



## Evidence Portfolios for State Agencies

### *Process*

Colorado is a leader in using data to inform decision making and smart state investments. To accelerate progress and build on the good work that has come before, the Colorado Evaluation and Action Lab (Colorado Lab) released a 5-year Vision for Evidence-Based Decision Making (EBDM) in state government (Nov. 2022).

The evidence portfolio process was developed to further implementation of this vision by supporting agencies in using and building evidence as part of the state budgeting process.

### **Background**

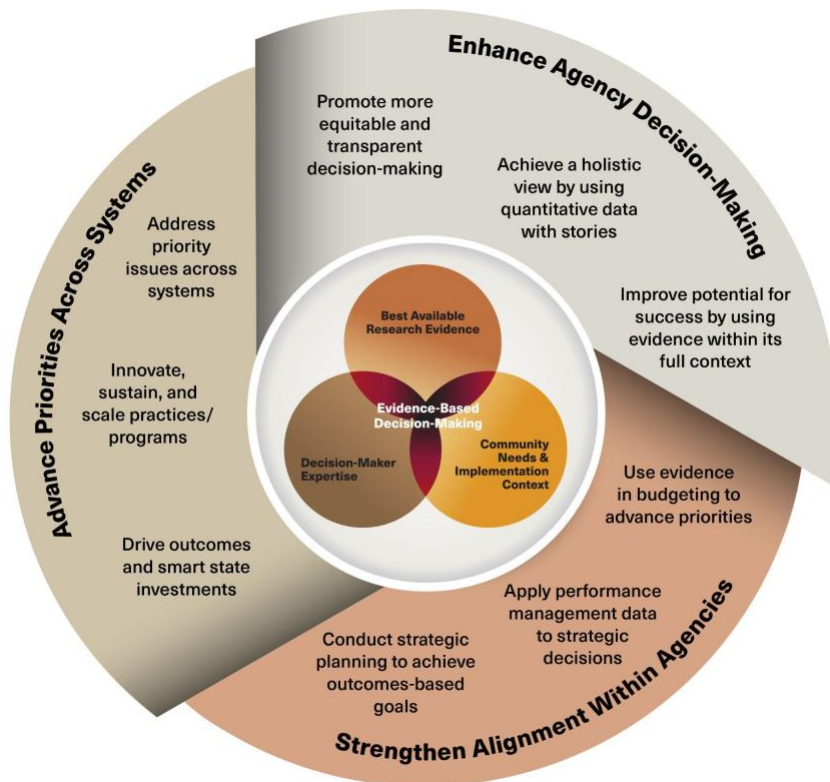
Annually, Colorado state agencies undergo a budgeting process to determine upcoming state investments that meet the priorities of Colorado communities and decision makers. The Governor's Office of State Planning and Budgeting (OSPB) collaborates with executive branch agencies to develop the Governor's annual budget proposal, which it submits to the legislature's Joint Budget Committee (JBC) every year on November 1st. State agencies have expressed a need for greater support in using data to inform budget and policy priorities and develop their budget submissions. In response, the Colorado Lab developed an evidence portfolio process that can be replicated and adapted by agencies to meet this need. The evidence portfolio process helps to align EBDM during budgeting, performance management, and strategic planning.

### **Value of Evidence Portfolios**

Evidence portfolios can support state agencies in applying evidence to drive outcomes, leveraging data to inform learning and action, and building evidence on what works and for whom, while promoting innovation. Evidence portfolios bring several benefits to state agencies and systems (Figure 1, next page).

*Value to Staff:* Importantly, evidence portfolios are a "tool for doing the work." They become a core part of the agency's infrastructure and process for decision making. This means they can and should be used beyond just the budgeting process. For example, they can be used for continuous quality improvement, to identify evaluation opportunities, to respond to emergent opportunities in partnerships and funding, to build shared understanding within and across teams, to support professional development and goals, to onboard and cross-train staff, and in reporting and communications.

Figure 1. Evidence Portfolio Benefits



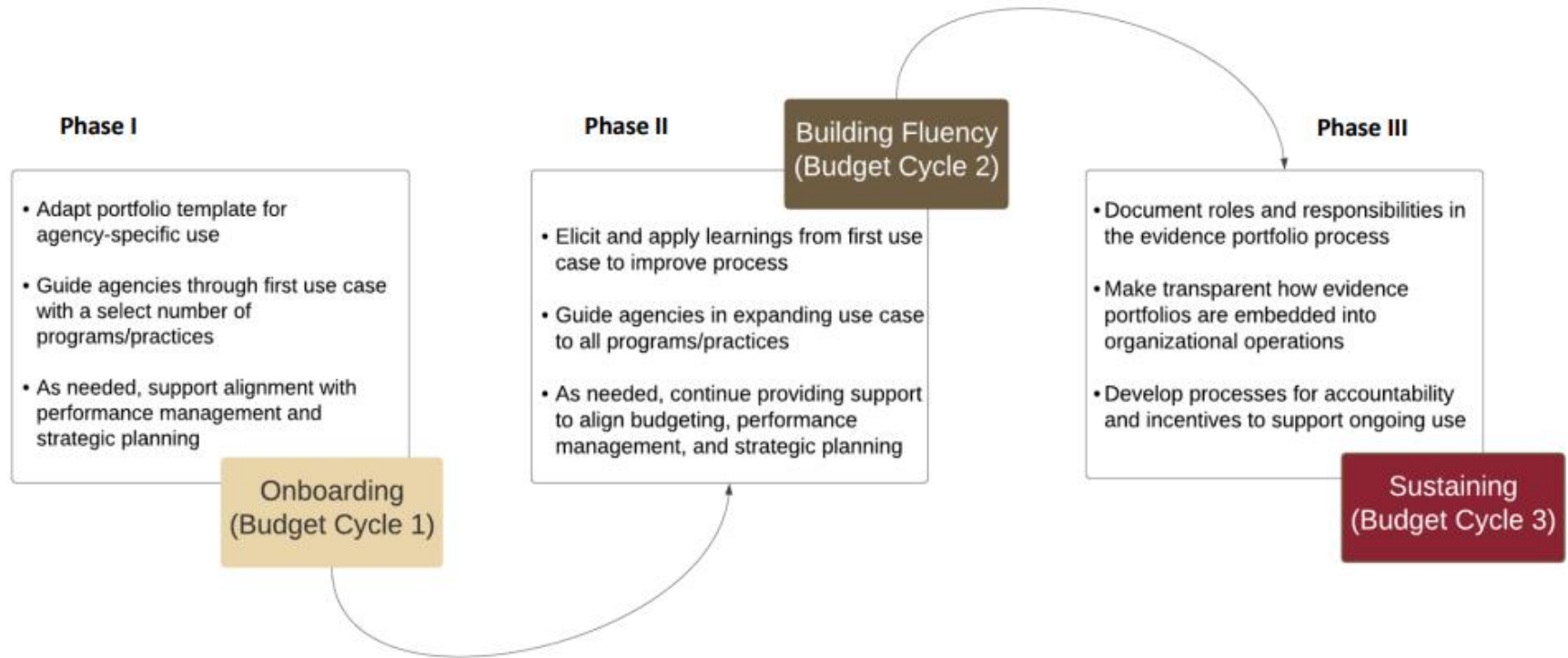
## Evidence Portfolio Development and Replication

The evidence portfolio process was developed using existing literature and tools from the fields of implementation science and evidence-based policymaking, and was informed by thought partnership with state agencies and the Governor’s Office. The Colorado Department of Early Childhood (CDEC) partnered with the Colorado Lab to pilot a version of the evidence portfolios to meet CDEC goals around stimulus funding and sustainability decisions. Learnings from this pilot helped to strengthen the evidence portfolio process and assess its value for advancing EBDM during the budgeting process.

Replicating the evidence portfolios across state agencies follows a pipeline approach (Figure 2). The three-phased pipeline approach typically takes multiple years to fully scale and helps to ensure state agencies receive the technical assistance necessary to a) launch successfully, b) build fluency and embed into agency operations, and c) sustain the evidence portfolio process over time. Phase I focuses on establishing the process and the first use cases, where immediate benefits in applying the evidence portfolios generated can be reaped. Upon first use, the tool will be adapted to each agency’s unique circumstances and the Colorado Lab provides technical assistance to support the integrity and efficiency of its use. An agency may move through a given phase in the pipeline within one budget cycle, or may need multiple budget cycles to fully accomplish a phase. This depends on factors such as capacity, complexity of organizational structure, and size of budget . Learn more about this process [here](#).

Definitions used are aligned with the evidence section of OSPB’s budgeting instructions as well as the evidence review process of JBC staff. As such, evidence portfolios help to effectively and efficiently complete agency annual budget submissions.

**Figure 2. Pipeline for Replicating Use of Evidence Portfolio Process Across State Agencies**



## Evidence Portfolio Principles and Structure

The evidence portfolio process is anchored in the following principles:

- *Evidence-Based Decision Making (EBDM)*: The process aligns with [Colorado's vision for EBDM](#) and the five defining features of a successful EBDM culture.
- *Proactive*: The process helps state agencies take a proactive approach to innovating, sustaining, and scaling practices/programs and infrastructure needs.
- *Learning Mindset*: The process informs state agencies as learning organizations, to facilitate decision making today and tomorrow.
- *Reach and Access Integration*: The process embeds transparency in how decisions may affect different communities.

**Confidentiality Note:** It is critical that confidentiality be maintained by all involved in the evidence portfolio process. Evidence portfolios are part of the pre-decisional process leading up to budget submissions. Expectations around how evidence portfolios will be used in the larger budgeting process and associated confidentiality protocols will be determined by agency leadership.

Evidence portfolios use a set of criteria tied to the three major domains in evidence-based decision making (Figure 3): best available research evidence, community needs and implementation context, and decision-maker expertise.

**Figure 3. The Evidence-Based Decision Making Approach**



The tool intentionally blends guiding questions for reflection with a numeric scoring approach and narratives to provide context to scores. This is because EBDM rests at the intersection of the three EBDM domains. It is essential that agency staff holding different roles work as a team to develop and update evidence portfolios over time. This team-based approach helps to break down silos and promote greater alignment of EBDM within an agency; such roles may include program managers, agency leadership, performance managers and strategy, policy, and budget staff, and strategy staff.

The evidence portfolios have several benefits, including:

- Promotes more **balanced decision making**, recognizing that different agency activities have different starting places and may reach or impact communities differently.
- Values both **numbers-based data and narrative-based data**, appreciating the need for both to get at a holistic view of benefits, harms, and unintended consequences.
- Integrates **evidence in context**, recognizing that research evidence alone is not the only contributing factor to policy and budget decisions.
- Enables the agency to **take an intentional pause**, slowing down to reflect on the good work done to date and identify opportunities for strengthening process and impact.

## Evidence Portfolio Process, in brief

The evidence portfolio process follows five major steps.

1. **Program/Practice Inventory is created.** An evidence portfolio is completed for each budget item that involves a program/practice as defined in [House Bill \(HB\)24-1428](#). The inventory is created once and then updated annually. Teams are identified as part of inventory creation. Teams create a “checks and balances” system that can strengthen alignment and help to verify documentation. Other key individuals to connect with (e.g., legislative team, budget teams, IT) are also identified upfront to ensure collaboration across silos.
2. **Leadership and staff are trained on the evidence portfolio process.** Training focuses on role alignment and responsibilities in completing evidence portfolios. Training is done over time and includes multiple touch points to triage issues coming up and build confidence of all participants in the process.
3. **Teams complete the evidence portfolios and verify documentation using the tool provided.** For each program/practice included in the inventory, an evidence portfolio is completed and recommendations around the program’s future are made. If the agency is working with an external evaluator, the team is encouraged to collaborate with the evaluators to obtain necessary portfolio information. When portfolios are complete, the teams should share back relevant information with the evaluators.
4. **Results and recommendations across the inventory are synthesized.** Agency leadership apply a systems lens to document and make transparent trade-offs and dependencies among the programs/practices in the inventory. Agency leadership review and discuss the synthesized information to ensure balance among components of the agency’s strategic plan and available budget.
5. **Decisions are then appropriately communicated and used by agency staff to promote transparency and accountability.** Portfolio content is used year-round as part of learning and action, including for quality improvement, responding to funding opportunities, reporting, and onboarding new staff.

Because this is an agency-owned tool to be updated annually, it is critical that agency staff can develop content for their portfolios and apply results, independent of external support once initial onboarding and fluency is built. This supports agency capacity building and sustainability.

## **Accompanying Materials**

- Program and Practice Inventory
- Evidence Portfolio Tool
- Evidence Portfolio Guidance Sheet (provided after training)
- Evidence Portfolio System Map (restricted use)