

Evaluation Policy for the Department of Health and Human Services

The Department of Health and Human Services (HHS or Department) recognizes evaluation as an essential process towards achieving its mission to enhance and protect the health and well-being of all Americans and is committed to building evaluation capacity and maintaining high-quality evaluation practices. Accordingly, the HHS Evaluation Policy provides overarching guidance for evaluation practices across the Department and is designed to allow the appropriate flexibility for each HHS Staff Division and Operating Division to determine specific practices best suited for their individual evaluation capacities and needs.

This HHS Evaluation Policy affirms and reflects the commitment to thoughtful, systematic evaluations of the Department's programs and services to produce high-quality evidence that enables a data-driven, informed approach to improving effectiveness, efficiency, and accountability; and is intended to provide clarity to HHS staff, stakeholders, and partners on the principles guiding evaluation and evidence-building efforts at HHS.

These evaluation efforts reflect long standing practices at HHS as well as more recent efforts to implement the Foundations for Evidence-Based Policymaking Act of 2018 (Public Law 115-435; herein referred to as the Evidence Act), legislation intended to advance evidence-building functions in the Federal Government. For purposes of this policy, the Evidence Act defines evaluation as *"an assessment using systematic data collection and analysis of one or more programs, policies and organizations intended to assess their effectiveness and efficiency"* (5 U.S.C §311(3)). This policy is not intended to address personnel evaluations, law enforcement, compliance, or investigative activities; nor does this policy preclude anything else in statute.

In response to the Evidence Act, the Office of Management and Budget issued [M-20-12](#), a memorandum that provides high-level guidance on federal program evaluation standards and practices. The standards included in this guidance – *rigor, relevance and utility, independence and objectivity, transparency, and ethics* – have been recognized for their usefulness and importance across both federal¹ and non-federal² evaluation communities. Thus, the HHS Evaluation Policy incorporates these standards as they appear in M-20-12, to affirm the commitment at HHS to conducting high-quality evaluations and maintaining consistency with the broader Federal evaluation community. HHS evaluations should adhere to these general standards to promote quality, credibility, acceptance, and utilization by HHS programs; grantees and other partners and stakeholders; researchers and evaluators; and policy and program decision-makers.

¹ [Administration for Children and Families, Evaluation Policy, November 2012](#); [US Department of State, Program and Project Design, Monitoring, and Evaluation Policy, November 2017](#); [US Agency for International Development, Evaluation Policy, October 2016](#); [US Department of Labor, Evaluation Policy, November 2013](#).

² [American Evaluation Association, Guiding Principles for Evaluators, August 2018](#).



RIGOR

HHS evaluations must produce findings³ on which Federal agencies and their stakeholders can confidently rely, with a clear explanation of limitations. The quality of an evaluation is dependent on the underlying design and methods⁴, thus the evaluation approach should use the most rigorous and appropriate methods while balancing the constraints of feasibility and available resources. Credible evaluations must be managed and conducted by qualified persons with relevant education, skills, and experience relevant to the methods undertaken.

RELEVANCE AND UTILITY

HHS evaluations must address questions of importance and serve the information needs of stakeholders in order to be a useful resource. Evaluations should present findings that are actionable and available in time to maximize the utility and utilization of these findings to benefit the program being evaluated. Information should be presented in ways that are understandable and that can inform and promote/advance evidence-based agency activities, decision-making and actions such as budget, program improvement, accountability, management, regulatory actions, and policy development.

INDEPENDENCE AND OBJECTIVITY

HHS evaluations must be viewed as credible for the public and other stakeholders to accept their findings. The credibility of evaluations is dependent on the actual and perceived independence and objectivity of those managing and conducting the evaluations. HHS Staff Divisions and Operating Divisions should enable evaluations to be conducted with an appropriate level of independence from programmatic, regulatory, fiscal, policymaking, and stakeholder activities and influences so that these evaluations are not biased by interests of stakeholders. The implementation of evaluation activities, including how teams are selected and operate, should be insulated from any undue influences that may affect their objectivity, nonpartisanship, and professional judgement. Those managing evaluations 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

Transparency has multiple implications for the credibility and value of HHS evaluations; accordingly, whenever possible, HHS should be transparent about planned, ongoing, and completed evaluations. Transparency of evaluations enables accountability and enhances impartiality by helping to ensure that aspects of an evaluation are not tailored to generate specific findings. Prior to beginning an evaluation, agencies should clearly document the purpose and objectives (including internal versus

³ Herein, “findings” refer to results, conclusions, and recommendations that are systematically generated through analyzing and interpreting data.

⁴ Herein, “design and methods” are used to collectively address the structure of an evaluation that answers an evaluation question, inclusive of evaluation approach; variables for, conditions under, timing of, and sources from which data are used or collected; and quantitative and qualitative data collection and analysis methods.



public use) of the evaluation, the design and choice of methods for the evaluation, the range of stakeholders who will have access to details of the work and findings, and the timeline and strategy for dissemination. The aforementioned evaluation decisions should take into consideration any legal, ethical, or other constraints for disclosing information. It is important to disseminate findings in a timely and accessible manner that provides sufficient detail so that others can review and interpret the work.

ETHICS

HHS 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 conducted to safeguard the dignity, rights, safety, and privacy of participants and other stakeholders and affected entities. Those managing and conducting evaluations should abide by relevant professional standards and any applicable human subjects protections pertaining to treatment of participants. Evaluations should be equitable, fair, and just, and should take into account relevant cultural and contextual factors.

