



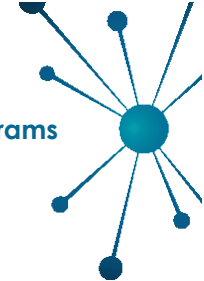
Building Evaluation Capacity for State Workforce System Programs

A Technical Assistance Summary Brief of the
2019 Peer Learning Cohort on Evaluation

Prepared by Margaret Patterson, PhD, and Cynthia Forland, PhD

Michelle Carson, Project Director, Safal Partners

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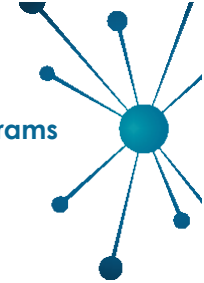
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Background

An evidence-building capacity scan of state workforce agencies revealed a striking truth: many states need help with building capacity to conduct workforce program evaluations to meet the requirements prescribed within section 116(e) of the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA). To support states in further developing workforce agency staff's evaluation capacity, the U.S. Department of Labor (DOL), Employment and Training Administration (ETA) established an online community of practice, the Evaluation and Research Hub in WorkforceGPS, with a complementary technical assistance opportunity—the Peer Learning Cohort on Evaluation (EvalPLC).

During the 2019 EvalPLC, states dealt with the unique challenges brought on by the pandemic and its resulting negative impact on workers, businesses, and the economy. The states' priority became one of virtually “all hands on deck” in handling the influx of unemployment insurance claims to support the wave of workers in financial crisis. While committed to the EvalPLC, pivoting to this most pressing need limited the ability of EvalPLC state members to participate in the last two sessions in April and May 2020 and for one state to complete its evaluation action plan by summer 2020.

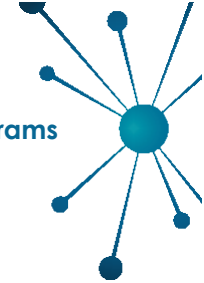
Against that backdrop, this brief report summarizes activities, strengths, and challenges related to states' evaluation capacity, insights, and successes from the state teams invited to participate in the EvalPLC through an application process in 2019. The six state teams in the 2019 cohort were Illinois (IL), Kentucky (KY), New Jersey (NJ), Oklahoma (OK), Texas (TX), and Wisconsin (WI).

EvalPLC Technical Assistance Activities

Throughout the EvalPLC, the participants on the state teams had the opportunity to:

- Use the [State Workforce Agency Evaluation Toolkit](#) to self-assess evaluation readiness, design, and implementation strengths and challenges.
- Participate in five virtual workgroup meetings to build knowledge, facilitate peer learning, and support teams to develop future evaluation plans.
- Meet for about five hours each month with the coach assigned to support them with advice and assistance tailored to each state's needs and the state's identified opportunities for improvement.
- Exchange promising practices across states and engage with workforce system evaluation subject matter experts (SMEs) in areas of greatest interest and need.

¹ Chocolaad, Yvette. “Evidence-Building Capacity in State Workforce Agencies: Insights from a National Scan and Two State Site Visits.” National Association of State Workforce Agencies, 9 May 2017, wdr.doleta.gov/research/details.cfm?q=Evaluation%20capacity%20NASWA&id=2611.



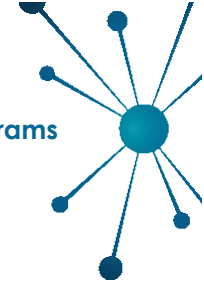
The virtual meetings encouraged peer-to-peer conversations, addressed technical assistance needs, and provided resources on evaluation topics of common interest. Each session featured facilitated peer learning exchanges and SME presentations on evaluation topics identified from review of the state teams' self-assessments. Meeting topics ranged from evaluation culture and awareness to data analysis plans, evaluation methods, and funding approaches. As part of the evaluation action planning activities, cohort members also engaged with nationally recognized SMEs from federal evaluation offices, state workforce program agencies, private foundations, and academia. These SMEs provided theoretical perspectives and practical information, described efforts to build internal evaluation capacity and procure external evaluators, and explained their own efforts to effectively report evaluation impacts and outcomes.

Coaching sessions with the cross-agency state teams occurred as they prepared to participate in each EvalPLC virtual session. Throughout the EvalPLC, state teams used these coaching sessions to identify the steps needed to implement actionable strategies. Information gained from the evaluation self-assessment results informed the topics for the EvalPLC meetings, peer conversations, and individualized coaching sessions as EvalPLC members developed their own state-specific Evaluation Action Plans (EAPs). The EvalHub EAP tool, developed by the DOL with input from former evaluation cohort participants, is a resource that state workforce agencies can use to transform the state's goals for evaluation into strategies and identify concrete next steps in:

- Evaluation Culture and Awareness
- Funding Strategies
- Data Management
- Staff Skills, Capacity, and Knowledge
- Strategic Planning

The remainder of this brief highlights the strengths and challenges, evaluation capacity-building strategies, next steps, and successes of and insights from the 2019 EvalPLC. The information sources for the states' strengths and challenges synthesized in this brief are gathered from the state teams' self-assessments, discussions during virtual meetings, coaching calls, and the states' EAPs. The report concludes with a section that highlights state-identified successes and insightful takeaways and considerations that could be helpful for other states, as they build capacity for research and evaluation for their workforce development programs; and as suggested, technical assistance enhancements to future EvalPLC efforts.

² Information summarized in this brief reflects the selected state teams' self-assessed readiness to design and conduct workforce program evaluations during the five-month period of the 2019 EvalPLC and their stated post-cohort plans.



States' Evaluation Capacity Strengths and Challenges

Each of the state teams utilized two self-assessment tools to identify strengths and challenges related to key elements for evaluation activities. The combined two self-assessments contain 43 statements about the overall readiness of the state teams to conduct evaluation activities and to design and implement evaluations. Each statement's response receives ratings that rank the state's evaluation capacity from "1," meaning not at all, to "5," in place and exceeding the key elements.

The six state teams' self-assessment responses drove the approaches used and content developed for each of the EvalPLC meetings. The state teams took two self-assessments, one after selection to participate, and one prior to the first peer cohort virtual meeting in Fall 2019. Results from the readiness assessments indicated that, on average, state teams identified strengths in *evaluation culture and awareness* and *data management*, and average ratings fell like "some of this sometimes." States identified *funding strategies*, *strategic planning*, and *staff skills, capacity, and knowledge* as challenges, on average, and they rated these areas an average of "making progress." From the design and implementation self-assessments, we learned that most state teams identified strengths in *data collection and analysis planning*, *evaluator selection*, and *participant rights*. The teams tended to assess data collection and analysis planning as "in place now." When they rated themselves on evaluator selection, results tended to be "making progress" or "some of this sometimes." States that reported strengths in participant rights indicated they were "in place now." All teams shared challenges with reporting and evaluation design and research questions, as both sections were generally rated "making progress" or "not at all."

States' Plans to Build Evaluation Capacity

As the state teams developed evaluation action plans, the EvalPLC coaches facilitated team discussions on how states might overcome the identified areas of improvement. State teams considered how to maintain momentum after the conclusion of the 2019 EvalPLC. Two state teams committed to maintaining a cross-agency group to continue to focus on planning for and conducting evaluations. The following sections discuss the states' plans in more detail across five topics on designing and conducting evaluations and building evaluation capacity.

Evaluation Culture and Awareness

Five states chose to focus on evaluation culture and awareness. Building a culture of evaluation means that the state workforce agency and its partners intentionally use information to analyze the enterprise's results (outputs and outcomes) to improve the delivery of services and programs. If an organization has a strong evaluation culture, its members can describe the benefits of program evaluation, use evidence-based results to inform its decisions, and conduct an evaluation or be a contributor to a partner's evaluation to add to the existing evidence base. Strategies identified by the state teams follow:



- Emphasize state-level processes to build evaluation culture or develop local evaluation requirements (KY, WI, OK).
- Transform the state's EvalPLC team into a permanent subcommittee of the state workforce board or assemble an evaluation team to create a seamless evaluation process for the state (IL, KY).
- Include effective evaluation strategies when implementing new or revamping existing programs and services (NJ).
- Develop Title I policy and technical guidance for local areas to meet evaluation requirements (OK).
- Train staff through experiential learning—using a brainstorming process with literature scans and reviews to inform the selection of research questions for a future research proposal (WI).

Identifying Funding Strategies

When planning for evaluation activities, the state or region must consider funding strategies. Funding strategies include investing in state-funded evaluations, leveraging local or state grant-funded project resources, or pursuing opportunities with external partnerships and other funding sources. Four of the state teams identified funding strategies unique to each:

- Involve stakeholders in rerouting and restructuring funding sources (KY).
- Develop an approach to use the governor's set-aside funds for evaluation, identify partner-funding resources, work with partners to pursue funding, and include evaluation in state program requirements (IL).
- Provide technical assistance to local areas to increase evaluation activities (OK).
- Use the Workforce Data Quality Initiative (WDQI) grant to create two new data steward positions, prepare for future evaluation grants, develop an evaluation tracking document, and create memoranda of understanding (MOUs) through a new long-term funding committee (WI).

Planning for Data Management

Data management is more than the collection, storage, and dissemination of information. It also entails the development of effective processes for collecting and storing the data coupled with the critical element of ensuring the security and quality of the data. Kentucky, Oklahoma, and Wisconsin addressed issues related to data management as part of their EAPs.



Three states considered updates to existing data mechanisms or implemented new data processes, use, dissemination, and documentation as follows:

- Analyze outcomes data and use results of a proposed survey to develop a seamless service delivery process (KY).
- Review and update all data-related partner MOUs (OK).
- Provide transparent and accessible data through a new tracking and approval mechanism (WI).
- Create a data dictionary, establish policies and standards for research, and build tools to share de-identified data (WI).

Building Evaluation Capacity

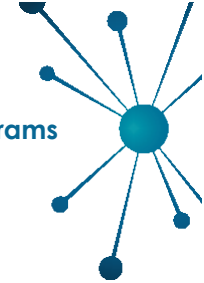
Building evaluation capacity involves developing the knowledge, skills, and attitudes of workforce agency and program staff to engage in conducting evaluations. Five states began planning for ways to build in-house research and evaluation capacity, as follows:

- Develop a set of duties for its evaluation team (KY).
- Build an evaluation unit consisting of in-house and third-party staff, define the unit's roles and responsibilities, and strengthen its capacity (IL).
- Enlist third-party assistance with evaluations and ask partners to contribute to evaluation planning (IL).
- Create a directory of agency research skills to engage a network of researchers (OK).
- Explore the use of advanced analytics (e.g., artificial intelligence) in its evaluation efforts (TX).
- Showcase evaluation and data-based decision making while also setting expectations for evaluation accountability (WI).

Planning for Evaluations

Strategic evaluation planning is critical for states to determine the evidence needed to improve programs and services. This kind of planning cycle begins with the identification of the program research questions that arise from stakeholder engagement and ends in the development of a learning agenda. Kentucky, Oklahoma, and Wisconsin identified goals for integrating strategic evaluation planning into their EAP, as follows:

- Incorporate evaluation into the state's 2020 Strategic Plan and monitor and analyze the Strategic Plan's goals (KY).



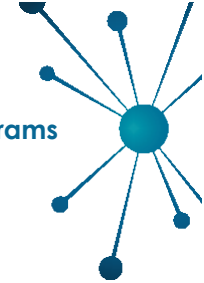
- Create an evidence portfolio of current and past research projects and WIOA research publications to share with core partners (OK).
- Compose an operating manual, assess state strategy, review federal resources, and create a learning agenda, action plan, and data strategy (WI).

State Teams' Planned Next Steps

State teams collaborated with a coach with evaluation expertise to identify their post-cohort focus areas and to apply lessons learned to their states' EAPs. With a concrete and specific set of challenges, corresponding goals, and specific strategies in an EAP, states position themselves to make progress in planning for and conducting evaluations of workforce programs. Strategies the state teams planned to focus on after participation in the EvalPLC included the following:

- Explore evaluation funding and expand staff evaluation skills, capacity, and knowledge. Commit to maintaining a cross-agency approach to access evaluation funding and to develop an evaluation unit comprised of state agencies and external third-party staff (IL).
- Emphasize longer-term goals, like managing input and outcome data more closely to confirm data system accuracy and building staff evaluation capacity by learning more about types and advantages of evaluations. Incorporate evaluation into future strategic planning activities and analyze the strategic plan's effectiveness through an evaluation (KY).
- Solidify a network of evaluation staff across core programs to support workforce program evaluation and review and update all data-related partner MOUs (OK).
- Define strategies and activities to create an evaluation culture and improve awareness of evaluation. Develop actions to enhance staff evaluation skills, capacity, and knowledge (NJ).
- Concentrate on the use of advanced analytics in evaluation efforts, including the application of artificial intelligence and machine learning in evaluation to enhance service delivery systems (TX).
- Access funding to fill two new evaluation and partnership-development positions and join the existing Information Technology Management Board in support of future planning efforts (WI).

The EvalPLC provided the impetus for New Jersey to move its efforts forward, saying that, "There was always evaluation in the back of our minds; with the cohort, we have all the necessary voices at the table, it's been a great start. We have identified the resources we need and the steps to take to get them."



States' Successes and Insights from the EvalPLC

Despite the diversion of states' attention to a rapid and focused response to the economic situation of 2020, the state teams identified successful endeavors that came about because of their participation in the EvalPLC. The Illinois team shared that, “the state workforce board adopted the new evaluation team [formed for the EvalPLC] as a subcommittee to work with them on identifying opportunities for continuous improvement.” With an eye to sustainability, Wisconsin decided that the team formed to participate in the EvalPLC would become part of the state workforce agency's Information Technology Management Board. This approach to continuity can support planning for a new data tracking and approval mechanism, the establishment of research and evaluation policies and standards, and tools to enable sharing de-identified workforce data. Following the conclusion of the EvalPLC technical assistance activities, state teams continued making progress in planning and implementing evaluations.

Wisconsin noted that the peer learning sessions provided “great information on the topics” in a format that allowed more detail and more engagement than a typical webinar.

Other insights from the 2019 EvalPLC participants reflected on how states can continue to build or enhance evaluation capacity across agencies' workforce development programs and on considerations for enhancement of future EvalPLC TA efforts.

EvalPLC Participants' Key Takeaways

- Integrate the EAP development process into the state's evaluation and strategic planning.
- Establish and maintain a state cross-sector group to focus on planning for and conducting evaluations of workforce development programs.

Considerations for Future EvalPLC TA Efforts

- Continue discussions with state peers and seek out opportunities to learn from evaluation and research SMEs to support state evaluation planning efforts.
- Use evaluation self-assessments and planning tools to identify key areas and specific strategies to advance state evaluation and capacity building activities.
- Engage local programs and other stakeholders to improve the likelihood of states' ability to meet evaluation and research goals.

³ The data collected immediately after the EvalPLC is limited in scope since the COVID-19 outbreak toward the end of the EvalPLC activities delayed evaluation activities that states had planned after the final webinar.



Appendix: Description of the 2019 EvalPLC Virtual Events

Planned Objectives	Session Recap	Additional Input
Event 1 <i>Establishing the Baseline</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Review state teams' expectations and assessments Recap state evaluation technical assistance needs Conduct peer learning exchange about the status of each state's evaluation efforts 	<p>Shared expectations for the EvalPLC; considered the strengths each state team possessed in evaluation, data, and strategic planning; walked through the results of the cohort's evaluation readiness and evaluation design assessments; and considered the states' aggregated opportunities for improvements in evaluation culture and awareness, funding, and data management.</p>
Event 2 <i>Introducing Evaluation Design and Action Planning</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Discuss evidence reviews and evaluations Consider needs for data analysis plans Conduct peer learning exchange activity on evaluation design and action planning Review evaluation action planning 	<p>Presenters covered logic models, evidence reviews, and elements of research design. The data analysis planning discussion included data elements and collection, data needs to address research questions, data security, and making data sets publicly available after evaluations' ends. During the peer exchange, participants discussed the challenges of using rigorous evaluation designs and the potential for using innovative evaluation methods, followed by a review of a performance-related structure and logic model example. Evaluation action planning was introduced, and the session ended with a conversation about balancing the appetite for research and evaluation with a demonstrated interest from stakeholders or "stomach size."</p>
Event 3 <i>Building Capacity for Evaluation</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Discuss how to build in-house capacity for evaluation Discuss what to consider when selecting an external evaluator Conduct peer conversation and learning exchange on capacity-building 	<p>Presenters focused on building evaluation capacity that included a discussion of in-house resources and third-party evaluators. State teams conversed about the difficulties in recruiting and retaining staff with the skills to conduct evaluations. Also deliberated was the use of a third-party evaluator and the need for in-house staff to coordinate with those evaluators to make sure evaluation projects stay on track and the agency meets the evaluator's data needs.</p>



Planned Objectives	Session Recap	Additional Input
Event 4 <i>Funding Strategies for Evaluation</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Share tips from the field on funding strategies for evaluation • Discuss strategies in peer learning exchange for funding evaluations with state team peers, including Oklahoma's experiences • Share potential funding resources 	<p>Presenters shared thoughts about strategically funding evaluations and emphasized the importance of conducting randomized control trials. Additional insights about using less rigorous methods to identify promising practices that may warrant more rigorous evaluation methods were stressed. Suggestions from a state's experience with funding research and evaluation efforts included suggestions to secure federal grants (e.g., WDQI, reemployment, systems integrations, and dislocated worker grants), to require evaluation as part of state-issued funding requests for proposals, and to be persistent in the pursuit of grants and other funding opportunities.</p>
Event 5 <i>Tips on Evaluation Reporting and Building Evaluation Culture</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Discuss how to report evaluation results • Discuss states' shared thoughts on building an evaluation culture • Conduct a peer learning exchange on evaluation capacity-building and evaluation action planning • Learn about states' evaluation progress updates and EvalPLC experiences 	<p>Presenters walked through the elements of a "good" evaluation report and showed examples of graphics to illustrate evaluation results. Discussions also highlighted the need for an evaluation culture that emphasizes, cultivates, and continuously works to be inclusive of program staff to build upon existing capacity and expand the staff's appreciation of the value of research and evaluation. During the peer exchange, state teams discussed the evaluation action plans developed throughout the EvalPLC and exchanged thoughtful conversations about their experiences with reporting evaluation results and building an evaluation culture.</p>