

6. BUILDING AND USING EVIDENCE TO IMPROVE GOVERNMENT EFFECTIVENESS

The Budget and previous actions by the Administration demonstrate a strong and enduring commitment to building evidence capacity across the Federal Government and engaging in high-quality evaluations to learn and improve. During its first week, the Administration stated its commitment to making evidence-based decisions guided by the best available science and data. The Presidential Memorandum on Restoring Trust in Government Through Scientific Integrity and Evidence-Based Policymaking (January 2021) affirmed that “[s]cientific and technological information, data, and evidence are central to the development and iterative improvement of sound policies, and to the delivery of equitable programs, across every area of Government.” Subsequent guidance in OMB Memorandum M-21-27, *Evidence-Based Policymaking: Learning Agendas and Annual Evaluation Plans* (June 2021) provided further details for agencies to execute on this commitment, and the Administration has relied on evidence as it tackles some of our nation’s biggest challenges, including its response to the COVID-19 public health emergency and advancing racial equity. Meeting this goal of an evidence-based government requires that Federal agencies use evidence whenever possible to advance their missions and operations and to commit to build evidence where it is lacking. It requires the Federal Government to foster and strengthen a culture of evidence where its generation and use is routine and integrated across all agency functions. The Budget builds on agencies’ efforts to effectuate evidence-based decision-making by further investing in agency capacity and activities to build and use evidence.

Building and Promoting a Culture of Evidence

Achieving an evidence-based Government demands a whole-of-Government approach where leadership and staff view evidence generation and use as essential to their roles. This is a mission-critical function, and evidence activities cannot occur in silos. The Federal Government must continue making progress by building on opportunities like those described below to fully realize the Administration’s commitment to evidence-based policymaking.

Implementing the Evidence Act Title I: The Foundations for Evidence-Based Policymaking Act of 2018 (Public Law 115-435, “Evidence Act”) is integral to advancing a Government driven by science and data. The statute makes agency evidence-building plans, known as Learning Agendas, foundational to building a culture of evidence generation and use. Learning Agendas and Annual Evaluation Plans provide a framework for systematic and strategic evidence building to support agencies in answering critical questions. OMB M-21-27 outlines a path for agencies to use these plans as tools to deliver an evidence-

based Government. It directs agencies to focus attention on the evidence needed to solve big problems. More specifically, it calls on agency leaders, staff, and stakeholders to examine the agency’s strategic goals and objectives, as outlined in the Agency Strategic Plan, and ask: what is it that our agency needs to do, what do we need to know about how to do it best, and what do we wish we knew? Situating Learning Agendas as part of Agency Strategic Plans reflects the integration of evidence building and use with the work of advancing agency goals. By using the development of these plans to think strategically about evidence needs, agencies can reduce scattered and ad hoc activities and instead prioritize resources on those questions that, when answered, can inform key decisions and high-priority functions. Moreover, the very process of creating Learning Agendas provides valuable learning and opportunities to bridge organizational siloes and bring disparate stakeholders to the same table.

Agencies have made significant progress implementing the requirements of the Evidence Act Title I. Since OMB released its initial implementation guidance in July 2019 – OMB Memorandum M-19-23, Phase 1 Implementation of the Foundations for Evidence-Based Policymaking Act of 2018: Learning Agendas, Personnel, and Planning Guidance – agencies have designated Evaluation Officers, Chief Data Officers, and Statistical Officials who bring critical leadership and expertise to their agencies. These leaders and their staff have identified priority questions that their agencies need to answer to meet their mission and improve their operations, planned and documented the significant evaluation activities they plan to undertake, and assessed their agency’s capacity to build and use evidence. Developing these types of strategic evidence-building plans is new for most agencies, yet they have embraced these activities and are publishing their Learning Agendas, FY 2023 Annual Evaluation Plans, and Capacity Assessments alongside the 2023 Budget. Agencies are also publishing Evaluation Policies, which are critical tools to ensure that evaluation activities uphold the evaluation standards of relevance and utility, rigor, independence and objectivity, transparency, and ethics as discussed below. Many agencies that previously had Evaluation Policies have revised their policies over the past year to better integrate and reflect equity principles in line with the Administration’s commitment to advancing equity.

Putting Plans into Action: As agencies begin the hard work of putting these evidence plans into action, this Administration has been clear about the important role that program evaluation must play in answering priority questions. OMB M-21-27 elevates program evaluation as a critical agency function, alongside information technology, human resources, and other key processes. Evaluation

is not a compliance exercise, and it is not solely an accountability tool. Rather, agencies should use evaluation to learn what works, for whom, and under what circumstances, and to provide insights into how to improve. The Federal Government must move away from an orientation that views evaluations as narrowly focused on answering the question, “Did it work?” with a simple “Yes,” or “No,” to one that includes evaluation in program and policy design from the beginning in order to build knowledge and understanding that informs decision-making. Evaluations rarely produce unquestionably positive results, yet most still provide meaningful and useful findings from which we can learn. Similarly, null or negative results should not be viewed as an indication of failure but instead as an opportunity to gain valuable knowledge. Using evaluation in this way entails a cultural transformation throughout an agency, from top leadership to program managers to front-line staff. It requires that agencies invest in a skilled workforce with the appropriate training and expertise, including for the Evaluation Officer and other staff. Conducting evaluations and using the results effectively demands that agencies make the necessary investments to support evaluation as a key agency function, moving beyond the bare statutory minimum to more robust resources.

This cultural shift in agencies further requires that the commitment to building and using evidence adheres to high standards when conducting evidence-building activities, including evaluation. As a scientific activity, agencies must strive to uphold the standards for program evaluation laid out in OMB Memorandum M-20-12, Phase 4 Implementation of the Foundations for Evidence-Based Policymaking Act of 2018: Program Evaluation Standards and Practices (March 2020). The Guidance not only makes clear the need to ensure that evaluation is carried out with relevance and utility, rigor, independence and objectivity, transparency, and ethics. It also describes concrete practices that agencies can implement to support efforts to meet those standards. The Evaluation Policies that agencies have established provide another mechanism to meet the Administration’s call to uphold scientific integrity, which is essential for restoring trust in Government. All scientific activities, including evidence-building activities like program evaluation, should be conducted without undue influence and consistent with appropriate standards and processes (Protecting the Integrity of Government Science, NSTC, January 2022).

Agencies must also consider how evaluation activities intersect with the Administration’s commitment to advancing equity. Evaluation is key to identifying and testing strategies and innovations that can effectively reduce disparities in priority outcomes. It is also critical that agencies design evaluations to yield useful insights and avoid perpetuating underlying biases by considering equity throughout the lifecycle of evaluation. This includes robust and sustained engagement with the full range of relevant and interested stakeholders to inform the prioritization of evidence needs, as well as the design, conduct, and application of evaluation and other evidence-building activities. When conducted without the input and insight

of those most directly affected by the programs and policies being evaluated, we risk maintaining blind spots in our understanding and perpetuating inequity. A focus on equity reinforces other critical principles like transparency and rigor; integrating an explicit commitment to equity in Evaluation Policies provides another channel for institutionalizing this principle in an agency’s culture of evidence. To support understanding and awareness of how to integrate equity throughout the evaluation lifecycle, OMB’s Evidence Team, in collaboration with a team of agency experts, hosted a five-part workshop series in the summer and fall of 2021.

Fostering Collaboration and Engagement: The Administration recognizes that effective collaboration across the Federal Government is essential to build on the strong foundation that dedicated civil servants in agencies have already put in place to support evidence-based policymaking. Since it started meeting monthly in Fall 2019, the Evaluation Officer Council has served as a forum for the Evaluation Officers from CFO Act agencies to come together as a community, exchange information, coordinate and collaborate on areas of common interest, and provide support to one another as they implement Title I of the Evidence Act. In Fall 2021, the Evaluation Officer Council honored Federal civil service leaders committed to advancing evaluation and evidence-based policymaking across Government through its inaugural Evaluation Officer Council Recognition Program. Those honored demonstrated dedication and commitment to using evaluation to improve Government and how we deliver for the American people. The Federal evaluation community is also collaborating through the Interagency Council on Evaluation Policy (ICEP). This group draws on evaluation experts from across Government to enhance the value and contributions of Federal evaluations to improve Government operations and delivery of Government services. These interagency communities highlight the ways in which Federal evaluation staff are working together to ensure that rigorous scientific tools like evaluation are used to help the Federal Government tackle big challenges.

With the launch of the new Evaluation.gov website in September 2021, the Federal Government now has a public-facing central home for evaluation and related evidence-building activities. The site demonstrates the Administration’s commitment to transparency and coordination, bringing together information about Evaluation Officers and evaluation offices from every CFO Act agency, as well as other agencies who are engaging in this work. Evaluation.gov will soon provide a one-stop-shop for agencies, researchers, and the general public to find and access Learning Agendas, Annual Evaluation Plans, Capacity Assessments, and Agency Evaluation Policies. It will provide an accessible way for researchers and funding partners to easily see what priority questions agencies are trying to answer and then to align their own research portfolios to help answer those questions. While these kinds of partnerships can be difficult to form and sustain, the intent is to start breaking down long-standing barriers and help facilitate productive partnerships to solve

our country's challenges. We also aim to open up engagement to a wide group of scholars, in particular those from Minority Serving Institutions (MSIs), Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs), community colleges, and those who may not typically have access to Federal projects and data.

New Initiatives to Accelerate Progress

The commitment to building fruitful partnerships both across Federal agencies and with non-Governmental researchers can be seen in efforts already taking shape. One such partnership is the Analytics for Equity pilot, a new initiative led by the National Science Foundation (NSF), the Office of Science and Technology Policy, and OMB. The Analytics for Equity pilot will leverage NSF's experience in funding research grants and connecting with academics, and it will distribute targeted funding to external research teams that are willing and capable of responding to Federal agencies' priority learning questions that focus on equity. The initiative aims to gain participation from academics with a broad range of institutional affiliations and areas of expertise. Agency partners will help shape the pilot's focus on a limited set of thematic areas and will provide guidance on data resources and agency needs.

The Biden-Harris Management Agenda Vision sets out key priorities for an equitable, effective, and accountable Government that delivers results for all Americans. A management-focused Learning Agenda in support of the President's Management Agenda (PMA) will identify key Government-wide questions to answer in support of the PMA Vision. This first-ever effort of its kind supports a larger effort under the PMA to advance management priorities for all Executive Branch Departments and agencies to improve how Government operates and performs. In support of the PMA vision of an equitable, effective, and accountable Government that delivers results for all, the PMA Learning Agenda will address critical evidence gaps and encourage research to close those gaps within, beyond, and in partnership with the Federal Government.

Achieving this vision of an evidence-based Government requires that we build and promote an environment and workforce that understands and appreciates evaluation and other evidence-building approaches. Recognizing this need, OMB is partnering with the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) and agency evaluation experts to develop the Federal Evaluation Toolkit. This resource will help build evaluation skills among the Federal workforce broadly by addressing the value of evaluation, how to interpret and communicate results to agency leaders, and how leaders can – and should – use results to support decision-making. In addition, OMB, in partnership with the Office of Evaluation Sciences (OES) at the General Services Administration (GSA), offers a regular workshop series for Federal staff on technical and policy areas related to evaluation and other evidence activities. The workshops are well attended and receive consistent positive feedback, thus demonstrating the broad demand and interest in acquiring these skills.

Investing in Evidence

Building and sustaining an evidence-based Government is a long-term proposition. Targeted investments in FY 2022 are providing cross-agency support that amplifies individual agency activities. The 2023 Budget includes a number of proposals to build evidence where it is lacking and develop evaluation capacity, while also using evidence to inform other investments.

Building Evidence Where it is Needed: The American Rescue Plan Act of 2021 (Public Law 117-2, "ARP") provided resources for over 200 programs and services designed to counteract the public health and economic harms of the pandemic. Building evidence on equitable approaches to implementation of ARP investments is the focus of multi-year, multi-agency projects. In addition to agencies' own initiatives to evaluate ARP programming, OES is undertaking a portfolio of evaluations with agency partners to better understand how to improve awareness, access, and allocation of ARP programs and resources, focusing on ARP programs with equity goals. Another strategy to generate lessons from ARP is a collaboration among OMB, GSA, and agency partners to launch a multi-year national evaluation of a cross-section of priority ARP-funded programs, using an independent third-party research firm. This first of its kind effort will encompass multiple agencies, geographies, and programs, and seeks to answer questions about where and how ARP programs helped advance equity, while building evidence for future programs and policies.

Many of the priority questions we need answered to more effectively deliver on the Federal Government's mission are inherently cross-governmental. In critical areas like hiring, equity, and rebuilding the economy, many of the policy and programmatic solutions span agencies and functions. However, the current structures and processes for conducting evaluation make it difficult to fund and conduct joint studies that could benefit multiple agencies. A coordinated approach to evaluation will help agencies use taxpayer dollars efficiently and effectively and promote a culture of learning and continuous improvement. To begin meeting this challenge, the 2023 Budget makes new investments in cross-agency evaluations aligned with Administration priorities. Each of these new evaluations will be housed at a lead agency but will address priority questions common to multiple agencies. The Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) will lead a coordinated cross-agency process to support the design and execution of evaluations of Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act (Public Law 117-58, "IIJA") investments. This is an opportunity to further ensure that IIJA investments are evidence-based and that agencies build evidence about the outcomes of these investments. The Small Business Administration will lead a coordinated cross-agency evaluation of agency efforts to improve equity in procurement, aligned with the Administration's commitment to increasing opportunities and removing barriers in Federal procurement. The Office of Personnel Management (OPM) will lead a series of pilot tests focused on the return to Federal facilities and hybrid work

environments, working with GSA to implement and test new space configurations for physical offices, training approaches for managing hybrid teams, new technology products, or other innovations agencies may consider as they look to the future of work. Finally, the Budget includes funding for the Department of Labor (DOL) to lead a new rigorous interagency evaluation of strategies aimed at improving Diversity, Equity, Inclusivity, and Accessibility (DEIA) within the Federal workforce. DOL will lead an evaluation of agencies' DEIA efforts, in close collaboration with OPM and other agencies to drive long-term, meaningful changes for the Federal workforce. The cross-governmental nature of these evaluations means that a range of agencies will participate in the evaluations and that the findings can be shared, applied, and used across agencies and contexts. The lead agencies will be expected to work with other agency partners to design these evaluations so that the results are timely, relevant, useful, and disseminated broadly, in service of addressing these Administration priorities more effectively.

The 2023 Budget also makes a number of new evidence-building investments at agencies to support Administration priorities. At the Department of Education (ED), there is an additional \$350 million, for a total of \$514 million, for the Education Innovation and Research program, which the Department would target towards identifying and scaling evidence-based models that improve recruitment and retention of staff in education, in particular in the critical shortage of science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) education, career and technical education (CTE), special education, and multilingual education. Additionally at ED, there is \$200 million in the CTE Innovation and Modernization Fund to build evidence of successful postsecondary models to address persistent challenges to career readiness and post-secondary attainment, especially among underserved students. Also at ED, a portion of the National Center for Education Statistics' National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) funding is specifically requested for research and development efforts needed to maintain NAEP quality and reduce future program costs. At the Department of Justice (DOJ), the Budget proposes a significant investment to support the deployment of body-worn cameras (BWC) to the Department's law enforcement officers. Part of this investment will be set aside for evaluation to assess the role of BWC in advancing criminal justice reform.

Sustaining High Capacity Evaluation Capabilities: In addition to investments aimed at strengthening evaluation capacity across the Federal Government, the Budget sustains or enhances funding for evaluation offices or units that pre-date the Evidence Act, including for evaluation activities at ED's Institute for Education Sciences; several parts of HHS, including the Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation (ASPE), the Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation (OPRE), and the Centers for Disease Control; the Department of Housing and Urban Development's (HUD) Office of Policy Development and Research; the Department of Agriculture's Food and Nutrition Service; DOL's Chief

Evaluation Office; GSA's OES; the Millennium Challenge Corporation; and AmeriCorps. The Budget also continues essential authorities for evaluating and improving Federal programs. For example, the Budget maintains the authority for DOL to set-aside "up to 0.75 percent" of appropriations so that there may be sufficient funds for conducting significant and rigorous evaluations, and it continues to provide DOL's Chief Evaluation Office the authority to carry out grants and demonstration projects to test innovative strategies for building evidence. The Budget also includes measures to further support these offices, such as the request for the Evaluation Funding Flexibility General Provision to give DOL's Chief Evaluation Office and Bureau of Labor Statistics, and HHS's ASPE and OPRE the ability to use evaluation funds over a greater period of time.

Using Evidence to Inform Investments: In addition to building evidence where it is lacking, the Administration supports new investments that are backed by strong evidence of effectiveness. For example, the Budget makes a number of investments in housing programs that are informed by careful and systematic evaluations of previous programs. Driven by evidence demonstrating that living in lower-poverty neighborhoods improves the long-term success of children and the health outcomes of adults, the Budget includes \$445 million in HUD's Housing Choice Voucher program for mobility-related supportive services to provide low-income families who live in areas of concentrated poverty with greater options to move to higher-opportunity neighborhoods. The Budget includes \$330 million for HUD grants to mitigate lead-based paint hazards in HUD-assisted and other low-income homes, reflecting clear evidence that ensuring children grow up in healthy, lead-safe homes provides a lifetime of benefits for both the children and society. The Budget includes \$85 million for investments in HUD's Healthy Homes grants and contracts, supporting comprehensive household hazard mitigation practices that have been shown to significantly reduce the costs of environmental diseases in children. As another example, the Budget includes \$3.3 billion for HUD's Continuum of Care program, which prioritizes grantees who commit to using a Housing First approach. The Housing First approach has been proven to be highly effective for ending homelessness, particularly for people experiencing chronic homelessness who have higher service needs. Finally, the Budget includes \$455 million for HUD's Housing Opportunities for Persons with AIDS (HOPWA) program, based on evidence that housing interventions improve stability and connection to care for people with HIV/AIDS and that lack of stable housing is one of the most significant factors limiting the use of antiretrovirals.

At DOL, the Budget provides \$303 million to expand investments in Registered Apprenticeship programs that have been shown to improve employment outcomes. The Budget also includes \$6 million to provide greater opportunities for women to enter Registered Apprenticeship and nontraditional occupations. In addition, the Budget includes \$375 million for Reemployment Services and Eligibility Assessments (RESEA). Beginning in FY 2023,

states will be required to use no less than 25 percent of RESEA funds for interventions or service delivery strategies with strong causal evidence showing a demonstrated capacity to improve employment and earnings outcomes for program participants. States have the flexibility to use up to ten percent of their annual RESEA funding to conduct evaluations of these interventions and strategies, and the Budget continues to make funding available for DOL to support states in implementing the evidence-based requirements, including through identification of strong evidence in the Clearinghouse for Labor Evaluation and Research (CLEAR) website.

The Budget also continues to support the use and building of evidence related to implementation of the First Step Act, a high priority Administration initiative. Building on activities started in FY 2022, the Budget supports funding at the Bureau of Prisons (BOP) in DOJ for an evidence-informed, workforce development initiative to be administered by DOL in partnership with BOP. The initiative seeks to implement a variety of evidence-informed workforce development models and practices including case management, support services, Registered Apprenticeship, occupational skills training, and transitional employment for current prisoners in BOP facilities or those that have been recently transferred to community placements. While the program models will be developed using evidence, the initiative also includes funds for robust rigorous evaluation to assess prisoner outcomes (e.g., recidivism, labor market outcomes, etc.) and consider the relationship between these outcomes and the type, intensity, and duration of services provided.

Building Evidence and Evaluation Capacity: Agencies' capacity to build and use evidence varies widely, and achieving the goal of an evidence-based Government requires further investments to develop that capacity. The Budget makes a number of investments to allow agencies to build the systems, personnel, and processes that they need. For example, the EPA will invest in building a broader and higher quality portfolio of evidence. The Budget ensures that EPA will have the personnel and resources to engage in more robust foundational fact finding, more durable improvements in data access and sharing, and stronger engagement of – and collaboration with – external stakeholders, academics, and other researchers. It will support EPA's use of more rigorous and labor-intensive methodologies and increase the number of program evaluations and other empirical studies that support EPA's Learning Agenda. Similarly, the Budget supports an expanded \$4 million independent evaluation fund at the Department of the Interior (DOI). This will allow DOI to conduct new studies and build evidence in areas on its Learning Agenda that are not otherwise funded.

In the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), there are several foundational investments to support evidence-building. For example, \$500,000 is included for funding evaluation-skilled personnel and evaluation activities to support DHS's Evaluation Officer, including coordination and execution of the Learning Agenda and Annual Evaluation Plan. The Budget also includes funding for

two highly skilled evaluators to strengthen the Federal Emergency Management Agencies (FEMA) capacity and capabilities for planning and executing high quality program evaluation and other evidence-building activities that inform learning and improvement across the breadth of FEMA programs and with regard to Administration priorities, including climate resilience for FEMA hazard mitigation grant priorities and equity.

At the Department of Veterans Affairs, the Budget requests funding to support two evaluation analysts in the Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA) to help build capacity that will allow VBA to promote greater equity in service delivery by measuring inequities among veterans who have historically been disadvantaged based on their race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, or gender identity; identify opportunities to address those inequities; and use data to systematically build evidence to understand whether changes have the intended effect of reducing inequities in service delivery.

Data Infrastructure and Capacity to Support Evidence-Building

The Evidence Act calls on agencies to strategically plan and organize evidence-building, data management, and data access functions to ensure an integrated and direct connection to evidence needs. The Budget recognizes that the collection, curation, governance, protection, and transparency of data are also essential for evidence building and thus includes commitments to advancing the data infrastructure and capacity that is foundational for building evidence within and outside Government. Chapter 15 describes how the Federal statistical system, especially the recognized statistical agencies and units, are expanding their longstanding capacity to produce and make accessible data for evidence-building as they work together to implement Title III of the Evidence Act. As a further example, the Budget continues to invest around \$33.5 million to support states, school systems, and other partners to design and implement Statewide Longitudinal Data Systems (SLDS), a program of the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) at IES, which supports early childhood through workforce data to make data-informed decisions and to conduct research to identify strategies to improve student outcomes. Similarly, \$6 million would sustain investments in DOL's Workforce Data Quality Initiative (WDQI) to support states in developing, connecting, and enhancing their longitudinal data systems that integrate education and workforce data to provides students and job seekers with information to select the education and training programs that best suit their needs. SLDS and WDQI enable the support of evaluation and research on the effectiveness of workforce and education programs and thus are integral to supporting evidence-building at the State and Federal levels. The Departments continue to jointly convene efforts to maximize lessons and partnerships.

Strategic, cost-efficient evidence-building relies on strong data governance that facilitates the access, protection, and use of program and other administrative data to enable and support secondary uses, including for

statistical and evaluation activities. Federal Evaluation Officers, in collaboration with Statistical Officials, Chief Data Officers, Senior Agency Officials for Privacy, Chief Information Security Officers, and other relevant officials, have a role in fostering data management for evaluation. Credible program evaluation requires using or collecting verifiable data that accurately capture the intended information and address the questions of interest. Administrative data that supports evaluation purposes can strengthen measurement reliability and validity of analyses and achieve cost efficiencies for the execution of evaluation studies.

Conclusion

The next fiscal year provides a critical opportunity to invest in the staff, capacity, and infrastructure needed to ensure that evidence is used to inform decision-making

across the Federal Government. Given the complex issues facing our nation, evidence can and should be brought to bear as we seek to understand our Nation's challenges, develop and implement solutions, and measure progress. The Budget demonstrates the Administration's commitment to making evidence-based decisions guided by the best available science and data in order to improve Government programs, policies, and operations. The proposals in the Budget seek to promote a culture of evidence by developing and strengthening agency capacity, using evidence to inform proposals, and building evidence where it is lacking. Supporting the rigorous evaluation of priority initiatives is central to these efforts. These investments are important markers on the path to an evidence-based Government that effectively and efficiently achieves its mission on behalf of the American people.