Department of the Interior
Departmental Manual

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Part 309: Framework for Evidence, Analysis, and Decision Making
Chapter 4: Evaluation Policy

Originating Office: Office of Planning and Performance Management (PPP)

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4.1   **Purpose**. This Departmental Manual (DM) chapter sets forth standards, best practices, and requirements that will enable the Department of the Interior (Department) to assess more fully the planning, performance, execution, equity, impacts, and outcomes of the Department's portfolios, programs, projects, services, and operations through program evaluation. The policy includes minimum standards and practices for designing, conducting, and using evaluations that better enable the Department to achieve its goals and provide benefit for its stakeholders. This policy also provides guidance and sets forth requirements for the Department's organizations to plan, budget, implement, and use results of evaluations as an element of evidence-based decision making. Finally, it establishes key roles and responsibilities for evaluation at the Department.

4.2   **Scope.** This DM applies across all Bureaus and Offices.

A.   For this policy, the references to "organizations" includes the following, unless otherwise excluded below: Offices, including all Department-wide offices organized under the Office of the Secretary; Bureaus and all activities encompassed within them; regions and operations/activities conducted as part of regionalized activities/operations; and multi-unit collaborative teams necessary for the conduct of the Department's mission.

B.   The Office of the Inspector General is exempt from this policy; it has its own evaluation and assessment requirements and authority.

C.   This policy provides overarching guidance and requirements for rigorous evaluations but does not prescribe how organizations will structure, schedule, or implement evaluation activities.

4.3   **Authorities.**

A.   Foundations for Evidence-Based Policymaking Act of 2018 (Evidence Act, P.L. 115-435) (the "Act").

B.   Government Performance and Results Modernization Act of 2010 (GPRAMA, P.L. 111-352).

4.4   **Definitions.**

    A.   Annual Evaluation Plan - A plan that describes "significant" evaluation activities for the upcoming fiscal year. The Act requires Federal agencies to make public annually a list of forthcoming significant evaluations. See definition of Significant Evaluation below.

    B.   Capacity Assessment - A recurring analysis of the coverage, quality, methods, effectiveness, and independence of statistics, evaluation, research, and analysis activities. Departmental leaders and managers use the capacity assessment to identify skills and resource needs, track progress and identify plans for maturing capacity and capability for collection, management, and use of evidence and evaluation activities.

    C.   Evaluation - The systematic collection and analysis of information about the characteristics and outcomes of programs, projects, or processes. This information provides a basis for making judgments, improving effectiveness, and informing decisions about current and future programs, projects, and processes. Evaluation is distinct from auditing and performance measurement.

    D.   Evidence-Based Decision Making - A decision-making process featuring the investment in and focus on the management and use of data and evidence to manage and execute programs, achieve mission goals, manage enterprise risks, and promote transparency. The Office of Management and Budget (OMB) has identified four types of evidence that inform decision making: foundational fact finding, policy analysis, performance measurement, and program evaluation.

    E.   Learning Agenda - A set of priority learning questions that, when answered, will help an organization improve operations and services and understand progress toward established goals. Learning agenda questions and stakeholder inputs drive outcomes and inform evaluation plans. (The term "evidence-building plan" is synonymous with "learning agenda.")

    F.   Significant Evaluation - An evaluation deemed "significant" represents a high priority for a Bureau, Office, Departmental leadership, or the Administration. Criteria for establishing evaluation significance will lie within each organization but is usually associated with supporting the Department's learning agenda, a Departmental agency priority goal, and/or a cross-Departmental or cross-government priority or initiative.

4.5   **Policy.** The Department is committed to using evaluation to inform evidence-based decision making and to demonstrate outcomes.

    A.   Organizations will employ program evaluation as a component of evidence-building within the Department to assess both operational and programmatic activities.

    B.   Evaluations demonstrate whether progress is made in achieving outcomes; they support continuous program improvement and may identify a need for alternative tools and

strategies to achieve outcomes. Evaluation is necessary to ensure effective program and project delivery for Departmental stakeholders.

      C.   Results of program evaluations can inform decisions related to resource planning and investment/divestment, strategic and tactical planning, changes to policy (existing or in development), implementing law or other Federal guidance, management of people and programs, and changes to processes or practices serving customers, beneficiaries, and partners.

      D.   The Evaluation Officer, Chief Data Officer, and Statistical Official, as designated under the Act, will advise and assist Departmental organizations in advancing the use of evaluation.

4.6   **Overarching Guidance.** Organizations are required to use evaluation as part of an approach to evidence-based decision making. Evaluations inform decisions about policies, strategies, priorities, planning, and budget-related activities.

      A.   Organizations have discretion to implement evaluations that address their specific priorities, needs, and stakeholder requirements. Bureau and Office discretion set forth in this policy does not negate any requirements for evaluations directed by Departmental senior leadership, OMB, the Administration, or any other oversight or regulatory body.

      B.   The Evaluation Officer's support team will work with organizations to identify key outcomes, stakeholders, and needs that inform plans for evaluations and the use of evaluation results and findings. The Evaluation Officer's team will provide templates, best practices, and other resources to enable these activities.

      C.   To the extent possible, organizations will conduct evaluations that adhere to Federally recognized standards, described below (see Section 4.8).

      D.   Organizations will comply with Departmental policy and guidance on the management and use of data as established by the Chief Data Officer and Departmental officials leading information privacy protection, security, and transparency.

      E.   As applicable, organizations will comply with evaluation requirements set forth in OMB Circular A-11 and other official direction established by cross-Departmental coordinating organizations and leaders, including, but not limited to, the Evaluation Officer, Chief Data Officer, Statistical Official, Chief Financial Officer, and Chief Acquisition Officer.

      F.   Organizations will provide significant evaluation plans to the Evaluation Officer, which will enable a timely Department-wide response in meeting Evidence Act requirements.

      (1)   Organizations will identify their plans to conduct significant evaluations in each budget year, and the Evaluation Officer will provide them to OMB in the annual budget submission in September.

(2)   Organizations are required by the Evidence Act to publish results of evaluations. To the extent practicable, the Department will make evaluation plans and results available to the public each year in the Annual Evaluation Plan published on www.evaluation.gov.

G.   Organizations, as described in Section 4.2A of this policy, are encouraged to conduct joint evaluations that address common customers, products, services, operations, and Department-wide outcomes. The Evaluation Officer's support team will help organizations facilitate and structure multi-organizational approaches and evaluations.

4.7   **Applying and Using Evaluation.**

A.   Organizations will use evaluations, in combination with other types of evidence, to support and inform decisions. Some, but not all, circumstances in which organizations should conduct evaluations are: 1) determining if programs, interventions, or policies are appropriate or ready to be adapted from another source, scaled up, expanded, or terminated; 2) determining the success of strategies employed to date on programs, interventions, policies, or response to regulatory actions—particularly if there has been a lack of evidence to show effectiveness; 3) testing changes or modifications to program or intervention components; 4) making decisions on activities, policies, interventions, or regulations with large budgetary, contentious, or potentially adverse end-user impacts; 5) determining effectiveness of substantial design changes to a previously-evaluated program, intervention, or policy; and 6) determining approaches and strategies for programs, interventions, or activities that are of high policy interest.

B.   OMB recognizes several types of evaluation. Organizations should apply the most analytically rigorous type of evaluation appropriate, feasible, and applicable for the work to be assessed. Information about these forms of evaluation can be found in OMB Circular A-11.

(1)   Descriptive Study - Describes the aspects of the program's components, goals, and associations between activities/services and recipient and participant outcomes.

(2)   Formative Evaluation - Assesses implementation of a program to determine whether it is feasible, appropriate, and/or acceptable. It assesses how the program is functioning and uses short-term outcomes to inform final development and implementation. It also can uncover new needs and provide baseline data.

(3)   Process or Implementation Evaluation - Documents what the program is doing and assesses how consistently the program is being implemented. It also helps identify necessary changes and improvements in operations.

(4)   Outcome Evaluation - Identifies the results or effects of a program, and measures the program beneficiaries' change in knowledge, attitude, behavior, and circumstances, resulting from the program.

(5)   Impact Evaluation - Assesses the causality between the program/activity and effect or result, achieved by using a comparison or control group.

(6)   Economic Evaluation - Determines cost-benefit or cost-effectiveness of a program or is analysis done to compare costs/benefits between different program implementation options.

4.8   **Evaluation Standards, Requirements, and Procedures.** The Department supports and adopts the Federal evaluation standards defined in OMB M-20-12. To the greatest extent possible, organizations will conduct evaluations that address and align to these standards.

A.   Relevance and Utility. Evaluations must address questions of importance and serve the information needs of stakeholders. Evaluations should result in actionable findings that are available in time for use.

B.   Rigor. An evaluation must have the most appropriate design and methods to answer key questions. Organizations must have sound practices for interpreting findings and reporting and sharing these findings within the organization and with external stakeholders and partners. The scope and rigor of an evaluation (or set of evaluations) requires balancing of the organization's goals, breadth of investments/activities, timeline, feasibility for sound conduct, and available resources.

C.   Independence and Objectivity. Evaluators should operate with an appropriate level of independence from programmatic, regulatory, policymaking, and stakeholder activities. Evaluators should strive for objectivity in the planning and conduct of evaluations and in the interpretation and dissemination of findings, avoiding conflicts of interest, bias, and other partiality. The following guidelines apply:

(1)   Organizations are encouraged to use external evaluators to conduct evaluations of programs, operations, or activities. External evaluators should have appropriate subject matter knowledge and the expertise to apply the best methods to answer the research question under investigation.

(2)   Organizations may conduct evaluations with their own staff if:

(a)   The Bureau or Office has trained evaluation staff with the requisite knowledge and experience commensurate with the complexity of the evaluation proposed; and

(b)   The evaluation staff operates independently from, and is not supervised by, the managers of the program to be evaluated.

(3)   Organizations should consider instituting requirements for independent/external evaluation in grants and cooperative agreements. Outcomes, progress, and work provided through contracts should be evaluated, but not conducted by the contractor doing the work.

D.   Transparency. Evaluations must be transparent in the planning, implementation, and reporting. This helps enable accountability and ensure an evaluation is not tailored to

generate specific findings. The following up-front decisions and documentation help ensure transparency of evaluations:

        (1)   Purpose and objectives;

        (2)   Stakeholders having access to details of the work and findings;

        (3)   Design and methods; and

        (4)   Timeline and strategy for releasing findings. Once evaluations are complete, comprehensive reporting of the findings should be released in a timely manner and provide enough detail so others can review, interpret, or replicate/reproduce the work without sacrificing confidentiality of survey respondents or release of sensitive data.

        E.   Equity. Evaluations will include a full range of perspectives and voices, considering justice, equity, diversity, inclusion, and accessibility. This entails integrating equity throughout the learning and evaluation lifecycle, beginning with the learning questions organizations choose to evaluate as well as the evaluation data collection, findings and conclusions, recommendations, and dissemination. The focus on equity will work in concert with and reinforce the requirements for rigor and transparency.

        F.   Ethics. Evaluators must adhere to the highest ethical standards to protect the public and maintain public trust. Evaluations should be equitable, fair, and just, and should consider cultural and contextual factors that could influence the findings or their use. Evaluators should remain cognizant of and ensure work remains consistent with evolving evaluation principles in ethics, equity, and design.

4.9   Responsibilities

        A.   Evaluation Officer. The Secretary designates the Department's Evaluation Officer. The Evaluation Officer has authority and responsibility for ensuring compliance with requirements in Title I of the Evidence Act and will ensure policies, controls, and systems are in place across the Department so that activities related to evidence and evaluation are aligned with Federal standards.

        B.   Evaluation Officer Support Team. Staff that support the Evaluation Officer oversee day-to-day activities related to implementing the Act and supporting evaluations.

        C.   Chief Data Officer. The Secretary designates the Department's Chief Data Officer. The Chief Data Officer has authority and responsibility for ensuring compliance with requirements in Title II of the Act, including all activities and responsibilities in governing, managing, and protecting the Department's data as a strategic asset.

        D.   Statistical Official. The Secretary designates the Department's Statistical Official. The Statistical Official has authority and responsibility for ensuring compliance with

requirements in Title III of the Act, including all activities and responsibilities in using the Department's administrative data for statistical analysis and informing decisions.

      E.   Bureau and Office Directors. Directors are responsible for ensuring their organization complies with direction set forth in this policy, participates in coordinating activities established by the Evaluation Officer, and considers results and findings from evaluations in decision making related to budget, policy, strategy, and conduct of programs and operations.