Guide for Clear Outcomes, Evaluation, and Evidence Language in Federal Notice of Funding Opportunities

ABOUT THIS GUIDE

The purpose of this guide is to help Notice of Funding Opportunities (NOFO) writers and other federal government personnel involved with NOFOs think through the evidence building sections of NOFOs. Results for America (RFA) is a nonprofit organization with experience helping government leaders use strong evidence and data to make sound decisions. RFA developed this guide after reviewing over 200 NOFOs from operating divisions across the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) to identify best practices and clarify terms and concepts. Learn more about this guide here.

Provisions related to performance measurement and evaluation can be some of the most important components of NOFOs. Requirements in these areas can help you select the strongest proposals. They can allow you to track the progress of grantees' activities, hold grantees accountable, and generate knowledge for future program improvement. NOFOs can also incorporate evidence into the design and selection criteria. However, if not crafted carefully, these provisions can cause unnecessary work and stress for applicants and federal staff throughout the life of the grant.

Answering the following five questions can help you determine your goals related to outcomes, evaluation, and the use of evidence:

1. What will the program do and what are the expected results?
2. Do you need performance measurement, evaluation, or both?
3. What are appropriate performance measures?
4. What type of evaluation will you use, if any?
5. How will you prioritize evidence in the program design?

The guide will explore these questions in-depth and then offers recommended language for you to adapt based on your needs and the goals of the NOFO.

RELEVANT TERMS

Outcome: The expected or desired change that will result from implementing a project. They are measured by at least one indicator that captures progress in achieving the intended result.

Goal: A broad statement of what a program is designed to achieve. It should briefly address the problem it is trying to solve. Goals are generally accompanied by measurable objectives and outcomes.

Objective: A measurable result that a program is expected to achieve in a set time frame that furthers a goal.
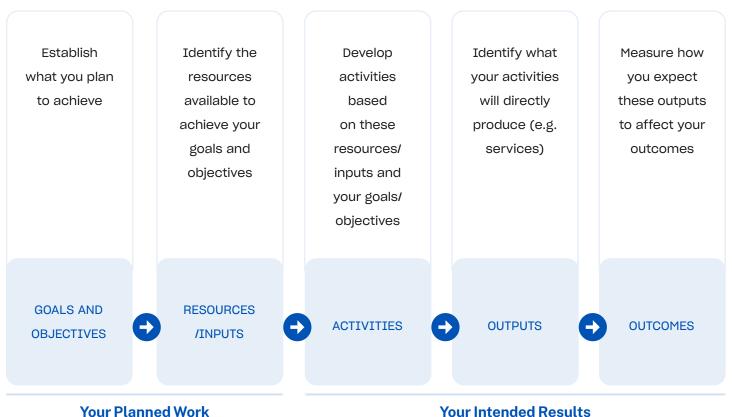
Question set 1: What will the program do (outputs) and what results are expected (outcomes)?

Before you start writing your NOFO it is important to develop a logic model. A logic model is a graphic that describes the relationship between your program's activities and its intended effects.

- Goals and objectives describe what you plan to achieve (e.g., reduce the number of people getting the flu).
- Resources are what is available to meet your goals and objectives (i.e., inputs such as funds, staff, and materials).
- Activities are the direct products and services delivered by a program (e.g., training first responders, serving meals, or vaccinating people).

- Outputs are the direct and measurable products and services delivered by a program (e.g., the number of vaccinations administered).
- Outcomes are the expected change that will result from program implementation (e.g., the percentage of hospitalizations from the flu). They are measured by indicators that capture progress in achieving the results.

The process of developing a logic model can help you to clarify why you think the program will achieve the expected results and easily communicate this to grant applicants. The outputs and outcomes identified in the logic model can be turned into performance measures or used to focus a program evaluation. Example logic models and links to agency logic models can be found here.

LOGIC MODEL

Establish what you plan to achieve	Identify the resources available to achieve your goals and objectives	Develop activities based on these resources/ inputs and your goals/ objectives	Identify what your activities will directly produce (e.g. services)	Measure how you expect these outputs to affect your outcomes
GOALS AND OBJECTIVES ➡️	RESOURCES /INPUTS ➡️	ACTIVITIES ➡️	OUTPUTS ➡️	OUTCOMES

Your Planned Work   **Your Intended Results**

QUESTIONS TO ASK YOURSELF:
- Do you want applicants to use your logic model to develop their program or do you want them to create their own logic model, perhaps using elements of your logic model as their foundation?
- Do you want applicants to include additional outputs or outcomes that are important to them but that may not be relevant for all grantees? For example, a vaccination program may have the desired outcome of reducing childhood disease rates, but if the grantee offers vaccinations at a community center there may be additional outcomes related to community engagement.

Question set 2: Do you need performance measurement, evaluation, or both?

Performance measurement and program evaluation require different resources and technical expertise. Performance measurement can answer basic questions about whether a project is performing the activities that it is supposed to and producing the expected outcomes. It is an essential activity to consider as part of a program because you can't improve performance without measuring it. If you need to know how much a program is producing (e.g., how many people are served, how many hours a clinic was open, or the number of avoidable emergency room visits) performance measurement may be sufficient. Programs often collect data to measure performance as part of their normal course of business and may use this data to adjust their program over time. While we suggest the term performance measurement for this activity, you may use different terminology for the same thing.

If you need to know how and why a program is operating and/or the extent to which the program is responsible for the changes in the people, communities, or organizations served, you will need to conduct an evaluation. Evaluations are typically more resource intensive than performance measurement and may address questions related to:

- The implementation of a program.
- The effectiveness of strategies used by a program.
- The effectiveness of a program.
- The contextual factors related to a program.
- How to effectively target specific populations for an intervention.

RELEVANT TERMS

Performance Measurement: Ongoing, systematic tracking of information relevant to programs, projects, goals, and/or activities.

Program Evaluation: Systematic analysis of a program or organization to assess effectiveness and efficiency.

Program evaluation can help you answer questions about the degree to which the grantee's activities are causing the desired outcomes, how much of an effect it is having, for whom, and under what conditions.

QUESTIONS TO ASK YOURSELF:
- Is this program subject to any legislative mandates related to performance measurement or evaluation? If so, you should identify and address these legislative mandates.
- Do you primarily need to know what a program is doing or achieving? If so, performance measurement is appropriate.
- Do you need ongoing monitoring of program outputs and outcomes? If so, performance measurement is appropriate.
- Do you need to know how and why a program operates or performs as it does? If so, program evaluation is appropriate.
- Do you need to know the extent to which a program is responsible for causing the outcomes or its return on investment? If so, program evaluation is appropriate.

Question set 3: What are appropriate performance measures?

Program performance measures should be driven by priorities at the program and agency level, as well as by legislative directives that authorize program funding. While much of the work of identifying the expected program outputs and outcomes should have been done through the development of a logic model, narrowing the focus to a small number of important and useful measures can help.

Resources that might help design good performance measures include:
- [ACL's Performance Measure Guidance](#)
- [USAID Performance Monitoring & Evaluation-Tips: Selecting Performance Indicators](#)

QUESTIONS TO ASK YOURSELF:
- Do you want grantees to collect both output and outcome performance measures?
- Will you set targets for the levels of outputs and outcomes that you expect, or will applicants set their own targets? If this is a new effort, you may not have enough information to set targets. This should be made clear in the NOFO.
- Are you mandating which performance measures the grantee should track, is the grantee proposing metrics, or will both you and the grantee have a role in deciding metrics? If you want to combine data across grantees to analyze the performance of the program, you should make sure that some performance measures are the same across grantees.
- How much detail do you need from applicants about how they plan to measure and track outputs/outcomes? For example, do you need samples of data collection forms, to know whether data will be collected from all participants or a sample, or information about quality control and how data will be kept secure?
- Are there other similar programs that have performance measures you can use? One benefit of this is that you may then be able to compare the performance of your program to that of the other program. Another benefit is that those measures have been tested by grantees in the field.

Question set 4: What type of evaluation will you use, if any?

If you determine that you need to conduct a program evaluation to understand how and why a program is performing the way that it is, your first step will be to figure out the specific type of evaluation that will best meet your need.

While evaluation may use performance data, it is distinct from performance measurement because:

- It is conducted at a particular point in time, not continuously.
- It answers questions about effectiveness and efficiency, which are different questions than performance measurement.
- It may use different data and data collection methods.

There are process evaluations, outcome evaluations without comparison groups, and evaluations that can determine causality (i.e., impact evaluations). Before choosing an evaluation type, you need to ask yourself what the goals of the evaluation are and what is feasible given the resources, data and maturity of the program being evaluated. The text box below shows common types of evaluation.

COMMON TYPES OF EVALUATION

Formative Evaluation assesses whether a program is feasible, appropriate, and acceptable before it is fully implemented. It focuses on learning and improvement and does not aim to answer questions of overall effectiveness.

Descriptive Studies can be quantitative or qualitative and describe a program, policy, organization, or population. They do not provide any information about effectiveness or causality. While not all descriptive studies are evaluations, some are used to understand relationships between activities and outcomes, describe program participants or components, and identify trends or patterns in data.

Process or Implementation Evaluation assesses how the program or service is delivered and often includes information on content, quantity, quality, and structure of services provided. It can help answer the question, "was the program implemented as intended?" or "how is the program operating in practice?"

Outcome Evaluation assesses whether outcomes were achieved, but does not look at whether the intervention itself caused the outcomes. Outcome evaluation is distinct from performance measurement in that it typically answers questions of effectiveness at a point in time whereas performance measurement focuses on ongoing outputs and outcomes.

Impact Evaluation uses a comparison or control group to compare outcomes with and without the program to assess the degree to which the program caused the outcomes. An impact evaluation can help answer the question, "does it work?" The difference between an outcome and an impact evaluation is that an impact evaluation uses a control group to determine whether a program caused an outcome.

Performance Management/Continuous Improvement: This type of assessment helps recipients develop a better understanding of what is and isn't working in their program implementation. While not a form of evaluation, performance management is included here because it is a common measurement activity.

QUESTIONS TO ASK YOURSELF:

- Do you need to know the extent to which the program is being implemented as designed, or whether the program is accessible to its target population? If so, a formative, process, or implementation evaluation may be appropriate.
- Do you need to know the extent to which the intended outcomes of the program are achieved? If so, an outcome evaluation may be appropriate.
- Do you need to know if the program caused or led to the observed outcomes? If so, an impact evaluation may be appropriate.
- Do you want grantees to conduct their own evaluations, or will they be required to participate in an evaluation involving multiple grantees (e.g., a national or cross-site evaluation)?
- Do grantees need to hire an external evaluator, or can they conduct the evaluation themselves using grant funding?
- What level of standardization do you want to impose on grantees about the type of evaluation, questions, and methods, and criteria for selecting an evaluator?
- How will the required evaluation activities be funded? Are there grant funds set aside for evaluation or is external funding required?

For more information about types of evaluation and evaluation standards, please see:

- GAO-21-404SP: Program Evaluation Key Terms and Concepts
- M-20-12: Phase 4 Implementation of the Foundations for Evidence-Based Policymaking Act of 2018: Program Evaluation Standards and Practices
- CDC: Types of Evaluation

Question set 5: How will you prioritize evidence in the program design?

Some programs require grantees to implement evidence-based models, or they give preference points to applicants who propose to implement evidence-based models. This one-page resource outlines these two approaches and provides examples. Key questions to ask if you plan to use either of these approaches include:

- Is there a systematic evidence review, clearinghouse, or other repository/clearinghouse of evidence-based models from which applicants can select?
- If not, how will you determine which activities are evidence-based? Can you include an expert review of the evidence in your grant review process?
- Is there an accepted definition of evidence in your program context that you can reference, or do you need to develop one for your NOFO?
- How many points will you assign to evidence-based models?

Some programs require grantees to conduct evaluations or assign preference points to applicants who propose to conduct evaluations. Key questions to ask if you plan to use either of these approaches include:

A. What kind of evaluation qualifies for the extra points?
B. How many points will you assign?
C. Will you assign points based on the quality of the evaluation proposed?
D. Can you include an expert review of proposed evaluations in your grant review process?

An Example:

Goal of the project: This project aims to prevent harm from house fires and carbon monoxide poisoning by teaching people about the importance of smoke and carbon monoxide detectors.

Objectives:
1. Hold 5 meetings at the public library about smoke detectors
2. Launch 3 PSAs on the local radio station about fire safety

Indicators:

1. Number of meetings held and PSAs launched
2. Feedback from the local fire department chief about how the project is going

Outputs:

1. Number of attendees at the meetings and number of listeners for the PSAs
2. Number of free smoke and carbon monoxide detectors distributed at the library

Outcomes:

1. New installations of smoke detectors (short-term)
2. Reduced injury and death from house fires and carbon monoxide poisoning (long-term)

Outcome indicators:

1. Number of people who respond to a survey saying they installed a detector
2. Number of deaths and injuries from house fires and carbon monoxide poisoning in a community that participated in this project

RECOMMENDED LANGUAGE

1. **LOGIC MODELS:**

   If you develop the logic model:

   [Agency] has developed a logic model that shows the problem, goals and objectives, desired activities, outputs, and outcomes.

   If the applicant develops the logic model:

   You must create a logic model that shows your proposed goals and objectives, activities, inputs, outputs, and outcomes. Accompany your logic model with a description that explains how each component leads to the next. The description should also explain how your grant activities contribute to the logic model. You can find examples and further operating division-specific guidance on logic models [here](#).

2. **PERFORMANCE MEASUREMENT:**

   It is important to collect data to determine if your project is meeting intended outcomes and outputs. To do this, we use outcome and output measures to monitor the progress of your work plan. You must provide a performance measurement plan, which should include the following elements:

Measures

To evaluate your project, you will need to define and collect the following types of measures.

Outputs

An output is the direct and measurable product and service delivered, or activity conducted by a program. Outputs describe the amount or level of product or activity.

If you will define the outputs:

[Agency Name] has developed the following outputs for this NOFO. For each output, you must [develop and describe a measurable indicator OR use the following indicators to measure each outcome].

You may want to create a table like the one below.

Output	Measurable Indicator
Example: Number of people who attend the seminar on smoke detectors	Example: X people attended seminar 1 and Y people attended seminar 2

If the applicant will define the outputs:

You must develop measurable outputs that will help you determine if you are meeting the goals and objectives of your project. For each output, describe the indicators you will use to measure progress.

You may want to create a table like the one below.

Output	Measurable Indicator
Example: Number of people who attend a meeting about smoke detectors	Example: X people attended seminar 1 and Y people attended seminar 2

Process Indicators

Process indicators are used to compare actual implementation to your initial project plan. These indicators can be quantitative or qualitative:
- Quantitative examples include outputs.
- Qualitative examples include data collected through interviews or focus groups with clients or administrators, structured observations, and other qualitative methods.

Describe which aspects of implementation you will examine and what measures you will use to gather the data for doing so.

You may want to create a table like the one below.

Process Question	Measurable Indicator
Example: Was the smoke and carbon monoxide awareness campaign implemented the way we planned?	Example: Number of meetings held at the public library in the program period Example: Number of PSAs aired on the radio in the program period

Outcomes

An outcome is the expected or desired change that will result from implementing a project. Outcomes must be measurable and have at least one indicator that captures progress in achieving the intended result.

An outcome indicator is an observable and quantifiable characteristic that shows progress toward a specific outcome. Outcome indicators:
- Can show positive, negative, or no change over time.
- Often include a target, which is a specific level of progress you plan to achieve by a specific point in time.

If you will define the outcomes:

[Agency Name] has developed the following outputs for this NOFO. For each output, you must [develop and describe a measurable indicator OR use the following indicators to measure each outcome].

You may want to create a table like the one below.

Output	Measurable Indicator
Example: The extent to which people make use of smoke detectors	Example: The percent of survey respondents who report installing a smoke detector for the first time

If the applicant will define the outcomes:

You must develop measurable outcomes that will help you determine if you are meeting the goals and objectives of your project. For each outcome, describe the indicators you will use to measure the progress in reaching it.

You may want to create a table like the one below.

Output	Measurable Indicator
Example: The extent to which people make use of smoke detectors	Example: The percent of survey respondents who report installing a smoke detector for the first time

For each output and/or outcome measure describe the following:
- The unit of the measure
- How often you will measure it
- The data sources and methods (e.g., x, y, and z) you will use to collect it
- Who will be responsible for collecting the data
- How you will record and store the resulting data
- The method you will use to identify changes in the indicator (e.g., regular surveys, data dashboards, or other kinds of regular data collection and review)
- The targets and timeframes for achieving each target
- How you will protect the data, including personally identifiable information and human subjects data

You can learn more about protecting human subjects here.

You may choose to use a table to show part of your information. However, be sure to describe the required information above thoroughly. Add any information needed for clarity. For example, if you will use client interviews, you may also want to detail the questions that you will ask.

3. EVALUATION:

Process or implementation evaluation:

Describe your plan to conduct a process or implementation evaluation. Your evaluation should determine whether your project is being implemented as planned. Your plan should include:
- Clear research questions (e.g., is your project reaching its intended audience?).

- A plan for data collection and management.
- A description of your research methodology, including quantitative and qualitative methods.
- An evaluation timeline, including a timeline for working with an evaluation contractor if needed.

Outcome evaluation without causality:

Describe your plan to conduct an outcome evaluation. Your evaluation should determine whether your project achieved its intended outcomes. Your plan should include:

- Clear research questions.
- A plan for data collection and management.
- A description of your research methodology, including information about your sample size and any planned statistical analyses.
- An evaluation timeline, including a timeline for working with an evaluation contractor if needed.

Impact evaluation (outcome evaluation with causality):

Describe your plan to conduct a rigorous impact evaluation with a comparison or control group. Your evaluation should determine whether your project caused changes in its intended outcomes. Your plan should include:

- Clear research questions.
- A plan for data collection and management.
- A detailed explanation of your research methodology, including details about your control group, your plan to measure outcomes, and your proposed statistical analyses (e.g., power calculations or effect size estimates).
- An evaluation timeline, including a timeline for working with an evaluation contractor if needed.

Agency-sponsored evaluation:

Grant recipients will be required to participate in [Agency-sponsored] evaluations if selected to do so. A planned national study of the program is designed to[fill in your purpose/goal]. Applicants will collect and report [fill in] OR Information about required outcome measurement will be forthcoming. [Agency] will provide support and technical assistance to recipients to ensure data quality. Successful applicants will learn more about the evaluation/potential evaluation and related expectations at [point in time].

4. PRIORITIZING EVIDENCE IN PROGRAM DESIGN:

Evidence-based programming is required:

Example 1: For purposes of this program, the term "evidence-based" refers to an activity with causal evidence of effectiveness for at least one relevant outcome, as documented by one or more high-quality experimental or quasi-experimental studies, accompanied by an explanation for why the activity is likely to improve outcomes for the populations that will be served, based on research and

input from participants and relevant stakeholders. Your proposal must be accompanied by references to the evidence for your proposed activities. [Agency] will review the quality of the evidence as part of the proposal review process. To be considered for funding, proposals must allocate at least 75 percent of grant funding to evidence-based activities.

Example 2: Applicants must propose to implement one or more service models deemed evidence-based by [relevant clearinghouse]. Up to 25 percent of grant funding may be used for other service models.

Evidence-based programming is prioritized in the review process:

For purposes of this program, the term "evidence-based" refers to an activity with causal evidence of effectiveness for at least one outcome, as documented by one or more high-quality experimental or quasi-experimental design studies, accompanied by an explanation for why the activity is likely to improve outcomes for the populations that will be served, based on research and input from participants and relevant stakeholders. As reflected in the scoring criteria below, up to 10 points will be awarded based on the strength of evidence for your proposed activities. This resource provides guidance on selecting evidence-based programs.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

For more information, please contact Nichole Dunn at nichole@results4america.org.