Jessica McNab:

Good afternoon, everyone. Thank you for joining us for this afternoon's webinar. For those who have joined us early, Chris did mention a few times why we are gathered this afternoon. So, I'll reintroduce the webinar for anyone who has just logged on. I know we probably have a good group of folks who will be joining the webinar within the next couple of minutes, so I'll start to slowly walk us through today's Agenda and our content.

So, welcome again. Thank you for attending today's HHS ASPE Webinar Series. Today is our final webinar of the seven-part series. And for the last several weeks since mid-July, we've been talking about Developing and Using a Learning Agenda Approach for Evidence Building.

My name is Jessica McNab. I'm a task lead from Mathematica, and I've helped support this project to date. I'll facilitate today's webinar with help from our government task lead, Dr. Amanda Cash. I'm also joined by my colleagues at Mathematica handling logistics. As mentioned, you've heard Chris. He helped introduce the webinar if you joined us early. And we also have Derek Mitchell on the line who will help us with our polling.

We're very excited, as mentioned, to wrap this webinar series, again, the seventh webinar in a seven-part series, with our featured speaker today, Dr. Demetra Nightingale from Urban Institute. Demetra is formerly from the Department of Labor, so she'll provide perspectives from both her role at Labor as well as her current working role at Urban Institute.

Let's just get started with a couple of housekeeping details before we jump into today's content.

So, if you've joined us before, you should be pretty familiar with our WebEx platform. If this is the first time you've joined us, we'll just review a few details about navigating the WebEx platform.

And please make sure to mute your phone or your computer unless you're speaking. As you'll see in the Agenda in the next couple of slides that we'll certainly save time for Q&A at the end of today's presentation. At that point you'll be able to click on the hand-raising icon, which will give us a sense of who's interested in making a comment or asking a question, and then at that point you'll need to unmute your line. But otherwise, please feel free to keep your lines muted.

As I mentioned, we'll have a Q&A portion at the end after Demetra's presentation. So if you have any questions for Amanda or for Demetra, please feel free to chat your questions in the Q&A pod that you should see in the right-hand side of your screen. You should be able to click on the arrow or the caret, however you refer to it, to minimize or maximize that pod. So, do use that Q&A pod for any kind of comment or questions for Demetra or for the project as a whole.

You can also access Closed Captioning should you need it by clicking on the Multimedia Viewer. And if you need to – if you need to reference or include the event ID, we can certainly push that through the chat if we haven't already.

Let's keep moving on. As mentioned, we will fly through the initial part of this Agenda really to feature Demetra's point of view about learning agendas and her experience, both at Labor as well as Urban Institute. So, Amanda and I will go through a couple of initial slides. Amanda will recap the impetus for this project, for the webinar series, some of our work to date, and all of the presentations from the agencies who have shared their different approaches. Demetra will speak about her experience, again, at Labor as well as Urban Institute. We'll save a good deal of time for Q&A, so please do think of any questions or comments that you have. You can chat those in as Demetra goes along, and we'll make sure to read those for her so she can answer as best she can.

We'll wrap up with a couple of additional details. We had a webinar just yesterday with ACF and Emily Schmitt, so on that webinar we talked about how we've released all of our 508-compliant materials from the presentations, those slides, recordings, transcripts, on the Mathematica website, so we'll make sure to provide those details again at the close of today's webinar.

As I mentioned, I'm Jess. I'm a Researcher and a Task Lead at Mathematica. I help lead curriculum development and facilitate different shared learning activities and technical assistance projects primarily focused on quality improvement and delivery of system reform.

In previous roles, I've worked with improvement specialists at managed care institutions and directed other types of technical assistance focused on rapid cycle improvement in hospitals.

Also as mentioned, I'm joined by a government Task Lead, Dr. Amanda Cash. Dr. Cash is the Acting Director for the Division of Data Policy within ASPE. Dr. Cash is an epidemiologist by training, but has focused much of her recent portfolio on research and evaluation methodologies appropriate for complex federal programs.

Dr. Cash also co-leads the federal Task Force for Combatting Antibiotic-Resistant Bacteria.

And her office is leading the implementation for Title I of the Evidence Act, which, of course, is why we're here today. So, Dr. Cash provides a lot of perspectives on our discussion.

As mentioned a few times, we're super excited that Demetra has joined us this afternoon. Demetra is an Institute fellow at Urban Institute where her research focuses on social, economic, and labor policy issues. She was a Chief Evaluation Officer at the U.S. Department of Labor from 2011 to 2016 where she developed what is recognized as one of the most premier evaluation units within the federal government.

Before joining the Department of Labor, Nightingale was at the Urban Institute, previously at the Urban Institute, then at Labor for three decades conducting research and evaluations on employment, labor, welfare, and other social and economic policies and programs.

She also was at Johns Hopkins University for seven years, where she taught graduate courses in social policy and program evaluation. She is a professorial lecturer at Trachtenberg School of Public Policy and Public Administration at George Washington University. And teaches graduate courses in program evaluation, integrating evaluation and performance management in the context of evidence-based policy making.

Nightingale is also the author and co-author of five books and numerous articles. Among her books are Repairing the U.S. Social Safety Net and Reshaping the American Workforce in a Changing Economy.

She is a fellow of the National Academy of Public Administration and serves on many task forces as well as advisory panels. She received her doctorate in Public Policy from George Washington University.

So, I think Demetra's bio certainly underscores how excited we are for her to join us this afternoon. So with that, Amanda I will hand off to you just to give us a bit of a recap of the project and our work to date. Amanda?

Amanda Cash:

So, if you haven't logged on before, our office is the Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation at HHS. We're the policy advisor to the Secretary, and, as Jess mentioned, we're leading the implementation of the Evidence Act. Which is fun for us.

And the objective of the series is to have speakers discuss their organization's stage of implementation of evidence-building approaches, processes developed to build evidence plans and how the plans are implemented, barriers faced when creating these plans and implementing them, and last of all, the impact of these plans on evaluation, organizational decision making, and program effectiveness.

And I'd like to just add that we're so excited to have Demetra round out this series and give us the benefit of her knowledge and just thank her, again, for talking to us today. And, Demetra, we are delighted that you will – this will be posted, so for people who weren't able to join us today, they'll be able to listen at their convenience.

So, I think we can go to the next slide. And, we really do hope that people are getting what they have needed from these webinars. And in that that we've tried to provide a plethora of different models and approaches to evidence building and evaluation plans. We're compiling the themes and implications into a summary report that we will, hopefully, be sharing with you by October. And we are - Mathematica is actually posting these on their website, and we will also be posting them on our ASPE website and putting them on the OMB Max page so that people can access them at any time.

And, I think that's it. I will turn it back over to you, Jess.

Jessica McNab:

Okay, great. Thanks, Amanda.

So, as mentioned, you may have joined us before. Perhaps you've joined us all seven times. I know a few of you have, so you will be used to this baseline data, but I'd like to take these couple of polls just to underscore what have been your learning interests to date. And we really, truly are compiling all this polling information for the summary report as well as understanding your stage of implementation.

So at this point, let's open the first poll. And the first poll, again, is about what are your learning interests? So, if you've attended all six or if this is your first webinar, are you here today because you're interested to understand the perspective of those agencies who really fully implement the learning agenda, option A. B, how agencies have structured their approach and processes, a bit of the details, the how-to how-tos. C, what they found in terms of barriers with all the strategies to – to help overcome those barriers? Option D, how and what agencies have learned. What are the lessons learned from this process? Or E, have we really not accounted for why you're here today, what you're interested in learning? And so, if we haven't touched on why you're here today and what you're interested in learning, use that Q&A pod, which I mentioned before, to chat in your response.

So I'll give everyone just a couple of seconds here to chose one of those options, A through E. If you choose E, chat in your response, and then we'll push the results.

Chris Talbot:

Jess, the results are starting to come in, and we have a majority of people saying that they are interested in learning about how agencies have structured their approach and processes to implement the strategies. We also have about a quarter of our audience, they're really interested in the barriers that agencies have experienced as well as the strategies to get past those barriers.

Jessica McNab:

Okay. Thanks, Chris.

So, pretty similar to each event. It seems as though people really want to know the approach, what kind of steps did they take. You know, reviewing the literature. What sort of items did they focus on? What steps did they add into the mix? And with all of those processes in mind, what barriers did they experience and what strategies might they have figured out since then to overcome.

So, I definitely think that, Demetra, from some of your presentation, you're going to talk through some considerations as well as the bits and pieces of the detail of adjusted approaches. So, that's just good for you to know. Folks are definitely interested in how you approached in your experience and some of the barriers and strategies that you may have experienced both at Labor as well as at Urban.

So, let's push poll number two. This just, again, gets the sense of what stage of implementation different agencies are in in terms of developing a learning agenda for evidence building. And so, Option A is fully implemented and operational. Option B, fully implemented but perhaps not operational in total. Option C, in the process. Option D, planning. Or Option E, other. Did we not really capture what stage you're in in terms of implementing a learning agenda approach for evidence building? And, again, feel free to use the Q&A box to chat in any of your responses.

Again, I'll give that just a minute her, and Chris will let us know what folks are saying.

Chris Talbot:

Jessica, it looks like we have a fairly even split between people that are indicating they're in the process of implementing as well as planning to implement.

Jessica McNab:

Thanks, Chris.

So pretty similar, again, to the previous six webinars. We've certainly heard different agencies present and had different perspectives on implementation. You heard just yesterday, if you joined us, that Emily Schmidt from the ACF spoke about really having many balls in the air in a sense and kind of being at all of the above. Just having aspects fully implemented and operational, but also being really in the throws of planning stages. So, I think this resonates with what folks have shared with us in the past. And, Demetra, again I hope that provides you with a little bit of perspective in terms of who's joined us this afternoon.
Thanks, Chris.

So with that, again, we are super excited that Demetra has joined us from Urban Institute. And Demetra, I'll – I'll – you don't need to have the ball, but I am figuratively passing the ball to you, and I'll help advance your slides.

Demetra, the floor is yours.

Demetra Nightingale:

Great. Thank you very much. I'm really glad to be here today, and hopefully some of what I have to say will be useful to those of you joining us. And thanks for coming.

Just to give you a little overview of what I'm going to talk about, I know many of you know the context, but just – just to be thorough, I'm going to just give you a brief context of thinking about learning agendas. Much of what I'll talk about will come from lessons and examples from the Department of Labor, although I'll integrate in some other examples as well.

Throughout I'm going to try to include several ways that agencies can use learning agendas, even if they're just starting out to having evaluation units or just starting with the evaluation learning agendas.

And, I'll end with some websites where you can get some more information if you're interested from the work I'm doing at the Urban Institute where we have forums and materials and tools.

As you know, the Evidence Act requires a whole lot of actions that all the affected agencies have to take. Up at the top, Learning Agenda and Evaluation Plan, is what we're going to be focusing on today. Although I think it's really important to also look at the bottom bullet, which is the Evidence Capacity because developing the learning agenda, and proceeding with evaluation plans really involves a whole lot of other capacity buildings which might be a having several balls in the air at once issue. And it's important, also, to emphasize that there's no single way that all of the agencies must approve according to the Act, and OMB is in the process of sending out various levels of guidance and materials, but I think (audio break) OMB also is saying single way (audio break) proceed.

So that said, one way to think about what evidence is, evidence in – in my mind includes a lot of things. I have this overlapping Venn diagram. Program evaluation, for sure. But it's more than that. It's also performance, analysis performance, monitoring. It's research and statistical analysis. And, although I don't have a sphere and a circle for this, it's also experience that comes from operating a managing program. And that's important as well, especially if you're going to use evaluation.

But if you look at the middle of the Venn diagram where they all overlap together, it is where, especially for a learning agenda that's coming from an evaluation office, touches on all aspects of evidence.

So, just looking at the evaluation sphere of evidence, there are many different types of evaluation, which I'm sure you're all familiar with. Experimental. Net impact analysis. And non-experimental or quasi-experimental impact analysis are really the two that are causal to an evaluation, causal impact determining what causes the impact that's being estimated.

And the third is cost-benefit analysis and effectiveness analysis, which really requires, of course, having some estimates of impact.

Fourth is statistical and performance analysis. And you can see where the Venn diagram pieces are pulling together here. that comes form the performance or administrative data system.

And finally, implementation and process analysis, or implementation science, that is focused more on making sure that the program operations, observational analysis through surveys or interviews, combining qualitative and quantitative analysis come to bear.

All of these types of evaluations can fit into a learning agenda, as I will describe.

So, as you've already heard, different agencies are at different stages in terms of their evidence culture, their evaluation operations, and their activities, which includes learning agendas. And on this slide, I've got sort of the – the far left is that there are some that are just beginning. They're new to doing learning agendas. They may never have had an evaluation plan or learning agenda. Or an evaluation office.

To the far right, which is some of the agencies and departments that are very sophisticated with long histories, 40, 50 years, like when you're looking at the CDC, or NIH, or some of the – the big agencies, long histories and experience of doing evaluations and research.

Most agencies are somewhere in the middle of – of those two, but each – each requirement in the Evidence Act is – is moving toward the right end of the continuum over time.

Also, agencies, and you've heard this over the past several weeks, agencies have very different types of departmental-level structures for their evidence and evaluation. At the top of this chart is the broad chief evaluation officer at the departmental level. And this is where the Department of Labor's Chief Evaluation Office sits in the different models. But others may have departmental-level evaluation offices where the – the lead person, or the chief evaluation officer, or the evaluation officer, or the senior evaluation officer is responsible for coordinating evaluations. But sub-agencies within the department may also have their own responsibilities, funding, and agendas for evaluation.

And then the third category, I call Facilitating Chief Evaluation Officer, which is maybe at the departmental level, but – but minimal, if any, funding at all for that office to directly initiate evaluation. So this is more of an expertise, a coordination, bit of a technical collaborator, coordinator for the agency's benefit.

So, many departmental agencies as well as sub-agencies also already have learning agendas and evaluation plans. I'll talk in a minute about the Labor Department.

What do evaluation plans and learning agendas mean? First, as the third bullet here says, some agencies and sub-agencies use the terms learning agenda and evaluation plan interchangeably. Learning agenda is intended really to prioritize the questions and issues on which the research and evaluation might address. It is ideally, and the Evidence Act requires it to be, multi-year. There are usually multiple dimensions of one or more issues. And that the priorities reflect the current administration, statutory requirements, operational needs, or other interests. And it may be public in some form.

Evaluation plans, in contrast, are typically annual. And identify the plans or expected evaluations or research projects that would be done. Ideally it should be linked back to the priority questions in the learning agendas. And it really – the evaluation plan is going to depend on what kind of funding and resources are available.

Now, I'll talk more about this in a minute, but, again, some agencies and sub-agencies use the terms interchangeably and have only one process.

Here's an example from the Labor Department. And in this chart, you can see at the bottom evaluations that are conducted based on the annual evaluation plan. Those evaluations, on an annual basis, come out of the learning agendas, which I'll talk about in a minute. And the information that goes into agency learning agendas come from the strategic plan, and the priorities in that. Often from congressional requirements that are included in statute. And OMB guidance that may – that may develop.

And the – the learning agendas and the evaluation plan also include a capacity development activity, which I'll talk about. And some data analysis and data analytics as well.

So, that there – there's a flow for where the information comes from and how it pops out at the end in a number of evaluations.

So, an example, this is a description of the Department of Labor's approach while I was there. There have been some changes since then. But it's still – the basic framework is similar.

It's a multi-year learning agenda, five-year agenda, that's developed at the sub-agency level there. Thirteen to 15 operating agencies within the Department, and each one of them have a learning agenda that is developed in collaboration with the evaluation specialists in the Chief Evaluation Office.

The learning agendas are updated annually. So they're five-year agendas but they're updated annually to remain as relevant and to re-prioritize as needed. So, for example, if it runs over an Administration change or a change in the departmental Cabinet-level secretary, there may be new priorities. And many of the learning agendas at the sub-agency level at the Labor Department are voluntarily included into the sub-agencies' annual or biannual strategic plans and their annual performance plans as well under the GPA requirements. They don't make that a requirement, but a number of agencies have voluntarily done that.

The learning priorities, and these A through D are sort of the general outline of what a Department of Labor sub-agency learning agenda looks like. And it identifies the key topics or the questions that might be related to performance issues, such as factors that might be associated statistically with different outcomes or performance metrics that an agency is held accountable for. They may be questions that are related to operational issues about the impact, or effectiveness, or causal effectiveness of particular strategies. Or there may be exploratory studies about operations.

There may be special initiatives that require background analysis, literature review, or preliminary analysis of potential outcomes, say doing simulation modeling or something like that.

And then, as I indicated before, the learning agendas also always can include evidence-building issues, such as data. Data is a huge evidence resource that's necessary. There could be topical briefings. There could be staff or grantee training around evidence and evaluation. Or thinking about coordination that might have to occur across agencies to carry out or to address a particular issue.

Then turning to the evaluation plan. So what I just talked about is sort of learning agendas that are developed at the sub-agency level. That means 13 to 17 each year, depending on how many operating agencies there are. And each of them are developed together with the Chief Evaluation Office. The learning agendas range in length from two to three pages to one large agency, the largest agency at the Labor Department is the Employment Training Administration. And the first year that they did a learning agenda, it was 150 pages long. So, they range from two pages to over a hundred pages, but most are about ten pages long. And – and address three to five high-priority issues, although some of the bigger agencies may have many bigger ones. The learning agenda is then considered a working document and is updated annually.

The evaluation plan takes all of the learning agendas and rolls them up, so to speak, to identify a reasonable, feasible, fundable set of studies that could be done, either externally or internally by analysts within the Department.

The annual departmental-level evaluation plan there is coordinated with the resources that are available to specify the studies, evaluations, and evaluation-related capacities, like capacity building, that could be funded in the coming year. And, at the Labor Department, these include those mostly funded by the Chief Evaluation Office, which has an appropriation annually.

And the intent is that the studies should be addressing the priority questions laid out in the learning agendas that come from the agencies. So this could include new evaluations that are expected in the coming year. Or it could indicate continuing studies and activities, some of which may require additional funding or new – new studies.

The annual plan, the annual evaluation plan, is submitted to Congress because the Labor Department has an evaluation set-aside authority, which allows the Secretary of Labor to set aside up to .75% of operating funds for evaluations. And those set-aside funds then get transferred into the Chief Evaluation Office for conducting evaluations.

And, so, the notice must, and this is true for any kind of funding transfers, the notice must go 15 days before the actual transfer occurs.

So, the notice to Congress, technically or legally only requires the Department to notify Congress of which studies are going to be possibly funded by the set-aside funding. But, in practice, the Department has been sending the entire annual evaluation plan to the – to Congress, both those studies that are funded – set-aside funding as well as with any other funding that the Office has. And that plan is then included on the – the Chief Evaluation Office website. A summary plan is published in the Federal Register. And the entire plan is posted on the website. So, public transparency is important.

At the bottom of this slide is categories which is sort of the outline of what's in the departmental evaluation plan. Again, the departmental evaluation plan is annually, and it indicates the studies that are expected to be done, or initiated, or continued in the – in the year. And it's organized by statistical and analytic studies that might be done. Performance analysis or related to performance that might be done. Basic or formal preliminary evaluations, statistical analysis, and organizational assessments. And then the causal impact evaluations. Because causal impact evaluations at the highest level of precision in terms of methodology, the Labor Department, as well as other departments and certainly the Evidence Act and OMB, are encouraging more use of formal causal net impact evaluations using experimental design, meaning random assignment, or a high-quality, non-experimental statistical analysis and clinical trials.

And then the fifth category of studies or activities that are in the annual plan are around capacity building. A number of them are listed here, whether it's helping sub-agencies or programs to develop logic models. Or data issues. Clearing houses, developing a clearinghouse or continuing to modify and – and improve the clearinghouse. Or other kinds of data and analytic issues.

I'm happy to talk more about capacity building if you like.

And then I just want to go through a few important lessons. I know I went through the – the two examples of learning agendas and evaluation plans pretty quickly, but I'll try to draw out some lessons. Even for agencies that are just beginning.

The lesson is, first, that it's really important to get stakeholder input for both the evaluation plans and possibly for learning agendas. And it includes both internal stakeholders and external stakeholders. The internal stakeholders are absolutely essential. And I really want to emphasize that because sometimes they're – they've been ignored in – in agencies that have developed evaluation plans. The internal stakeholders are program agency administrators, as well as field staff. The political and administrative leads in the department. Collaborative efforts between the evaluation offices and the operating agencies. So, it's not enough that the evalua – that the learning agenda, just evaluators talking to evaluators, but the only way it becomes really relevant, evaluation can be useful and relevant, is to get the input from internal stakeholders, program users, field, and service delivery providers, so that the questions are really useful for programs and to help improve programs.

There are also external stakeholders. And also, by the way, for internal stakeholders, at the Labor Department we have some conference calls. Some of the agencies had webinars for their field offices and regional offices. Some of them also sent out drafts of their learning agendas for field offices, regional offices, and work groups to review.

External stakeholders are also critically important. Sometimes people forget that congressional committees and OMB offices are external to the Department. But if you – if you retain – one way to find out, you could – you could ask for their input, and certainly they could review drafts, but often, if you retain a record or a log of the kinds of questions that you're getting from congressional staff and congressional committees, and from OMB, you get a very good idea of the priorities that those entities have.

The research and academic community, an important external stakeholder. Best obtain the information through our revised request for information, the Federal Register, or webinars. Any kind of public comment in the Federal Register. And one approach that the Employment and Training Administration, a large sub-agency at Labor, did was to have a contract with a university to obtain and compile stakeholder input into their five-year plan, and then that was incorporated into their learning agendas.

So there are a lot of different ways to get the input.

And, I've already mentioned several times, it's important to include not only evaluations and a list of studies that are being done, but also the capacity-building activities. Especially now as agencies are just beginning to develop their evaluation activities, it's important to think about what it's going to take to have a culture of evaluation.

So, in addition to the specific studies, there should be attention to staff development and training. At the Labor Department we did monthly or quarterly brown-bag seminars on different evaluation-related topics or releasing results. Staff can also be encouraged to take university courses or – and especially to attend a lot of the free conferences like the American Evaluation Association, APPAM, or some professional associations relevant to your agency.

Systems capacity development and technical assistance for field offices is just as important as for the national office operating agencies.

Data systems, I've often said that I spent probably a third of my time every day, week in and week out, on improving data. And that is critically important. So, you can't do good evaluations if you don't have good data.

Public use files and evidence-based clearinghouses, which maybe you'll have another set of webinars on those. But all of those should be incorporated into the learning agendas as well as the actual studies.

Another good practice is to use learning agendas to include them in budgeting. And here are just a few ideas. You can use the learning agendas to draft a chapter in the annual agency budget submission to OMB. I'm not sure if OMB requires that yet, but at the Labor Department we always add – add a chapter on evidence in the departmental submission to OMB. It can include citing relevant findings from research or evaluations, especially if there are new budget requests, and OMB has continuously said if you're asking for new money, you better have some evidence. And I expect that will continue.

You can consider various approaches for discretionary grants that incorporate tiered funding where evidence is a criteria to be considered. And some of the other strategies that are – that are listed here.

You can also use – incorporate learning agendas into the strategic planning process. At the Labor Department we included an evidence chapter in the strategic plan. And what we did there as identify all the strategic priorities and the cross-agency priorities, the CAPs, and had a matrix where we lined up evaluations that either had been done, are being done, or planned, and associated with each of the strategic priorities in the strategic plan.

So, any things like this that could be done quickly, that highlight, and raise, and elevate the importance of the role of evaluation in the department is a useful way to begin.

The Urban Institute, it does federal evaluation workshop theories. And, you know, all of you are welcome to attend. And on the next slide, I think there should be some websites – yes. There's a website, how you can reach me, how you can reach the Urban Institute's Evidence Capacity Building page as well.

And, I just wanted to – to end by saying that you might not be able to do all of these things all at once. I'd say if you're just beginning to start that you focus on capacity building. On developing a general learning agenda. Maybe beginning with the operating agencies that are most willing to do that so that you don't run into the challenge of agencies that are resistant right away.

Think of ways to engage stakeholders to help prioritize research topics.

And develop an evaluation policy statement if you don't already have one. I didn't have a slide on this, but some of you may know that the major principles that almost all of the departments that have evaluation offices are using, are rigor, using the best, highest-quality methods possible in evaluation. Independence, meaning that the agendas, learning agendas, and evaluation plans, and the results of studies are independent and free of bias and undue influence. Transparency that reports and results and studies are all released publicly. Ethics. Most importantly protecting human subjects and data privacy. And, I think the most important principle is that the studies that are developed and included in the learning agenda should be relevant to the program operating agencies and to improving the results of their programs.

I'll stop there and turn it back to Jess.

Jessica McNab:

Thank you so much, Demetra. I was furiously trying to capturing a couple of notes, and I know we already have a question or two, I think a comment – excuse me – and a question from the group.

So, I just want to start by recapping a couple of things. We'll go to some of the questions, and then I know I jotted down a couple of questions for you just from my own interests.

So, again, thanks. I think you not only helped kind of tie the entire series together with a bow, and put so many validating points on what many of the speakers have been presenting since mid-July. But I think, you know, your final kind of comments in terms of lessons learned, and where to start, and how to start, how to imbed those principles, I think really send people off on – on high note as we wrap this webinar series.

So, let's just start by going to one of our questions from one of our attendees, Clint. So, Clint says, can you speak to the topic of culture clash among different communities of practice in the world of analytical methods? For example, not all researchers necessarily agree that impact evaluations are the only method that can contribute the casual inference – let me just scroll down here – as opposed to impact estimates. For example, epidemiologists or qualitative evaluators.

So I'll start with that, and I know Clint has a couple of other comments and questions. So, I think just kind of summarizing, can you speak to that culture clash among those different kinds of communities within the analytical methods world?

Demetra Nightingale:

Sure. I think absolutely there – there are lots of conflicts in the academic and research community, and that's just one of them. There's also a lot of disagreement about the use of experimental design and random assignment versus non-experimental and more statistically-oriented outcome and impact analysis. And that it's important, also, to have some of the qualitative and experiential information as well.

And ideally, the best kind of an evaluation is one that uses all those multiple methods together. One of the most interesting dialogues that's going on right now has to do with using the results of evaluations. And coming out of the healthcare profession, for example, a big issue is – is not too stringently indicating how research should affect medical treatment. And that the importance of the provider, the doctors, the physicians, the clinicians, experience and knowledge also integrates with the clinical and scientific findings that come out.

So – so Clint is absolutely right. There – there certainly is some tension. And to me it's healthy tension because we need more and more creative analysis that's – that's being done, particularly to improve the use of evaluation results, but to present it in a way that is not narrowly constraining or inhibiting the provision – the importance of experience and knowledge at the actual service-delivery level. And each agency and each discipline is going to be different, so what is useful and may be controversial in NASA may not be relevant to some of the human service agencies, and the same with some of the enforcement agencies or health provision agencies.

Jessica McNab:

Um hmm. Thank you. And Clint, feel free to chat in any additional responses or clarifications there. And I know, I just wanted to make mention that you have been so engaged and active in our webinar series, which I thank you for, Clint, but I know all of your opinions and questions are – are your own and not necessarily representative of the Congressional Research Service.

A couple of other questions, Demetra. One is, are there lessons learned for you or from you in terms of how to bridge across separate communities of practice regarding terminology, frameworks, or even priorities? So, you spoke a bit about the terminology and priorities, but any other lessons learned out of the four that you reviewed in terms of how to bridge across those different communities?

Demetra Nightingale:

To me the most important thing, and I'm not sure what – who the people are who are on the – on the webinar today are, but it's really important that the evaluation office or unit has a staff that are able to communicate. And sometimes it means translating and communicating and interpreting between researchers and academics and program administrators, staff, and operators. And – and so I think the lesson is that the evaluation office staff have to be technically trained on evaluation methodology that's appropriate for that particular department. As Clint said, that could be different in different departments. But that they are also able to cultivate the relationships with the most important of the government operations, which is the – the actual program operating units.

So it's – in order to be – and, again, as I said, the most important principle to me, that needs to be followed, is that the research needs to be relevant to the particular agency or sub-agency at hand. You don't just do evaluation for the sake of it. Or to do – have a journal article that's talking about whatever the primary or vogue methodology might be. But that the studies are being done to help improvement government results.

And, so I think that the way to do it is to have the – the appropriately-trained evaluation staff in those offices that can be the bridge and communicate between the different communities.

Jessica McNab:

Um hmm. Yeah, thank you for that. I think we've – we've talked quite a bit about how different agencies have taken different approaches, I think, sometimes, in the initial steps to really define the terminology or operational definitions because there are so many different ways to describe. I think a great example is evidence building and evaluation plans sort of interchangeable with learning agenda. But, thanks, I think it's helpful and answers Clint's question.

So, another question, Demetra, is – comment and question. Some evaluations might be released externally, but others might be conducted in a safe space for internal learning and deliberation. Are there good ways for thinking about this and being more formal about it?

Demetra Nightingale:

Um, if I understand the question, I'll give you an example. As – at the end I – I talked briefly about sort of the guiding principles for an evaluation office, one of which is transparency. And from an academic perspective, that usually means peer-reviewed journal articles, having all studies publicly released and available, having data that's available for replication by other researchers. And that should be the policy, general policy. However, and I'll give you the example of the Labor Department which we learned from some other departments, which I'll briefly mention.

There are some instances where good evaluation, and research, and analysis, is done for internal management purposes, which may preclude it from being publicly released. And that some of that research and evaluation might be done internally. Whoever's doing those evaluations, whether they're internal evaluators or external, third-party evaluators, they should be independent and free of any conflict of interest of the program or issue that they are evaluating.

In some cases, the resulting report might be appropriately maintained in-house rather than public. To me that should be an exception, not the rule. And the – the policy that we adopted at the Labor Department was that all studies would be released unless a legal – there was some legal prohibition against releasing it. So, for example, the Labor Department includes a number of enforcement agencies, and legal arbitration offices and units, and if a study was likely or potentially placing the government's position in litigation or in some judicial action, or if there as some legal prohibition to – to releasing information, it could be maintained in-house.

However, and this is really important, you make that determination up front when you're developing your learning agendas, not when you see what the results are.

So, all studies are released regardless of whether the findings are positive or not unless an initial determination before the start of the project is made that it is for internal purposes only. And examples of that would be we had a number of studies that – that were testing different sequences in the arbitration or litigation process within some of the legal units. And they were using experimental design to randomly assign some of the cases to one judicial review process to speed up the process compared to the normal. And so those kinds of studies are for internal purposes and not external purposes. But in general, they should all be released.

But it's critical –

Jessica McNab:
Thank –

Demetra Nightingale:
You don't wait until you see the results and then decide if it's going to be released or not.

Jessica McNab:
Um hmm. Um hmm. Very good and valid point. Thank you. Thank you, Demetra.

So, I think a nice assortment of questions. Thank you for asking questions. Thanks for your responses and just all the effort that you put in to take a sense of who might be on the line and how to tie the webinar series together, Demetra, is really helpful. Again, we'll include some of the points that Demetra has provided when we compile all of the presentations and what has been shared by each agency into the summary report.

So I think with that, I'll move on to just a couple of additional details in terms of where you can access all of the information that is available to date. We do have all information from – from our webinars that are currently 508 compliant in Mathematica website. And as Amanda mentioned earlier in today's presentation, she'll be sharing those internally through the auspices of ASPE as well. So, for right now, the most immediate path for you to obtain information about those materials is on Mathematica's website, Mathematica-mpr.com.

As I mentioned yesterday, if you have joined us before, or if you joined us yesterday for the first time, we showcased the information. And our website may look and feel a little bit different if you joined it before and you're joining it more recently. That's because we've rebranded, so it definitely might look a little bit different to you. But in our main landing page for Mathematica, there is an Evidence tab, and that's where we tend to load a lot of our publications and different projects and reports. So you click – you can either click on the Evidence tab, which will then take you to a second tab in terms of the (inaudible) where you will see a link for Publications, Projects, Working Papers, as well as Recent Evidence.

So you can file through publications and projects to find all of the information from this project and the publications for each of the events, or you can use the Search icon which is the fastest right – route. So, if were to search something as simple as ASPE, it will produce the most recent relevant publications. So, from there you would get a full list of different products – excuse me – different publications associated with a project. You'll see our project landing page, which describes the project. And you can click on the Related Publications page which will then take you to materials for each of the 7 webinars where we have approved content that is 508 compliance so you can drill into the information. And we just used USDA's presentation as an example. You can see there that the recording of the webinar is loaded as well as links to a couple of learning agendas that USDA provided specifically in the transcript and the slides. So you can click through, you can share, you can forward, whatever you'd like to do. We're very happy to have that there at your disposal.

So, with that, and you know, there were a couple – couple of questions about that after we wrapped the webinar. If you have any questions, feel free to chat us. Chris has put those web pages in the chat. You can also just click and open those up on your computer. So, again, please feel free to chat us, or email us, and I'll put the email back up on the screen when we wrap today's webinar.

You will get a popup to take an evaluation. It will be your final evaluation. Again, these evaluations just should take you a couple of minutes. But, please, if you could, or actually probably 30 seconds or less depending on how many comments you write. Please take a quick peek at the webinar evaluation which gives us a sense of how today's webinar went and did we meet our expectations, how was the content, did you feel any of the content was actionable for your own work at your agency.

Again, Chris has pushed the project page in the chat but you can see it here. It's very long, so please do click on that link or use the couple of steps that I shared in terms of accessing the – the materials on Mathematica's website. And as noted, Amanda will share materials internally through ASPE.

So, there we are. We've come to the close of our webinar series. We want to thank you so much for all of you being so engaged. We really appreciate all of the questions and all of the insights from our presenters across the webinar series.

I hope you have a lovely afternoon, and take care. Thank you.