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Better Government: Measure the Impact of State Funded Programs

Florida's policymakers, including Governor DeSantis and the 160 members of the Florida Legislature, face many tough choices each year. State leaders must find effective solutions to critical challenges such as the need to reduce crime, improve school performance, promote affordable housing, and enhance water quality. Additionally, even with a state budget of $117 billion (2023), requests for spending always exceed available resources. Each year, the Florida Legislature considers thousands of bills during the 60-day Legislative Session and passes the Appropriations Act (Budget) that allocates available resources among competing needs.

Ideally, legislators would make budget decisions by assessing whether current efforts to address these problems are achieving desired results and considering what options would generate the best return on the investment of tax dollars. However, the legislature often has limited information to make these determinations. Florida collects very little information on the thousands of programs run by Florida state agencies. There is no measurement on cost, results, who are served and how goals are being met. In fact, Florida lacks a comprehensive list of these funding projects, often referred to as *member projects*.

It should be noted that the legislature lacks a list of *all* state programs that receive funding in the base budget or information on whether these programs are achieving positive outcomes. The Florida Policy Project, in partnership with Gary Landingham, PhD, Director, FSU Askew School of Public Administration and Policy, and author of this report, will be completing additional research and recommendations regarding best practices for measuring state funded programs.

Mechanisms for Measuring

A growing number of states, including "red", "blue", and "purple" ones, are taking steps to provide legislators with more useful information on whether current programs are generating desired results and worthy of continuation. While these states' activities vary, most have required agencies to submit inventories of their current programs and have created systems that categorize these interventions by their level of effectiveness

evidence.[1] Key elements of these systems include statutory language that provides clear definitions of programs, detailed criteria for evaluating program impact, and funding preferences for activities that rigorous evidence shows to be effective. These definitions help ensure that programs are judged consistently and provide a common language for discussing program effectiveness. The states use these frameworks to systematically review their current spending, seeking to identify and retain successful programs and to shift funds away from those that lack evidence of desired results. As noted in a recent nationwide report, these governments have shifted over $22 billion to evidence-based programs and policies (Results for America, 2023).

As reviewing the base budget is a major task, states generally begin by focusing on a few agencies or policy areas, such as mental health, criminal justice, substance abuse. The states form teams, often including both legislative and executive branch staff, that work with the agencies to develop comprehensive lists of their current programs. The teams then assess the available evidence about the programs' effectiveness, which may include in-state evaluations and performance metrics.

A key resource in this effort is the network of research clearinghouses that curate evidence about program effectiveness. In recent decades, thousands of high-quality studies have assessed program outcomes in many policy areas. However, until recently, these findings were difficult to access because many were unpublished or reported only in academic and professional journals. The clearinghouses systematically identify and review these studies and use the information to assign evidence ratings to programs. A recent study identified over 50 of these entities, which are typically operated by governments, universities, and research collaboratives (Bridgespan, 2015). Prominent clearinghouses include the U.S. Department of Education's *What Works Clearinghouse,* the U.S. Department of Justice's *CrimeSolutions.gov* and the University of Colorado's *Blueprints for Healthy Youth Development*. Additionally, the United Kingdom has established a network of What Works Centres that rate programs in health care, aging, policing, education, local economic growth, and social services (What Works Network, 2018). Australia has created similar entities including the Communities and Families Clearinghouse Australia, the Australian Centre for the Study of Sexual Assault, the Australian Family Relationships Clearinghouse, and the National Child Protection Clearinghouse (Australian Institute of Family Studies, 2010).

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[1] More information on these evidence-informed governance techniques and an assessments of Florida's current use of them can be found in a recent report issued by The LeRoy Collins Institute at the Florida State University: *Better Choices: Evidence-Based Policymaking Can Improve Florida's Outcomes,* released in February 2021.

The clearinghouses are a gamechanger, making high quality evidence about program effectiveness much more accessible. While the clearinghouses vary in how they report information, most operate searchable websites that display their program ratings and the studies that contributed to these ratings. For example, *Blueprints for Healthy Youth Development* enables users to search interventions by evidence ratings, target populations, program settings, continuums of intervention, and risk and protective factors (Blueprints, 2023). To further facilitate access to this information across clearinghouses, the Pennsylvania State University's *Evidence to Impact Collaborative* operates the Results First Clearinghouse Database, which consolidates the evidence ratings of nine major clearinghouses through a single web portal. The portal enables users to search over 3,200 programs to quickly identify what works across social policy areas (Penn State, 2023). The Database classifies programs into five categories:

- Green (highest rated): programs with a demonstrated positive impact based on rigorous evidence such as randomized control trials.
- Yellow (second-highest rated): programs that are promising with a positive impact based on high quality evidence such as comparison group studies.
- Blue (mixed effects): programs that have inconsistent impacts (a mix of positive and negative outcomes) based on high quality evidence.
- Gray (no effects): programs that are ineffective in achieving desired results based on high quality evidence.
- Red (negative effects): programs that harm participants based on high quality evidence.

Other State Examples for Budget Project Measurement

- **Alabama's** Commission on the Evaluation of Services is a bipartisan, cross-branch commission that advises the legislature and governor on current spending. The 14-member Commission has co-chairs from each branch and includes six members appointed by the legislature, six members appointed by the governor, and two nonvoting members—the state director of finance and the deputy director of the Legislative Services Agency Fiscal Division. Commission staff evaluate current services within specified policy areas. The Commission began its work by examining the state's suicide prevention programs (Pew, 2022).

- **Minnesota** requires agencies to report inventories of current programs in 13 policy areas, including criminal justice, child welfare, education, aging and adult services, and health, and it categorizes each program by its level of effectiveness evidence. A searchable database (https://mn.gov/mmb/ results-first/ inventory/) maintains this inventory, listing over 500 programs, their evidence ratings and service descriptions, and links to the research clearinghouses that were used to classify each programs' effectiveness. This database enables legislators, agency leaders, providers, and citizens to quickly review what programs the state is delivering and whether these activities are likely to achieve desired outcomes (Minnesota Policy and Budget, 2023).

- **Mississippi** uses a detailed screening process for legislative funding requests. Agencies must justify the need for new programs by providing evidence on population needs and how intended services would meet these needs, research showing that the approach has been found effective in other jurisdictions, detailed implementation plans, and proposed performance metrics that will be reported. Legislative staff review this documentation and assess whether the sponsors have provided sufficient answers to these questions, and the legislature has typically declined to fund requests that fail to meet these criteria (Pew, 2017).

- **North Carolina** employs formal criteria for classifying programs by their evidence of effectiveness and requires agencies to justify requests for additional funding with evidence that the intervention will be successful (Pew, 2021).

- **New Mexico** has one of the nation's most rigorous systems for using evidence in its budget process. All state agencies are required to report inventories of current programs and their performance metrics quarterly and incorporate this information in their annual budget requests. Legislative staff analyze the reported data and publish quarterly report cards that assess each agency's progress against designated benchmarks. These staff also conduct rigorous evaluations of state programs at the direction of legislators. he Legislative Finance Committee holds regular hearings on agency performance, and these data are regularly discussed during budget deliberations. In addition, the state has implemented quarterly forums in which legislative and executive branch

officials jointly meet to discuss performance data and potential solutions to identified problems (Pew, 2022).

- **Washington State** requires agencies to report inventories of behavioral health, criminal justice, juvenile justice, and child welfare programs, and it analyzes the extent to which these interventions meet the evidence requirements. The state requires its social service agencies to target funding to evidence-based programs and training whenever these interventions are available. This requirement has been phased in, aiming to increase the percentage of funding dedicated to evidence- and research-based programs by 7.5% per year (Washington Department of Social and Health Services, (2014). To further inform legislative policy and budget decisions, the Washington State Institute for Public Policy (WSIPP) developed a nationally recognized benefit-cost analysis model that uses the findings of high-quality evaluations and state-specific population and cost data to calculate the returns on investment that the state could achieve by funding alternative evidence-based programs. These analyses regularly rank over 400 programs across 11 policy areas, including adult and juvenile justice, child welfare, Pre-K to 12th-grade education, children's and adult mental health, substance abuse, health care, higher education, and workforce development (WSIPP, 2023).

While these state processes vary in scope, they collectively give legislators more confidence that programs receiving ongoing funding are delivering effective services to residents.

Recommendations: Establish a framework to measure member projects' effectiveness

Making high-quality evidence more accessible to legislators can better inform their tough choices and increase confidence that programs in the base budget are achieving a positive return on taxpayer dollars. This policy report recommends that Florida:

1. Establish a policy framework, in either Section 216, F.S., or Legislative Budget Request Instructions, that clearly defines "program" and levels of effectiveness evidence and assigns a funding preference to evidence-based programs that could achieve high returns on the investment of taxpayer dollars. Pilot programs should be required to undergo rigorous evaluations within five years to determine whether they are achieving intended goals and are worthy of

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continued funding. Where feasible, agencies should be required to increase the percentage of funds allocated to evidence-based programs over time.

2. Create a mechanism to begin reviewing the base budget in designated policy areas. This mechanism should include requiring agencies to report comprehensive inventories of their current programs. A designated entity, such as the Legislative Budget Commission, OPAGA, and/or the Office of Economic and Demographic Research, should classify the programs by their evidence of effectiveness and identify opportunities to reallocate funding that is currently used to support programs that rigorous evidence shows to be ineffective.

Author Bio:

Gary VanLandingham, Ph.D., is Director of the Reubin O'D. Askew School of Public Administration and Policy at Florida State University. Before joining FSU, he was founding Director of the Pew-MacArthur Results First Initiative, which worked with over 30 states and local governments to help them use rigorous evidence and economic analysis to inform budget and policy choices. Previously, he served as Director of the Florida Legislature's Office of Program Policy Analysis and Government Accountability.