



Program Evaluation: Guidance for Legislators in Bill Drafting

This guide provides an overview of what needs to be considered when drafting statutory language for program evaluation to support smart state investments.

Be Specific About the Evaluation Purpose - and Little Else

Clearly defining the purpose of an evaluation, including a general description of the concept to be examined (e.g. educational attainment, housing stability, recidivism, etc.), helps to ensure that the purpose will be met. Limit the amount of detail specifying *how* the purpose will be met so the details can be worked out by those closest to the work. Keep in mind that quality evaluation requires resources and time. The purpose of the evaluation should be matched to existing capacity and the size of the proposed investment (*see funding considerations on back*).



To clearly communicate what you hope to learn and how that information will be used, three components should always be explicit in a bill (examples on the right):

1 What purpose will the evaluation address?

The evaluation will address whether the program is being implemented as designed. Program staff will use interim reports (released quarterly) to drive ongoing improvements in implementation.

2 How is this information going to be used?

The evaluation will address whether the program is reaching the intended target population. Once the program reaches fidelity in fiscal year 2026, state decision makers will use this information to determine where to focus expansion efforts.

3 Who might act on the information and over what timeline?

The evaluation will examine the impact of the program on the target population. If the program is not having the expected impact, the evaluation will examine why. When the program sunsets in four years, the General Assembly will use the evaluation results, among other evidence, to inform the decision to continue investment.

It is impossible to anticipate all potential barriers and opportunities to the work, and avoiding rigid directives allows those closest to the work to make adjustments while staying consistent with the evaluation's purpose.

Whenever possible, avoid putting details about the following in statute:

- 1. Measurement Approach.** Be flexible about how variables are measured to accommodate uncertainty in the quantity and quality of available data.
- 2. Specific Data Elements or Types.** As long as their use is consistent with the purpose of the evaluation, be open to various types of data including quantitative administrative data, qualitative data from focus groups and interviews, and everything in between.
- 3. Methodology.** The evaluation methodology should match the purpose of the evaluation, be appropriate given a program's maturity level, and be feasible given the available data. There are tradeoffs among these considerations, and an agency evaluation team or an experienced external evaluator can make the best choices.

If any of the above elements must be specified for authorization purposes (e.g. for data sharing), provide the evaluator as much flexibility as you can within the necessary constraints.

Consider Including Statutory Language for Data Sharing, Timeline, and Funding

These three factors will influence the feasibility and quality of the evaluation.

1) Authorize data sharing if multiple systems are needed to support the evaluation's purpose

Often, data from multiple systems are needed to address an evaluation's question(s) of interest. Clear authorizing language can reduce ambiguity and relieve some of the burden on data stewards to interpret privacy laws. Leveraging statute to explicitly authorize data sharing under strict conditions like those provided by the [Linked Information Network of Colorado](#) can give data owners the confidence they need to become supportive evaluation partners.

Even when authorized by statute, data sharing agreements across multiple entities can take several months with evaluations involving personally identifiable information requiring longer. Also, administrative data may not be available for some time after collection. For example, child welfare data are updated in real time, but quarterly earnings data are on a six month delay.

Contact [LINC](#) for more information about how a data owner can become a data partner and when statute may be helpful for that purpose.

2) Establish a timeline that considers the complexity of the program and the evaluation

The timeline should be informed by the likely evaluation design and accessibility of data.

Key timeline considerations:

- There are often tradeoffs between the timeliness and actionability of findings and the evaluation design. An interim report that releases early findings can provide the opportunity for timely action while longer-term outcomes are still being collected.
- If the purpose is to evaluate program effectiveness, a new or innovative program needs to first be delivered with fidelity. The amount of time necessary to bring a program to fidelity varies based on program complexity but can take up to several years, during which time the focus should be on evaluating processes rather than outcomes.
- Evaluations cannot report on results that haven't happened yet. If a program's primary benefit takes three years to realize, then the results of an evaluation should not be expected for at least four years. This includes a year to obtain the outcomes data, analyze the data, allow for stakeholder feedback, and disseminate.
- Large samples give us greater confidence in an evaluation's findings. Sample sizes can be increased by expanding a program to reach more people at the same time or by giving new groups of people the program over time. Including new participants over time extends the length of time needed to complete the evaluation.

The [Colorado Lab](#) can help you connect with an experienced evaluator in the relevant subject area to determine the sample size needed to achieve the evaluation's purpose and establish reasonable timelines.

3) Include adequate funding to support quality evaluation

The funding amount will depend on the complexity of design and where the program is at on the [Steps to Building Evidence](#). If an evaluation is contracted out, the budget should include a portion of an internal employee's salary for managing the work and ensuring actionability of the findings. A common rule of thumb is to allocate around 15% of the annual program budget for evaluation, with no less than \$100,000-\$150,000/year for mature programs. This allows for a reasonable outcome evaluation with a comparison group. This amount should be increased if there is an additional process evaluation or significant original data collection. Generally, slightly less is needed to conduct a process evaluation only.



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Colorado Evaluation & Action Lab
UNIVERSITY OF DENVER

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