Jessica McNab:

Good afternoon everyone. Thanks for joining us this afternoon to webinar. Just going to give it another minute here. I still have about 13 folks on the line and I know we've had over 80 registers. I'm just going to give it another minute and then I'll slowly begin to open the webinar.

Okay. Well why don't we slowly get started. I know a few folks are joining the line, getting on the WebEx platform and filing in so we will start slowly with our introductions. First many of you have joined us before. This will be pretty similar to our previous webinars in the webinars series. So welcome and thanks again for attending this afternoon's webinar. It is a Health and Human Services - Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation webinar series, which we showcase different federal agencies and their approach for developing and using a learning agenda for evidence building. Okay. For those of you who have not met me yet, my name is Jessica McNabb. I'm a task lead at Mathematica and I help support this project.

I'm going to facilitate the webinar today, but I have my counterparts from Mathematica, Derek on the line with me. He's going to focus on some of the logistics for our webinar this afternoon and our government task lead from ASPE is on the line with us as well, Dr. Amanda Cash. Dr. Cash will chat through the webinar series. The impetus for the work and what we've heard so far from different federal agencies reviewing their approach to learning agendas.

Today's featured speaker, which is why we're here today is Brittany Borg from the Small Business Administration. She's going to share their evaluation plan and learning agenda approach and we'll walk through the specifics of the webinar and the agenda. But of course we're really going to focus on Brittany and the small business associations approach to learning agendas and then save a good amount of time for any questions or comments that you have for her or for SBA as well.

So this is the fifth webinar and in our seven part webinar series. Hopefully you've joined us for a couple of previous webinars. Again, Amanda will showcase who spoke to what on what dates. And we're working through all of the contents of recording the transcripts and both 508 compliance slides so that you can access those since we have already hosted four of those and we started in the middle of July.

We recently, within the last couple of weeks, shared an updated flyer for the webinars series because we had scheduled our sixth webinar for August 28 with ACF and Emily Schmitt. So you should have received that to the Federal Evaluators Listserve or through other platforms that Dr. Cash may have shared. And we are working to possibly schedule another webinar so please do stay tuned on that. So let's just start with a couple of housekeeping details. For those of you who have used WebEx before, this will probably be a bit redundant for you. For those who haven't, we just review a couple of the different pads and features of WebEx you should feel comfortable using platform, asking us questions, raising your hand, things like that.

So one of the first pieces is of course, please make sure to mute your line unless you're speaking and we do encourage during the Q and A for you to raise your hand. There should be a pad or an icon next to your [inaudible] you can actually click and raise your hand, if you do have a question and we'll point to, we'll call you out by name and then you'll need to make sure to unmute your line. So unless you're asking a question during the Q and A or making a comment on Brittany's presentation, please do feel free to mute your line either on your phone or through the icon on the webinar platform.

There should be a Q and A pod in the right hand corner of your screen. The Q and A pod is what we're going to use for you to ask us questions. If people feel like piping in through the phones, please do feel free to use the Q and A for us to see what kind of questions you have about the webinar itself, but also any questions that you have for Brittany and small business associations specifically.

And then the last feature is closed-captioning. If you need closed-captioning, there should be a multimedia viewer pod in the bottom of your screen as well. And segue on top over to that. Derek, I'm not sure if you put the events ID in the chat yet to folks but we'll make sure to give you an a event ID that you can use to put in the event ID box and that will help a create the closed-captioning, should you need that.

Okay, so moving on, let's get into the details for our agenda this afternoon. Again, if you've joined us before you're probably pretty familiar with the way that we work through our content. Again, my name is Jessica McNabb and I'll introduce Dr. Cash and Brittany in more detail in a minute. So I'll go through a couple of additional house-keeping opening slides. Amanda will step in and a recap webinar series, but also talk about the project itself, emphasis for the work and how that ties to the evidence act. Again, our featured speaker is Brittany Bork from the SBA. We're very excited that she's here this afternoon. We'll save a good deal of time for Q and A and then a couple of just additional slides in terms of our next events and ways to contact us should you have any questions or comments for our team.

And seguing back to our chat feature, I see that Derek has chatted in the event ID, so again, should you need closed-captioning, please see that event ID is there for you to use. It's 4113022.

Okay, so I'm Jessica McNabb as I mentioned, I'm a researcher and a test lead at Mathematica and I've done a variety of different things at Mathematica and previous positions, but primarily focused on curriculum development in different shared learning activities or technical assistance projects. I'm most often focused on quality improvement and delivery system reform. So I've worked kind of the sharper end at a manage care hospital system and also for the American Hospital Association really specifically working with hospitals and rapid cycle improvement. Our government task lead as mentioned is Dr. Amanda Cash. Dr. Cash was the acting director for the division of data policy at ASPE. Dr. Cash portfolio includes research on evaluation methodologies that are appropriate for complex federal programs. She also co-leads the federal task force for combating antibiotic resistant bacteria. Her office is coordinating in the leading the implementation of title one of the evidence act.

We'll just focus on implementing evidence building and evaluation plans and of course that's why we're here today. But she's also an epidemiologist by training and has certainly most primarily spoke of the recent work on evaluation evidence as well as anti-microbial resistance.

But Brittany, again, our features because prompts SBA has joined us. She is the director for analysis and evaluation or a director in the analysis and evaluation division at SBA. Brittany leads analysis and evaluation and is responsible for creating the agency's enterprise learning agenda, which we'll talk about in great detail. She conducts evaluations and analysis to support a state programs and economic analysis for policies as well as regulation.

So with that, Amanda, I'm gonna toss it back to you just to recap a bit about the series' objectives and who we've heard, from which agencies, so far in the webinar series. Amanda?

Amanda Cash:

Great. Thanks Jess. Okay, so many of you have heard, so I'm just going to say briefly, if you don't know, the office of the assistant secretary for planning and evaluation within HHS is the policy advisor or think tank to the secretary or fourth secretary of HHS. And we are leading implementation of the evidence act here at HHS. We're conducting these webinars, so federal staff at HHS and other agencies can learn more about evidence building plans. We also really welcome your questions and participation throughout the series. So just to give you a quick rundown of the objective of the series, it's to have speakers discuss their organization's stage of implementation of evidence building plans, their processes developed to build evidence building plans and how those plans were implemented. Barrier space when developing and implementing evidence building plans and strategies to address them. And lastly, really to understand the impact of evidence building plans on evaluation and organizational decision making and program effectiveness.

Again, Jess mentioned, I was just going to give you a quick recap. On July 18th, doctors Marina Volkov and Ajay Vatave joined us from NIH to talk about their evaluation plan. On July 23rd, Ellie Morefield joined us from USDA and the Foreign Agricultural Service to talk about what they were doing there with their learning agenda. And on July 30th, Mary Hyde joined us from the Corporation for National and Community Service to speak to her evidence building plan and how they've done it from a smaller agency perspective. And then last week, we heard from Rebecca Kruse and Cynthia Phillips at the National Science Foundation, and they spoke to, very much their approach at NSF, which was really great.

You can access these recordings and presentations on NPR's website, and I will send the link out to the FedEval Listserve, and we'll send an updated schedule of the webinars. I think we have, as Jeff mentioned, ACS left and maybe one more presentation. And I think now I'm going to turn it back over to you, Jess, to do our intro poll. So again, if you've been with us before we apologize, but we hope we have some new folks as well. So please go ahead and answer the polls if you haven't before.

Jessica McNab

Thanks Amanda. So you should see, Derek has pushed up first poll here, and again it could seem redundant that we're asking you these same two questions. We're going to file through all of the information from those who have answered which from which agencies to try to understand what are the common or most common learning interests for the webinar series itself for each event, but also stage of implementation in terms of implementing a learning agenda at your HSC.

So starting with question one, what are you most interested in in terms of series itself? So now we're in the fifth webinar of this series. Or specifically thinking about Brittany's content, what did you come here today to hear her talk through? What kind of questions you have?

So is it Option A, which agencies have fully implemented their learning agendas? And you'll hear from Brittany, and they're fully implemented and operational. So you're going to hear from someone who has gone through each stage of the process and certainly Brittany has a lot to share.

Is it about specifically how agencies have structured their approach and processes?

Is it Option C, the barriers and the strategies to overcome those barriers from implementing their learning agendas?

Is it Option D, how and what agencies have learned when implementing their learning agendas?

Or is it E and you'll have to chat in your response?

Well if we haven't covered what you're most interested, A, B, C or D, you'll need to chat in your response for others. So I'll pause there and be comfortable with silence and let you all chat in your responses and then Derek will let us know which responses most resonate with you.

Derek Mitchell:

Thank you Jess. So it looks like a lot of our participants have chosen Option B, how agencies have structured their approach and processes to implement learning strategies, followed by Option C the barriers agencies have experienced when implementing their learning agendas as well as their strategy agendas have implemented. So those are our-

Jessica McNab:
Okay.

Derek Mitchell:
Top choices.

Jessica McNab:
Great, thanks Derek. And I think pretty similar to our previous events, it seems like folks are interested in sort of the how to, how-to's of approach and processes. What is your approach, what kind of processes did you use, and also what kind of barriers did you experience, what might you have implemented to overcome those barriers, or perhaps you're still thinking through that.

So thanks Derek. Let's push our other poll. Let's push our second poll about stage of implementation. Okay, great. So second question is at what stage is your agency in terms of implementing a learning agenda to evidence building?

Of course we've had folks, NIH first presented, as Amanda said, we had lots of folks join and had many folks have joined from NIH and other similar agencies. So, if you're aware of where your agency is in terms of implementing a learning agenda, have you and your agency, have you fully implemented and is your learning agenda operational? Are you using it on a day to day basis, Option A, are you fully implemented but not perhaps fully operational? Is it Option B, in the process of implementing, is it Option D, are you planning to implement but you're not yet in process or E, have we not covered any stages of implementation for your agency, in which case you'll have to chat in your response.

So, pause there again and toss it to you, Derek, to see what folks are saying.

Derek Mitchell:
Sure Jess. So we have a split between our top vote getter planning to implement followed by other chat in response.

Jessica McNab:
Okay. Interesting. So hopefully folks do type something in so you can see both in the chat is also, which will sustain the results following the event. What would be those, should we have any other stages of implementation?

Okay, Derek do you want to push those results?

Derek Mitchell:
Okay. So okay, so now planning to implement is still our top vote getter with 38%-

Jessica McNab:
Okay.

Derek Mitchell:
Followed by in the process of implementing with 23%.

Jessica McNab:
Okay, great. And just looking at our Q & A, I don't think we had anyone chat in any responses. So if there isn't a stage that we hit, I don't see any individual's chats. Feel free to put that in the Q & A. You'll have to actually chat that into your response in the Q & A box if that's your response.

Okay. So Brittany, hopefully that give you a sense again of who's on the line. Folks seem to be most interested in the how-to's in terms of how you approach your learning agenda and also when you go through the barriers and the strategies that you use to overcome those barriers or perhaps your still thinking through those, that seems to be what most folks are tuned into, so this afternoon's seminar and for our webinar with ACF coming up in a couple of couple weeks.

So with that, I am going to give a quick introduction to Brittany again and then pass you the ball Brittany. Just a second here, let me pull this down for you. So as mentioned, Brittany Borg is the director in the division of analysis and evaluation for SBA and she's going to review, just as our featured agencies have, the details of her approach and also a lot behind what was entailed in that approach and how she came to some lessons learned, barriers and strategies to intervene from those barriers. So with that Brittany, again, it's a pleasure that we have you this webinar this afternoon and I'll toss the ball to you. You should be able to advance your slides.

Brittany Borg:

Great. Thank you Jessica. And thank you Amanda and ASPE for putting on this webinars series, it's great to be able to learn from our federal colleagues and have the space, particularly now when we've had a lot more requirements and guidance related to learning agendas and evaluation plans. So it's a great timing to be able to discuss the best ways forward.

So the Small Business Administration, just to give a quick overview, is an agency in the Executive Branch of the federal government. We are not under a larger department. Our administrator does sit on the President's Cabinet, but we're relatively small, so there is about 2000 employees throughout the United States. We have a lot of field personnel because our mission is to help Americans start, grow and build small businesses, become entrepreneurs and then also recover from disasters. So we have kind of a unique role in America's disaster recovery.

I put in here that we touched nearly 1 million end users per year, but it's probably more than that. It varies greatly depending on if we've had a lot of disasters and then it also ebbs and flows with the economy a little bit.

So SBA has a pretty broad mission. If you think about starting, growing small businesses, that's everything from thinking about should I start a small business, to growing your small business into a medium size business? And then the disaster piece that a few touches is not just related to small business. SBA's disaster programs are authorized to lend to basically anybody recovering from a disaster. So that can be small businesses, but also larger businesses, homeowners, renters, nonprofits. There's very few restrictions on whether or not you qualify based on your characteristics for an SBA disaster loan. So we've got a huge gamut with a pretty small budget and a pretty small amount of employees running all of these programs.

So our approach to developing a multi-year learning agenda. We started this process about three years ago, in response to everybody's favorite thing, a GAO recommendation. And so I want to iterate that from three years ago to now. We have done everything that you see in these slides. So if you're thinking about how am I going to meet all of these requirements from evidence act? It's tough, we put a lot of effort to this, but it is possible. So we started with building a program evaluation framework and guidelines before we even went down this road. And then we had the fortuitous timing of wanting to develop a learning agenda at the same time we were starting our new strategic planning process. That process is pretty well defined and ingrained in the leadership here at SBA, the career leadership, and so it's pretty easy to tack on the development of the learning agenda to that process. In our discussions with programs about what they were hoping to accomplish over the next four years and how they were going to go about doing it, the natural inclination, then, is to say, well, how do you think that that strategy... What evidence do you have about strategy will actually work? And where do you not have evidence? Where do you think that the strategy is almost anecdotal? And so it's pretty easy to draw on that process to create our learning agenda.

Then, once we had these questions solidified for each strategic objective, which is how we formatted the learning agenda so that it maps to our strategic plan, and that maps to everything we do for performance and budgeting as well. So these processes are pretty, I don't want to say seamlessly integrated because it's a lot of work behind the scenes to make them integrate, but they are pretty integrated.

So every year, we do an annual call, then, for evidence building proposals from the program offices. And one criteria, we have a little template but they fill out. One criteria is identifying where the proposal contributes to answering a question in the enterprise learning agenda, or more than one question. So we keep tying back what people are asking us to help them understand to this broader strategy document of the learning agenda. And then we use those calls for proposal responses to prioritize evidence building investments over the next year, or sometimes two. You know, if it's a bigger project or one that needs to wait a little bit to have some other pieces fall into place, but typically it's for this next year. The projects do not have to be evaluations. So for example, this last year we decided to just take an entire program office and do logic models for each program that it runs, because they needed to tend to that base foundation first.

And another thing we emphasize is that evaluations do not have to be experimental. It's great if they are we have one going on right now that is, but there's been a culture at SBA previously that if you can't do an experiment, then it's not worth doing anything at all. And given the restraints around experiment experiments, not just time and money, but also, are you even legally allowed to? Is it logistically feasible? We wanted to reiterate that there's a lot we can learn without having to do an experiment. So don't be afraid to push out an idea and we can help you figure out the most rigorous, yet practical way to evaluate or build evidence related to the question that you have. So we tried to make the scope really broad to get more people involved and to not scare away people.

So there's a few steps each year we go through to update and create the ELA. So first we meet with every program office individually. We discuss learning agenda preliminary questions. We have a guiding document that talks about the challenges, goals, and opportunities facing their programs. So while the learning agenda is a multiyear document tied to the strategic plan, for the most part, our questions don't change that much each year. But we want to give the opportunity to tweak things, to add things. And then also these discussions help keep the ELA in people's minds right before our call for proposals. And we gather a bunch of information that we can use for the next iteration, which will come up next year as we start planning for the FY 2022 strategic plan.

So our evaluation team conducts follow-up meetings with each office to refine and clarify potential research questions. And I want to say that we don't go into any of these meetings empty-handed. Our evaluation team is integrated with our performance and budgeting teams, so we've been in, either as flies on the wall or active participants, in tons of performance management related discussions, budget discussions, strategic objectives reviews, the agency priority goals, anybody's working on a cross-agency priority goal. We're plugged in to all of that. So we see these conversations happening and know what keeps coming up as these sticking points, and we bring those up.

So then we formulate the research questions based on their feedback and propose evaluations to address these research questions, just to get the program offices thinking about things. And if they seem really interested, we will help them develop their response to our call for proposals, if they're really interested but having trouble thinking through that process. The program office leadership reviews all of the research questions, and they prioritize, in their own office, which evaluations or evidence building projects they might want to put forth as response to our call for proposals. And then we, of course, draft the ELA and we engage stakeholders to review that draft both internally, and we've been experimenting in different ways to do this externally. So last year we put our previous version in the federal register and asked for comments.

That was useful, but we didn't get a ton of engagement. This year, we are sending it around to researchers that we've engaged with or that we know are interested in the subject matter of small businesses or entrepreneurship or disaster relief or recovery, and just kind of asking them how they would like to be engaged with. We aren't necessarily giving it to them yet, because we're not sure how to approach this. We don't want to just throw it out there and see what we get back. We're trying to figure out the best way to engage external stakeholders.

And then we also send it to OMB as part of our OMB submission and then subsequent Congressional justification every year. So that process that's going to be required in the foundations act, we're already doing for the most part, so that is going to work pretty seamlessly for us. And then lastly we finalize and we disseminate it and we publish it. And that's something, even before that became a requirement, was something that our office was really adamant that happened, to try and hold ourselves accountable. We were concerned that this would become kind of a check box that “yes, we complied with JAOs recommendation, check”, and move on. We wanted to make it public so that people could hold us accountable.

So how do we select these evidence building activities? As I said, we have an annual call for proposals. Right now, it's at the early part of the calendar year, but due to the requirements in the evidence act, we're going to move it forward towards more November timeframe, I think. It's sent to the whole agency. Anybody can submit. Although I will say, if we think we want to select your proposal we do make sure your leadership is on board, but we can strong arm them if necessary. We, of course, have leadership support as well, but we're not trying to force this down anybody's throat. That is for sure. The template asks to identify which part of the ELA the project contributes to and we also do what we call “learning agenda roadshows” where we take it around to different offices, staff meetings. SBA has a few different community of practices, and we go there and try and explain what this is.

We internally review the proposals against a rubric on, partially our framework and guidelines about, is it rigorous? Can we do this in a transparent and independent way? That sort of thing. But then we also have the realities of, is there a leadership priority here? Has Congress asked us to do this? Is there money to do this? Right? Perhaps the only way to do the evaluation in a rigorous enough fashion to get something usable requires a pretty big investment. So we weigh all of those things and then we make recommendations to our chief financial officer who is also our performance improvement officer. So then this person knows both where budget priorities are and where performance issues lie. And that combination makes them a good person to talk to about where evidence building can have the most bang for the buck in our agency.

And then we select those evidence building activities. And for the most part we use independent contractors, not exclusively, but for the most part, that's how we accomplish our evaluations. So stage of implementation, I would say we're fully implemented and operational. We are in our third year of doing this kind of cycle, we're starting our third year now, I would say, we've done two complete years. It's worked pretty well. So during the strategic planning cycle, we identify the key questions related to each strategic goal. Our offices are already used to doing the strategic planning piece and identifying strategic goals. And that process works seamlessly enough that we just slid ourselves right in there. The questions identified and refined, also through literature reviews, senior leadership, staff engagement, performance management process. We have quarterly deep dives and then external partners, as I mentioned. The final learning agenda is cleared through our agency. And in that case every single program office and support office clears the document, because we have a strategic goal that's related also to support for SBA. So like HR, IT, those sorts of things.

They have goals that they trying to meet, so we support them and their evidence building activities as well. OMB reviews it and then we publish it. And now, we're working on ... Right now our annual evidence building plan is included in our learning agenda. Due to the requirements of the Evidence Act, we will be splitting those out to make it very distinct. So that is a change that we're working on for this upcoming year.

But again, we did this all within three years and we really went from planning to implemented in a matter of a year or so. So you can do it. You've just got to find the resources and the people and the way that that works for your agency.

Barriers and strategies. SBA has a wide variety of interest and experience at the program office level. I was actually working in a program office who had ... we had developed its own learning agenda and its own suite of evidence, and building on that evidence and conducting evaluations every year. So there was that scenario when we started, all the way to offices who barely knew who the participants in their program were. They weren't even collecting that sort of data, just for operations, let alone for evidence building. So that level of variation in experience made it difficult. You wanted to be able to provide value to those advanced users, but not go way over the heads of those kind of nascent users.

Our strategy there and my recommendation is just to be prepared to spend more time with offices that need more assistance. And that seems obvious, but I think so often we hold in all hands and we say, "Here's what we're doing," and it's a one size fits all, and then we move on with our lives. And if you want your whole agency or department or office to be on board, you've got to be able to customize your approach to their stages of interest and experience.

Another barrier, and we still encounter this barrier daily, I would say, is the lack of awareness about what evidence already exists. So we'll get things like, "Oh yes, this is proven." And it's like, "No, that's just, kind of, like, hearsay and anecdotal," all the way to, "There's no evidence on this topic whatsoever," when they might not be necessarily related to that program specifically, but certainly around the topic of, for example, providing technical assistance for small businesses. There's definitely some research that's been done about that.

One thing we started doing this year, is investing in a more thorough literature review and systematic reviews. We have what we call, internal to my office, the evidence registry, which is a really fancy Excel spreadsheet, which is not really fancy, that lists basically every piece of evidence public, not created by SBA evidence, that we think matters. And we have different keywords assigned to them, which program it probably applies to, or programs in the case that there's multiple, which strategic objective it might relate to. And then a preliminary marker for the kind of rigor or usefulness of the evidence.

So, is it just somebody's almost like a GAO or IG or CRS related report, or was it an experiment, an academic ran, or in the case of SBA, we have a lot of industry groups. Is this something an industry group put out and if so, do we need to take that with a grain of salt? Helping offices and programs understand what's already been done, I think is helpful. But it's definitely something that we still struggle with.

And then another barrier is ... You do all of this, you create this great suite of evidence. But the capacity for evidence building and use for decision making, taking that evidence and then applying it to decision, is a huge change on the way most leaders operate. And it's very difficult.

I found that most leaders prefer you to just tell them the answer and then say, and then therefore this is a decision you should make. And if you don't do that for them, it's difficult for them to take your evidence and then translate that into an action. And I don't necessarily think it's our role as evidence builders or the people conducting evidence building planning, to make that leap for them, right? That they can weigh evidence in their decisions, but sometimes it's not the only driver. In fact, for the most part, it's not the only driver for a decision. But knowing that they've weighed it appropriately, is where I think we get stuck.

One thing that we have tried to do, is, we've created an evidence and evaluation community of practice. This is mostly for staff level, not leadership, although we wouldn't object to any leaders participating, that's for sure. But we do create a space for staff who work on these sorts of things to come together and talk about the evaluations that are going on. Any ad hoc data analysis that they're doing, a place where they see data collection isn't working properly, how to visualize data, how to communicate findings, how to synthesize all the evidence that's out there, how to think about methodologies even.

Sometimes we get really into the weeds about methodologies. It just depends on what people are looking for, and so right now, that's our best strategy for working through this barrier. Though, I will say we've contemplated and are still contemplating, creating trainings specifically geared towards leaders, and how they can then understand a suite of evidence and how it might apply to a decision. Because I think that's a skill that by the time you get to leadership you haven't had to develop evidence, if you ever did. And you probably have a lot of ideas about what's right because you've worked in that program for a long time. And understanding how to analyze a suite of evidence and take those findings and apply them to decisions, is a training that, at least at SBA, we don't offer and I think would be very beneficial.

Expected impact. There are a few. I put things on here that I thought were a little bit surprising to me. So first was that, program staff are in agreement on desired outcomes of their efforts and areas for evidence building. I don't know why I was surprised that this was an impact that we got, and because it had been really useful, because when you think about it, it's common for people who work on a program to not all be on the same page. But when you go into it, you just assume that everybody knows why their program exists. And when you start talking about it you realize, well maybe they don't and maybe on the general scheme they do, but the granular details of who it's there to serve and how it serves them, you can find very disparate answers. Going through this process got people more on the same page and it got them more on the same page about what they really know and what they actually don't know, and they just think they know.

So that was a great area of impact that this process has resulted in and is continuing to build upon. Another piece is, it allowed us to continue to highlight the importance of continued improvement. One misunderstanding or misnomer that we continue to combat, is that we are here to provide an audit function and it's not at all what we are here to provide.

We are here to provide a systematic review of your program or an area of your program, or likely, it's just a small area of your program, and we're going to try and help you figure out how to make that area better. We are not here to take your money away. We're not here to give you more money. We are not here to report you to the IG. We're not internal controls. We're just here to help you think of ideas and ways that might best improve your program.

We use the word recommendation and just, this week I have been considering if that's the best word, because obviously, the GAO and IG also use that term. And sometimes then, programs feel like they have to comply with our recommendations and that's not the case. They're recommendations, not tasks that they have to complete.

We're working on that continued improvement piece, and I hope that we continue to be able to highlight that. And then last, it allows us to focus evidence, building activities to the areas of the highest potential impact, so the creation of a learning agenda and then the subsequent call for proposals that maps to that and gets ranked and reviewed allows us to make sure that we're spending our time and money on the places for the agency that will produce the highest potential impact.

Offices are still allowed to do their own evaluations and evidence building activities- (coughs) excuse me, with their own funds of course. But we make sure that the limited budget our centralized office has is targeted to the most effective, hopefully most effective places.

Lessons learned. So as I think I repeated several times, utilize structures and processes that are already in place and accepted within your agency. For us that was the performance management, strategic planning, and budgeting processes. Those are already integrated and we were able to integrate in that.

It's a natural fit where your performance is lagging or needs some help. That's where we can come in and maybe you're measuring the wrong things, maybe your processes need to change. And then in terms of asking for money, we should back up that with a suite of evidence as to why we think that money will get us to where we want to go.

So for us that worked very well, but there might be other things in your agency or organization that you can kind of tack yourself onto that then it doesn't feel like a brand new thing. Yet this another, you know, kind of, I don't know, objective de jour or from OMB, that's not this. This is something that can be integrated into what you're already doing.

Again, meet your program offices where they're at, they're going to probably be all over the place.

Gather information from a wide variety of sources. We have found perhaps not surprisingly, that our office of general counsel has just been this plethora of knowledge because they have people who have been there for a really long time and they see really the intricate details of how programs work often because they're helping them write rules and weigh in on decisions.

And so at first we were just relying on the program, but it's possible that we hit somebody in the program that only been there for a couple of years or maybe only in that position for a couple of years and so getting a wide variety of sources has really helped round out our thinking about problems or opportunities that programs are facing.

Engage your staff, not just your leaders, this seems obvious, but again, I think it's one of these things where if it turns into a compliance exercise, you just get your leaders to sign off and you move on with your life.

We've been very conscious about making sure that this is as much as possible staff involved or staff led because any recommendation that does get implemented is likely going to be implemented by staff. And the more that they're involved and on board with the process of how you got there, the more likely it is that that will be successful.

And then again, allow for various evidence building activities. I think OMB has been very clear about this and we appreciated that. Not just experiments. Obviously experiments are your gold standard. That's what you want to do if you can, but I think especially if you're getting started, if the very first thing you do is a huge multi-year RCT, you're gonna have a problem keeping people engaged.

So feel free, I encourage you, to start with small quick wins that helps people see the value right away and work your way up to larger and more complicated experiments that are going to require a lot of staff and leadership buy-in over a long sustained period of time. Not to mention money. So if you feel like you need to start small, I say start small.

So now I'm going to turn it back over to Jessica so she can read any Q and A that you all may have.

Jessica McNab:

Great, thanks. And you pass the ball. Thanks Brittany.

That was great. I jotted down a ton of questions for you and just general commentary, and we have already a couple of questions in the chat. So now that Brittany has made it through the details of how SBA is approached. I'm sure you all have jotted down questions or comments, I don't know that we have any hand raises yet, but I know we have a couple of questions.

Let me just start with a couple of comments cause you've had so many good nuggets in your discussion. I think one thing is certainly something that we hope to do and I think Amanda touched on this is showcase different agencies, different sizes, different organizational structures.

And I think in your agency profile talking about how you know, Friday's the best day versus the touch you have, and your comment that it is possible that this took three years but, but you made it happen. So I really appreciate your comment that it is possible and some of the details in terms of the timing of this for you.

But I also think some of your other comments about how you really made sure that leadership was on board. You might, you know, kind of strong arm as you needed to, but that was a way that you engaged, is to ensure you connected the dots between having to be fast-led but also having leadership on board. I was interested to hear more about the rubric that you mentioned, your, your Excel document, your resource library, your training, those all sounded like different interesting aspects of this work. Probably it's stuff that you were already doing that may have been built on specific to the ELA for SBA.

So with that, let's turn to a couple of questions that we have already in the chat for Brittany. A couple of questions from Clint and then others, if you'd like to chat in any of your questions in the Q and A pod, please feel free to do so.

So Clint, let's start with a couple of your questions. So one question is 'the literature on management and learning emphasizes how fast paced and serendipitous the process can be. Given the need for an annual learning agenda process, how do you plan to accommodate the evolution, opportunities, and risks in the middle of the year as program officers encounter new questions and issues as they arise?'.

Brittany Borg:

So first I want to know where do you work in government that it moves that fast? That's awesome. I would say at SBA annual is about as fast as we move, but let me, let me, let me answer that a little more seriously.

So on the- we do as best we can to plan for the big stuff that is likely going to need to be contracted out to an independent evaluator and that then obviously is money dependent. SBA is very, there's only a very few instances where we don't have annual year, fiscal year money. So for the most part it's annual. We get our budget. Last year it was like April, and they spent is by June and then now we have no money again until the Congress gives us more at some point, hopefully before October 1st.

So on that end those bigger things, annual for us works pretty well. If we do notice one of those bigger things comes up mid-year or like kind of off-cycle. We hold it, we keep the program office engaged, we do a lot of pre planning exercise, look at their data, get everything prepped and say you know 'we're gonna help you write a good proposal so that we all know that this is, this is a priority and it's not probably going to be this grassroots generated evidence building project, it's definitely gonna be a top-down situation', that happens.

It's not, it's probably less than a quarter of what we do. But it does happen. If there's opportunities or risks in the middle of the year, we do have staff that will do this sort of work, right?

So one case in point is our office is tangentially involved in the Performance Management Improvement and Accountability Act, the PMIAA, and one thing that SBA's HR has done is create a sort of mentoring program around that act and project management.

So they came to us totally off cycle a little bit at the last minute and the like: "we should make sure that what we're doing here is actually accomplishing what we wanted it to do, right?" And we're like, "yes! That's great". And we certainly don't want to lose an enthusiastic customer who is asking for our assistance, help evaluate what they're doing.

So in that case we were able to carve out a staff members time to do that, at least for this first year in-house, get some preliminary evidence and then if we think that, and if they want to continue, then maybe the next year we have that ready. So they could submit a proposal about how they would do it more robustly building on that preliminary work for that first year. But I would say for the most part, SBA does not move fast enough that that matters.

Jessica McNab:

Thanks Brittany, and Clint hopefully that helped answer your question, but of course feel free to chat in any additional or follow-up questions.

So Clint has another question. And then they an, a third question in here. And I know others will chat in their questions as well. So a second question from Clint: "Have you worked to build analytical capacity within programmatic offices? And if so, how?"

Brittany Borg:

Yes. So that is something that we actively tried to do through our evidence and evaluation community of practice. A lot of that is training.

We also- so our office as we're tied with the Performance Management Office and, but let me just quickly clarify: program performance management, not personnel performance. I don't rate anybody. Each staff member is more or less assigned to an office as their, what we call, liaison. And so those staff members are allowed to and encouraged to provide analytic support, training, setting up data collections, consulting on every project that makes sense for our skillset in the program office. We do it through a variety of ways, both formal and informal. Formal would be our evidence and evaluation senior practice. We've also ran an internal to the SBA Excel training course, and then definitely ad hoc, one-on-one sit down with the program and figure out what their needs are. Our office has developed dashboards for many of our program offices using their own data and then showed them how to update it themselves. But we, since we developed them, are always on call to help if they get stuck or need changes or, this year we're revamping one entirely because they've kind of changed course a little bit. We provide a lot of hands-on support in a variety of ways.

Jessica McNab:

Hmm. Interesting. Okay, thanks. Clint, again, I hope that answered your question. That even raised a couple of follow-up questions for me, but let me turn to one of Richard's questions for you, Brittany. He asked, "What number of staff are in the evaluation office at SBA? How many resources are devoted, not counting contractors, to this effort?

Brittany Borg:

Right, so our new office's name is the Office of Program Performance, Analysis and Evaluation. It has two divisions within it. The analysis and evaluation division has five staff plus myself as director, and then the performance management division has five staff plus a director. I note both offices, or both divisions, because we do kind of a matrix management system. We have two lead program evaluators. I also typically run one evaluation, at least, per year, and then other staff do analytics. Could be related to an evaluation or not. They do program performance management, which is part of evidence building, even if it's not evaluations. And then we do have a staff member that's on the performance side but is also a trained evaluator, and so she is picking up more evaluation work. So that's not a clear answer. We have to lead program evaluators and then we have a bunch of other staff. We either do it part-time sometimes, or provide analytic support to those evaluations. In terms of money resources, our contract budget per year is about a million dollars for the entire agency.

Jessica McNab:

Okay, thanks Brittney. Hopefully that helped answer your question, Richard. Derrek, let me just check with you. Do you see any hand raises? I don't think I do, but as a reminder you can use the a raise hand motion in the pod next to year name if you want to ask a question over the line, and then you'll need to unmute yourself or call out your name. Sir, do you see any hand raises for Brittany?

Derek Mitchell:

Hey Jessica. I'm looking at our attendees list and I do not see anyone with their hand raised at this time.

Jessica McNab:

Okay. So Brittany, I have a couple of other questions for you, as folks think through additional questions, some of which we've asked on previous webinars. One is just the details of the timeline. So you talked about A, business class will be, you know ... Small Business Association is not a massively large office like some of the agencies who have presented, or other agencies within the federal government. So you talked about, within three years you've done this really from start to finish, you're fully implementing the operational. And of course, they all panned out a little bit differently. But when you walked through those different steps for selecting the evidence building activities, you talked about that call for proposals and then reviewing the proposals in then actually selecting the evidence building activities for the next year. So generally, how might you emphasize different aspects of those steps? What takes longer in the process? What is higher effort, higher value? What would be your timeframe to review and turn around recommendations? Can you provide any more detail about that? The specific details of that timeline of those three larger steps?

Brittany Borg:

Yeah, wow. That's actually a really tough question. The first thing, as I mentioned, that we did was create a framework and guidelines for evaluation in general at SBA because we felt if we didn't have those standards to look back to, people wouldn't understand what we were even talking about. That's how foreign program evaluation was to SBA in general. Like I said, there are certain pockets that did it well, but for the most part we were concerned that people would assume that this was a new audit function, or they would assume this was an HR function. We've had that a lot. This learning agenda must mean people are learning. Therefore it must be HR. And I know we're not alone in that due to a lot of OPM's comments.

So we did that first and that took about four months to write up. We stole from a lot of people. Borrowed, its intellectual property of the government. HHS, for example, Naomi Goldstein, has kind of pioneered this on their end. I would say a huge part of what we say is ours is actually hers, and maybe she took it from someone else. I don't know. So look around to your peers and take what you can and cut that four months down to two and then you've got your base. I do think for us that was essential, because otherwise people would have not even been receptive to the learning agenda process. Even though we integrated it into an existing process, they would have been like, "What is this?" At least then we could point to ... It's not a policy, right? We didn't go through the policy making process, but it is a guiding document that we also published online.

Then creating the questions. We farmed a lot of the preliminary questions beforehand. So we even initially came to programs with some questions that we had thought up of, given our staff's extensive interactions with the programs. If you don't have that already, if you don't already have, I call them our tentacles. If you don't already have your tentacles into the program offices, or your support staff or whatever groups you're looking to do the learning agenda on, then I think you've got to do your own document review first. I do think you need to go into those meetings or discussions prepared, and understand their programs pretty well, and what they do, and what research has already been done. My experience has been, even in the experienced and interested program offices, that work isn't done necessarily in a really systematic way and so we were able to bring that in immediately and guide the discussion where we wanted it to go.

Since we already had most of that knowledge in house, we were able to turn those meetings around within a month or two. Again, we were able to check them onto a strategic planning process that was already happening. In terms of writing it, the first year we did it, it was literally me sitting at my desk for a week and just writing, and then two weeks of internal office review, and then another two weeks of broadening that scope. And if you think of throwing a pebble in the water and the waves coming out, it was internal review, and then program office review, and then executive leadership review, and then OGC review. We just kept broadening the people involved. And so that took longer, that probably took four months. The review took longer than writing it because we wanted to get as many people involved in that as possible. If you were just trying to get something out, you probably could have skipped that step. But if you're trying to make it meaningful, you can't.

Jessica McNab:

Okay. That's helpful. I think if folks consider their own steps and what makes sense for the agency. We've heard a variety of different approaches and certainly I think almost all agencies have talked about that first step of really making an operational definition and clearing the air and spreading the word. You talked about your road shows. I think others have referenced that too, just trying to get a sense of who understands what, and broadening folks' understanding of pure ELA process, so that's helpful. So with that, Brittany I just want to thank you again for sharing your information this afternoon. I think we'll move on to a couple of wrap up details for the rest of our webinar series. And if you thought of any other questions, as they wrap up in the next couple of minutes for these next couple of slides, feel free to chuck them in the Q and A pad, and we'll make sure to get those to Brittany. Brittany, thanks again for joining us.

So in terms of event materials, thank you to all of you who have emailed our help desk email, which I'll put in the chat here in a second. I really appreciate all the questions that you've asked us. We are still working through finalizing the website and all of the materials from all of the webinars. Again, for each webinar, we'll host slides, a transcript and a recording. So it makes a lot of sense in how you can adjoin all of the webinars in the webinars series. We'll make sure to share that information. Amanda will push that internally, and we should have that too, shortly.

But we also have another webinar coming up on the 28th with Emily Schmidt, and I think I see Emily. Or Emily was on the call this afternoon. She may have had to have dropped since we're right at the top of the hour. But Emily Schmidt from ACF. We'll talk on the 28th, in two week’s trial, again, 3:00 to 4:00 PM Eastern Daylight Time, so please feel free to join us for that event as well. I'm going to put a truncated link for that registration. If you haven't already registered for the 28th, please feel free to do so. That should be in the chat: you're welcome to use that registration to register the event.

We look forward to seeing you in a couple of weeks. Once the webinar wraps, you'll get a pop up to take our webinar evaluation, again if you'd joined us in times past. It just asks you very basic questions about the quality of the webinar. Did we meet our objectives? How did you feel the content and the flow went? And will you take any action following today's event? Like the series itself. But last not least, again, thank you for joining us. I have chatted in our help desk email, into the chat. So feel free to use that to register for the webinar with Emily on the 28th from ACF. And with that, I'll bid you all adieu. Have a great afternoon, and we'll see you in a few weeks. Thank you. Take care.