

Do you want a state government official to support your policy idea? Bring good research (and expect better outcomes)

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Policymaking is a game of inches - one of thin margins and narrow windows. With more than 35 state legislatures across the country [reconvening in the coming weeks](#), state government leaders will soon be making innumerable important choices about budgets, grants, and program operations. With incremental changes being crucial to success, we now know how you can influence these decisions and make them more impactful: bring good research.

Our recent [experiment](#) told us state decision makers were 22% more likely to support a sample program if it was supported by rigorous research and had an “evidence-based” label. In the mess of policymaking, such an advantage can make a program stand out like a pink highlighter in a drawer of old pens. Knowing that an evidence-based strategy is more likely to be selected can provide a competitive advantage for people looking to change policy and, even more importantly, improve the outcomes of residents.

When we say “evidence” we mean a record of success as demonstrated by a rigorous evaluation. There are over 2,000 evidence-based practices in nonprofit and government clearinghouses (some examples include: the [Federal What Works Clearinghouse](#), [Results First Clearinghouse](#), and the [Results for America Economic Mobility Catalog](#)). These tools seek to distill rigorous research papers into summaries that convey how confident you can be that they will achieve outcomes. “Evidence-based” may make it sound like these programs are inaccessible to many providers, but in a recent [survey](#) of nonprofits, more than half of respondents said they were implementing one.

The state government decision makers in our study are not necessarily the people who you see in the news, but they are responsible for guiding the expenditure of billions of dollars that directly affect all of us. Knowing that state decisionmakers prioritize evidence can also inform how certain people close to the government do their work. If you are a nonprofit leader, this finding means that a team of grant reviewers may be more likely to select your proposal if it is “evidence-based”. If you are an advocate, show state agency staff the research supporting your legislative agenda. Finally, If you are a state agency grants manager, policy staffer, or budget builder: Your colleagues (and your boss) care about evidence.

[Six states](#) (led by both Republicans and Democrats) see evidence as such a crucial component to governing that there is a place on their internal budget development forms for capturing this information and using it throughout the decision making process. Efforts like this to embed evidence in bureaucratic processes have paid off: [Tennessee](#) knows that, so far, at least 30 of its programs, funded by \$1.6 billion in state and federal funds annually, use practices that have a proven track-record of improving people’s lives. This summer, Minnesota [reported](#) \$1.4 billion in new annual investments in evidence-based programs. These investments mean that people’s

lives are better than they would have been if state leaders were to have made decisions based on anecdotes or gut instincts.

There is a lot of work left to do, however. For example, a recent [report](#) from the Minnesota Department of Management and Budget showed that only about 6% of human services grant expenditures (accounting for about \$125 million in annual spending) are evidence-based. Only a [couple of states](#) publicly report the evidence basis for items in finalized budget packages. No states set targets for how much should be spent on evidence-based strategies and only a handful of state agencies have set an expectation that all grant programs define and prioritize evidence. Every state should institutionalize the collection of evidence to help their staff and the general public know how decisions are informed by research.

You likely don't work in or near the state government - what does this mean for you? Regardless of your view on the right size of government, we all want taxpayer dollars to be spent effectively. Principally, the use of evidence as a tool to invest in proven strategies is a sign that government decision makers care about what works. But this is an abstraction. Practically, our communities are better when we invest in programs proven to help a third-grader read with proficiency, a single parent find a higher paying job, or the family matriarch stay safely in her home. We're all better off when government leaders, bureaucrats, non-profit leaders, advocates, and researchers bring the evidence to improve outcomes.

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