



Building Evaluation Capacity for State Workforce System Programs

A Technical Assistance Summary Brief of the
2023 Evaluation Peer Learning Cohort

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Background

Evaluation of state workforce programs is a complex endeavor; many states may need assistance building evaluation capacity to meet the requirements of section 116(e) of the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA).¹ To support states in further developing the evaluation capacity of workforce agency staff, the USDOL, Employment and Training Administration (ETA) established an online community of practice (CoP), the [Evaluation and Research Hub](#) (EvalHub), in WorkforceGPS. ETA also established a complementary opportunity—the Evaluation Peer Learning Cohort (EvalPLC)—to provide direct technical assistance (TA) for up to six states annually.

This brief report summarizes activities, strengths, and challenges related to states' evaluation capacity, providing insights and highlighting successes from the state teams that participated in the EvalPLC in 2023. The six state teams in the 2023 cohort were Alaska, Delaware, Indiana, Iowa, Kansas, and Wisconsin.

EvalPLC TA Activities

Throughout the EvalPLC, participants on the state teams had the opportunity to:

- Use the [State Workforce Agency Evaluation Toolkit](#) to self-assess evaluation readiness, design, and implementation strengths and challenges.
- Participate in five virtual workgroup meetings to build knowledge, facilitate peer learning, and support teams to develop evaluation plans.
- Meet regularly with the coach assigned to support each state with advice and assistance tailored to address their evaluation needs and opportunities for improvement.
- Exchange promising practices across states and engage with workforce system evaluation SMEs in areas of greatest interest and need.

The virtual meetings encouraged peer-to-peer conversations, addressed TA needs, and provided resources on evaluation topics of common interest. Each session featured facilitated peer-learning exchanges, and three sessions included presentations from SMEs on evaluation topics, drawing from a review of the state teams' applications and self-assessments. Meeting topics ranged from evaluation culture and awareness to funding strategies for evaluation. Cohort members also engaged with nationally recognized SMEs from federal evaluation offices, state workforce program agencies, philanthropic foundations, and private research organizations. The SMEs provided program evaluation concepts and theoretical perspectives as well as practical information that described efforts to report evaluation impacts and outcomes effectively. SME insights included the use of program evaluation to support continuous improvement and concrete strategies for funding research and evaluation of workforce development programs. To support states' work on evaluation readiness, SMEs shared examples of evaluation in the service of continuous improvement and described efforts to conduct evaluation of state policies and specific legislation.

¹ Chocolaad, Y., & Wandner, S. A. (2017). *Evidence-building capacity in state workforce agencies: Insights from a national scan and two state site visits*. National Association of State Workforce Agencies.



The teams made use of the State Workforce Agency Evaluation Toolkit to learn about evaluation concepts, methods, and applications; develop research questions; and design evaluation plans.² The toolkit outlines the types of evaluations and design principles, including key elements for designing a timeline and evaluation plan. It offers strategies, actions, and processes to implement evaluations, design reports, and create data analysis plans. The toolkit also describes steps to consider when selecting an evaluator and determining who may conduct the evaluation.

Coaching sessions with the cross-agency state teams occurred as they prepared to participate in each EvalPLC virtual session. Throughout the EvalPLC, state teams used coaching sessions to identify the steps needed to implement actionable strategies. Information gained from the state applications and evaluation self-assessment results informed the topics for the EvalPLC meetings, peer conversations, and individualized coaching sessions as EvalPLC members developed a state-specific capstone project.

The remainder of this brief summarizes strengths and challenges, evaluation capacity-building strategies, next steps, successes, and insights regarding the 2023 EvalPLC.³ The information sources for the states' strengths and challenges synthesized in this brief originate from the state teams' self-assessments, discussions during virtual meetings, coaching calls, and the states' capstone projects. The report concludes with a section that highlights state-team-identified successes and insightful takeaways for USDOL's consideration. These considerations may aid other states in building capacity to conduct research and evaluation activities for workforce development programs and services as well as help USDOL enhance future TA efforts.

States' Evaluation Capacity Strengths and Challenges

Each state team completed two self-assessment tools [from the State Workforce Agency Evaluation Toolkit](#) to identify strengths and challenges related to their capacity to conduct key evaluation activities. The two self-assessments contain 43 statements about the overall readiness of the state teams to conduct evaluation activities and design and implement evaluations. The first self-assessment tool measures a state's evaluation readiness, which refers to a state's foundational capacities for rigorous evaluation along specific dimensions (i.e., evaluation culture and awareness; funding strategies; data management; staff skills, capacities, and knowledge; and strategic planning). Each statement's response receives ratings that rank the state's evaluation capacity from 1 (not at all) to 5 (in place and exceeding the key elements). The state teams later employ the Evaluation Design and Implementation Assessment tool to gauge their operational capacities for performing an evaluation. As in the Evaluation Readiness Assessment, team members rate themselves on a scale of 1 to 5 regarding their progress in planning for the following elements of evaluation: evaluation design and research questions, data collection and analysis plan, evaluator selection, participant rights, and reporting.

The state applications and self-assessment responses from the six state teams generally influenced the approaches used and content developed for each of the EvalPLC meetings. For example, results from the readiness assessments indicated that all states rated themselves at

² U.S. Department of Labor, Employment and Training Administration, Office of Policy Development and Research, Division of Research and Evaluation. (2020). [Evaluation toolkit: Key elements for state workforce agencies](#).

³ Information summarized in this brief reflects the selected state teams' self-assessed readiness to design and conduct workforce program evaluations during the five-month period of the 2023–2024 EvalPLC and their stated post-cohort plans.



or near the halfway point in readiness. State teams were most similar in data management readiness. The range of self-ratings for evaluation culture and awareness was also narrow; the average self-ratings were “making progress” or “have some of this, sometimes.” Familiarity with evaluation resources and university and third-party evaluator partnerships appeared to be strongest. For funding strategies, ratings were generally “making progress” or “have some of this, sometimes.” The most variability occurred in staff skills, capacity, and knowledge, with a 9-point range between the highest and lowest self-ratings. In most categories, one or two states are outliers, with high average ratings that reflect prior EvalPLC experience and more advanced evaluation capacities.

From the design and implementation self-assessments, most state teams identified strengths in at least one area of design and implementation readiness. However, there is wide variation in overall readiness. One state rated itself as highly ready, while three clustered around median readiness and two self-rated as having lower readiness. These variations reflect differing levels of experience and capacity for evaluation generally and in the specific categories described below.

States typically rated themselves in the lower to middle ranges for evaluation design and research questions. In general, these states have not yet enacted rigorous evaluation designs for WIOA Title I activities or timelines for such evaluations or they are “making progress” in these areas. All the states have data systems in place and a majority have access to or verified the ability to access required administrative data. However, five of the six states rated themselves as “not at all” or “making progress” on having a data analysis plan that details how data sources will be used to construct outcome or impact measures and describes the study population and a statistically sound sampling plan. For the self-ratings in participant rights, all six states have taken at least some steps to protect the privacy of participants, whether in progress or fully in place.

Overall, there were greater variations among states in their self-assessments for evaluation design and implementation than for evaluation readiness (i.e., a 34-point spread for design compared to a 19-point spread for assessment of readiness). The ranges and reporting results for data collection and analysis were particularly wide (i.e., 18 and 13 points, respectively). The ranges for individual elements of readiness were much narrower, with the exception of evaluation skills, capacities, and knowledge, as described above. These variations offered the state teams an opportunity to learn from each other.

States’ Plans to Build Evaluation Capacity

As the state teams developed capstone projects or other state-specific evaluation plans, the EvalPLC coaches facilitated team discussions on the approaches to strengthening the areas identified for improvement. The following sections detail the states’ plans across five topics on designing and conducting evaluations and building evaluation capacity.

Enhancing Evaluation Culture and Awareness

To build a culture of evaluation, the state workforce agency and its partners must intentionally use evidence to analyze the agency or organization’s activities and results (i.e., inputs, outputs, and outcomes) to improve the delivery of services and programs. With a strong evaluation culture, its agency members and partners can describe the benefits of program evaluation, use evidence-based results to inform their decisions, and conduct an evaluation or contribute to a



partner's evaluation to add to the existing evidence base. Strategies identified by the state teams include:

- Collecting data on the ways each Title delivers services and refers participants (AK)
- Documenting standards for rigorous evaluations (IN)
- Conducting focus groups comprising non-English speaking customers and community stakeholders to identify these customers' employment needs and concerns (DE)

Identifying Funding Strategies

When planning for evaluation activities, the state or region must consider funding strategies. Funding strategies include investing in state-funded evaluations, leveraging local or state grant-funded project resources, or pursuing opportunities with external partnerships and other funding sources. Most states in the 2023 EvalPLC did not express specific strategies for funding evaluation. Two of the state teams shared the following strategies for funding:

- Researching alternative sources for evaluations, including WIOA program and Governor's Discretionary Funding for Evaluations (IN)
- Discussing potential of prior relationships of Title II to multiple foundations (e.g., Lumina, Jobs for the Future (JFF), Achieving the Dream, Ascendium)—receiving funding or services (WI)

Data Management

Data management is more than the collection, storage, and dissemination of information. It also entails the development of effective processes for collecting and storing the data coupled with the critical element of ensuring the security and quality of the data. Alaska and Iowa addressed issues related to data management as part of their capstone projects or other state-specific evaluation plans. These states considered updates to existing data mechanisms or implemented new processes for data use, dissemination, and documentation as follows:

- Develop a common referral process that's usable by all WIOA Titles, supported by a common data repository that can be accessed and contributed to by each of the Titles (AK)
- Conduct rigorous exploration of the quality of datasets to inform future data collection and evaluation (IA)

Building Evaluation Capacity

Building evaluation capacity involves expanding the knowledge, skills, and abilities of workforce agency and program staff to engage in conducting evaluations. As highlighted in the State Workforce Agency Evaluation Toolkit, it requires building leadership and agency relationships and leveraging funding sources. States with evaluation capacity also establish organizational structures for sharing “big data” and leverage and integrate federal workforce data. These states develop evaluation plans and learning agendas and track significant developments affecting



state evaluation capacity-building.⁴ The state teams below initiated plans to build in-house staff research and evaluation capacity, knowledge, and skills as follows:

- Develop cross-title training so staff understand how business is conducted in other titles (AK)
- Document standards for rigorous evaluations; create a routine procedure to guide teams as evaluations are completed (IN)
- Engage multiple partners, including Iowa State University and the state's Integrated Data System for Decision-Making (I2D2) to assist with WIOA Title I evaluation and enhance data collection and analysis (IA)
- Convene an initial meeting with research staff across WIOA Titles I-IV; after that, continue with meetings bimonthly (KS)
- Work toward a collaborative (cross-agency) learning agenda (WI)

Developing Evaluation Plans

Strategic evaluation planning is critical for states to determine the evidence needed to improve programs and services, consider and set research priorities, catalog completed research efforts, and identify current studies underway. This kind of planning cycle begins with the identification of the program research questions that arise from stakeholder engagement and program operations and ends in the development of an annual research and evaluation learning agenda along with a multi-year evaluation plan. All state teams identified goals for integrating strategic evaluation planning into their future evaluation plans:

- Determine the current referral process used by each WIOA Title/program; compare processes to find commonalities and differences (AK).
- Plan for data collection to design, implement, and evaluate the impact of a pilot program to increase use of workforce services by non-English speaking customers (DE).
- Develop protocol and standard operating procedures for evaluations (IN).
- Build action plan to act as a roadmap for agency evaluation activities (IA).
- Develop an evaluation plan that includes scope of possible evaluation questions that can be answered with data from the workforce system (IA).
- Plan to collect and evaluate referral data across WIOA Titles (KS).
- Research existing customer feedback loops implemented by WIOA programs and partners and gather models and recommendations of best practices (WI).

⁴ U.S. Department of Labor, Employment and Training Administration, Office of Policy Development and Research, Division of Research and Evaluation. (2020). [Evaluation toolkit: Key elements for state workforce agencies](#).



State Teams' Planned Next Steps

State teams collaborated with a coach to identify their post-cohort focus areas and apply lessons learned to their states' capstone projects or other state-specific evaluation plans. With a concrete and specific set of challenges, corresponding goals, and specific strategies in an evaluation plan, the states positioned themselves to make progress in planning and conducting evaluations of workforce programs. The state teams planned to focus on the following strategies after participation in the EvalPLC:

- Review other states' research and evaluation efforts (AK).
- Develop a research proposal and present it to upper management (AK).
- Collect data to determine where a pilot project would be most effective (DE).
- Develop a process to track America's Job Center (AJC) services to target populations (DE).
- Establish roles and responsibilities of key subject matter experts and set expectations for collaboration across divisions/teams (IN).
- Expand evaluation workgroup to include staff from Finance, Communications, and other departments (IN).
- Build an action plan to act as a roadmap for agency evaluation activities (IA).
- Review the action plan's effectiveness and refine as needed (IA).
- Gather referral data across WIOA Titles I-IV (KS).
- Review existing literature and gather information from staff, partners, and state and federal agencies on customer feedback loops (WI).

States' Successes and Insights from the EvalPLC

The 2023 EvalPLC TA was responsive to state needs on two levels: (1) the content of cohort events addressed common needs, and (2) the coaching was customized for individual state needs. During the first cohort session, the state teams expressed interest in specific areas for future sessions, including evaluation design and research questions, funding strategies, data collection and analysis planning, and strategic planning. Coaches supported states in addressing challenges, providing just-in-time support and status updates to states and feedback to leadership on states' progress with evaluation action planning. The planned EvalPLC events included information on how to design an evaluation, drive change based on evaluation results, use funding strategies, create an evaluation culture, raise awareness, and build and sustain evaluation programs.

The 2023 cohort's state teams identified purposeful endeavors during their participation in the EvalPLC. Alaska will survey and interview staff to establish baselines. Delaware designed a logic model to define planned work activities and intended results (inputs, short- and long-term outcomes, and impacts). Indiana intends to continue to engage in the community of practice and utilize resources obtained from the EvalPLC, while engaging with other states as their



evaluation capacity develops. Iowa will continue to hold regular meetings with the group to collaborate. Similarly, Kansas will continue to build connections across WIOA Titles. Wisconsin may consider one combined evidence plan that links to individual agency evidence plans. And all states (AK, DE, IN, IA, KS, WI) submitted designs for capstone projects or state-specific evaluation plans.

Short- and Long-Term Takeaways From the 2023 EvalPLC

- Pursue and leverage partnerships with external research entities, including universities.
- Consider participant equity and barriers when planning evaluations.
- Use EvalPLC process to bridge silos and build new relationships in support of evaluation.
- Encourage and facilitate peer-to-peer sharing and consultation between states outside of monthly EvalPLC sessions.
- Use capstone process to identify areas where evaluation can contribute to improving services and implementing solutions.

Considerations for Future EvalPLC TA Efforts

These recommendations are cumulative, reflecting what worked well and what could be improved when conducting EvalPLC TA based on the current year as well as past years' cohorts.

To Improve the EvalPLC Process:

- Continue setting clearer expectations from the outset, which all state team members (i.e., not just the state team leads) must meet, in coaching and formal EvalPLC sessions.
- If technically feasible, encourage all participants to be on camera during EvalPLC sessions, in addition to speakers or presenters being on camera, to facilitate more dialogue.
- Continue disseminating recorded EvalPLC sessions to all registered participants to allow for scheduling conflicts and follow-up for content missed.
- Continue to welcome states that may have previously participated to re-apply for the EvalPLC.
- When selecting states for admission into the EvalPLC cohort, strongly consider those with executive leadership and/or prior policy agendas that can benefit from evaluation and research.
- Continue inviting state teams from the preceding cohorts to present as the current state teams acclimate.



To Support Evaluation Learning:

- Conduct a survey of past EvalPLC participants to learn about their progress in evaluating their workforce development systems, particularly WIOA Title I.
- Engage current cohort teams to present in EvalPLC sessions; focus on funding strategies and evaluation culture, awareness, and strategic planning, depending on the level of maturity of the states in research and evaluation.
- Emphasize that evaluation is broader than customer satisfaction surveys or performance assessment, frequently referring to the State Workforce Agency Evaluation Toolkit and other EvalHub materials.
- Continue featuring state evaluation reports in EvalPLC sessions to provide concrete examples illustrating the concepts and benefits of evaluation.

To Strengthen State Teams:

- Continue encouraging greater diversity in team composition, including representation from non-WIOA agencies such as human services or economic development.
- Strongly suggest including at least one team member with analytic skills and experience and continue encouraging participation from all, regardless of such expertise. Clarify that this is a learning process and extensive technical background is neither expected nor a precondition of participation.
- Encourage state teams to establish and maintain a state cross-agency group to focus on planning for and conducting evaluations.



Appendix: Descriptions of the 2023 EvalPLC Virtual Events

Session Title	Planned Objectives	Session Description
1. <u>Establishing an Evaluation Capacity Baseline</u>	Introduced TA team (i.e., ETA, coaches, and project managers) and state teams to learn about state needs and expectations and describe how the EvalPLC planned to help, including: • Presented an analysis of state team applications, identifying specific trends; • Covered relevant information and research/evaluation requirements; • Explained range of research/evaluation, including examples of recent studies; and • Discussed and shared possible use of available resources/tools and options for state team capstone project.	Met each of the state team leads and heard about state team membership and what teams were looking to gain from the EvalPLC process, including particular interest in: learning the best ways to collect and evaluate customer service feedback, develop evaluation designs and research questions, develop and maintain an evaluation culture, and further build internal staff capacity. Heard about states' strengths and opportunities for improvement based on their applications for the cohort and in responses to polling questions during the meeting. Provided a refresher on the role of evaluation under WIOA for both USDOL and states. Looked ahead to upcoming activities, including completing self-assessments and developing a capstone project.
2. <u>Designing Evaluation to Drive Change</u>	• Learned from a SME about promising practices for strategically selecting research questions, methods, and dissemination strategies to drive change. • Learned from state peers about their experiences with developing and implementing research and evaluation projects to improve policy and operations. • Heard state insights from the Evaluation Readiness Assessment (ERA).	States provided their feedback and experience with the ERA, sharing that the assessment helped them understand where they need to work and improve as well as areas of variability across agencies in the state. One SME emphasized the importance of the relationships between the state programs and their research partners in designing and conducting evaluation projects. The SME also highlighted the value of sharing initial findings with state leaders to ensure that the areas of focus and specific research questions were leading to truly actionable results. The state peer discussed a recent study they conducted of WIOA Title I services. They walked through the research questions, data collection, and data analysis steps in-depth, as well as their

Session Title	Planned Objectives	Session Description
		findings and recommendations for the future of one-stop operations.
3. <i>Strategies for Funding Evaluation</i>	Learned from SMEs about strategies for funding evaluations, particularly working with private foundations. • Heard state insights from the Evaluation Design and Implementation Assessment. • Learned from state peers about their experiences with funding research and evaluation projects. • Heard states' insights from the Evaluation Design and Implementation Assessment.	States provided their feedback and experience with the Evaluation Design and Implementation Assessment. The state peer discussed the approaches their state has pursued in securing funding for data infrastructure and evaluation projects. An expert panel representing a private foundation shared their experiences in working with states, along with their insights and tips for working with private foundations more broadly. The state peer discussed the approaches their state has pursued in securing funding for data infrastructure and evaluation projects.
4. <i>Evaluation Culture, Awareness, and Strategic Planning</i>	• Learned from a national expert about building and sustaining an evaluation program. • Learned from an individual state's experience with developing a learning agenda and evidence plan.	State Culture of Evidence: A national expert shared how to build and sustain an evaluation program, including: strategically integrating and aligning evaluation into strategic planning, learning from the federal space in setting up frameworks, fitting evaluation into routine practice, convincing operations and policy staff to care about evaluation, and dealing with common sticky issues. A state expert team provided insights into their development of a learning agenda and evidence plan.
5. <i>State Reflections and Future Plans</i>	• Heard from state team members regarding feedback on the EvalPLC process. • Heard lessons state teams have learned through the process and their planned next steps through formal presentations. • Provided an opportunity for state team members to ask questions of their	Lessons Learned: The cohort process aided states in identifying specific strengths and challenges, including the following: • Strengths • Existing resources within individual agencies to collect, secure, and transmit data • Leadership and staff commitment to evaluation • Trust among agencies



Session Title	Planned Objectives	Session Description
	colleagues on their presentations.	• Collaboration with internal and external research staff • Challenges • Dedicated resources for evaluation (staffing, funding, etc.) • Differing understanding of evaluation and data systems across agencies • Data sharing limitations • Staff scheduling Future Plans: States identified concrete and specific next steps in furthering their evaluation of workforce development programs, such as the following: • Research additional funding opportunities. • Collect data to see where a pilot project would be most effective. • Build an action plan to act as a roadmap for agency evaluation. • Gather referral data across Titles I-IV. • Research existing customer feedback loops. States provided their feedback on the cohort process, including the realization that evaluation could start small with a targeted approach. They also communicated appreciation of the opportunity to work with and learn from other states and each other. As one state team member said, “Hearing and seeing other states processes, resources and thoughts is what was most valuable.”