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# Testimony of John Bridgeland Before the U.S. House Committee on Ways and Means Subcommittee on Human Resources

At a hearing before the U.S. House Ways and Means Committee Subcommittee on Human Resources, John Bridgeland, Results for America senior advisor, former White House Domestic Policy Council Director under President George W. Bush and former member of the White House Council for Community Solutions under President Barack Obama called for greater use of data and evidence to help young people, their families and communities. The hearing was convened by Subcommittee Chairman Charles Boustany (R-LA) and titled "[Expanding Opportunity by Funding What Works: Using Evidence to Help Low-Income Individuals and Families Get Ahead.](#)" The hearing is the second in a series "focused on ways to help move America's families forward" according to the Committee.

## FULL TESTIMONY:

Chairman Boustany, Ranking Member Doggett and other distinguished Members of this Committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify on the important subject of using evidence to inform budget and policy decisions that can expand opportunity for low-income individuals and families.

I am a Senior Advisor of Results for America, a nonprofit organization committed to improving the lives of young people, their families, and communities through the increased use of data and evidence at all levels of government. I also am testifying from my perspective as a former Director of the White House Domestic Policy Council under President George W. Bush and former Member of the White House Council for Community Solutions under President Barack Obama.

At Results for America, our efforts are guided by three principles that we believe government at all levels should follow: 1) build evidence about the practices, policies, and programs that will achieve the most effective and efficient results; 2) invest limited taxpayer dollars in what works; and 3) direct funds away from those practices, policies and programs that consistently fail to achieve measurable outcomes. More than 100 local and national leaders have publicly supported these principles.<sup>1</sup> Our goal is to leave to others the debate about whether we should be spending more or less money on particular social programs and instead build a debate about how to get better results with the resources that we have, while learning from both successes and failures.

According to a 2013 GAO report, only 37 percent of program managers said that an evaluation of their programs had been completed in the last five years and another 40 percent did not know whether such an evaluation had been conducted. The former OMB Directors in our coalition estimate that only about one percent of federal non-defense discretionary spending is backed by evidence. A 2011 GAO report highlighted that while the federal government spent \$18 billion on 47 different job programs, "little is known about the effectiveness of most programs." I cite these statistics from the perspective of wanting to see that limited resources support solutions that improve outcomes for young people, their families, and communities.

When I co-chaired the White House Task Force for Disadvantaged Youth in 2002- 03, we discovered 339 federal programs for disadvantaged youth, administered by 12 departments and agencies, at a cost of \$224 billion annually. Although government was collecting and reporting significant data on various inputs and outputs – how much a program costs and how many people they served – we wanted to know more than the evidence could tell us about how programs were helping to boost opportunity and to change lives. We made decisions with the evidence we had, and where the evidence was stronger based on rigorous evaluations, the President proposed State of the Union initiatives that the Congress supported to help disadvantaged youth.

Efforts to improve the performance of government have a long and bipartisan history. The last century featured blue-ribbon commissions to strengthen government performance and get better results. The 1912 Taft Commission recommended an executive budget; the 1937 Bronlow Commission highlighted ways to improve efficiency through reorganization and better management practices; two Hoover Commissions in the 1940s and 1950s worked to reduce the number of government departments and increase their efficiency; the Grace Commission in the 1980s worked to reduce government waste and increase efficiencies; and there were other reform efforts along the way. The Congressional Research Service noted that the Government Performance and Results Act was considered a "watershed" – "for the first time, Congress established statutory requirements for most agencies to set goals, measure performance, and submit related plans and reports to Congress."

The pursuit of better evidence related to individual programs has a bipartisan history and has been advanced most recently by both President George W. Bush and President Obama. In 2002, the Office of Management and Budget created a Program Assessment Rating Tool ("PART") that established a system to measure everything from program design and implementation to evidence and results. The PART informed recommendations the President made in his budget submissions to the Congress and the daily operations of department and agency officials. President Obama has expanded efforts to evaluate programs in several agencies and developed innovative policies, such as the Social Innovation Fund and Investing in Innovation Fund (i3), to focus on

programs with evidence of impact and to build knowledge about what works in the field. Efforts across administrations have built upon one another. For example, President Bush signed legislation that required Head Start programs to be evaluated and President Obama ensured that those with lower performance outcomes must improve their results and re- compete for funding.

We make the following specific recommendations to build a stronger evidence base for what works, use evidence to invest in what works, and redirect funding away from what does not work:

**1. Set Aside 1 Percent of Program Funds For Evaluation at Each Federal Department and Agency.** Congress should authorize agencies to invest one percent of their total discretionary funds for program evaluation. Agencies could spend funding on the highest-priority evaluations, subject to Congressional oversight. The Administration's FY16 budget request seeks this authority for the U.S. Department of Labor. The information gathered by this one percent investment would inform how the other 99 percent of dollars in a department or agency are spent. If chief evaluation officers were appointed at each agency, they would help create a stronger culture of using evidence to inform decision-making, and help coordinate data, evaluation and performance management so that agencies and Congress could learn more about the effectiveness of programs over time.

**2. Create Comprehensive, Easy-to-Use "What Works" Clearinghouses at Each Department and Agency.** As evidence builds for programs that are effective – and those that are not – government can play an important role in sharing those results by putting evaluations online in a format that is true to the research and accessible to policymakers, their staffs, and the public. In addition to informing better decision-making, these clearinghouses can signal to organizations seeking federal support and to researchers the importance of using rigorous research and evaluation designs. I know from my own experience in working to highlight and address the nation's high school dropout challenge that the What Works Clearinghouse at the U.S. Department of Education and the increasingly sophisticated data collected and reported by the Department on high school graduation rates have helped create an environment of following the evidence and being accountable for results. High school graduation rates have reached an all-time high, and in many states

and school districts, the improvement is driven by increases in the very populations that have had the lowest graduation rates.

### **3. Encourage the Use of Rapid, Low-Cost Tools to Determine Impact.**

Government can also highlight and encourage the use of rapid, low-cost tools, including low-cost randomized controlled trials, to increase the effectiveness of social spending. Government already collects and reports high quality data to measure outcomes such as student achievement, employment and earnings, criminal arrests, receipt of government assistance, and more. Using such data already collected for other purposes to measure key outcomes of a particular program, rather than engaging in costly original data collection, is an approach gaining traction in the Executive Branch and in jurisdictions across the country as highlighted in the report, *Rigorous Program Evaluations on a Budget: How Low-Cost Randomized Controlled Trials Are Possible in Many Areas of Social Policy*.

**4. Use evidence to invest limited tax dollars in what works.** The previous recommendations focus on building the evidence base, but policymakers also need to make decisions based on evidence to improve the effectiveness of government. There are a variety of ways to do this. The tiered-evidence approach has gained momentum in recent years, where competitive grant programs reward grantees with greater levels of evidence with greater funds, while new, promising programs that need to be tested get fewer funds, and all programs participate in evaluations to increase learning and improve over time. The Investing in Innovation Fund (i3) and Social Innovation Funds, discussed earlier, are examples of this approach. Pay for Success is also a promising idea, where the government promises to pay only after a program delivers specified results, and government could certainly strengthen performance-based contracting.

**5. Direct funds away from what consistently fails to achieve outcomes.** I know it is never politically popular to discuss ending programs, but if we continue to fund what does not work, we fail to serve the American people. There are sensible ways to do this. One is to ask low-performing grantees to improve and re-compete for funding. Head Start does this now, and the policy was part of a bipartisan reauthorization of that program in 2007. When consistent and reliable evaluations show that program outcomes are weak, those programs

should be given a reasonable time to improve or have their funds shifted to other proven programs.

**6. Create an Environment of Continuous Learning.** Congress should create an environment of continuous learning, not simply an "on-off switch" when the evidence is unclear. When I served on the White House Council for Community Solutions in 2011–12, we discovered that there were 6.7 million young people disconnected from school and work and that in addition to the moral and societal imperative to help them, the cost of their disconnection to U.S. taxpayers was \$93 billion annually in lost revenues and increased spending on social services. When we examined the historic and current federal response to this highly vulnerable population, we saw the dangers of simply eliminating programs that had no evidence of effectiveness.

Youth Opportunity Grants were created to help disconnected youth in the 36 cities, rural areas and tribal lands where they were disproportionately found. Because there was no rigorous evidence of the program's effectiveness, the grants were completely eliminated. Years later, an independent, high-quality evaluation showed that Youth Opportunity Grants had reduced the number of out-of-school youth and, in key groups that had been struggling, boosted their employment rates and increased hourly wages. Our White House Council had lost a key tool to improve life outcomes for disconnected youth and save taxpayers money.

We also saw the opportunity costs of continuing programs like the Even Start Family Literacy Program, where evaluations showed that the program did not boost literacy rates for children or parents who received the intervention, yet Congress went on to spend more than \$1 billion on the program over the subsequent eight years. Too often, government is either flying blind or failing to use the insights from evaluation studies in deciding whether programs should be expanded, altered, or terminated.

Our *Moneyball for Government* book, co-authored by former White House OMB Directors Jim Nussle (President George W. Bush) and Peter Orszag (President Obama); U.S. Senators Kelly Ayotte (R-NH) and Mark Warner (D-VA); former White House economic advisors Glenn Hubbard (President George W. Bush) and Gene Sperling (President Clinton and President Obama); former

White House Domestic Policy Council Directors Melody Barnes (President Obama) and me (President George W. Bush); Results for America CEO and Co-Founder Michele Jolin and others, contains many recommendations to create an environment of evidence and learning.

Another valuable resource, *Show Me the Evidence*, co-authored by a former Staff Director of this Subcommittee, highlights the progress that is currently being made to use evidence to inform policymaking. We recognize there are many considerations that will drive the decisions of policymakers, but we believe government can do better to inform those decisions with a stronger evidence base.

Finally, our Results for America coalition is pleased to announce today our support for the Evidence-Based Policy Commission that we understand Chairman Paul Ryan (R-WI) and Senator Patty Murray (D-WA) are proposing. We also applaud the bipartisan Social Impact Partnership Act that was introduced by Congressmen Todd Young (R-IN) and John DeLaney (D-MD) to improve social and public health outcomes by encouraging states, towns, and investors to coordinate and expand proven public policies that create more opportunity for people in need.

Given the opportunity gaps in our society, the millions of vulnerable children and families in our country, and the progress that we are seeing in areas where clear goals are set, plans of action are developed, and evidence-based reforms are marshaled, the time could not be better to put evidence at the center of policymaking. Thank you.