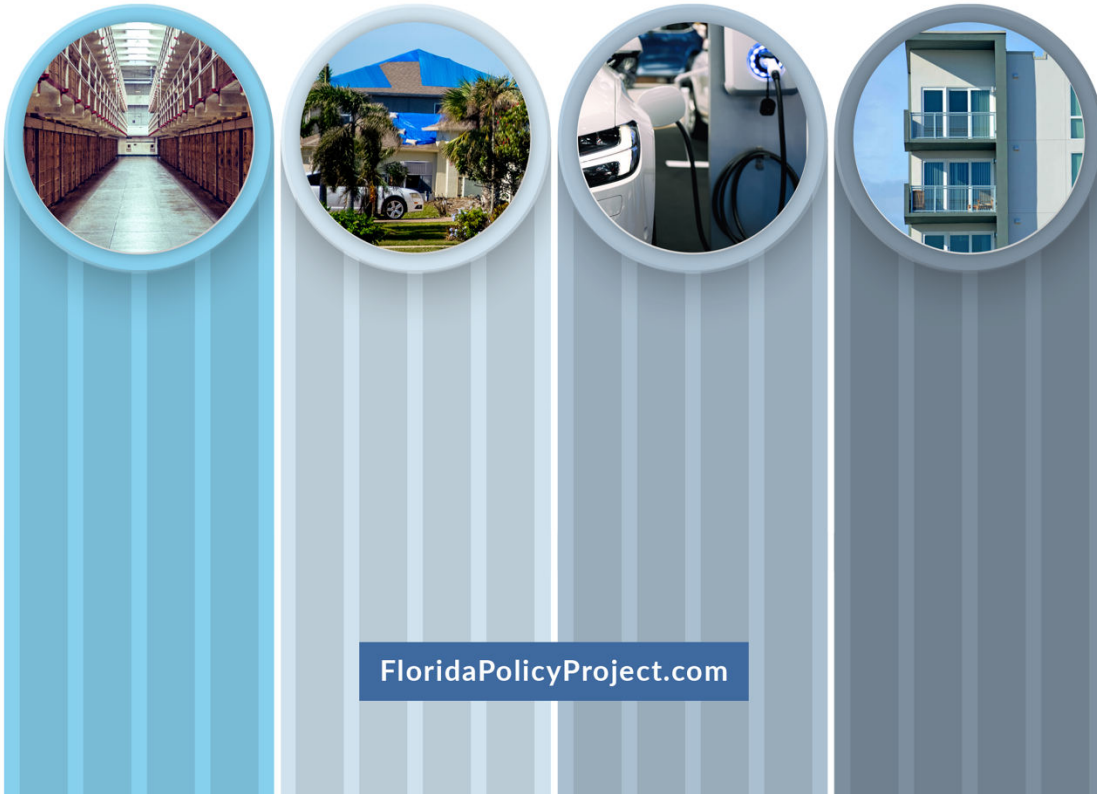


FLORIDA POLICY PROJECT

BEST PRACTICES, BETTER OUTCOMES



FloridaPolicyProject.com

Better Government: Utilize OPPAGA for its Highest and Best Use

The legislature could take several steps to make Florida's Office of Program Policy Analysis and Government Accountability (OPPAGA) research more accessible to legislative members. OPPAGA could serve as a resource for policy and budget deliberations. A first step is to reignite OPPAGA's resources therefore allowing for more robust research. Second, the legislature could direct OPPAGA to release *all* its research products to *all* legislators, therefore enhancing production and distribution of findings.

For background, OPPAGA's staffing has been cut by over 40% since 2010. Prior to 2010, OPPAGA conducted over 60 studies a year. It has released an average of 23 studies a year over the past decade. While the Office does excellent work, it *does not* have the capacity to research all areas of critical legislative interest. The Office currently has 48 authorized positions, a significant reduction from the over 80 positions it had prior to the 2010-2011 fiscal year, when its staffing was cut as part of the across-the-board budget reductions for legislative joint offices that were made during the Great Recession.

OPPAGA releases three types of products – reports, research memos, and an annual list of recommendations that have not yet been acted upon by the legislature. However, currently, reports are broadly disseminated to legislators, while research memos (which composed 39% of OPPAGA's research output over the past decade) and the annual list of OPPAGA recommendations are not widely distributed. While it could be argued that some of OPPAGA's research qualifies as legislative work papers that are exempt from public records requirements, our review determined that none of the reports or memos released over the past 10 years address internal legislative deliberations but instead provide objective information about policies and programs. OPPAGA could be better employed to conduct the kind of research critical to legislative decision-making.

Recommendation: Fund and Use OPPAGA to provide research and measurement to the Florida Legislature

OPPAGA's mission is to conduct performance evaluations and policy reviews on topics directed by the legislature and provide research and technical assistance for legislators and legislative committees. The legislature can create a win-win for itself and the public by expanding OPPAGA to better inform legislative decision-making.

Legislators could rely on OPPAGA to measure state funded programs' effectiveness and performance. OPPAGA's requirement to conduct and publish two-year follow-up evaluations of programs was dropped when its operating mandates were removed from statute and placed in Joint Rule 3. Resuming this requirement would keep programs accountable to the legislators who fund them.

Authorizing OPPAGA to offer higher starting salaries to new staff and increasing the Office's authorized positions would increase the number of program evaluations and

policy analysis. Enhancing the Office's production and distribution would enable more efficient, effective research and measurement for policy makers.

Adequately funding and staffing OPPAGA, and then robustly employing it to evaluate program success, directly informs legislators on which programs are working and why – and which aren't. This leads to better practices in spending taxpayer money, resulting in more effective and efficient government. Favoring these better practices translates to better outcomes.



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.