

## Critical Issues for the Commission on Evidence-Based Policymaking

Founded in 1991, Social Policy Research Associates (SPR) is a nationally recognized research, evaluation, and technical assistance firm located in Oakland, California. Our work provides insight to government, non-profit and foundation clients on what works in workforce development, human services, education and effective philanthropy. After more than 25 years of working with dedicated people working on behalf of some of our nation's most vulnerable populations, we've learned that people are better able to make good decisions when they have good information. Program directors want to do their best work and create lasting impact on their clients. This requires high-quality data, rigorous analysis, and the ability to act on the lessons from both. The commission's work represents an excellent opportunity to create infrastructure and culture to advance two areas critical to that ability:

- Promoting evaluation requirements for publicly-funded programs that are both rigorous and realistic
- Improving the quality and accessibility of administrative data, including by supporting the development of integrated state database systems.

We appreciate this opportunity to inform the commission on the importance of the above issues.

### #1 Promote evaluation requirements that are both rigorous and realistic

The evidence generated by third-party evaluations can provide critical insight on how best to allocate resources and develop policies in order to move our nation's workers and families to economic stability. To ensure that such evidence is available, evaluation must be both required by the funding entity and held to certain standards of rigor. For example, SPR has been privileged to evaluate five different programs funded by the US Department of Labor's Workforce Innovation Fund, a grant program which enabled states and local areas to pilot innovative approaches in workforce development. Grantees received larger amounts to scale and/or replicate evidence-based approaches and evaluate them using an experimental or quasi-experimental design, and smaller amounts to test new approaches using evaluation approaches that measure changes in participant outcomes, but do not assess whether the program caused these changes. This approach allows both the program and its evaluation to move the field forward, by centering the importance of conducting evaluation while accounting for the fact that the most rigorous evaluation designs are not always appropriate for the first attempt to learn about a particular service design.

Under the Workforce Innovation Fund, SPR has been able to conduct evaluations of promising approaches in workforce development—using a variety of methods appropriate to where each approach is situated in its development—to inform the rollout of service delivery under the new Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act, which incorporates many approaches first tested under

the Workforce Innovation Fund. Simply put, encouraging innovation while requiring evaluation makes it easier to learn what works and for whom. This approach should be expanded to other agencies and to any new funding streams to come under the current administration.

## #2: Improving the Quality and Accessibility of Administrative Data

One of the most essential parts of conducting high-quality evaluation to support policy development and refinement is being able to track evaluation participants in administrative data: for example, using Unemployment Insurance wage records to determine whether a job training program increased earnings or using arrest and conviction records to determine whether an offender reentry program reduced recidivism. In both cases, to determine whether an investment in a program was worthwhile, evaluators need access to high-quality, individual-level data from government agencies. SPR has collected employment, education and criminal justice data from state and local agencies across the country, and encountered wide variation both across and within states in how such data are standardized, stored, shared, and linked depending on the agency in question. Key issues encountered include:

- Inconsistent, but often lengthy and cumbersome, processes for accessing data. Each agency negotiates its own data sharing agreements, which can add up to significant time and cost for national studies that require data from multiple agencies in many states, particularly when there may be variations in exactly what the process requires and how long it takes.
- Differences in the collection and completeness of data across agencies. For example, data may be stored in different electronic formats or even in hard copy, and evaluators must therefore allocate time to merging, standardizing and even keying all of the data prior to analysis. Administrative data also do not always include or release the same variables, and this limits the extent to which analysis can identify what works for whom.

In addition to this experience accessing administrative data for evaluation, SPR has also been privileged to serve as the technical assistance provider for the Department of Labor's Workforce Data Quality Initiative (WDQI), which provided grants to states to develop longitudinal administrative databases in order to facilitate a more comprehensive understanding of workers' training, employment and earnings outcomes over the course of their careers. Longitudinal databases can also help state agencies understand system dynamics over time—how quickly, for example, training programs are developed and accessed relative to labor market shifts that require new training. Through our work with state agencies as a technical assistance provider, several key challenges have been made clear: the difficulty of tracking outcomes for individuals as they move across state lines, the need to navigate and adhere to multiple privacy regulations when linking data, and the need for improved data systems at the state level. WDQI has helped surface these issues and bring agencies together to consider how to address them, but further investment is needed to put these ideas into action and replicate successful approaches both across states and to other policy areas beyond workforce development and education.

Thank you for the opportunity to address the commission during this important time for evidence-based policymaking. Researchers, policymakers and program administrators have a growing common understanding of the need to do a better job of understanding what works and why, so we can invest public dollars wisely and do work that matters most.

**Dr. Andrew Wiegand** (*Ph.D., Social Psychology, University of California, Santa Cruz, M.P.P., University of California, Berkeley*) is the President and CEO of Social Policy Research Associates. In his nearly two decades of work at SPR, Dr. Wiegand has served as Project Director and/or Principal Investigator for more than 20 national evaluations, as well as multiple state and local evaluations. A well-known expert on evaluations of workforce, education, and human services programs, particularly those focused on youth and justice-involved individuals, Dr. Wiegand has led or helped to lead national impact evaluations of the Pell Grant Experiments, the [Reintegration of Ex-Offenders \(RExO\) Project](#), and [YouthBuild](#), as well as multiple studies of programs funded under the Workforce Investment Act and its successor, the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act.

