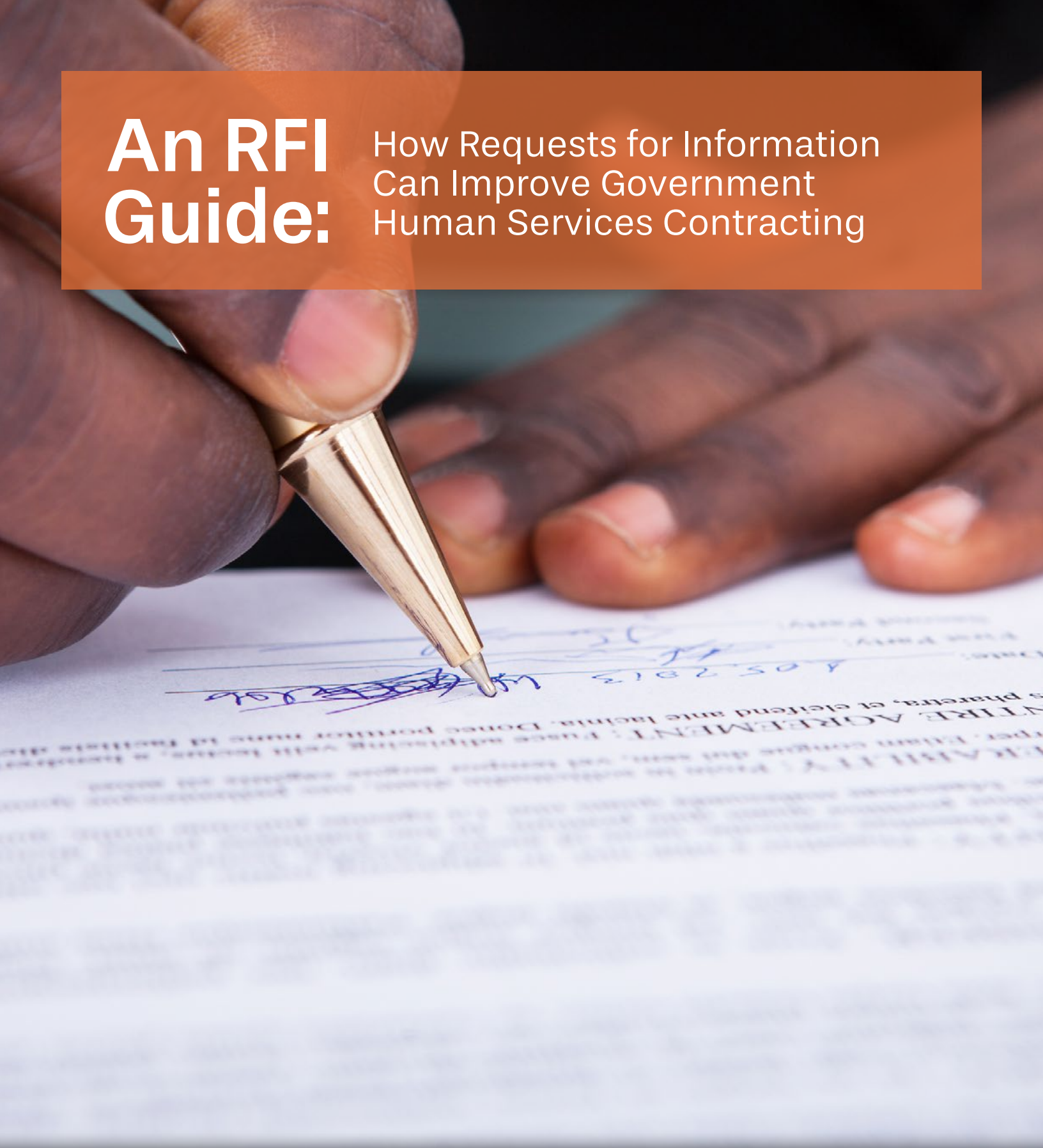


# An RFI Guide:

How Requests for Information  
Can Improve Government  
Human Services Contracting



PROJECT  
EVIDENT

RESULTS  
FOR AMERICA

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## About the RFI Guide

This Request for Information (RFI) Guide was developed by [Project Evident](#) and [Results for America](#).

Project Evident offers a comprehensive platform of tools, resources, and direct services that not only help nonprofits and funders improve how they measure, evaluate, and report results, but also strengthen their alignment with each other. Project Evident is committed to creating an interdisciplinary and practical approach for continuous evidence building—one that ultimately helps foster a healthier ecosystem around evidence in the social sector.

Results for America's goal is to make investing in what works "the new normal." Results for America acts as a catalyst for decision-makers at all levels of government, helping them build the skills and will they need to be effective champions for what works.

This guide is designed to help governments improve outcomes by increasing their collaboration with human services providers at their primary point of intersection: the contracting process.

## Executive Summary: The Problem and Solution

### THE PROBLEM:

Governments too often fail to meaningfully engage human services providers and community stakeholders in their procurement processes and, as a result, develop and implement human services contracts that are less effective than they could be in achieving desired outcomes for their residents. By skipping the important information gathering stage and simply releasing Requests for Proposal (which are often recycled from previous years' procurements), governments miss crucial opportunities to improve results through collaboration and information sharing between the public sector, human services providers, and community stakeholders.

### THE SOLUTION:

One solution is to develop partnerships between the public sector, human services providers, and community stakeholders to establish a shared vision for success and strategies for leveraging the collective talents of government and human services providers to achieve that vision. Implementing a government procurement process that engages human services providers and community stakeholders allows for greater alignment between sectors and better outcomes for residents. The Request for Information is a tool that can be used to engage human services providers and community stakeholders in the government procurement process.

### THE REQUEST FOR INFORMATION:

Requests for Information (RFIs) allow government, community stakeholders, and human services providers the opportunity to identify relevant community challenges, co-create strategies to solve those challenges, and design the best procurement structures to achieve the desired outcomes. An RFI is an important step in creating the type of open and inclusive collaboration needed between government and human services providers to support better social service delivery across the United States. Ultimately, improving outcomes for communities in need requires that both government and human services providers commit to improving the government procurement status quo. This work begins at the earliest stages of human services contracting when:

- **Governments** use RFIs to gather critical information from human services providers and community stakeholders to inform the goals of upcoming human services contracts and ensure that they are scoped appropriately in order to achieve the desired outcomes for residents.
- **Human services providers** use RFIs to provide their expertise and inform the goals and structure of an upcoming human services contract to help ensure that it is designed to maximize opportunities to achieve outcomes for residents.

Project Evident and Results for America came together to develop this RFI Guide because we believe that building stronger, results-focused partnerships between government, human services providers, and the community will contribute to meaningful and sustained outcomes for communities in need.

To accomplish these goals, this RFI Guide leads government and human services providers through a series of Collaborative Procurement Questions (described on page 7) that can be used over the course of the entire government contracting process (described on page 12), including in an RFI itself (sample RFIs are on page 14 and a Model RFI Template is on page 21). These Collaborative Procurement Questions are designed to elicit information from government, human services providers, and the community that will produce an improved procurement process (and ultimately better human services outcomes). By using these Collaborative Procurement Questions and the steps outlined in this RFI Guide, governments and human services providers can use an RFI process to improve outcomes by increasing collaboration, enhancing competition, and prioritizing evidence-based programs.



## Introduction:

# Improving Human Services Contracting – Why an RFI?

Requests for Information (RFIs) are used to gather information from stakeholders before the start of an official government procurement process.<sup>1</sup> By focusing on the pre-proposal phase and before any Request for Proposals (RFP) is released, the RFI allows for collaboration between government, human services providers, and community groups in a way that is not possible (and may be legally forbidden) during the latter stages of a formal government procurement process. Because an RFI occurs outside of the formal procurement process, it can be accomplished quickly (sometimes in a matter of weeks) and informally (through meetings, simple web forms, and even an email comment box). The RFI is an important (yet all too often missing) phase in the procurement process that can facilitate guided discussion, discovery, and learning about which types of human services programs may work best for a select population of individuals within a given jurisdiction's purview.

The effective use of an RFI can lead to an improved human services procurement process and better outcomes for communities in need by:

1. **Improving collaboration:** Increased cooperation between governments and human services providers, through the creation of a culture of shared accountability and joint problem-solving, in order to deliver better results toward clearly articulated outcome goals.
2. **Enhancing competition:** Increased number and diversity of providers in the procurement process so that government contracts are better matched with highly qualified human services providers that are more likely to achieve meaningful results.
3. **Prioritizing evidence-based programs:** Additional input and feedback from human services providers and community stakeholders leads to a more specific definition of the challenges facing a community, increasing the ability to match evidence-based practices and promising new programs to those particular challenges.

Collaborative government procurement processes supported by RFIs lay the foundation for the improved delivery of services that can fundamentally alter the outcomes achieved by human services providers. In fact, one of the key learnings from the implementation of Pay for Success and other outcomes-based funding structures over the last several years is that stronger collaboration between government leaders and human services providers is a key ingredient in achieving better outcomes.<sup>2</sup> As such, this RFI Guide contains a series of Collaborative Procurement Questions which identify common-sense steps for governments and human services providers alike to improve government procurement processes and produce better outcomes for communities.

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<sup>1</sup>A Request for Information may also be called a Request for Feedback, a community feedback session, a Request for Innovation, or similar names. For more details on the key terms used in human services procurement, please see the Key Terminology section of the Results for America's [What Works Toolkit: A State and Local Government Policymaker's Guide to Improving Human Services Contracting and Outcomes](#).

<sup>2</sup>Pay for Success is a public-private partnership in which front-end funders (private and/or philanthropic entities) provide the upfront working capital to scale prevention-focused social interventions; government then compensates the front-end funders if the intervention is proven to produce a measurable social impact.

This RFI Guide builds upon the [What Works Toolkit: A State and Local Government Policymaker's Guide to Improving Human Services Contracting and Outcomes](#) (What Works Toolkit) released by Results for America in August 2018. The What Works Toolkit details how state and local governments and human services providers can work together to implement accessible, collaborative, and outcomes-focused contracting to enhance positive results and better serve communities in need. Specifically, the What Works Toolkit has [five detailed recommendations](#) to move state and local government agencies and human services providers from compliance-focused to outcomes-focused contracting.



This RFI Guide most specifically builds upon Recommendation #1: Gather Feedback and Focus on Outcomes by using a collaborative procurement framework to explore the role of RFIs in helping governments take the first step of engaging human services providers and community stakeholders (including service recipients, community residents, and community-based organizations) to gather feedback, define desired objectives, and establish outcome goals for each key contract.

## Collaborative Procurement Questions

The key difference between the government procurement status quo and a more collaborative procurement process is the commitment to and use of an ongoing conversation to engage human services providers and community stakeholders in identifying needs, goals, and desired outcomes. The Collaborative Procurement Questions below form the basis for this ongoing conversation that should occur throughout the contracting process with the government soliciting, and human services providers supplying, the necessary information to develop an effective contract that is more likely to achieve the desired outcomes for the designated target populations.

As a starting place, government leaders, human services providers, and community stakeholders should together consider the Collaborative Procurement Questions prior to any Request for Proposals (RFP). The information garnered in response to the Collaborative Procurement Questions should be used throughout the government procurement process, including in the development of the RFP and ultimately the contract and monitoring process. Government leaders and human services providers should also frequently revisit these questions throughout the human services contracting cycle to ensure they are achieving their goal of more meaningful outcomes for communities through increased collaboration, enhanced competition, and the prioritization of evidence-based programs.

For more details on the specific junctures of the procurement process where government leaders and human services providers should revisit these questions, please see the Steps to Effectively Integrate an RFI into the Procurement Process section on page 12. Of note, the list that follows includes a comprehensive range of illustrative questions that could be included in a collaborative procurement process and Request for Information (RFI). The questions below should be used as a starting point for both government and human services providers to identify a subset of questions that are most applicable to the particular procurement at hand.

### Collaborative Procurement Questions:

1. **Overall Goals:** How will this human services procurement help achieve the desired outcome goals?
  - a. What are the outcome goals for this procurement?
  - b. How was community input used to define these outcome goals?
  - c. What is the identified target population?
  - d. What interventions address the target population's challenges? Are these proven, promising, or not-yet-evaluated programs? Do these interventions address the foundational components that contribute to this challenge in the life, home, and community of the target population? What are the likely impacts and quantifiable measures if the intervention works as intended and the outcome goals are achieved?
  - e. What is the realistic timeframe for achieving these outcome goals?
  - f. How are the outcome goals aligned with similarly situated programs or contracts?
  - g. What support can the government provide to improve the human services providers' likelihood of success (including referral streams, physical space, or other in-kind support)?

2. **Budget:** Is the overall budget sufficient to achieve the desired outcome goals?
  - a. Does the budget cover the full cost to deliver the services? If not, what program requirements or activities will not be met due to fiscal constraints? If not, can the government suggest alternative revenue streams to address any funding gap?
  - b. Are there government guidelines or restrictions on use of funds that may interfere with service delivery?
3. **Government Procurement Process Improvement and Simplification:** Is the proposed procurement process inclusive and accessible to allow the best positioned vendor across objective selection criteria to be chosen?
  - a. Does the procurement process pose any barriers to achieving the outcome goals?
  - b. Are there redundant paperwork requirements, duplicative data collection requirements, or other barriers that can be removed in order to simplify the contracting process?
  - c. Can the government use a standardized contract with uniform provisions and timelines?
  - d. How much time is sufficient between the release of the RFI, the release of the RFP, and the response deadlines? How much time is needed to finalize implementation plans between the contract award and start date?
4. **Competition:** Are the procurement and contracting processes and timeframes set up to increase the quality, number, and diversity of potential human services providers?
  - a. Does the procurement process engage a wide range of potential providers across various dimensions (size, geographic footprint, community connections, program models, experience)? Will the procurement-related outreach engage potential providers from underrepresented populations and those not currently within the government's portfolio?
  - b. Does the procurement process consider providers' demonstrated performance across key service domains, past experience in the area(s) of service, and evidence of effectiveness rather than, or in addition to, price per service?
  - c. Does the procurement process preference evidence-based interventions (such as extra points or a funding set-aside for proposed solutions with moderate or strong evidence of effectiveness)?
5. **Outcomes- and Performance-Based Contracts:** Does the contract and payment structure incentivize outcomes (rather than strictly outputs) and strengthen evidence-building and learning?
  - a. Is outcomes-based funding a realistic option for the programmatic goals and, if so, how could it strengthen the evidence for the particular intervention type and achieve better results for the target population?
  - b. For any outcomes-based contract, are there clearly delineated outcomes, strong governance structures, training and technical assistance resources, and other supports in place to sustain the outcomes-based delivery and reporting over the contracting period?



- c. Are performance-based incentives appropriate for this type of contract (instead of, or in addition to, cost-based contracting)? What are the potential unintended consequences and incentives of paying for performance?
  - d. What portion of funding is exempt from performance-based payments to ensure that providers without immediate access to working capital can participate?
  - e. What other kinds of government incentives and support would be most meaningful to encourage provider participation and interest in outcome and performance funding?
6. **Contract Structure and Flexibility:** Is the contract and payment structure flexible enough to build evidence while also allowing for improvement in the service delivery model?
- a. Are the contracting provisions flexible enough to allow providers to build and strengthen evidence about what works, refine their service delivery model, or make other modifications to better achieve the desired outcomes?
  - b. Can the government offer a multi-year contract (with relevant intermediate milestones) to allow for outcomes measurement and increased evidence building? If not, would a pilot period be a viable way to adjust the service delivery model, incorporate participant feedback, and inform a longer-term contract?
  - c. Are there broader policy reforms, waivers, or other changes to procedures, regulations, or laws which the government might consider making to increase the effectiveness of the service delivery model?
  - d. Are the contracting provisions flexible enough to mitigate any impact on the services under contract created by future changes in policy or practice?
  - e. Does the contracting structure allow the provider to expand programs that have generated evidence of success?
7. **Metrics:** What metrics are used to capture short-term process outputs and longer-term outcomes to track the success of the program?
- a. Do the government and human services providers have a shared agreement about the relevant metrics, how they will be collected, how they will be assessed, when they will be reviewed, and how they will be acted upon?
8. **Data:** What types of data can be shared between government and human services providers to track program participants, identify implementation challenges, and evaluate the results over the course of the service contract?
- a. Will real time administrative data be shared with human services providers?
  - b. What data infrastructure or policies are necessary to allow for the real time sharing of administrative and other data?
  - c. What data will human services providers share with the government? Do human services providers have the systems and processes to collect this data?
  - d. Is the data collection (and cleaning) process conducive to tracking the key elements necessary to measure the implementation and results of the program?

9. **Shared Governance:** Is there a collaborative shared governance body in place that is empowered to regularly access key performance indicators, monitor performance, address any service delivery challenges, make relevant changes to implementation plans, update contract provisions, and/or modify regulations?
- Is there a process in place to address the impact of future changes to federal/state/local policy that could impact service provider's ability to meet the outcome goals or metrics?
  - Is there a process in place to address the potential impact of future changes in the baseline incidence of an outcome across a target population that could make it more difficult for a provider to meet a contracted-for outcome metric?<sup>3</sup>
10. **Continuous Improvement:** Do the structure of the project, the procurement process, and the contract provisions support continuous program improvement by the human services provider and the government?
- Does the budget include the costs of continuous quality and program improvement, such as adapting and improving services over time to meet changing participant and human services provider needs?
  - If the budgeted funds do not include the costs of continuous program improvement, are there other public funds that can be blended or braided to support this function?
  - If the publicly budgeted funds do not include the costs of continuous quality and program improvement, what other resources are available (including for supporting collaboration, enhanced analytics, or data sharing with similar programs)?
11. **Evidence-Building and Evaluation:** Does the project support performance monitoring, program evaluation, and other ways to build evidence about the effectiveness of the program?
- Is there a plan in place to build and strengthen the evidence base about what works for which target population(s) and under what conditions?
  - How is the evaluation paid for? Does government cover all or most of the cost of the evaluation?
  - If the government cannot provide adequate funding for an evaluation, what other resources can it make available for a program evaluation (including data, expertise, staff support, connections to outside partners, and access to third party sources of funding or support)?

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<sup>3</sup>For example, a change in the baseline rate of teen births could significantly impact a provider's likelihood of hitting a teen birth rate outcome metric in a project that ties payment to outcomes.

## A NOTE ON FUNDING SOURCES AND RESTRICTIONS

As noted above, governments should consider diverse sources of funding for their human services contracts. For more details on ways to diversify funding sources for governments' human services contracts, see Results for America's [What Works Toolkit: A State and Local Government Policymaker's Guide to Improving Human Services Contracting and Outcomes](#). This What Works Toolkit contains specific recommendations and examples for how governments can identify and blend diverse government funding sources (see Recommendation #2: Break Down Government Funding Silos). For the purposes of this RFI Guide, there are several types of more detailed questions that governments may want to consider, especially when using federal or state funds which may have restricted uses, such as:

- Does the funding source create any limitations on the length of the contract?
- Could uncertainty about future public funding allocations have a negative impact on the human services provider and the people it serves? If so, what approaches could help? For example, annual funding commitments may present budget uncertainties for human services providers delivering a program that is 18 months long. This may lead to delays in enrollment that undermine shared service goals.
- Are there restrictions on the use of multiple public funding streams? If so, could changes be recommended to allow braiding or blending of funding? For example, if the procurement is paying for a service that could also be considered a Medicaid-reimbursable service if provided to a Medicaid-eligible recipient, what steps can be taken to provide access to those additional funds for the targeted service? Or are there eligibility restrictions, such as immigration status requirements, that interfere with procurement goals more broadly?

For more information about the blending and braiding of public funds from multiple sources, please see the Urban Institute's [publication](#) on braiding federal funds to scale evidence-based solutions for families battling opioid use.



## Steps to Effectively Integrate an RFI into the Procurement Process

In order to advance a more dynamic, solutions-oriented government procurement process, government and human services providers should follow a more thorough, consistent, outcomes-focused, and collaborative procurement process.<sup>4</sup> A Request for Information (RFI) forms the basis for this process by catalyzing a guided discussion between government, human services providers, and the community at the outset.

It is important to note that this RFI process need not be formal or time consuming; in many cases steps one through four below could be accomplished within a matter of weeks. In fact, answers to these Collaborative Procurement Questions may be gathered through stakeholder meetings, rather than written communications, especially in cases where the targeted communities' preferred mode of communication is not English.

While the Collaborative Procurement Questions are of particular utility for an RFI, they can be used throughout government contracting processes to increase collaboration – with the government soliciting, and human services providers supplying, the information needed to achieve the desired outcomes for the designated target populations.<sup>5</sup> Specifically, the Collaborative Procurement Questions can be used in the following phases of human services procurement:

1. **Contract Scoping:** Government procurement processes should begin with governments developing and reviewing a list of important upcoming contracts that can be strengthened through collaborative, outcomes-focused procurement. For the identified procurement opportunities, the government should determine their desired outcomes, budget, funding sources, and timelines.
2. **Pre-RFI Conference:** Using the Collaborative Procurement Framework as a guide, governments, human services providers, and community stakeholders should schedule a pre-RFI meeting(s) to discuss the desired outcomes, budget, funding sources, and timelines of forthcoming government contracts for human services.<sup>6</sup>
3. **RFI Development:** Using information gathered from the initial pre-RFI discussions with human services providers and the Collaborative Procurement Questions, governments should develop and release RFIs that describe the desired outcomes, budget, funding sources, and timelines of its upcoming human service procurement. (For more details on the content of an RFI see both the RFI Case Studies and Leading Examples section on page 14 and the Model RFI Template in Appendix B.)

<sup>4</sup>For more details on ways to improve collaboration and outcomes throughout the human services procurement process, please refer to Results for America's [What Works Toolkit: A State and Local Government Policymaker's Guide to Improving Human Services Contracting and Outcomes](#).

<sup>5</sup>For more details about the specific steps that governments should follow for the entire procurement process, please see the Collaborative Procurement Checklist in Appendix A.

<sup>6</sup>To identify potential participants in RFI discussions, governments should use their existing vendors list, community groups recommended by their constituent affairs office, any existing network of community providers, notices in local media, postings on social media, direct outreach to influential community leaders, and other proven means of engaging relevant stakeholders.

4. **RFI Feedback:** Human services providers should use the Collaborative Procurement Questions as a guide to provide written or verbal feedback to the procuring government entity.
5. **RFP Development:** Governments should then use the Collaborative Procurement Questions and feedback received from human services providers and community stakeholders to develop a Request for Proposals (RFP) that will achieve the desired outcomes by enhancing collaboration, increasing competition, and prioritizing evidence-based programs.
6. **RFP Pre-Proposal Conference:** Governments should host a pre-RFP proposal meeting(s) with human services providers to discuss the RFP. During the pre-RFP proposal meeting(s), governments should share information about, and providers should ask about, the topics listed in the Collaborative Procurement Questions.
7. **Grant Applications:** Human services providers should use the Collaborative Procurement Questions to inform the content of the proposal they submit to the government in response to the RFP.
8. **Contract Negotiation:** Upon selecting a human services provider(s), government and the chosen provider(s) should use the Collaborative Procurement Questions to agree upon a contract that reflects their shared goals, priorities, and needs.
9. **Contract Management and Evaluation:** After finalizing a contract, governments should ensure that the collaborative approach extends beyond the procurement process by requiring regular performance monitoring meetings. These active contract management sessions should be focused on continuous program improvement and bring together governments and human services providers to monitor implementation, identify progress, provide timely feedback, and make necessary adjustments. As part of these efforts, governments and human services providers should work together to evaluate the effectiveness of the intervention, which improves the evidence base for future procurements.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup>For more details on the best practices for contract management see Recommendation #5 in Results for America's [What Works Toolkit: A State and Local Government Policymaker's Guide to Improving Human Services Contracting and Outcomes](#), which discusses the important role of monitoring outputs as part of an overall feedback loop between governments and human services providers.

## RFI Case Studies and Leading Examples

An increasing number of innovative governments have already improved outcomes by implementing the concepts outlined in the Collaborative Procurement Questions and Steps to Effectively Integrate an RFI into the Procurement Process sections of this guide. The sample Requests for Information (RFIs) and case studies below provide leading examples that can be employed by other governments to solicit feedback from human services providers and community stakeholders as a way to increase collaboration, enhance competition, and prioritize evidence-based programs.

Together these sample RFIs and case studies provide strong examples of how local and state governments have employed a more collaborative procurement process to achieve improved outcomes for their residents. It is worth noting that while a number of the examples below are related to Pay for Success projects, they can nonetheless be used for a much wider range of procurements. In fact, one of the key takeaways from local and state Pay for Success initiatives has been that increased collaboration between governments and human services providers leads to better outcomes.

### COLORADO:

Through its Office of State Planning and Budgeting, the State of Colorado released a [Call for Innovation](#) in January 2017 for proposals highlighting innovative approaches to measurably improving outcomes for Colorado youth involved or at high risk of involvement in the child welfare and juvenile justice systems. Overall, 61 proposals were submitted in response to this Call for Innovation resulting in three state-funded Pay for Success projects to serve Colorado youth and their families.

### NEW YORK CITY:

New York City has taken a comprehensive approach to increasing collaboration with human services providers and community stakeholders. This effort included the creation of a [Nonprofit Resiliency Committee](#) composed of city government officials, human services providers, and community groups. This Committee developed a [Guide to Collaborative Communication](#) which provides practical examples of how to use RFIs to increase the overall level of collaboration between government and human services providers.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup>See page 14 of the Guide to Collaborative Communication for details on using an RFI.

## RHODE ISLAND:

The [Strategies to Identify and Prevent At-Risk Families RFI](#) developed by the Rhode Island Department of Children, Youth, and Families contains in-depth questions on how to better structure, measure, and fund programs for children and families. In a related effort, this same Department [moved to outcomes-focused contracts](#) to expand family-based services by asking providers to propose the services, supports, and resources that would best enable children and families to achieve the outcomes prioritized by the Department. This approach, coupled with an institutionalized system of performance feedback loops, allowed the Department to make a 50% expansion in foster care resources for children with the highest need.

## SOUTH CAROLINA:

Through its [Adapting Pay-for-Success Methods to Managed Care Incentives to Improve Health and Social Outcomes for Medicaid Beneficiaries RFI](#), the South Carolina Department of Health and Human Services requested input on the specific outcomes, intervention strategies, payment structure, and potential barriers to improving the health of its residents. This RFI gathered information on innovative approaches to rewarding demonstrated improvement in health and social outcomes for beneficiaries.

## WASHINGTON:

The Washington State Health Care Authority's [Community Engagement in Supportive Housing Interventions RFI](#) provides an example of a clear project overview accompanied by very specific questions to elicit feedback about the best program models and potential partnerships for supportive housing. In its [Best Starts for Kids](#) program, King County (WA) used an equity lens to design its [contracting process](#) and focused on building trust between human services providers and King County government agencies. This focus led to major shifts in the King County contracting process including greater engagement of community members and local organizations to jointly develop shared goals and values for government contracts.

## HARVARD KENNEDY SCHOOL GOVERNMENT PERFORMANCE LAB:

The Government Performance Lab at the Harvard Kennedy School has [a collection of exemplary RFIs](#) and other government procurement documents. In addition, through Bloomberg Philanthropies' What Works Cities initiative, the Government Performance Lab has also helped a variety of jurisdictions use an RFI to improve outcomes, including [Tempe \(AZ\)](#) and [Boston](#). In Boston, the city used a web form as an RFI to collect information from vendors; this led to a problem-based RFP that outlined outcome goals rather than specific solutions, allowing vendors to use their expertise to identify the best solutions. As part of What Works Cities, the Government Performance Lab has also developed [strategies](#) for governments to increase collaboration.

## Sector Perspectives

Governments and human services providers bring unique perspectives to the work of solving community challenges. While governments often control budget and policy decisions, human services providers have significant expertise in how best to meet the needs of residents. In order to successfully increase collaboration and achieve more meaningful outcomes for those residents, it is important to understand the unique perspectives each of these stakeholders bring to their primary point of intersection: the human services contracting process.

### Human Services Providers Perspective

For human services providers, developing, implementing, and continuously improving an evidence-based intervention that reliably produces meaningful and cost-effective outcomes requires significant and ongoing investment. The process to implement, evaluate, learn, and continually refine an intervention model is very resource intensive. A lack of sustainable funding for ongoing service delivery, even for the most proven intervention models, means that few providers have the resources needed for ongoing program improvement, evaluation, and evidence generation activities. As a result, few human services providers are engaged in continuous evidence building, few of their interventions have strong evidence demonstrating meaningful and sustained results, and government contracts continue to focus primarily on pricing and buying short-term inputs and outputs rather than outcomes of critical importance to communities and practitioners.

Furthermore, government practices, regulations, and laws far too often restrict human services providers' access to critical data sources needed to produce evidence of impact across social service interventions. Government practices, regulations, and laws also present other obstacles to human services providers' data analysis and evaluation efforts, including duplicative and conflicting data collection requirements and underfunded or unfunded data collection, analysis, and reporting requirements. Governments can play a critical role in providing the financial resources and access to administrative data needed by human services providers to develop their ability to regularly assess and report their evidence of impact. By strengthening human services providers access to outcomes data and providing sustainable funding for evidence-based programs, the government can serve as a crucial partner in scaling evidence-based interventions.

#### HUMAN SERVICES PROVIDERS COMMITMENT TO EVIDENCE

For practitioners, evidence of impact is inextricably tied to improving program implementation and performance monitoring. In June 2018, based on surveys and interviews with hundreds of nonprofit organizations between 2016 and 2018, Project Evident released [\*Roadmaps for Continuous Improvement and Evidence Building in the Social Sector\*](#), which concluded that nonprofit leaders, deeply committed to understanding the impact of their work on program participants, are desperate to get better at collecting data and using it to measure outcomes, impacts, and cost-effectiveness. Contrary to conventional wisdom, human services providers want to build evidence not to meet grant requirements or check boxes for funders, but to provide better services and show that those services make a difference.



## Public Sector Perspective

Local, state, and federal governments increasingly depend on human services providers to meet the needs of their residents. According to the 2013 National Survey of Nonprofit Government Contracting and Grants, "governments paid close to \$81 billion to human services providers for services through contracts and grants in 2012."<sup>9</sup> Despite the size of this spending, many governments do not have strong partnerships with their contracted human services providers which impedes their ability to get the best outcomes for their residents.

Innovative government leaders who want to establish effective partnerships with human services providers to increase impact face several barriers to changing the status quo. First, procurement and privacy laws are often interpreted in ways that do not incentivize collaboration with human services providers or the sharing of administrative data with them. Second, administrative data are collected with diverse and inconsistent goals, definitions, and reporting units and are not always useful for measuring the impact of interventions. Furthermore, many government agencies have a culture of restricting access to critical data sources, rather than fostering a sharing and learning organizational mindset.

As a result, government contracts are typically focused on measuring inputs and outputs rather than longer-term outcomes, which makes it difficult to structure flexible contracts that allow resources to be redirected to meet changing program needs without time consuming contract amendments. Along with this focus on output targets, an overemphasis on compliance and contracting minutiae means that contracts are too often renewed year after year regardless of impact. As a result, there is a wide gulf between the status quo and the ideal state of collaborative, outcomes-focused, and community-first contracting.

## Aligning Sector Perspectives to Build a Better Government Procurement Process

This Request for Information (RFI) Guide is one tool that can help governments and human services providers move away from the output-focused status quo to create partnerships that focus on delivering meaningful outcomes for communities in need. As one example, King County (WA), through their [Best Starts for Kids](#) initiative, implemented [a more accessible, collaborative, and outcomes-focused contracting system](#) that resulted in a significant increase in new organizations applying for publicly available funds. Collaborative planning and partnership development position both government and human services providers to better accomplish their respective goals: successful outcomes-based human services contracts that make a measurable difference for communities.

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<sup>9</sup>The Urban Institute, [Nonprofit-Government Contracts and Grants: Findings from the 2013 National Survey](#)

## Conclusion

Governments and human services providers can improve outcomes for residents through strong collaboration. This Request for Information (RFI) Guide uses a series of Collaborative Procurement Questions to help governments and human services providers jointly improve results at their primary point of intersection: the human services contracting process. By identifying the key questions that governments and human services providers should answer during every human services procurement, this guide is designed to increase collaboration and meet shared outcome goals. In sum, when governments and human services providers work together to implement accessible, collaborative, and outcomes-focused contracting, they can enhance positive results and better serve the young people, families, and communities who depend on them to provide the services they need to reach their fullest potential.

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## Appendix A: Collaborative Procurement Checklist

The detailed checklist below provides an easy step-by-step resource for governments to create a collaborative and outcomes-focused procurement process. This list incorporates information from the Request for Information (RFI) Guide, recommendations from the [What Works Toolkit: A State and Local Government Policymaker's Guide to Improving Human Services Contracting and Outcomes](#), and other common sense steps necessary to bring a collaborative lens to procurement. While this list is designed as a checklist for governments, it can also offer human services providers insight into the process that government will follow and allows providers to identify where and how they can participate (as identified by \*\* in the list below).

### COLLABORATIVE PROCUREMENT CHECKLIST FOR GOVERNMENTS

- Review the list of the most important contracting opportunities coming up in the next year.
- Use the Collaborative Procurement Questions to identify goals for upcoming procurements, including gathering any data you have to date on current services and community need. \*\* (Human services providers may be able to supply information and data on current services.)
- Identify key internal and external partners.
- Hold a pre-RFI conversation with human services providers and other community stakeholders to identify high level outcome goals and map existing community resources.\*\*
- Create a draft RFI that incorporates information gathered through the use of the Collaborative Procurement Questions as well as feedback from human services providers and community stakeholders.
- Review a draft RFI with your organization's internal stakeholders:
  - Share the goals of the discussion and ask them for any necessary parameters or administration procedures relevant to the discussion.
  - Share examples of RFIs from other governments.
- Release an RFI.

*Collaborative Procurement Checklist continued on next page →*

- Invite participants to provide written or verbal feedback on the RFI.\*\*  
For verbal feedback received at a meeting, consider the following items for a meeting agenda:
  - Introduce yourself and your reason for inviting them to participate.
  - Share philosophy of collaboration.
  - Outline length and expectations of the meeting.
  - Establish that participating in this conversation does not preclude you from participating in the procurement.
  - Ensure that participants know that there are no wrong answers and that you are looking for honest and open feedback.
  - Use the Collaborative Procurement Questions to gather feedback on the RFI.
- Incorporate feedback and insights from human services providers into an RFP.
- Issue an RFP.
- Hold pre-proposal meetings including community information sessions and/or webinars to answer questions about the RFP; publicly post answers to all questions received.
- Receive RFP proposals from human services providers.\*\*
- Review proposals and select human services provider(s) (with input from a community review panel representing the target populations).
- Negotiate a service contract with human services provider(s).\*\*
- Award contract(s) to selected human services provider(s).\*\*
- Meet frequently with the selected human services provider(s) to identify progress, make necessary course corrections, review outcomes, and discuss evaluation results. Where applicable, create opportunities for shared learning between human services providers working towards similar outcome goals.\*\*

## Appendix B: Model RFI Template

For assistance in creating a Request for Information (RFI) for a human services procurement, please refer to the model template below to help begin the process.

### Model RFI Template

*This template is intended for use in conjunction with the RFI Guide as a tool to improve human services outcomes by increasing collaboration between governments and human services providers at their primary point of intersection: the human services contracting process. This template serves as a user-friendly extension of the RFI Guide to provide governments with a ready-made format for applying the recommendations from the RFI Guide. Specifically, this template is part of a larger procurement process (detailed in the Steps to Effectively Integrate an RFI into the Procurement Process section of the RFI Guide) and designed to be completed using the recommended RFI questions from the Collaborative Procurement Questions section of the RFI Guide.*

[COVER PAGE]

#### **Government Logo**

#### **RFI Title**

#### **Submission Instructions**

Limit to short table or paragraph, more detailed instructions and limitations can be added at the end.

- Contact Information
- Deadline
- Format
- Who to Contact with Questions

#### **Brief Clarification of Purpose**

Include information on the purpose of the RFI, including that "no funding will be awarded based on responses to RFI."

#### **Brief Introduction** (1 to 3 sentences)

- Who is soliciting information?
- From whom is information being solicited?
- Why is information being solicited and how will it be used?

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## Model RFI Template

[BODY OF RFI]

### **Purpose and Background: Clarify Goals for RFI**

Brief reiteration of who is soliciting information and target stakeholders; summarize why information is being solicited and how it will be used.

### **About Organization**

Brief summary of mission and background information on agency issuing RFI. Emphasize organizational goals and priorities that are relevant to RFI.

### **About Program**

Description and statement of purpose of any program(s) (e.g. Pay-for-Success model, preventive health initiative, etc.) within the agency that are specifically covered by the RFI. Include information about specific program authorities to be utilized and the anticipated funding levels available.

### **Statement of Opportunity**

Describe the outcome goals, changes, and opportunities the government agency is hoping to address as a result of this RFI and overall procurement process. Describe specific challenge(s) the agency seeks to solve. This should provide more details on the goals briefly summarized in the first section above.

### **Information Solicited**

Use the information gathered through the pre-discussion with human services providers and community stakeholders (based on the Collaborative Procurement Questions outlined in the RFI Guide and below) to clearly articulate the feedback and information being solicited. In some cases, questions are described as guidelines and respondents are encouraged to share any additional information they deem relevant. Many RFIs include approximately 5 to 12 questions addressing topics. Use the Collaborative Procurement Questions listed below to select the specific areas where feedback is being solicited.

### **Collaborative Procurement Questions:**

1. **Overall Goals:** How will this human services procurement help achieve the desired outcome goals?
  - a. What are the outcome goals for this procurement?
  - b. How was community input used to define these outcome goals?
  - c. What is the identified target population?

## Model RFI Template

- d. What interventions address the target population's challenges? Are these proven, promising, or not-yet-evaluated programs? Do these interventions address the foundational components that contribute to this challenge in the life, home, and community of the target population? What are the likely impacts and quantifiable measures if the intervention works as intended and the outcome goals are achieved?
    - e. What is the realistic timeframe for achieving these outcome goals?
    - f. How are the outcome goals aligned with similarly situated programs or contracts?
    - g. What support can the government provide to improve the human services providers' likelihood of success (including referral streams, physical space, or other in-kind support)?
2. **Budget:** Is the overall budget sufficient to achieve the desired outcome goals?
  - a. Does the budget cover the full cost to deliver the services? If not, what program requirements or activities will not be met due to fiscal constraints? If not, can the government suggest alternative revenue streams to address any funding gap?
  - b. Are there government guidelines or restrictions on use of funds that may interfere with service delivery?
3. **Government Procurement Process Improvement and Simplification:** Is the proposed procurement process inclusive and accessible to allow the best positioned vendor across objective selection criteria to be chosen?
  - a. Does the procurement process pose any barriers to achieving the outcome goals?
  - b. Are there redundant paperwork requirements, duplicative data collection requirements, or other barriers that can be removed in order to simplify the contracting process?
  - c. Can the government use a standardized contract with uniform provisions and timelines?
  - d. How much time is sufficient between the release of the RFI, the release of the RFP, and the response deadlines? How much time is needed to finalize implementation plans between the contract award and start date?
4. **Competition:** Are the procurement and contracting processes and timeframes set up to increase the quality, number, and diversity of potential human services providers?
  - a. Does the procurement process engage a wide range of potential providers

## Model RFI Template

across various dimensions (size, geographic footprint, community connections, program models, experience)? Will the procurement-related outreach engage potential providers from underrepresented populations and those not currently within the government's portfolio?

- b. Does the procurement process consider providers' demonstrated performance across key service domains, past experience in the area(s) of service, and evidence of effectiveness rather than, or in addition to, price per service?
  - c. Does the procurement process preference evidence-based interventions (such as extra points or a funding set-aside for proposed solutions with moderate or strong evidence of effectiveness)?
5. **Outcomes- and Performance-Based Contracts:** Does the contract and payment structure incentivize outcomes (rather than strictly outputs) and strengthen evidence-building and learning?
- a. Is outcomes-based funding a realistic option for the programmatic goals and, if so, how could it strengthen the evidence for the particular intervention type and achieve better results for the target population?
  - b. For any outcomes-based contract, are there clearly delineated outcomes, strong governance structures, training and technical assistance resources, and other supports in place to sustain the outcomes-based delivery and reporting over the contracting period?
  - c. Are performance-based incentives appropriate for this type of contract (instead of, or in addition to, cost-based contracting)? What are the potential unintended consequences and incentives of paying for performance?
  - d. Will a portion of funding be exempt from performance-based payments to ensure that providers without immediate access to working capital can participate?
  - e. What other kinds of government incentives and support would be most meaningful to encourage provider participation and interest in outcome and performance funding?
6. **Contract Structure and Flexibility:** Is the contract and payment structure flexible enough to build evidence while also allowing for improvement in the service delivery model?
- a. Are the contracting provisions flexible enough to allow providers to build and strengthen evidence about what works, refine their service delivery model, or make other modifications to better achieve the desired outcomes?
  - b. Can the government offer a multi-year contract (with relevant intermediate



## Model RFI Template

milestones) to allow for outcomes measurement and increased evidence building? If not, would a pilot period be a viable way to adjust the service delivery model, incorporate participant feedback, and inform a longer-term contract?

- c. Are there broader policy reforms, waivers, or other changes to procedures, regulations, or laws which the government might consider modifying to increase the effectiveness of the service delivery model?
  - d. Are the contracting provisions flexible enough to mitigate any impact on the services under contract created by future changes in policy or practice?
  - e. Does the contracting structure allow the provider to expand programs that have generated evidence of success?
7. **Metrics:** What metrics are used to capture short-term process outputs and longer-term outcomes to track the success of the program?
- a. Do the government and human services providers have a shared agreement about the relevant metrics, how they will be collected, how they will be assessed, when they will be reviewed, and how they will be acted upon?
8. **Data:** What types of data can be shared between government and human services providers to track program participants, identify implementation challenges, and evaluate the results over the course of the service contract?
- a. Will real time administrative data be shared with human services providers?
  - b. What data infrastructure or policies are necessary to allow for the real time sharing of administrative and other data?
  - c. What data will human services providers share with the government? Do human services providers have the systems and processes to collect this data?
  - d. Is the data collection (and cleaning) process conducive to tracking the key elements necessary to measure the implementation and results of the program?
9. **Shared Governance:** Is there a collaborative shared governance body in place that is empowered to regularly access key performance indicators, monitor performance, address any service delivery challenges, make relevant changes to implementation plans, update contract provisions, and/or modify regulations?
- a. Is there a process in place to address the impact of future changes to federal/state/local policy that could impact service provider's ability to meet the outcome goals or metrics?
  - b. Is there a process in place to address the potential impact of future changes

## Model RFI Template

in the baseline incidence of an outcome across a target population that could make it more difficult for a provider to meet a contracted-for outcome metric?

10. **Continuous Improvement:** Do the structure of the project, the procurement process, and the contract provisions support continuous program improvement by the human services provider and the government?
  - a. Does the budget include the costs of continuous quality and program improvement, such as adapting and improving services over time to meet changing participant and human services provider needs?
  - b. If the budgeted funds do not include the costs of continuous program improvement, are there other public funds that can be blended or braided to support this function?
  - c. If the publicly budgeted funds do not include the costs of continuous quality and program improvement, what other resources are available (including for supporting collaboration, enhanced analytics, or data sharing with similar programs)?
  
11. **Evidence-Building and Evaluation:** Does the project support performance monitoring, program evaluation, and other ways to build evidence about the effectiveness of the program?
  - a. Is there a plan in place to build and strengthen the evidence base about what works for which target population(s) and under what conditions?
  - b. How is the evaluation paid for? Does government cover all or most of the cost of the evaluation?
  - c. If the government cannot provide adequate funding for an evaluation, what other resources can it make available for a program evaluation (including data, expertise, staff support, connections to outside partners, and access to third party sources of funding or support)?

### Detailed Submission Instructions & Disclaimer

Include instructions on how to submit the RFI response. Insert any legal disclaimers about the non-binding nature of this request for information and that entities responding to this notice will not receive preference (or be excluded) in the RFP process. If possible, allow for response to be submitted electronically (via email or uploaded to a portal) rather than requiring the delivery of paper copies which may be burdensome for community stakeholders. As noted above, the RFI may take the form of verbal comments at a meeting rather than formal written responses.