, they often need to expand the definition of “evidence” among staff members to include a broader range of designs. ACF discussed how it was critical to communicate to staff all the forms of research that can be conducted at different stages of programs to demonstrate impact and effectiveness—from descriptive research to performance measures to impact evaluations. Some methods can be more effective for answering specific types of questions, so it is important to match activity design to context. The presenter from Urban Institute noted that capacity-building efforts should be included as “evidence-building activities” when drafting this portion of the plan, particularly for agencies without a strong existing evidence-building infrastructure.

To accompany the release of the evidence-building plan, many agencies plan to compile tools and resources to support programs in selecting evaluation strategies. Through the process of developing evidence-building plans, many agencies identified a need for resources to help subagencies design their own effective evidence-building activities. NSF plans to develop a “study option menu,” which will help staff select appropriate strategies to build the evidence base for their priority questions. Similarly, SBA created an evidence and evaluation community of practice as a space for evaluation staff to discuss how to better collect and use data.

5. Publicizing and operationalizing the plan with activities

Agencies disseminate their evidence-building plans internally and externally, with the support of leaders. Each agency discussed a “roll out” of the final plan after final reviews are completed.⁴ Presenters noted that leaders were key in promoting the use of the plan, though they reiterated that buy-in by leaders *and* program staff must be cultivated through stakeholder engagement before the dissemination stage. USDA hosted a webinar to review the final plan with stakeholders, and many agencies posted the reports publicly for accountability.

Agencies noted the importance of coordination across questions when implementing evidence-building activities. Given that the evidence collected often pertains to more than one focus area, creating a non-siloed process improves the accessibility of information for decision making. For example, USAID recommends assigning meta-coordinators to lead efforts across multiple questions, rather than one or two staff members per question.

D. Barriers to the implementation of evidence-building plans

Presenters identified a variety of barriers and strategies for overcoming barriers when implementing evidence-building plans in their agencies; some barriers and strategies are agency and context specific, whereas others are more general. In the next section, we summarize common barriers and solutions implemented across the selected agencies, which are also highlighted in Table III.2.

Table III.2. Challenges (barriers) and solutions (strategies) highlighted by presenters

| Challenges agencies encountered | Solutions agencies identified |
|--|--|
| Limited knowledge about organization evaluation and monitoring among program staff or leaders | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Used plain language; spoke in terms that program and leadership staff regularly use ▪ Established a working definition of “evidence” and provided level-setting information before stakeholder engagement, as needed |
| Staff are fearful of being evaluated or uneasy using evidence for decision making | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Addressed fears of evaluation by having leadership reinforce that they do not expect programs to be perfect but do expect programs to use evidence for continuous improvement ▪ Built trust between evaluation specialists and program officers ▪ Spent more time with offices that needed additional assistance in implementing the plan ▪ Trained leaders on how to interpret and weigh evidence |
| Difficult to get buy-in or agreement on priorities from staff on evidence-building plan and implementation | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Enlisted agency leaders to articulate the importance of evaluation to staff ▪ Ensured transparency when deciding on evidence-building priorities ▪ Secured a “quick win”—answered one of the plan’s priority questions by synthesizing the existing evidence ▪ Highlighted stories of effective use of evaluation and relied on staff to share stories of their positive experiences of using evidence for decision making with peers |

⁴ Mathematica has posted a few example learning agendas in the same location in which the webinar series is housed (<https://www.mathematica-mpr.com/our-publications-and-findings/projects/webinar-series-and-summary-report-on-developing-and-using-evidence-building-and-evaluation-plans-for>). In addition, several completed learning agendas also may be found at the following website hosted by HHS ASPE: <https://aspe.hhs.gov/evaluation-evidence>.

Limited understanding of evidence among agency staff. Outside of evaluation offices, staff often have less knowledge and understanding of concepts related to evidence and evaluation. They may not understand what evidence means, why evidence gaps are important, or how evaluation is different from basic research. Evaluation leaders may need to educate staff about the importance of evidence for their programmatic decision making. For example, the USDA presenters noted that staff may not understand the nature of evidence-building plans and evidence gaps or be able to identify what constitutes rigorous evidence. Therefore, they explained and continued to revisit these concepts with staff during the process of implementing learning agendas.

Presenters identified a number of strategies to address staff members' differing levels of exposure to and knowledge of evidence. CNCS and the presenter from Urban Institute said evaluators should use plain language and terms that program staff and agency leaders use regularly. Other presenters emphasized the need for level-setting across subagencies and staff; for example, NSF established an operational definition for "evidence" across the agency. The Urban Institute presenter said that the Department of Labor encourages staff to advance their knowledge of evaluation by joining quarterly brown bags, attending conferences, and pursuing continuing education.

"The most important principle... is that the research needs to be relevant at the agency or sub-agency at hand. You don't just do evaluation for the sake of it... the studies are being done to help improve government results. And the way to do it is to have the appropriately trained evaluation staff in those offices that can be the bridge and communicate between the different communities.

—Dr. Demetra Nightingale (Urban Institute)

Discomfort with evaluation and use of evidence for decision making. In any given agency, some staff will be more comfortable than others participating in evidence-based activities and using evidence for decision making. If staff associate evaluations with "audits" or performance reviews, they may be concerned that evaluation results will reflect poorly on their work and thus resist evidence-building efforts.

To address fear of evaluation, CNCS staff emphasized the importance of having leadership reinforce that they do not expect programs to perform flawlessly; rather, programs should aspire to use evidence to support continuous improvement of their program operations. Moreover, staff in the evaluation department need to model this approach by identifying areas for their own improvement. Agencies emphasized that the development of an evidence-building plan also provides an opportunity to build trust between evaluators and program staff. ACF noted that language can be important during these interactions—they found that using the language of "learning" rather than "research" was a less intimidating way to connect with staff and build buy-in.

Regarding evidence use, SBA noted that leaders may be accustomed to asking evaluation staff to use the evidence to point them to the best decision but may be uncomfortable weighing the evidence themselves and translating it into an informed decision. To address this discomfort, SBA developed an evidence and evaluation community of practice to create a space for staff to

discuss best practices for communicating evidence, synthesizing findings, and other planning activities.

Mixed buy-in from agency staff on priorities and/or the importance of evidence building. Finally, given limitations in resources, knowledge, and support for evaluation evidence, several webinar presenters highlighted the challenges of getting staff to buy into the development and implementation of the evidence-building plan. For example, NSF staff said there was a history of not involving stakeholders in the planning of agency-wide evaluation efforts; this history created a barrier to enlisting staff participation and interest in the development of the learning agenda. At CNCS, some staff viewed evidence building as “nice to have” but not necessarily part of their mission. Finally, NIH commented that diversity across divisions (for example, differing cultures, resources, and capacity) led to staff having discrete priorities for evaluating the agency’s work.

Presenters highlighted a number of strategies they have employed to improve buy-in among staff at their agencies. For example, NIH evaluation staff focused on making the case to the agency’s leaders on the importance of evaluation. To address staff views that evaluation is not a necessity, NIH staff told stories of the effective use of evaluation and arranged for non-evaluation peers to convey these stories as much as possible. They also suggested that transparency was critical to getting staff buy-in on priorities for evaluation. SBA staff highlighted the importance of investing time and energy in offices and staff that need more assistance. Both USDA and CNCS recommended going for a “quick win” to demonstrate the plan’s value. For example, they might show colleagues that one or two high-priority questions could be answered by synthesizing existing evidence.

“In most cases, we’re working with multidisciplinary and cross-functional teams, often that have never worked before together. So they approach [the planning process] from very different perspectives related not just to their scientific discipline, but also to their functional role in the agency. We must create and support infrastructure for collaboration to make those working groups and teams successful. So we’re using things like learning agenda technical teams and governance teams, and memos of agreement with leadership, to help articulate some roles and to ensure that everyone who needs to have a voice in the learning agenda has that voice.”

–Rebecca Kruse (NSF)

E. Expected impacts

Presenters discussed a range of improvements they expect to occur within their organizations as a result of the development and implementation of evidence-building plans. For example, agencies anticipated staff would develop an enhanced understanding of evaluation-related activities and resources within their organizations, the organizational culture would improve related to the use of evidence for decision making, and organizations would make better and more efficient investments in evidence-building activities.

Assessing evaluation activities and resources is an inherently valuable exercise.

Conducting landscape analyses required agencies to take stock of where evidence existed; also, through these discussions, agencies determined to what degree the evidence was used. From there, agencies then identified new resources that could improve the accessibility and use of evidence. For example, the NIH presenters reported that their evidence-building plan led them to

identify both existing and needed resources regarding evaluation. As a result, they plan to develop a clearinghouse of existing resources and reports, and connect evaluators doing similar work in different parts of the agency to create communities of practice. Similarly, USAID indicated that a key next step for the agency will be to disseminate information from activities it has planned. This will include a document containing a systematic review of evidence relevant to the agency, along with keywords and an assessment of each study's design quality. Finally, in preparation for its agency-wide agenda, ACF catalogued its existing research projects and developed a common framework and terminology for discussing evidence-building activities across program offices.

Presenters also expect that colleagues will develop more favorable views regarding the use of evidence to inform programmatic decisions. The presenters were optimistic that their agencies are achieving—or are likely to achieve—greater use of evidence through agency-wide culture change. For example, both NIH and SBA presenters predicted that staff engagement in developing an evidence-building plan would result in staff being less likely to view evaluation as an audit and more as a tool for improving organizational performance. Similarly, the CNCS presenter indicated that this process will promote greater awareness of how evaluation can promote innovation and continuous improvement. The plan has shifted conversations inside the agency, with staff beginning to challenge their assumptions about which activities are performing well and leadership requesting information from evaluation leaders within the agency.

Finally, the presenters indicated that the process of developing an evidence-building plan will improve how organizations invest their resources for evaluation and monitoring. Agencies reported that evidence-building plans help them streamline their investments. The USDA presenter noted that the plan will improve the agency's ability to make better long-term research investments and spend evaluation and monitoring resources on high-priority topics. Similarly, the SBA presenter noted that development of an evidence-building plan will enable the agency to focus its evaluation activities on the areas of highest impact. The presenter from Urban Institute recommended that evidence-building plans be incorporated into agencies' annual budget submissions to OMB. Additionally, agencies can incorporate relevant findings from research and evaluation efforts into new budget requests and reference findings in budget narratives to make their case for funding.

F. Lessons learned

In the section below, we highlight presenters' lessons learned and key takeaways from the process of developing their agencies' evidence-building plans. These lessons generally focus on engagement with stakeholders, adapting the planned activities to the context of their organization, and being strategic in selecting priorities and directions for the evidence-building plan.

Engage stakeholders early and often. The reviewed literature on evidence-building plans emphasizes the importance of engaging stakeholders in developing the plan and selecting priorities; most of the webinar presenters highlighted this finding as an essential practice. NIH staff emphasized the importance of early and frequent communication with stakeholders;

similarly, USAID staff described the need to build end users' buy-in to the plan beginning early in the process. Both USDA and NIH recommended using a participatory approach to plan and solicit ideas from agency staff, and emphasized that the time investment up front is necessary to ensure that staff buy into the learning process. Based on their experience in partnering with program staff, NSF recommended creating a toolkit for stakeholder engagement across the evidence-building plan, which articulates how and by whom the information will be used; provides evidence for effectiveness; and lays out the initiatives that staff care most about.

In Table III.3 and the section that follows, we have highlighted themes from the presenters on best practices for engaging stakeholders in the development of the evidence-building plan.

Table III.3. Effective practices for engaging stakeholders

- USDA benefited from using a thorough, participatory process to ensure that people buy into the evidence-building plan.
- USAID coupled the learning agenda with other agency priorities to garner leadership support.
- CNCS staff brought cross-cultural competencies to the table: tolerating ambiguity, using active listening, and showing humility. They noted that not everyone is on the same page as the evaluation staff; at the same time, program staff have expertise that evaluators do not.
- The presenter from Urban Institute found that internal conversations with program staff, field staff, service delivery providers, and political/administrative leads are critical. Stakeholder input is more than evaluators simply talking with evaluators.
- NSF created a toolkit for stakeholder engagement across the learning agenda, articulating how and by whom the information will be used; used a variety of techniques for engaging stakeholders; and paired learning agendas with initiatives that people cared about.
- NSF selected high-visibility, high-priority topics to increase interest.
- SBA met with program staff in their offices and engaged with them, not just with leaders.

Be flexible in approach and develop a fit-for-purpose strategy. Another general theme from the lessons learned by presenters was the need for flexibility in developing an evidence-building plan. Given the diversity in size and focus of federal agencies, NIH emphasized the need to use an approach that fits with the context of an agency, and noted that agencies should be willing to change course as activities and priorities evolve. USAID recommended that organizations plan for regular “pause and reflection” sessions to review progress with the development of the evidence-building plan.

Build on existing structures and avoid “reinventing the wheel.” Last, presenters recommended that organizations and evaluation leaders consider existing evidence-building structures and models, both inside and outside of their agency, and use this information to build their plans. First, NIH recommended that agencies seeking to develop such plans take stock of what frameworks and plans other federal agencies have used, and adapt them to fit their own context. Similarly, ACF emphasized that staff should make an effort to build on existing evaluation efforts and strategies within their organization; if a subagency has an approach to evidence building that is working well, consider scaling these best practices agency-wide rather than starting from scratch. Similarly, the SBA presenter recommended that the evidence-building plan use existing structures and processes already in place. Finally, multiple agencies noted that the activities identified in their evidence-building plans built on research and evaluation efforts already underway.

IV. Conclusion

Many agencies that participated in the HHS ASPE webinar series initiated their evidence-building plan to comply with the Evidence Act. However, the presenters indicated that their colleagues recognized the inherent value not only of planning and prioritizing their evidence-building activities, but also of increasing access to evidence for decision making. Evidence-building plans have been a natural next step toward institutionalizing the availability and use of evidence in agencies' programs and administration. Many agencies have found these plans to be a useful tool for organizing and directing research, performance management, and evaluation efforts to address gaps in knowledge.

As agencies build on a general framework and a set of principles for developing an evidence-building plan, they use a broad spectrum of approaches to customize the plan to the context in which their organization operates. Each of the seven federal agencies represented in the webinars chose a different strategy for developing their evidence-building plans, taking into account their structure, culture, and existing workflows and planning processes. The presenters emphasized that investing in developing a customized strategy at the outset was key to a successful implementation. Rather than being stand-alone documents, evidence-building plans can and should be integrated into existing structures, such as strategic planning or budget development.

According to most presenters, stakeholder engagement figured prominently in the development of an evidence-building plan. Although each agency took a different approach to stakeholder engagement, all noted that a participatory process was critical to gathering input, promoting awareness, and ensuring transparency. Engagement with agency staff allowed the evaluation staff to build the agency staff's buy-in to the plan's objectives; staff and leaders should be invested in the questions and activities in the plan if both are intended to guide decision making.

Finally, many presenters pointed to the shift in culture in their agencies with respect to developing and implementing an evidence-building plan. Evaluation staff may encounter resistance from agency staff that stems from a lack of knowledge or scarcity of time and resources. However, alongside these challenges, the presenters concluded that (1) the evidence-building plan provides an opportunity to build the capacity and culture for using evidence at all levels of the agency, and (2) brokering education and knowledge is essential to institutionalizing evidence-building activities.

As this webinar series has shown, the development of evidence-building plans by federal agencies is an emerging field, and there continues to be institutional learning across federal agencies about the best strategies for implementing this approach. In Appendix A, we have assembled a library of 10 resources that may be useful to federal agencies or other organizations as they plan to implement an evidence-building plan. In addition, evidence-building plans are but one part of the Evidence Act; we highly suggest that federal agencies make use of the additional guidance on complying with the Evidence Act, released by OMB in July 2019 and cited in the references below.

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