

Stakeholder Engagement Toolkit

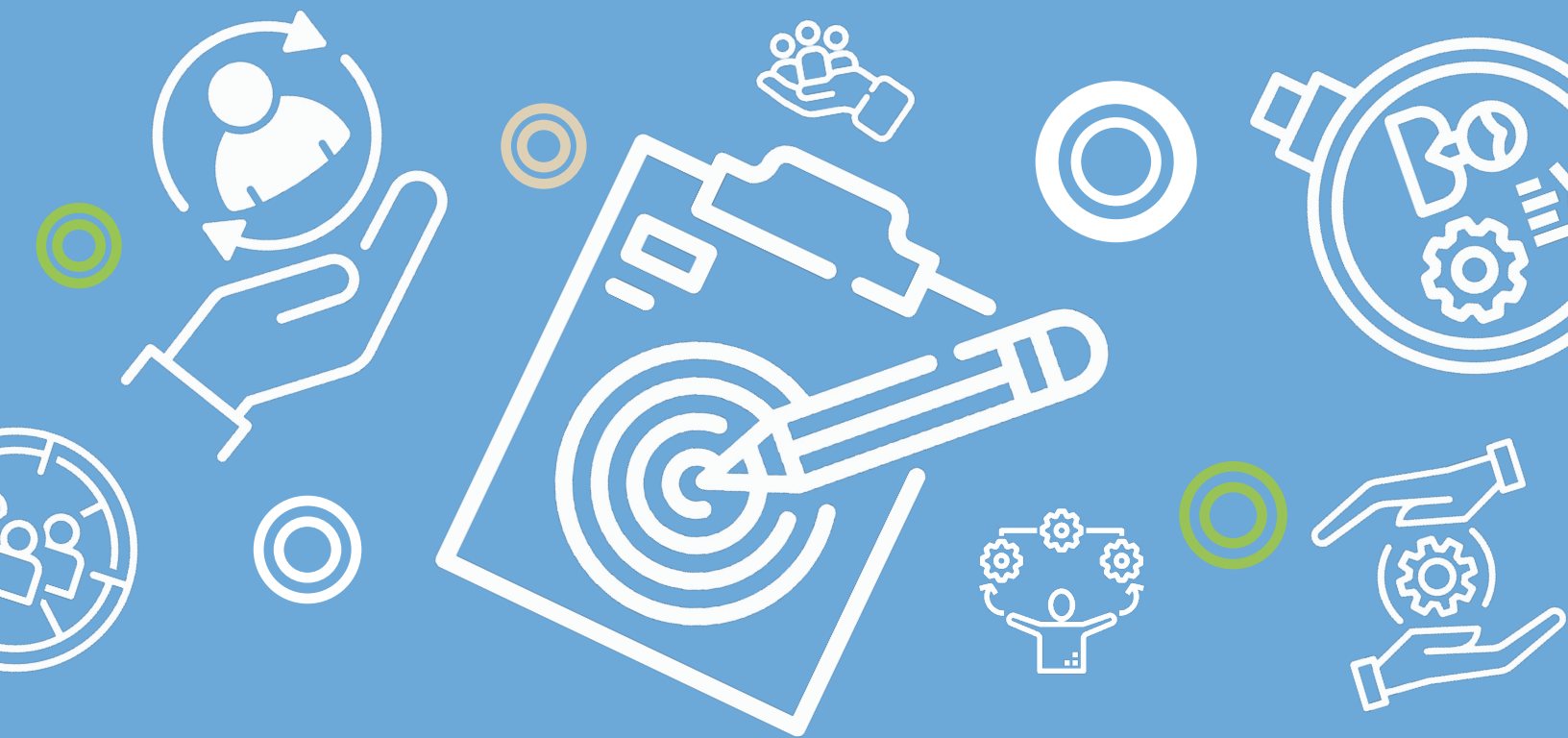


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“Stakeholder engagement is valuable, generally, because it ensures that your decision-making process, and your actual decisions and product and data use, are collaborative. In some ways, you’re not just kind of in your own basement trying to figure out what to do and then you come out with something and everybody’s like, ‘Well, you didn’t get our input, this is wrong.’ So having it be collaborative is important because it gets buy-in and also helps ensure that you’re getting to hopefully the best, and ideally also the most equitable, outcomes with your data decisions.”

Digital Services Expert

Introduction

Agencies have a variety of options available to them to interact with individuals outside of their organization – including through press releases, partnerships, listening sessions, and so on. But how should agencies conceptualize those activities so that their efforts to engage are meaningful and contribute to better policy decisions?

This stakeholder engagement toolkit is designed as a resource for individuals at federal agencies who are interested in how to meaningfully engage stakeholders in policy and program decisions. The toolkit is informed by existing evidence on stakeholder engagement, two expert convenings, and semi-structured interviews with federal officials and other members of the evidence-building community. This toolkit is the result of a collaboration between the Data Foundation and the Center for Open Data Enterprise (CODE), with generous support from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation.





Defining Stakeholder Engagement

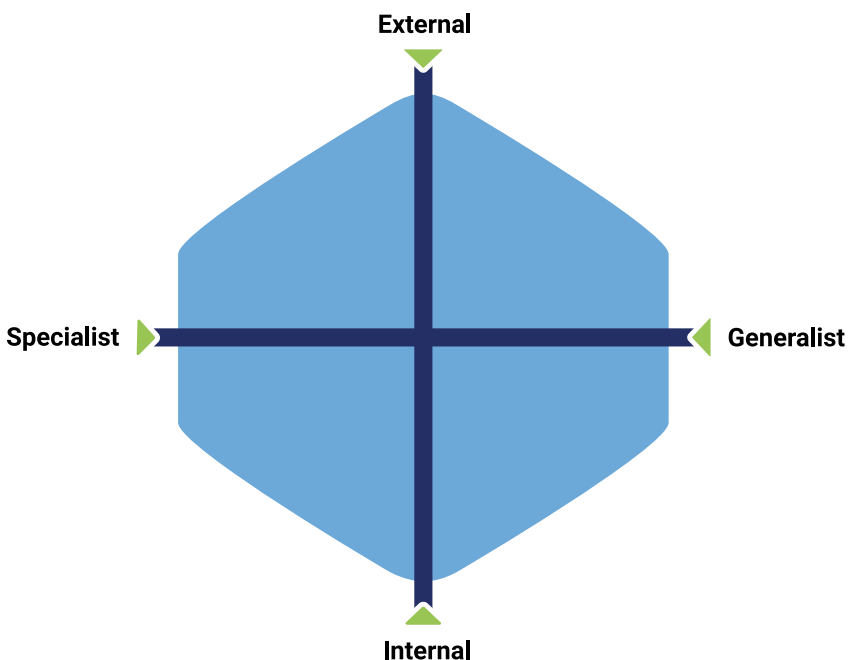
Stakeholder engagement is the interactions between agency staff and actors with people and organizations who have an interest in or are affected by a program, policy, or process, implemented or decided by an agency. When it comes to applying stakeholder engagement to evidence-building activities and research, stakeholder engagement is equally applicable to aligning research and evaluation questions, identifying data collection and quality needs, equity considerations, and addressing other key factors in the evidence-building and evidence-use processes.

Some agencies may already be participating in stakeholder engagement, though have never considered it as a part of an engagement strategy. Because the term stakeholder engagement can cover a broad range of activities, agency staff may find it helpful to use more specific terms when planning their activities to meet requirements for stakeholder engagement, but can use this toolkit to help understand how activities can provide benefit and fulfill evidence building **mandates**.

“ I would define stakeholder engagement as; the processes, the outreach, and the partnerships that have been established to ensure efficiency and effectiveness. Stakeholders need to be able to see themselves in our products and services. And that’s where you have an effective partnership and of course it is multifaceted. There are different types of partnerships. I think an effective partnership is one in which there’s active interaction and nurturing so that everyone is getting out of it what they see as value for themselves ”

Federal Data Executive

Who are my stakeholders?



A stakeholder is a person or organization who has a vested interest in the activities, a decision, or an outcome of the agency. A stakeholder may be a program beneficiary, decision-maker, partner, researcher, or even a program implementer.

One way to better understand who your stakeholders are is to consider the types of interactions with individuals and organizations across different contributions and knowledge types: internal to external, and generalist to specialist.

Developing a Stakeholder Map for Learning Agendas From *Making Federal Agencies Evidence Based*.

Many programs may have a general sense of stakeholders but not a comprehensive, shared understanding of the community that affects achievement of goals and objectives. The stakeholder mapping process is also useful for identifying indirect evidence producers and users who can support or otherwise affect implementation of identified activities.

Agency staff must identify which stakeholders could affect the success of the selected program or strategic goal, including internal, external, oversight, partners, allies, and opponents. Consider the relative importance of the stakeholder for achieving program goals, their interest in execution, or the extent of their role in implementation. Stakeholders involved in implementation might include, for example, representatives of state or local governments, nonprofits, and/or private sector contractors involved in the delivery of the program or strategy. During the session, participants directly identify and note the relevant stakeholders, and discuss them with other participants in the process.

The range of views from **individuals external to internal** defines how closely stakeholders are intertwined with your agency. For example, in a large Cabinet-level Department, other agencies or bureaus may be considered more internal relative to an agency at a different Department in the federal government, but more external than other programs run by your own agency. In contrast, for federal agencies that collaborate with state partners, those partners may be viewed as external partners when receiving grants but have more internal cooperation as stakeholders under cooperative agreements or coordinated structures. The range from external to internal will vary based on the unique circumstances of individual agencies and program activities.

Working knowledge of stakeholders also ranges on specific topics from **generalist to specialist**. For example, a member of a federal advisory committee may have extensive specialized knowledge of a data product and be well versed in the challenges and policies associated with the technical development of the product. This puts them closer to the specialist end of the scale than a potential future general or public user of the product. In this example, a general user of the data product will also have valuable information to relay to the agency, however, their knowledge is likely not as focused on the technical expertise needed to create the product.

Agencies formulating or using evidence-building plans, evaluation plans, or conducting other related activities can readily identify individual stakeholders and stakeholder groups based on the external-internal and generalist-specialist considerations. The concepts can also be paired together. For example, for a federal-state program, a program office of experts on implementation may provide centers of expertise as internal-specialists (e.g., analyzing and interpreting, or using information), state partners and non-profit collaborators may be external-specialists (e.g., providing data and evidence), members of the general public may be external-generalists (e.g., affected by outcomes or beneficiaries).

To identify the relevant stakeholders your agency may want to engage with, you can bring together a diverse group or staff from your own agency to brainstorm and consider who may be external, internal, generalist, and specialist individuals or organizations to the project at hand. You may also choose to identify key stakeholders or representative stakeholders who can help identify other stakeholders for broad and inclusive representation. Activities such as stakeholder mapping can be beneficial to guide this work.



How can I effectively engage with my stakeholders?

Stakeholder engagement falls on a spectrum and can range from informing your constituents about possible decisions on a program to empowering a community that is affected by a new policy with final control over what that specific policy looks like. Current guidance from the Executive Branch does not explicitly state the level of engagement required, though many existing instances of engagement fall somewhere between consulting and collaborating with stakeholders.

RPP members funded through the Institute of Education Sciences (IES) at the Department of Education reported that partnerships provided local policymakers with new ideas or frameworks for policy development. A [study of several IES-funded RPPs](#) found that some organizations may have more “absorptive capacity” to engage with external stakeholders and absorb new information, assimilate it, and apply it in novel ways. This capacity can be attributed to communication pathways within complex, multi-layer organizations, strategic knowledge in leadership, and resources available for partnership.

Informing and Consulting

Lower levels of engagement may be appropriate when an agency needs to provide updates on business processes or apprise stakeholders of change, such as a change in legislation that affects program delivery. In these cases, this type of information sharing is a way to build stakeholder trust through transparent communication.

- For example, the *Federal Register* is a method of informing or consulting stakeholders. *Federal Register* comment notices are open to anyone with knowledge and access. The notices are one way for agencies to provide people outside of government the opportunity to leave substantive comments on proposed rules or notices. For those familiar with government processes, it is a well-established mechanism for providing input to the government, meaning specialists will often take advantage of the opportunity; however, it may not be adequate to reach non-specialist stakeholders, individuals with language or accessibility limitations, or those unable to meet time constraints required for filtering information provided through the *Federal Register*.

Involving and Collaborating

Agencies may wish to collaborate actively with stakeholders because they may need expertise that the agency does not have, have a specific regulatory requirement, or want to ensure that relevant or key stakeholders are involved in decisions that may directly impact them.

- Collaborating with stakeholders can take more resource-intensive forms, such as developing a research-practice partnership (RPP). A RPP is a collaborative method of engagement that can effectively engage stakeholders. RPPs allow practitioners and researchers to form persistent, long-term relationships that bring a wider set of experiences into policy decisions and bridge the gap between data and decision-making.



Requirements

There are various statutory and regulatory requirements for agencies to engage stakeholders. Though such requirements should not be the sole motivation for stakeholder engagement activities, it is important for agencies to understand the law, regulations, and guidance that exist that will impact their efforts.

The Foundations for Evidence-Based Policymaking Act (Evidence Act) prompted sweeping changes across agencies, directing them to develop better processes for generating and using evidence for decision-making. Among the various provisions, the Evidence Act focuses on the importance of stakeholder engagement. It specifically requires stakeholders engagement when developing evidence-building plans and maintaining open data plans. Additionally, the Evidence Act instructs the Chief Data Officer Council to consult with external stakeholders to increase access to federal data. Implementation guidance for the Evidence Act from the Office of Management and Budget has also included strategies for engagement to help clarify agencies' responsibilities.

The Biden Administration also demonstrated a commitment to improving stakeholder engagement in a number of areas. The 2022 President's Management Agenda encourages agencies to engage with external stakeholders, and various Executive Orders have directed agencies to solicit stakeholder feedback to inform policy and programmatic decisions.



What are the benefits of stakeholder engagement?

Thoughtful stakeholder engagement activities can help agencies support policy priorities and program activities and can provide a number of specific benefits based on what your agency hopes to achieve.

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|---|--|
| Additional Expertise and Project Success | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Can ensure that the expertise of both internal and external specialists is captured.• Promotes the uptake and use of data. |
| Increased Buy-In | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Can help foster acceptance of and willingness to actively support and participate in new initiatives or policies, including those impacted by decisions under consideration. |
| Address Sources of Disagreement | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Potential disagreement can be identified, assessed, and addressed earlier in the decision-making process.• Transparent engagement processes can lead to increased trust from external partners and those affected by the agency. |
| Long-Term Partnerships | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Stakeholder engagement is a process that can be iterative. Relationships built through this process can contribute to future projects. |
| Increased Equity | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Can build credibility and trust among communities that have traditionally had reason to distrust the federal government.• Ensures communities with the most need can access meaningful, useful data to help address their challenges.• Can provide a voice to challenges and important issues that may have otherwise been overlooked. |



What are common barriers or obstacles to impactful stakeholder engagement?

Stakeholder engagement is not easy because it takes time, money, and people. For those implementing programs, additional outreach and engagement can be stressful to already full workloads. Common issues that may interfere with engagement processes identified by the experts we interviewed fall into two broad categories: institutional barriers and “checkbox” engagement, and a lack of robust and diverse networks. Each of these types of barriers can be addressed with thoughtful planning, training across the workforce, and support from key stakeholders in the process.

Institutional barriers and ‘checkbox’ engagement

Some agencies have mature approaches to stakeholder engagement that build it into the culture of their organization. But, many may find it difficult to devote time and resources to engagement. For these agencies, it may seem easier to ‘check-the-box,’ by meeting minimum statutory requirements. However, agencies that take a compliance mindset will not realize the full benefits of stakeholder engagement.

Identified cultural and structural barriers to stakeholder engagement include:

- Concerns about ownership of data and the loss of control associated with sharing data
- Organizational silos
- Unclear authority or direction from leadership
- Fear of change or desire to maintain status quo
- Real and presumed legal and regulatory restrictions
- Absence of sufficient dedicated resources (e.g., personnel or funding)
- [Lack of training to upskill existing personnel](#)
- Insufficient communications technology

“A mid-level manager in the federal system may be overseeing a program but needs five levels of approval to make the tangible collaboration with another program. So sometimes in trying to get the five levels of approval, the time to leverage the resources has expired. Maybe that’s an issue of bureaucracy and federal workers not always having the power to make those connections.”

Public Health Scientist

“Even a short conversation with external stakeholders can require multiple levels of approval and input, which can make it difficult to foster the kind of regular, informal interactions we’re hoping to have.”

Federal Communications Specialist

Lack of robust and diverse networks

'Checkbox' engagement can also have a compounding effect on robustness of input from stakeholders. When agencies are not able to fully commit to the engagement process, and instead rely on bare minimum efforts, it becomes more difficult to do the necessary work to **continually** capture the broadest possible stakeholder field. Missing stakeholders, such as those at the state, local, or tribal level, can result in missing key insights to the success (or failures) of agency activities, inhibiting the ability to realize fuller benefits of stakeholder engagement. In other words, the agency may not receive the full range of feedback relevant for addressing key questions the engagement process was initiated for in the first place, which could exacerbate the challenges in the policy environment.

Gaps in stakeholder engagement and other barriers must be addressed during the initial planning stages of an engagement process. What are the actual goals? What are the resources available to accomplish these goals? Who are the proper stakeholders? How could a long-term partnership or two-way engagement relationship be beneficial to both parties? Answering these questions can ensure that you can reach your audience by anticipating potential barriers, such as communications needs and cost to participation for both the agency and the stakeholders.



What skills does my team need to meet our engagement requirements and get the most out of our efforts?

It can be challenging to add stakeholder engagement activities to an already full plate of responsibilities. What can make it even harder is that the skill set required for planning, implementing, and following up on quality engagement activities is diverse and may not overlap with your team's existing training. Additionally, the broad set of skills take on an entire engagement portfolio, making a team approach more appropriate.

Professionals with a wide array of stakeholder engagement experience identified a number of skills that are beneficial for meaningful engagement. Multiple professional associations – such as the [American Evaluation Association](#) – even explicitly identify engagement among the core competencies for the fields, recognizing both the role of engagement as a competency but also the many skills required for successful engagement. While this list is not exhaustive, it is a good place to start identifying areas where your team could increase their engagement efficacy.

Interpersonal Skills

- Cultural competency: As [defined by the American Association for Health Education](#), “cultural competence is the ability of an individual to understand and respect values, attitudes, beliefs, and mores that differ across cultures, and to consider and respond appropriately to these differences in planning, implementing, and evaluating health education and promotion programs and interventions.”
- Respect for lived experience: A skilled engagement process will include methods for ensuring that the experiences of participants are valued.
- Humility and humor: The ability to deal with stressful situations and disarm potential conflicts is vital to creating a space for engagement to be successful.
- Resilience and flexibility: Engagement work can be challenging. Tempers can flare and deep-seated frustrations are frequently brought out. If someone is going to do this work, they need to be able to simultaneously focus on the overall engagement goal and be resilient enough to not take the process personally.

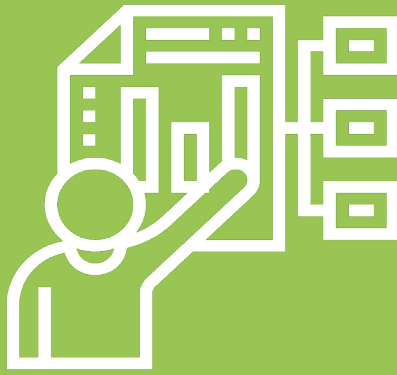
Technical Knowledge

- Those working in engagement activities should be technically competent in the subject matter being discussed. This does not necessarily mean that they should be experts in the field, but they must be able to understand the context for topics and questions brought up by stakeholders.

Networking

This is a broad category, but may include such skills as:

- Coalition building
 - Communications
 - Public speaking
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Effectively implementing a stakeholder engagement strategy

Stakeholder engagement is contextual, making it a difficult process to complete by simply checking boxes. Who to engage, what level of information to provide in the process, how much feedback to seek, and the goals of the engagement need to be explicit.

A well planned engagement process can lead to greater uptake of data, long-term partnerships, new opportunities for learning and growth, increased trust from stakeholders, and more. Determining success for stakeholder engagement will depend on the individual goals of the agencies involved.

Stakeholder engagement is an iterative and complex process, where the end of one project may be the beginning of another. Long-term successful stakeholder engagement can lead to an overall increase in programmatic success – but agencies must understand the potential benefits and commit the necessary resources to meaningfully incorporate the various perspectives of those with vested interest in their policies, programs, and mission.

Consider the Benefits of Stakeholder Engagement

- Find support among colleagues and leadership based on the benefits of stakeholder engagement in your context. Understanding the relevant benefits of stakeholder engagement can help persuade others in your agency to support your project.

[Know Your Regulatory Requirements](#)

- If focusing on the benefits of stakeholder engagement is not enough to get support, there are also the regulatory and statutory requirements for stakeholder engagement.

Set Your Goal

- Have a firm understanding of the goal of the engagement process before you begin. Centering the project's goal will inform all other subsequent steps of engagement.

Begin your Project

- Once you understand the goal, consider what level of engagement you are willing and able to give to your stakeholders. Based on those two decisions and considering applicable regulatory requirements, you can then determine whether your stakeholders need to be generalists, specialists, internal, or external – or more likely a combination of those qualities –. Once you've made your stakeholder selection, it is crucial to listen, be receptive, and identify strategies to incorporate feedback based on the goals of the engagement process.

Assess the Appropriate Engagement Level

- Once a goal is determined, you can consider the appropriate level of engagement. This decision should factor in statutory requirements, leadership support, and available resources (workforce, funding, and time) as well as the desired outcomes.
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Identify Your Stakeholders

- Depending on your goal and the level of engagement you choose, you can develop an understanding of which stakeholders you will need. Begin your engagement work by conducting stakeholder mapping; bringing in a diverse set of agency staff to participate in the mapping process will help you develop a more complete understanding of who may be important to engage.

For example, be cautious of limiting the invited stakeholders to the same group every time if your goal is to bring in new insights and perspectives.

Acknowledge and Plan for Possible Barriers

- Anticipating barriers and identifying ways to address them in advance is key to a successful engagement process. **Possible barriers** vary depending on context – these barriers should be identified early and planned for, while recognizing that others may arise.
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Learn from Your Peers

- While this work can be difficult, agencies do not need to start from scratch. There are pockets of efficient and effective engagement work already underway across the federal government. Learning from existing work is helpful when identifying a place to begin as well as a way to avoid duplication of efforts.
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Examples of stakeholder engagement activities

[Stakeholder Engagement and Communication for Healthy People 2020 Final Report, 10-29-2018](#)

- The final report on Stakeholder Engagement and Communication for Health People 2020 was written by a federal advisory committee tasked with making recommendations to the Director of Health and Human Services for the implementation of the Healthy People 2030 initiative. It specifically focuses on how stakeholder engagement could help increase the uptake and understanding of the Healthy People 2030 objectives; the report includes a number of success stories from the previous Healthy People 2020 process as well as suggestions on how to engage stakeholders across various sectors.
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[National Vital Statistics System](#)

- The National Vital Statistics System (NVSS) is an excellent example of a long-term engagement process that has had an outstanding impact on public health. Established in 1960, the NVSS is a collaboration between federal agencies and state agencies to share vital statistics data and can serve as a model for future sustainable engagement partnerships.
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[Household Pulse Survey](#)

- The Household Pulse Survey is a collaboration with multiple federal agencies to quickly deploy an efficient data collection to measure household experiences during the coronavirus pandemic and recovery. This project demonstrates how stakeholder engagement among federal agencies can produce innovative data products.
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[LymeX and LymeDisease.org](#)

- The LymeX initiative at HHS is a public-private partnership with the Steven and Alexandra Cohen Foundation that aims to advance solutions to tick-borne illnesses while engaging affected patients at each step. LymeX is now one of the largest partnership efforts in the public health sector and the collaborative agreements between HHS and its partners demonstrates the power of grassroots organizing and the possibilities of deep and long-term engagement.
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Appendix

Foundations for Evidence-Based Policymaking Act¹

| Section of Document | Synthesis of Requirement or Guidance |
|---|---|
| Additional Expertise and Project Success | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Can ensure that the expertise of both internal and external specialists is captured. • Promotes the uptake and use of data. |
| Increased Buy-In | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Can help foster acceptance of and willingness to actively support and participate in new initiatives or policies, including those impacted by decisions under consideration. |
| Address Sources of Disagreement | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Guidance on making data open by default should include an analysis of the costs and benefits to the public of creating accessible, machine-readable data. |
| Federal Agency Responsibilities to Make Data Open By Default | <p>Federal agencies are required to develop and maintain strategic information resources management plans that include open data plans. As part of these plans, agencies are required to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Facilitate external collaboration to understand how data users value and use government data • Collect and analyze information on data asset usage by internal and external users • Designate a point of contact for stakeholders to interact with agencies about their open data programs • Evaluate and improve quality of open data assets • Identify priority data assets and evaluate them for disclosure based on public interest |
| Federal Agency Responsibilities to Make Data Open By Default | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Federal agencies are required to engage the public to encourage use of agency data and publish information on data asset usage by non-government users. |
| Federal Agency Responsibilities to Make Data Open By Default | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Agencies are required to let the public request disclosure of specific data sets and share suggestions for how the agency should prioritize data for disclosure. • Agencies are required to help the public expand open data use and create additional value from their public data through challenges, competitions, events, or other methods. |

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| Data Inventory and Federal Data Catalog | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Agency heads are required to consider if data rights holders have been consulted when determining if data should be released or not. |
| Chief Data Officers | <p>In fulfilling their functions under the Evidence Act, Chief Data Officers are required to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Coordinate with officials in their own agencies who have responsibility for data Consult statistical officials in their agency Engage agency employees, the public, and contractors and encourage collaboration to improve data use Identify open data points of contact Serve as agency liaison on using data for statistical purposes to OMB and other agencies |
| Chief Data Officer Council | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> The Chief Data Officer Council is required to encourage data sharing agreements between agencies. |
| Chief Data Officer Council | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> The CDO Council is required to engage and consult with non-government users of open data on questions of improved access to federal data. |

¹This synthesis was prepared as part of a Toolkit for Practitioners of Stakeholder Engagement in Government Data Programs. It is not meant to constitute legal advice, but instead to serve as a starting point for federal data practitioners looking to better understand their legal requirements and related guidance around stakeholder engagement.

2022 President’s Management Agenda

| Section | Synthesis of Requirements or Guidance |
|---|--|
| <u>Workforce</u> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Agencies will include engagement with public servants and stakeholders inside and outside the federal government as part of efforts to improve the federal workforce. |
| <u>Delivering Excellent, Equitable, and Secure Federal Services and Customer Experience</u> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> To improve the federal government’s customer experience, agencies must better understand and involve their customers to improve benefits, services, and programs. Customer needs can be better understood through gathering feedback, conducting research, sharing insights, and testing approaches. Capacity to gather customer feedback, conduct user testing, and apply human-centered design research methods will be improved by 2024. Methods for improving customer experience include “Discovery Sprints” and first-person human-centered design research. OMB and GSA will engage with agencies to identify opportunities for shared products and services. |

M-19-23 - Phase 1 Implementation of the Foundations for Evidence-Based Policymaking Act of 2018: Learning Agendas, Personnel, and Planning Guidance

| Section | Synthesis |
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| Phase 1: Learning Agendas, Personnel, and Planning | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> The Evidence Act requires agencies to create learning agendas, which requires consultation with various stakeholders. |
| Chief Data Officer Council | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> The CDO Council is required to consult with stakeholders on ways to improve data access. |
| Appendix B: Purpose | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Through stakeholder consultation, learning agendas can promote interagency collaboration. |
| Appendix B: Establishing and using a Multi-Year Learning Agenda | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Agency leadership should be engaged in the learning agenda process. They can help identify key stakeholders to engage, among other things. Internal and external stakeholders should be consulted throughout the learning agenda development and implementation process. Stakeholder engagement can ensure that the agenda addresses relevant questions and resonates with stakeholders. Internal stakeholders to be consulted include staff who oversee designs, processes, operations, or programs discussed in the plan as well as staff who work on evaluation, statistics, analysis, data, enterprise risk management, performance, policy, regulations, privacy and information law, and leadership. <p>External stakeholders required to be consulted by the Evidence Act include the public, state and local governments, and non-governmental researchers.</p> <p>Additional groups to be consulted include OMB, federal grant recipients, Congress, and industry and trade groups.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Agencies should gather input in the most effective way for them. Some methods include RFI's in the Federal Register, listening sessions with stakeholder groups, Technical Working Groups, and bilateral consultations. Learning agendas should include stakeholder feedback. |
| Appendix C: Designation of Chief Data Officers | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> CDOs should consult with their agency's Data Governance Body and agency officials with whom they may share responsibilities when carrying out their duties. |
| Appendix C: Qualifications for Chief Data Officers | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> CDOs should be skilled at coalition building and influencing stakeholders. |

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| Appendix C: Qualifications for Evaluation Officers | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Evaluation Officers should be skilled at coalition building and influencing stakeholders. |
| Appendix C: Responsibilities for Evaluation Officers | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Evaluation Officers are the senior contact for evaluation efforts with external stakeholders and officials responsible for other related agency functions. • Agency evaluation policies provide stakeholders with clear expectations related to principles like evaluation, rigor, relevance, transparency, independence, and ethics. |
| Appendix C: Qualifications for Statistical Officials | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Agency statistical officials should be skilled at relationship building with government officials, academics, researchers, international organizations, and other stakeholders |
| Appendix D: Creating an Annual Evaluation Plan | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Agencies should consult with internal and external stakeholders while developing their initial Annual Evaluation Plan. This will look different for every agency, but at a minimum, internal consultation should include offices and staff with a role in undertaking evaluations or using their results. |

M-20-12 - Phase 4 Implementation of the Foundations for Evidence-Based Policymaking Act of 2018: Program Evaluation Standards and Practices

| Section of Document | Synthesis |
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| Summary of Federal Program Evaluation Standards | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To be useful, federal evaluations have to serve the information needs of stakeholders. • Federal evaluations have to produce trustworthy, clear findings for agencies and their stakeholders. • Federal evaluations have to be conducted to the highest ethical standards and protect participants and other stakeholders. |
| Summary of Evaluation Practices | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Federal evaluations have to identify and involve internal and external stakeholders. |
| Implementation | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Implementation should leverage knowledge from internal and external stakeholders. |
| Appendix B: Federal Program Evaluation Standards | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Evaluators should involve and consider stakeholders since stakeholder buy-in promotes the use of findings. This will help move an agency’s mission forward. • Evaluators should solicit input and feedback through peer review, technical working groups, other consultation of independent, unbiased experts, and other methods to strengthen credibility. • Evaluators should engage an inclusive, broad range of stakeholders. • Evaluations should include a design plan which includes information about the process for selecting and engaging stakeholders and experts. • To ensure fair, just, and equitable evaluations, a broad range of perspectives – including usually unrepresented voices – should be considered. This includes accounting for cultural and contextual factors like language, political and social climate, power, economic conditions, etc. • Evaluators should identify and inform affected stakeholders prior to the start of the evaluation and if it is significantly modified and communicate findings to them after it is finished. |

Appendix C: Use Expert Consultation Effectively

- Consulting internal and external experts can strengthen an evaluation, expand the content and technical expertise of the evaluators, provide critical review of the evaluation, and make its findings more likely to be seen as credible.
- Expert consultants should be selected based on their expertise and with transparency around their independence, objectivity, and any conflicts of interest.
- A list of experts and how to engage them should be developed at the start of the evaluation.
- Expert consultants can be engaged through technical work groups, expert groups, or peer reviews.

Appendix C: Establish, Implement, and Widely Disseminate and Agency Evaluation Policy

- Agency Evaluation Policies should be widely shared with stakeholders.
- Agency Evaluation Policies should be written in plain language and avoid jargon.
- Agency Evaluation Policies should be shared publicly and promoted with internal and external stakeholders.

Appendix C: Engage Key Stakeholders Meaningfully

- Stakeholder engagement can build support and interest in evaluation, ensure that evaluation design is well informed, and lead to better evaluation findings.

Agencies should identify key stakeholders, including federal leadership and staff in the agency doing the evaluation and other agencies, state and local agencies, service providers, practitioners, experts, program recipients or participants, representatives from communities, organizations, or others affected by policies being evaluated, etc.

- Stakeholder engagement plans should be developed early and discuss whom to engage, when, why, and how.
- Engaging relevant and diverse stakeholders can ensure evaluations are responsive to current needs.
- Stakeholders should be engaged at different stages of an evaluation.

Appendix C: Establish and Uphold Policies and Procedures to Protect Independence and Objectivity

- Incorporating stakeholder feedback should be balanced with the need to release findings in an objective, timely manner. For example, some agencies allow stakeholders to provide feedback and then share react publicly to the final product if they feel their feedback wasn't sufficiently addressed.
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M-21-27 - Evidence-Based Policymaking: Learning Agendas and Annual Evaluation Plans

| Section | Synthesis |
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| Opportunities from the Evidence Act | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Creating learning agendas and evaluation plans -- required under the Evidence Act -- requires working across silos with internal and external stakeholders. |
| Strategic Evidence Building | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Agency leaders and diverse stakeholders can identify needs and gaps when building a learning agenda by asking “what is it that our agency needs to do, what do we need to know to do it best, and what do we wish we knew?” • The process of developing a learning agenda -- including engaging stakeholders -- may be as beneficial as the final product. • Agencies should meaningfully engage diverse stakeholders when developing learning agendas and annual evaluation plans to shape the priority questions being asked or the study design. Stakeholder engagement provides innumerable benefits. • Agencies are expected to engage with internal stakeholders. • The Evidence Act requires agencies to engage with the public, state and local governments, and non-governmental researchers on their learning agendas. • Other stakeholders include OMB, federal award recipients, Tribal and territorial governments, Congress, industry and trade groups, academics, NGOs, communities and individuals served by the agencies, and more. Agencies are expected to systematically consider why engagement is important for both the agency and stakeholders through stakeholder mapping exercises and other methods. • Benefits of stakeholder engagement include identifying the most relevant and urgent questions, generating information, advancing equity, and meeting the needs of underserved communities. It can only be accomplished through intentional interactions with diverse stakeholders. • Different agencies will have different engagement priorities. For some, engaging with state, local, tribal, and territorial governments will ensure that ground-level problems are surfaced and addressed. For others, engaging with external researchers can help agencies understand existing research and create alignment on research priorities moving forward. • Stakeholder engagement should be transparent, build trust, and advance equity. RFI’s in the Federal Register are not adequate to encourage a rich exchange of ideas and engage diverse stakeholders. Other methods to consider include community engagement, participatory research, listening sessions/focus groups, technical working groups, bilateral consultations, and other methods that consider the lived experiences of those affected by policies. <p>These activities may require clearance under Paperwork Reduction Act, but agencies can leverage flexibilities like those outlined in the OMB memo Flexibilities under the Paperwork Reduction Act for Compliance with Information Collection Requirements.</p> |

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- Agencies should consider the following, among other methodological approaches to evidence-building: pilot projects, randomized controlled trials, quantitative survey research and statistical analysis, qualitative research, ethnography, research based on data linkages, and established community engagement processes.

Other methods to be considered consistent with OMB guidance include risk assessments and inclusive methodologies including participatory, emancipatory, community-based, user-led, and partnership research.

Community engagement can promote equity and lead to better research and evidence.

- Equity must be considered throughout the evidence-building lifecycle. Early, active, and consistent engagement with diverse stakeholders will lead to high-quality insights and lower the chances of perpetuating underlying biases. Engagement should start at the beginning when priority questions are being identified.
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OMB Circular A-11 - Preparation, Submission, and Execution of the Budget

| Section | Synthesis |
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| <p>Section 290- Evaluation and Evidence-Building Activities</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Evidence plans (learning agenda, annual evaluation plan, capacity assessment, etc.) should reflect agency-wide activities. Sub-agencies, bureaus, and divisions should be actively engaged in the process of developing them. The Evidence Act emphasizes the need for collaboration and coordination among agency staff. The Evaluation Officer is the senior contact on evaluation for agency-wide and cross-cutting evaluation efforts for interested parties and other stakeholders and in coordination with the CDO, CIO, Statistical Official, Performance Improvement Officer, and other relevant agency officials. Indigenous Traditional Ecological Knowledge can and should inform federal decision-making. |
| <p>290.15 What are the requirements for engaging interested parties on the Learning Agenda and Annual Evaluation Plan?</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Agencies are expected to engage diverse stakeholders from the start while developing learning agendas and annual evaluation plans. <p>Internal staff to be engaged include agency leadership, those that oversee design, process, operations, or programs being discussed as well as those working on other evaluations, statistics, analysis, data, risk management, performance, policy, regulatory, privacy and information law.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> The Evidence Act requires engagement of the public, state and local governments, and non-governmental researchers for the learning agenda. Additional partners for engagement include OMB, federal award recipients, Congress, the private sector, academics, NGOs, tribal governments, and communities. Agencies should consider the best ways to identify and engage stakeholders so that both parties gain value. Stakeholder mapping exercises are one approach to identifying them. Engagement methods should be transparent, trustworthy, and meaningful. They should rely on existing activities and requirements to the extent possible. Some approaches to engagement include: RFI's in the Federal Register, sustained community engagement, participatory research, listening sessions/focus groups, technical working groups, bilateral consultations. Engagement should not be limited to development of the learning agenda and annual evidence plans. <p>Benefits of engagement through the lifecycle of evidence generation and use include transparency, relevant evidence, and broader use of findings.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Engagement approaches used should be described in the Annual Evaluation Plan and updates to the learning agenda. |

Memorandum on Restoring Trust in Government Through Scientific Integrity and Evidence-Based Policymaking

| Section | Synthesis |
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| Task Force on Scientific Integrity | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Task Force on Scientific Integrity is required to identify best practices for engagement with federal scientists and contractors • The Task Force on Scientific Integrity is required to gather stakeholder input on scientific-integrity practices. This input can come via a virtual stakeholder summit, a public request for information, a virtual listening tour, open forums, and other methods. |
| Evidence-Based Policymaking | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • OMB may require agency evidence-building plans and annual evaluation plans to include approaches to evidence-based and equitable delivery of policies and programs. These approaches could include quantitative-survey research, qualitative research, ethnographic research, established community engagement processes, and more. • Agencies are required to make data publicly available, consistent with the Evidence Act to ensure that researchers inside and outside government can use data for equitable, evidence-based policymaking. |
| Agency Chief Science Officers | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Agency heads can appoint multiple scientific-integrity points of contact to coordinate with agency Scientific Integrity Officials on implementation. • Agency Chief Science Officers are required to prioritize evidence-based, equitable, inclusive, and participatory practices for research and communication. • Chief Science Officers and Scientific Integrity Officials will regularly meet to discuss how to expand scientific-integrity practices. |
| Scientific Advisory Committees | <p>Agencies are required to review their needs for independent scientific and technical advice from official bodies. The review needs to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Assess which existing science and technology advisory committees should be continued ○ Identify agency policies, processes, or practices that need to change to enable external experts from serving on committees |

- Agencies are required to ensure that nominees to advisory committees be diverse, representative of a variety of professional backgrounds, provide well-rounded, expert advice, and are selected based on their scientific and technical skills, with priority for experience with evidence-based, equitable, inclusive, and participatory practices.
- Agencies are required to report to OMB on the results of these reviews. Specifically, which committees should continue or be restarted, which need new membership, and which agency policies, processes, or practices need to be updated.

Executive Order 13985 Executive Order On Advancing Racial Equity and Support for Underserved Communities Through the Federal Government

| Section | Synthesis |
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| Engagement With Members of Underserved Communities | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Agencies are required to consult with communities that have been historically underrepresented, underserved, or discriminated against by the federal government. • Agency heads are required to increase coordination, communication, and engagement with community-based and civil rights organizations. |
| Establishing an Equitable Data Working Group | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Equitable Data Working Group is required to consult with other agencies to share best practices and information. This consultation should result in recommendations to improve existing federal data collection. |

Executive Order 13994 Ensuring a Data-Driven Response to COVID-19 and Future High-Consequence Public Health Threats

| Section | Synthesis |
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| Policy | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• The Executive Branch’s response to COVID-19 will be guided by the best available science and data.• Agencies are required to facilitate gathering, sharing, and publication of COVID-19 relevant data. <p>Agencies are required to help other federal, state, local, tribal, and territorial organizations develop policies to facilitate informed community decision-making.</p> |
| Enhancing Data Collection and Collaboration Capabilities for High-Consequence Public Health Threats, Such as the COVID-19 Pandemic | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Agencies are required to designate a senior official to lead COVID-19 and pandemic-related data issues. They should open data about public health threats to the public.• The COVID-19 Response Coordinator can convene agency representatives to coordinate data on the COVID-19 response as well as how that data is shared with non-federal government entities. |

Executive Order 13995 Ensuring an Equitable Pandemic Response and Recovery

| Section | Synthesis |
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| Purpose | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> This Executive Order outlines a government-wide effort to address health equity in COVID-19 response and recovery. |
| COVID-19 Health Equity Task Force | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> A COVID-19 Health Equity Task Force within HHS will include the heads of other agencies as well as up to 20 non-Federal appointees. Non-federal members should have lived experience relevant to disproportionate rates of suffering from COVID-19 as well as equity in public health, community-based services, and other experiences. The Task Force should make recommendations to agencies around culturally-aligned communication and outreach to underserved communities. The Task Force should collaborate with agencies on recommendations to expedite data collection in underserved communities and develop data that can help set pandemic related targets in those communities. It should also develop recommendations with agencies for a long term strategy to address data shortfalls, gaps, and other data related challenges. The Task Force can consult with a variety of non-federal stakeholders to achieve its objectives. |
| Ensuring an Equitable Pandemic Response | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Pandemic response plans can be modified to advance equity with consideration to priorities expressed by the most impacted communities. |