

## Managing Complex Inputs to a Learning Agenda

### How the Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation and the Office of Family Assistance Refined the Welfare and Family Self-Sufficiency Learning Agenda

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Learning agendas can help agencies systematically identify and prioritize their knowledge needs. When developing or updating a learning agenda, agencies and their programs often confront the challenge of synthesizing abundant and complex inputs — including summarizing what is known from the existing knowledge base as well as identifying the most critical knowledge gaps.

This spotlight describes how the Administration for Children and Families' Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation (OPRE), in collaboration with the Office of Family Assistance (OFA), developed strategies for refining the learning agenda for the Welfare and Family Self-Sufficiency research, evaluation, and technical assistance portfolio. To support this work, OPRE and OFA partnered with the [ACF Evidence Capacity Support Project](#), led by Mathematica and its partner Child Trends.

#### The challenge: Synthesizing large amounts of input about knowledge needs

Seeking input from a broad range of people who have an interest in an agency or program – such as program participants, staff, grant recipients, or partners – helps ensure that a learning agenda reflects a variety of perspectives and includes the most pressing questions. The existing knowledge base is another critical source of input because it prompts new questions and helps clarify knowledge gaps.

In refining their learning agenda, OPRE and OFA faced two common challenges stemming from a large amount of input:

- Organizing the many ideas for knowledge-building generated through several feedback sessions held by OPRE and OFA, and
- Synthesizing the relevant research literature to understand whether new studies or other learning activities might be required to meet knowledge needs.

OPRE and OFA also needed an efficient and minimally burdensome process for periodically updating the learning agenda.

**A learning agenda** describes the questions that an agency, office, or program seeks to answer through systematic knowledge-building.

Learning agendas are a first step in systematically building knowledge to understand how a program is working and what changes might be needed to better achieve its aims.

The Foundations for Evidence-Based Policymaking Act of 2018 requires federal agencies to develop and publish learning agendas.

#### About this spotlight series

Building and using evidence can require federal agencies to develop solutions for novel and complex challenges. Evidence describes the knowledge gained from systematic efforts to understand the effectiveness or efficiency of an organization's work, or to understand the context or communities in which an organization conducts its work. This series highlights aspects of work conducted by OPRE to extend and deepen evidence capacity among program offices at the Administration for Children and Families (ACF). The ACF Evidence Capacity Support project, led by Mathematica and partner Child Trends, supports this work by helping offices develop evidence-building plans, conducting needs assessments, and analyzing administrative data, among other tasks.

## The solutions for making large amounts of input useful

Together, OPRE, OFA, and the Evidence Capacity Support Project team developed four solutions:

- **A logic model for learning agenda development.** The logic model visually conveys how the learning agenda and the activities required to produce and update it support the offices' missions. OPRE and OFA are continuing to refine the logic model to position it to anchor the learning agenda and support future updates as context and knowledge evolve.
- **Short literature summaries.** To identify which knowledge needs might require new research or other learning activities, the team summarized studies sponsored by OPRE and, for some topics, other federal research offices. The team developed a brief literature summary for major strands of work within ACF's welfare and family self-sufficiency portfolio, highlighting existing knowledge and remaining gaps in each area.
  - First, the team compiled relevant information from among selections of OPRE's sponsored research, evaluation, and other resources identified by OPRE.
  - Second, the team synthesized findings and gaps in the literature related to three of the five strands of work within the welfare and family self-sufficiency portfolio: Capacity Building within Human Services Programs; Strategies for Advancing Positive Participant Outcomes; and Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) Policy, Funding, and Administration.
- **Crosswalk knowledge needs to existing research evidence.** The team examined whether existing research from the literature summaries could answer questions gathered during OPRE and OFA's previous feedback sessions. Questions for which evidence was not available were candidates for inclusion in the learning agenda.
- **An internal process for updating a learning agenda.** To ensure that the learning agenda continues to be relevant, the team proposed a process that OPRE and OFA can use to periodically update the learning agenda and related products. The team also developed tools for the process, including a document outlining steps for identifying, reviewing, and including diverse information sources in periodic updates, and an Excel template to organize the information.

## How this work enhanced evidence capacity at OPRE and OFA

Evidence capacity encompasses the range of knowledge, skills, behaviors, and resources that support an agency's ability to build and use evidence to inform its work. These attributes can be organized into five dimensions: evidence culture, leadership, evidence infrastructure, human capital, and engagement (see figure).

A key focus of the partnership was enhancing OPRE's and OFA's *evidence infrastructure*. The Evidence Capacity Support Project team collaborated with OPRE and OFA to develop tools and processes to summarize key findings and gaps in specific portfolios of work. The information from this analysis will inform future updates to the Welfare and Family Self-Sufficiency Learning Agenda—in some cases answering previous learning questions, and in some cases identifying additional gaps. This work will support OPRE and OFA in strategically planning for future research, evaluation, technical assistance, and other learning activities.



For more information about the key dimensions of evidence capacity, see the [Evidence Capacity in Organizations: A Literature-Informed Framework](#), published by OPRE.

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