

Managing for Success: Focusing on Revenue-Neutral Approaches to Scaling the Use of Evidence

The Forum for Youth Investment's 2017 report, *Managing for Success: Strengthening the Federal Infrastructure for Evidence-based Policymaking*, reviewed the current landscape of offices, interagency collaborations, policies and other mechanisms which produce and use evidence at the federal level and recommended ways to strengthen and better coordinate this infrastructure. The report was meant to serve as a complement to the Commission on Evidence-Based Policymaking, particularly in terms of its recommendations on increasing agency capacity to use evidence.

The Forum's report received input from the Cross-Agency Learning Community on Federal Investments in Research and Evaluation, a group of federal officials in agencies focused on research and evaluation related to children and families. The Forum also conducted research on the status of each building block for its landscape scan of current efforts. The recommendations for this report were further informed by interviews with current and former federal agency staff as well as White House officials spanning five administrations and a bipartisan set of organizations involved with evidence-based policymaking.

The twenty five recommendations were organized into three overarching categories: integrating multiple types of evidence into decision-making processes, elevating evaluation and focusing on revenue-neutral approaches to scaling the use of evidence. This issue brief will examine the report's third subset of recommendations: revenue-neutral approaches to scaling evidence use.

The Problem

When policymakers use evidence, they frequently use it to either call for increased funding for effective programs or call for decreased funding for ineffective programs. While this approach may initially sound desirable, it actually has drawbacks that limit the scale of evidence-based policymaking. In the current budget climate, the extent to which funding for effective programs can be increased is limited. Any effort to do an across-the-board increase for every program with an evidence base is neither possible nor practical. On the other hand, efforts to decrease funding for ineffective programs will create a backlash for evidence. There are instances of Congress responding to negative evaluations of popular programs by passing legislation prohibiting any future evaluations of it. The population that is served by an ineffective program has also not gone away and their problems still exist and need a solution.

A revenue-neutral approach to scaling the use of evidence could avoid these pitfalls. Two approaches fall under the Forum's definition of revenue-neutral approaches. First, policymakers can shift funding from programs that evidence suggests do not work to programs that evidence suggests do work, *for the same population and issue area*. This method is not limited by the need to increase overall funding caps for the federal budget as a whole and shows advocates that they will get better results for the people and issues they care about if they incorporate evidence into their work. The second revenue-neutral approach is using evidence to spend the exact same amount of money on the exact same program, but encourage or require changes that will make that program more effective and efficient. This ensures that federal staff can focus on using evidence to improve their programs rather than risk potential funding cuts due to one poor evaluation. A revenue-neutral approach to evidence-based policymaking

can help scale the use of evidence by creating more buy-in for evidence. As one advocate testified before the House Ways and Means Committee, “Congress should create an environment of continuous learning, not simply an ‘on-off switch’ when the evidence is unclear.”

Recommendations

The Forum’s recommendations in this section primarily focus on changing the direction of ongoing work so that evidence is used for continuous improvement of programs rather than an up or down approval process. Much of this change in approach can occur if leaders in government signal that they see this approach as vital for increasing the effectiveness and efficiency of government programs. For example, leaders like the chief statistician, chief performance officer and chief information officer can work to foster a culture that encourages agencies to focus on using evidence for program improvement. Likewise, interagency bodies can convene their members to support this approach and examine potential best practices or common challenges. Congress and the Office of Management and Budget can also signal their preference for a revenue-neutral approach through the annual appropriations and budget guidance process, respectively. With many agencies already interested in the use of evidence, leaders across the federal government should focus on the question of how their staff use evidence.

Another potential tool for increasing the use of revenue-neutral approaches to evidence-based policymaking is to ensure that the various guidebooks on principles and best practices include information about how agency officials should use evidence in this context. These guidebooks could include examples, best practices, key challenges to look out for, and other information useful to officials who want to use evidence to improve their program. Finally, federal staff should support this approach at the state and local level through training and technical assistance. This effort will help states and localities use their limited budgets more efficiently and create a strong culture for the use of evidence across the government as a whole. Revenue-neutral policies can help increase the political will to use evidence and ensure that evidence is used in a process of continuous improvement.

Recommendations		
White House Leadership Positions	Interagency Coordinating Bodies	Agency-level Offices and Actions
The OMB director for management/chief performance officer, chief statistician, U.S. chief technology officer, and chief information officer should create a culture of partnering with agencies to use evidence to help programs improve.	Each interagency coordinating body should convene members to develop jointly agreed-on methods for scaling the use of evidence through revenue-neutral approaches.	Agencies should include revenue-neutral approaches to scaling the use of evidence in their budget submissions to OMB.
Guidebooks detailing principles and best practices	Policies governing the creation and use of evidence	Mechanisms helping States and Localities
Guidebooks should include information about not only how evidence should be created but also how it should be used – including when and how it could be best used to increase and decrease funding and for revenue-neutral approaches to improve programs.	Congress should establish revenue-neutral approaches to scale the use of evidence. OMB’s annual budget guidance should promote revenue-neutral approaches to using evidence.	Provide states and localities guidance and technical assistance for implementing revenue-neutral approaches to scaling the use of evidence.

For more information and to read the whole report, visit:

<http://www.forumfyi.org/managingforsuccess>.