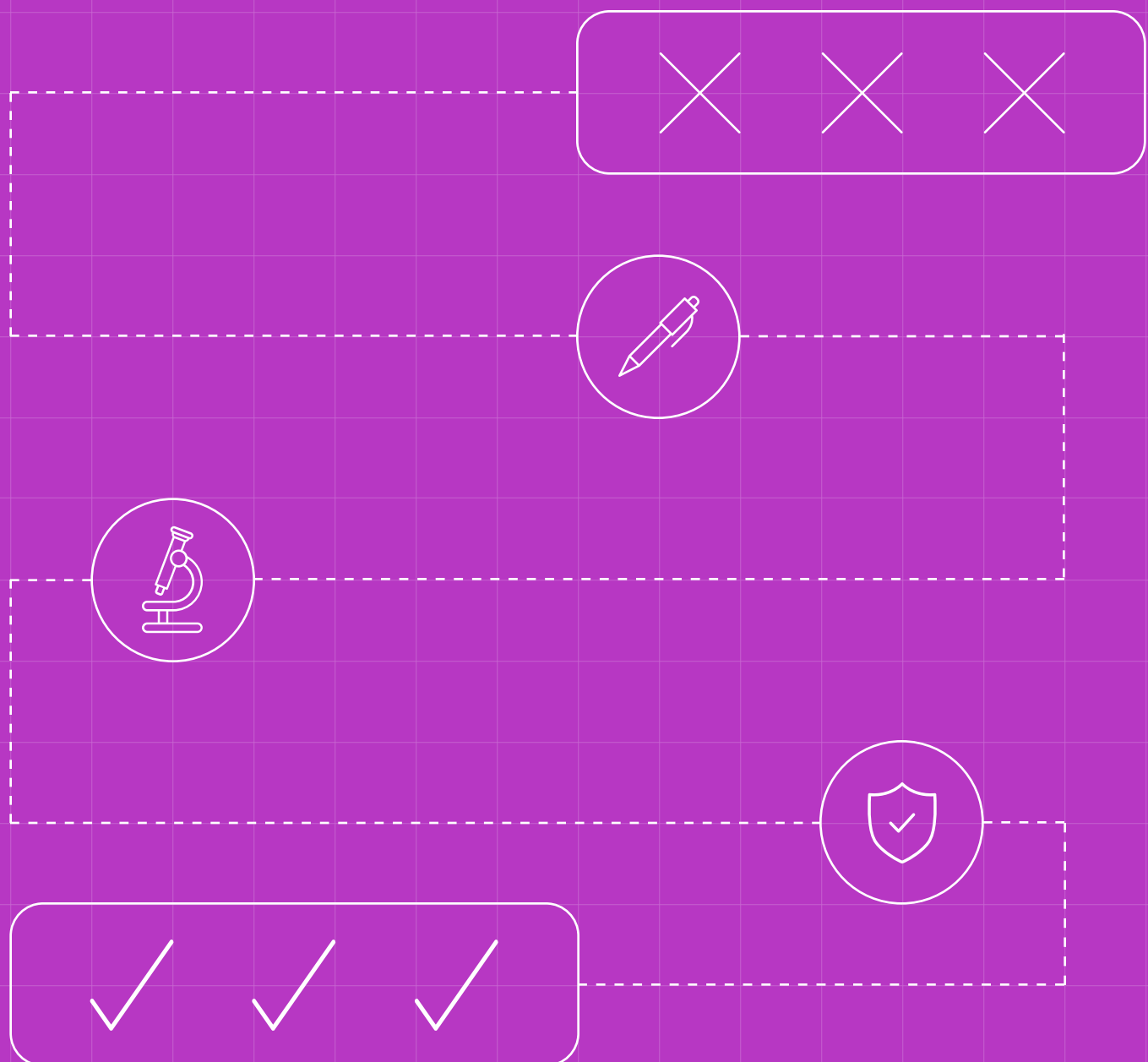**Chapter 4**

Establishing an Evaluation Policy

Why This Matters

Residents, elected officials and other stakeholders in your jurisdiction increasingly expect program and budget decisions to be based on solid evidence. Building this evidence to measure effectiveness and support decisions requires rigorous evaluations — which are more likely to become business as usual if an agency or entire institution has a clear evaluation policy.

Without such a policy, it is hard to establish new institutional practices to regularly invest time and resources into evidence-building evaluations. Further, a commitment to evidence and evaluations needs to be sustained beyond the tenure of one supportive, influential leader. An established policy is like a signpost signaling that evaluations someone needs to follow.

An evaluation policy articulates an agency's principles, goals and practices for building and using evidence. It can serve several purposes:

- Promote and protect the integrity of evaluation activities by highlighting principles such as independence, objectivity, transparency and equity as a process as well as an outcome.

- Provide guidance on the agency's expected practices for building and using evidence.

- Clarify how equitable processes and outcomes are being planned for and executed through an evaluation.

- Build shared understanding and support for building and using evidence across an agency's divisions and with external stakeholders.

- Orient new staff and leaders to the agency's evaluation goals, principles and practices.

- Elevate or bolster the status of evaluation and the use of evidence both internally and externally.

- Help to create a learning agenda and culture for the department, agency or state/local/tribal government.

Developing a Policy

As a starting point for creating an evaluation policy, consider consulting across agency divisions and with external stakeholders. Consultation helps to both improve the policy's content and build institutional support and buy-in for it.

Defining Evaluation

Some evaluation policies define evaluation. Here are two example definitions, one federal and one local:

"[A]n assessment using systematic data collection and analysis of one or more programs, policies, and organizations intended to assess their effectiveness and efficiency."

—Office of Management and Budget, Executive Office of the President

"A systemic method for collecting, analyzing, and using data to examine the impact, effectiveness, and efficiency of a program. Evaluations require (1) asking a specific question, (2) making a plan to answer the question, (3) collecting data and (4) using that data to answer the question."

—City of Tempe, Arizona

(For information on how to define evidence, see Chapter 1.)

Components

Many evaluation policies integrate five major principles: rigor, relevance, independence, transparency and ethics. (See "Evaluation Policy Guidance From Washington D.C." on p.44 to learn about the federal government's guidance in these five areas.) Results for America recommends that policies also encompass two additional values: equity and cultural validity, humility and competency.

Here is an overview of all seven principles:

Rigor Evaluations must produce findings that agencies and their stakeholders can confidently rely upon. Committing to rigor ensures that your investments in evaluations produce sound evidence you need for future decision making.

Relevance The results of an evaluation must be useful for your jurisdiction or agency. Prioritize evaluations that might drive investment decisions, impact current processes or address questions about services that your community members want answered.

Independence Evaluations must be objective in order for stakeholders, experts and the public to accept their findings.

Transparency To enable accountability and ensure that an evaluation is not tailored to generate specific findings, evaluations must be transparent across the planning, implementation and reporting phases.

Ethics Evaluations should be planned and implemented to safeguard the dignity, rights, safety and privacy of participants and other stakeholders and affected entities.

Equity Evaluation is a critical tool to advance equity as a process and an outcome. If designed with equity in mind, evaluations can show the effectiveness of policies or practices for different population groups. Equity is also a principle that shapes evaluation processes and practices

such as community engagement. (See Chapter 3 for more on gathering community input.)

Cultural validity, humility and competency Evaluations should accurately and respectfully reflect the life experiences and perspectives of program participants. They should recognize the value of knowledge gained from lived experiences. And they should acknowledge the complexity of cultural identity, recognize the dynamics of power, eliminate bias in language and employ culturally appropriate methods.[15]

CONSIDER

To support equity while planning evaluations, consider posing the following questions to staff:

- Does the evaluation plan involve consulting with key populations and stakeholders to inform research questions, methods and analysis?

- Is the evaluation plan designed in a way that is mindful of power dynamics present in the communities under study?

- Is there any biased language present in the evaluation plan?

For more questions, see this resource from King County, Washington.

Evaluation Policy Guidance From Washington D.C.

In recent years many governments have established evaluation policies. The trend was accelerated by the federal Foundations of Evidence-Based Policy Making Act of 2018 (aka, Evidence Act), which made such policies mandatory for cabinet-level federal agencies. Some state and local agencies (e.g., Minnesota) have established evaluation policies as well.

The Evidence Act required the federal Office of Management and Budget (OMB) to establish program evaluation standards to guide federal agencies in developing and implementing evaluation activities and policies. The OMB's five standards[16] — reproduced verbatim here — can serve as a starting point for state and local agencies that are considering creating evaluation policies.

Relevance and Utility Federal evaluations must address questions of importance and serve the information needs of stakeholders in order to be useful resources. Evaluations should present findings that are actionable and available in time for use. Information should be presented in ways that are understandable and that can inform agency activities and actions such as budgeting, program improvement, accountability, management, regulatory action and policy development.

Rigor Federal evaluations must produce findings that federal agencies and their stakeholders can confidently rely upon, while providing clear explanations of limitations. The quality of an evaluation depends on the underlying design and methods, implementation and how findings are interpreted and reported. Credible evaluations must be managed by qualified evaluators with relevant education, skills and experience for the methods undertaken. An evaluation must have the most appropriate design and methods to answer key questions, while balancing its goals, scale, timeline, feasibility and available resources.

Independence and Objectivity Federal evaluations must be viewed as objective in order for stakeholders, experts and the public to accept their findings. This depends on the independence and objectivity of the evaluators. Federal agencies should enable evaluators to, and evaluators should, operate with an appropriate level of independence from programmatic, regulatory,

policymaking and stakeholder activities. While stakeholders have an important role in identifying evaluation priorities, the implementation of evaluation activities, including how evaluators are selected and operate, should be appropriately insulated from political and other undue influences that may affect their objectivity, impartiality and professional judgment. Evaluators should strive for objectivity in the planning and conduct of evaluations and in the interpretation and dissemination of findings, avoiding conflicts of interest, bias and other partiality.

Transparency Federal evaluation must be transparent in the planning, implementation and reporting phases to enable accountability and help ensure that aspects of an evaluation are not tailored to generate specific findings. Decisions about the evaluation's purpose and objectives (including internal versus public use), the range of stakeholders who will have access to details of the work and findings, the design and methods, and the timeline and strategy for releasing findings should be clearly documented before conducting the evaluation. These decisions should take into consideration any legal, ethical, national security or other constraints for disclosing information.

Once evaluations are complete, comprehensive reporting of the findings should be released in a timely manner and provide sufficient detail so that others can review, interpret or replicate/reproduce the work.

Ethics Federal evaluations must be conducted to the highest ethical standards to protect the public and maintain public trust in the government's efforts. Evaluations should be planned and implemented to safeguard the dignity, rights, safety and privacy of participants and other stakeholders and affected entities. Evaluators should abide by current professional standards pertaining to treatment of participants. Evaluations should be equitable, fair and just, and should take into account cultural and contextual factors that could influence the findings or their use.[17]

The OMB's guidance also describes evaluation practices to support these five standards.

Policies in Place: Real-World Examples

Federal

A catalog of federal evaluation policies is available at Evaluation.gov. Here is a sampling of examples showing the varied scope, level of detail and focus of evaluations.

U.S. Health and Human Services: The department's Administration for Children and Families (ACF) adopted a policy in 2021 that is designed around OMB's five standards. Its "Rigor" section states that ACF "will recruit and maintain an evaluation workforce with the knowledge, training and experience appropriate for planning and overseeing a rigorous evaluation portfolio."

U.S. Department of Treasury: Its one-page evaluation policy lists and briefly describes five principles based on the OMB standards detailed above. It also includes quality standards related to staff expertise, evaluation designs, data quality, presentation of findings and post-evaluation action plans.

U.S. Department of Labor: The agency's policy "represents a commitment to conducting rigorous, relevant evaluations and to using evidence from evaluations to inform policy and practice." The policy, which is modeled on OMB standards, includes a requirement that DOL grantees are willing to participate in evaluations.

U.S. Agency for International Development: The agency's evaluation policy, originally established in 2011, is a 20-page guide. It covers the purposes of evaluation, organizational roles and responsibilities, and evaluation practices and requirements. In addition to discussing principles similar to the OMB standards, the policy discusses reinforcing local ownership of evaluation and the use of findings, consistent with USAID's mission. It also discusses the use of evaluation findings in strategy development and decision-making.

States

Results for America's 2023 State Standard of Excellence spotlights 11 state governments that have an evaluation policy and a learning agenda to support the building and use of evidence. Two state examples are:

North Carolina: To support opportunities for evaluation, state agencies are developing "Priority Questions" as part of the 2023-2025 strategic plans.

Minnesota: The state's evaluation policy requires the public release of all completed evaluation reports regardless of findings. All completed evaluations are added to the Minnesota Inventory, which shows the evidence base for 730 state interventions.

→ For endnotes, see the full policy guide here.

Exercise 4: Develop Your Evaluation Policy

Building off the evaluation policy standards and components described in this chapter, begin developing your own evaluation policy. You can also read Results for America's recommended evaluation policy language in our additional resources section.

Purpose Statement: Why has your jurisdiction decided to develop an evaluation policy and how will it be used?

Principles: Describe how the evaluation policy will integrate these seven important values.

Relevance:

Rigor:

Transparency:

Independence:

Ethics:

Equity:

Cultural Validity, Humility and Competence:

Key Practices

Evaluation Plan: Which activities — community engagement, theory of change, etc. — are critical to your evaluation plan, and why?

Data Quality: What are your standards for data and disaggregation?

Evaluation Findings: What will you do to share the results with community members, internal teams and the broader field?

Post-Evaluation: How are you going to incorporate what you've learned into program design/performance management?