

A group of people are gathered around a wooden table, engaged in a collaborative work session. In the foreground, a person's hand is pointing at a tablet device. Another person's hand is holding a pencil, ready to write on a document. The table is covered with various documents, including one with a blue pie chart. A laptop is partially visible in the bottom left corner. The background shows the arms and hands of other participants, suggesting a busy, collaborative environment. The overall lighting is soft and professional.

IMPROVING OUTCOMES THROUGH COLLABORATION



How an RFI Can Help Get Better Results

By **Jed Herrmann**

In 2015, the Colorado legislature allowed the use of Pay for Success contracts to measurably improve outcomes for Colorado youth involved or at high risk of involvement in the child welfare and juvenile justice systems. Under this law, the state was authorized to create a series of contracts that only paid human services providers when they reached agreed-upon outcome goals.¹ This approach, which uses interventions with strong evidence of effectiveness, allowed the state to try new approaches to improving services for at-risk youth in the state. The question was, however, **where to begin?**

Roger Low, who served as Pay for Success Project Manager in the Colorado Governor's Office of State Planning and Budgeting at the time, is currently Policy Director at America Forward.² America Forward represents a coalition of more than 100 social innovation organizations working across the country to measurably improve lives. Low noted, "Often a traditional procurement focuses on a set of narrow compliance requirements. We wanted a very different process that would encourage applicants to think more innovatively, and focus on what really matters—making the lives of Coloradans measurably better." Colorado wanted to build on the progress that the state's human services providers had already made while also identifying areas where their work could be augmented and scaled. To engage the community in their movement toward using evidence to get better results across the state, Colorado found the perfect mechanism: a 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. RFIs are quite literally government information requests that ask human services providers and community stakeholders to help inform the goals and structure of upcoming human services contracts.

Using this approach, Colorado issued an RFI³ in January 2017, which it titled

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a Call for Innovation,⁴ as a "catalyst for collaboration and innovation," noting to potential respondents that "your good ideas, your creative energy, and your deep knowledge of this population...will lead to conversations across the private, public, and nonprofit sectors." Through this approach, the state received 61 separate submissions, which ultimately led to three state-funded Pay for Success projects to serve Colorado youth and their families. As Low observed, "Colorado's Call for Innovation helped draw dozens of nonprofits, service providers, local governments, and universities whom I don't think would have fit neatly into a traditional RFP process. This open and competitive outcomes-driven process laid vital groundwork for the subsequent launch of projects that linked state dollars to better results for at-risk Colorado youth."

Zooming out from Colorado, RFIs can serve as an important step in creating the type of open and inclusive collaboration needed between government and human services providers to support better social services delivery across the United States. RFIs are used to gather information

from stakeholders before the start of an official government procurement process. By focusing on the pre-proposal phase, and before any Request for Proposal (RFP) is released, the RFI allows 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.

When executed correctly, as in Colorado, an RFI can pay dividends not only for governments but also human services providers and communities. An RFI is a way to increase collaboration between governments and human services providers, through the creation of a culture of shared accountability and joint problem-solving. This cooperation can allow governments and human services providers to deliver better results toward clearly articulated outcome goals.

At the same time, these approaches can lead to enhancing competition in the government contracting process by allowing for increased numbers and diversity of providers in the procurement process. This means that government contracts can be better matched with highly qualified human services providers that are more likely to achieve meaningful results in communities. In addition, RFIs can also serve as a vehicle to prioritize evidence-based programs. The additional input and feedback from human services providers and community stakeholders through an RFI process can lead to a more specific definition of the challenges facing a community, thus increasing the ability to identify evidence-based practices to meet those community challenges.



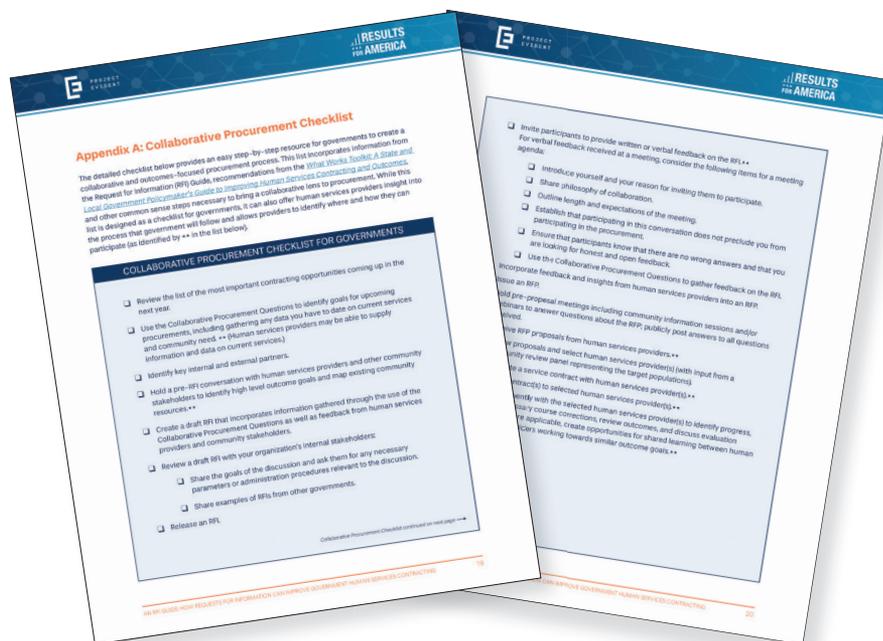
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This upfront work and collaboration can achieve improved results for governments and communities. RFIs allow governments to gather critical information from human services providers and community stakeholders to inform the goals of its upcoming human services contracts and ensure that they are scoped appropriately in order to achieve the desired outcomes for residents. But this approach also improves on the status quo for human services providers who can use the collaborative approach afforded by an RFI to provide their expertise and inform the goals and structure of an upcoming human services contract to help ensure it is designed to maximize opportunities to achieve outcomes for residents.

For example, the Rhode Island Department of Children, Youth, and Families (DCYF) used this approach through its 2017 RFI for Strategies to Identify and Prevent At-Risk Families.⁵ The RFI contained in-depth questions on how better to structure, measure, and fund prevention programs for children and families. This informed the department's procurement of services designed to prevent the occurrence of neglect and abuse. The RFI sought input from services providers and other community stakeholders on ideas for new programming,

Procurement checklist example

The RFI Guide includes a checklist designed for governments to create a collaborative and outcomes-focused procurement process.



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SARA PETERS, MANAGING DIRECTOR
OF POLICY AND EVIDENCE-BASED FUNDING FOR PROJECT EVIDENT

adjustments to current programming, adaptations for specific populations or circumstances, and suggestions for financial, operational, and organizational refinements.

This work occurred within a broader set of departmental reforms⁶ aimed at improving services to and outcomes of children and families through active collaborations with contracted providers to enhance accountability, improve results, and adjust services delivery based upon learning what works. Deb Buffi, the Associate Director of Compliance and Contracts at the department, explains how it sought to work with providers once these new contracts were in place, “We engage with our providers, it’s collaborative,” she says. “Through active contract

management that we launched with the help of Harvard’s Government Performance Lab, we created a safe atmosphere for providers to problem solve for what things really work and how they can deliver real results.”

This work has helped the department expand⁷ the number of families referred to prevention services by 180 percent and improve the share of clients in community prevention programs that subsequently opened to DCYF care from 8 percent to less than 3 percent.

As the Colorado and Rhode Island examples illustrate, one of the key results from the implementation of Pay for Success, and other outcomes-based funding models over the last several years, is that stronger collaboration between government leaders and human services providers is a key ingredient in achieving better outcomes.

As Sara Peters, Managing Director of Policy and Evidence-Based Funding for Project Evident,⁸ which provides a set of tools, resources, and direct services to social-sector leaders to help them build and strengthen their continuous evidence-building practices, noted “Public procurement, and specifically the Request for Information phase, provides a natural opportunity to ensure that human services providers’ evidence-based learnings and results are appropriately reflected in public funding and service delivery requests.”

In order to distill these lessons and help state and local governments achieve better results and increase collaboration, Results for America and Project Evident produced a

See RFI on page 31

step-by-step guide for designing and implementing an RFI. Released earlier this year, the resource is called *An RFI Guide: How Requests for Information Can Improve Government Human Services Contracting*.⁹

The RFI guide includes templates, case studies, checklists, and 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. The Collaborative Procurement Questions, designed to be used by all stakeholders to inform their work together, range from the simple (such as “What are the outcome goals for this procurement?”), to the more complex (“Does the contract and payment structure incentivize outcomes, rather than strictly outputs, and strengthen evidence-building and learning?”).

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. At their essence, these Collaborative Procurement Questions, and RFIs in general, can help move state and local governments into closer collaboration with human services providers and community stakeholders.

Despite the wide range of potential questions in an RFI, it is important to note that this process need not be formal or time consuming. In many cases an RFI can be accomplished in weeks. In fact, the answers to the Collaborative Procurement Questions that form the basis for an RFI may be gathered through stakeholder meetings, rather than written communications, especially in cases where the targeted communities’ preferred mode of communication is not English.

Model RFI template

The RFI Guide includes a six-page template for use in creating a Request for Information for a human service procurement.



This collaborative approach allows a more dynamic, solutions-oriented government procurement where government and human services providers work together to form a more thorough, consistent, and outcomes-focused process.¹⁰ An RFI also forms the basis for this collaboration at the outset by catalyzing a guided discussion between government, human services providers, and the community. 

Reference Notes

1. 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.
2. See <http://www.americaforward.org/>
3. See <https://sites.google.com/state.co.us/rfpfs/pay-for-success/call-for-innovation>
4. 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 “Key Terminology” in the Results for America’s What Works Toolkit (https://results4america.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/What-Works-Toolkit_A-State-and-Local-Government-Policymakers-Guide-to-Improving-Human-Services-Contracting-and-Outcomes.pdf).
5. See https://govlab.hks.harvard.edu/files/govlabs/files/rhode_island_dcyf_rfi.pdf
 6. See <https://results4america.org/works-toolkit-action-rhode-island/>
 7. See <https://govlab.hks.harvard.edu/rhode-island-department-children-youth-and-families-performance-improvement>
 8. See <https://www.projectevident.org/>
 9. See <https://results4america.org/rfi-guide/>
 10. For more details on ways to improve collaboration and outcomes throughout the human services procurement process, please refer to the Results for America’s What Works Toolkit (<https://results4america.org/what-works-toolkit/>), which was featured in the April 2019 issue of *Policy & Practice*.