

Open Science Principles in Practice: Office of Evaluation Sciences Example

The content below is publicly available and can be found at oes.gsa.gov.

Office of Evaluation Sciences (OES) Overview

OES makes government better by helping agencies build and use evidence to learn what works. The Office of Evaluation Sciences (OES) is an interdisciplinary team of evaluation experts that works across the federal government to help agencies build and use evidence. OES forms innovative partnerships with federal agencies to tackle some of the most pressing challenges in the United States, such as improving government efficiency, reducing improper payments, and supporting veterans. OES provides expertise to rapidly develop and test evidence-based insights to identify effective and cost-effective strategies to improve government.

The Office of Evaluation Science's mission is to build and use evidence to improve the effectiveness and efficiency of government programs, leading to cost savings.

- Who we are: The OES team is composed of interdisciplinary evaluation experts and includes a mix of federal employees, fellows, and academic affiliates, often on loan from a university or research institution.
- What we do: We deliver high-quality evaluations with actionable findings that help agency partners understand what does and doesn't work, and what works best.
- Why is OES at GSA? At the General Services Administration's (GSA) Office of Government-wide Policy, OES is uniquely situated in a central entity that can easily deploy technical support, provide an independent yet intragovernmental perspective, and develop standards for high-quality evidence activities in the federal environment.

OES Evaluation Policy

At the Office of Evaluation Sciences (OES), because we generate results that impact the lives of millions of Americans, the quality of our work and the reliability of our findings are of paramount importance. We take this responsibility very seriously, and we have developed an Evaluation Policy designed to ensure that our evaluations are conducted to the highest standards. This evaluation policy statement presents core principles that guide OES' planning,

implementation, and use evaluation to learn what works. The way in which OES conducts evaluations should always achieve the following tenets:

- **Rigor** — Our findings should be credible and mean what they purport to mean. Evaluations are conducted to the highest standards; our statements about statistical significance are clear and correct; and the limitations of our findings are clear. All OES analyses go through an internal replication, and any discrepancies between the two analyses are addressed before the results are finalized. Bottom line: Policymakers and program designers should be able to act on our findings with confidence.
- **Relevance** — Project selection should take into account (1) the policy or program priorities of our agency collaborators, and (2) potential impact on a priority outcome based. To OES, relevance is also ensured by exclusively utilizing existing administrative data as the outcome of our evaluations.
- **Transparency** — We are committed to ensuring that researchers, agency collaborators, policymakers, and the public at large are able to learn from our work. We keep a public record of all evaluations fielded and publicize all of our findings (including null results and those that run counter to our own prior expectations and goals). We conduct our work in such a way that we can verify our results, and we document our work thoroughly so that others with required data access could reproduce the results.
- **Independence** — We retain control over decisions about project selection and the ability to release our evaluation results.
- **Ethical Practice** — OES evaluations will be conducted in an ethical manner and safeguard the dignity, rights, safety, and privacy of participants. Evaluations will comply with both the spirit and the letter of relevant requirements such as regulations governing research involving human subjects.

Office of Evaluation Sciences Example: Decreasing abandonment of calls to the 988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline

An updated caller experience resulted in more people being connected to a 988 counselor

- What is the agency priority? Strengthening crisis care and suicide prevention infrastructure – including improving the efficacy of the 988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline ("988") – is a high priority for SAMHSA, situated

within HHS. The American Rescue Plan invested \$282 million to support transition to the 988 dialing code as a replacement for the 10-digit National Suicide Prevention Lifeline. In the four months before the study approximately 44% of calls to 988 were abandoned prior to being routed to a local call center; 11% of remaining calls were abandoned while waiting to be connected to care. SAMHSA seeks to increase the proportion of callers to 988 who connect to care.

- What did we evaluate? SAMHSA and OES, along with the national administrator of the 988 system, made changes to the integrated voice response (IVR) system and messages that callers hear when calling 988. The intervention changed the message script and voice recording during the initial IVR (before a call is routed to a local call center) and the script, voice recording, and music that callers hear while waiting to be connected to a counselor. The new IVR message callers hear before calls are routed was about 10 seconds shorter than the original IVR.
- How did the evaluation work? The program change was evaluated with a cluster randomized trial. SAMHSA and the national administrator of the 988 system deployed the updated (treatment) version of the IVR and wait messages alongside the existing (control) versions on August 3, 2023. During the 4-week study period 196,659 calls were from phone numbers randomly assigned to hear the existing version of the IVR experience and 197,130 calls were from phone numbers randomly assigned to hear the new version of the IVR experience.
- What did we learn? The updated caller experience increased the likelihood of being routed to a call center and increased the likelihood of each call being connected to a counselor. Both of these differences were statistically significant. The differences in the likelihood of connecting by phone or text within 24 hours of an initial call were positive but not statistically significantly different between the two groups. During the four-week study period the new IVR resulted in approximately 1,400 additional calls answered by a counselor. This effect implies that if all calls to 988 are exposed to the new IVR over a 12-month period, reaching about 5.9 million calls, an additional 36,000 calls would be connected to a counselor.

OES Evaluation Fellowship

OES Evaluation Fellowships begin in the fall of each year. Selected applicants will serve their one-year fellowship term as Evaluators, joining a team of interdisciplinary experts at the U.S. General Services Administration (GSA) that works across government to help agencies build and use evidence.

- Our team members work alongside agency collaborators to apply evidence-based insights, make concrete recommendations on how to improve government, and evaluate impact using administrative data. We're uniquely situated at the center of government to share leading practices, develop resources, and build skills related to evidence and evaluation in the federal workforce.
- To date, we've completed [over 130 collaborations](#), including over 100 impact evaluations, with dozens of agency partners. We follow the best practices in social science research to build evidence in order to be [a leader in transparency and accountability](#). We form innovative partnerships to tackle some of the most pressing challenges in the United States and abroad, such as decreasing abandonment of calls to the 988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline, increasing access to grants for child care providers, and improving government efficiency.
- Fellows join the OES team on-loan from academic, nonprofit, or government offices on either a reimbursable or non-reimbursable basis, and have come from a variety of universities, non-profits, and federal departments.
- The work and role of OES is unique and includes directly designing, implementing, and analyzing evidence-based interventions through impact evaluations in a large-scale federal policy environment. OES Evaluators apply promising interventions at a national scale, reach millions of people, and work closely with key decision makers in government. Evaluators design and direct high-impact evaluations, author academic publications, work on portfolios shaped by agency priorities, and benefit from a dynamic team and flexible federal work environment.