

Evaluation and Monitoring 101

The Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation, within the Administration for Children and Families, builds staff skills to assess program performance and impact

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Overview

The Administration for Children and Families (ACF) in the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services promotes the economic and social well-being of children, families, and communities. ACF programs address a variety of issue areas, including economic independence, child and adolescent development, and disaster response. But how do staff know whether programs are operating efficiently, improving over time, and having their intended effect? That's where performance monitoring and evaluation come in. Both monitoring and evaluation involve **systematic methods for collecting, analyzing, and using information to answer questions about a program, to strengthen program operations, improve program effectiveness, or inform decisions about future program development**. Put more simply: monitoring and evaluation can help answer questions about whether programs are working, in what contexts, and how programs could be improved.

Across the federal government, agencies and their operating divisions have made a variety of choices about how to structure their learning and evaluation functions. Within ACF, specific program offices are primarily responsible for monitoring and reporting program performance on an ongoing basis, whereas the Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation (OPRE) is primarily responsible for conducting systematic studies to assess how and how well programs are working. OPRE also plays a critical role in supporting ACF's overall capacity to generate evidence, understand the implications of evidence, and apply lessons learned in program planning and implementation.

One way OPRE helps build evidence capacity within ACF is by providing an annual training called **Evaluation and Monitoring 101**. The training's purpose is to "strengthen [evaluation and monitoring] capacity by helping agency staff better understand how to design, conduct, and use findings from program evaluation and performance monitoring."¹ This interactive, hands-on professional development opportunity helps staff understand how to use performance monitoring and evaluation to answer different types of questions about ACF programs. Through the training, OPRE aims to increase staff members' knowledge of performance monitoring best practices, develop their skills to

Monitoring and evaluation

involve systematic methods for **collecting, analyzing, and using information to answer questions about a program**, in order to:

- Strengthen program operations
- Improve program effectiveness
- Inform decisions about future program development

¹ DiSalvo, C., and C. Bridges. "Building ACF Evidence Capacity with Evaluation and Monitoring 101." OPRE Insights Blog, May 17, 2021. Available at <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/opre/blog/2021/05/building-acf-evidence-capacity-evaluation-and-monitoring-101>. Accessed May 2, 2022.

conduct high-quality performance monitoring, and help them understand how to effectively partner with OPRE on program evaluations.

This brief describes the history of OPRE’s Evaluation and Monitoring 101 training, discusses the training design and learning outcomes, and describes how OPRE incorporates participant feedback to improve the training each year. The information in this brief may be useful for ACF staff who are considering participating in the training, ACF program leadership who are interested in sending staff to the training, and/or other agencies who are contemplating launching their own such training to build capacity for learning and evaluation.

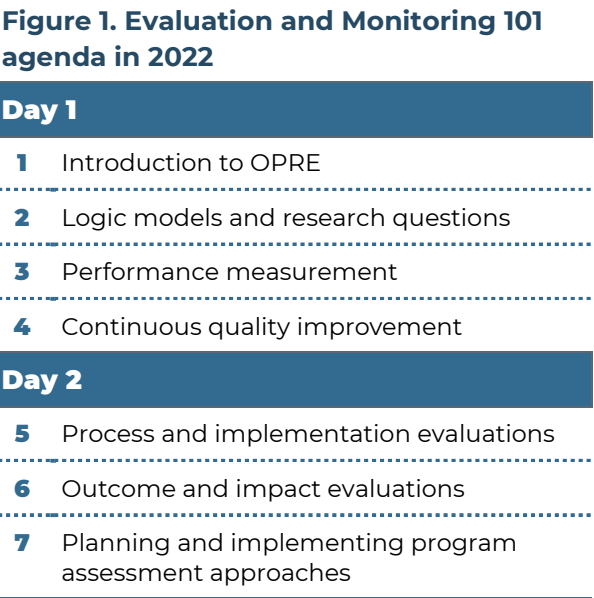
Background

Since its inception nearly a decade ago, the Evaluation and Monitoring 101 training has evolved to meet the changing needs of ACF staff and address a growing federal interest in evidence-based decision making.² Prior to 2015, OPRE staff led a single-session version of the training, primarily geared toward ACF staff who wanted to build performance monitoring or program evaluation requirements into a funding announcement, which ACF now refers to as a Notice of Funding Opportunity (NOFO). In 2015, OPRE expanded the training to include broader evaluation and monitoring concepts (beyond NOFOs) but continued to offer the training in one session. Then, in 2016, OPRE hosted the first six-session Evaluation and Monitoring 101 training, representing a shift toward the current training design. By expanding the course, OPRE was able to offer more interactive course content and dive deeper on performance management and program evaluation concepts.

All ACF staff members are eligible to enroll in the training, and prior experience with evaluation and monitoring is not required. More than 100 ACF staff participated in the two-day training held in April 2022, which included seven virtual sessions (Figure 1) ranging in length from 1 to 1.5 hours. Participants attended from across the country and brought a wide range of experiences across divisions and functions. Participants held various roles, including program officer, policy fellow, federal field specialist, operations chief, research analyst, and more.

Course content

In the 2022 training, learners developed foundational knowledge about monitoring and evaluation concepts, practiced applying key concepts through case studies (both real and fictitious), and considered implications for their own work. Sessions blended lecture-style presentations with opportunities to apply knowledge, helping participants make meaning of the lessons in real time. Participants engaged with one another and with facilitators through the Zoom chat feature and through Mentimeter, an interactive software application that supports real-time polling and engagement. Participants in the 2022 training made the most of opportunities for virtual interaction, with one participant noting that they especially enjoyed “the multiple modes/platforms for audience participation and engagement.”



The training rooted all content in a framework that distinguishes between **two categories of program assessment** (Figure 2). Each category of program assessment is associated with different methods that can help staff answer different types of questions to advance the ACF mission.

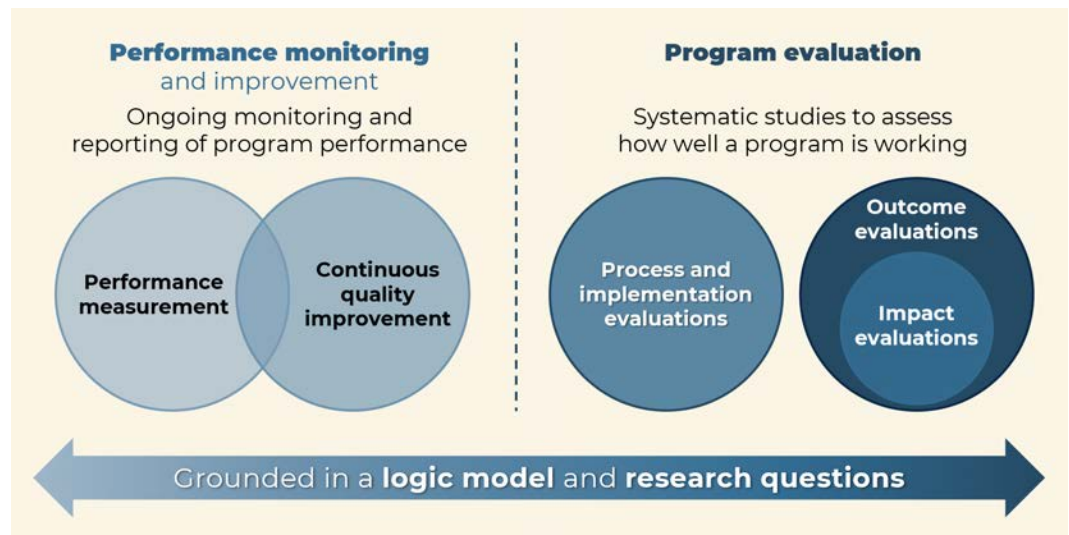
² For more information, see the [Foundations for Evidence-Based Policymaking Act](#) (2018) and the [Administration for Children and Families Evaluation Policy](#) (2021).

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1. **Performance monitoring and improvement** involves ongoing monitoring and reporting of program performance. Methods include **performance measurement** and **continuous quality improvement**. Performance monitoring methods provide staff with descriptive information, collected at regular intervals, about what is happening in a program.
2. **Program evaluation** involves systematic studies to assess how well a program is working. Methods include **process and implementation evaluations**, **outcome evaluations**, and **impact evaluations**. Program evaluation methods can help staff understand a program's implementation; assess changes in participant knowledge, attitudes, or behaviors after a program; or identify the effects of a program by comparing those who received a service with those who did not.

Throughout the training, each session built on concepts introduced in prior sessions. For example, the first session of the training, *Introduction to OPRE*, introduced key terms, concepts, and types of program assessment. Then, the second session, *Logic models and research questions*, emphasized that all evaluation and monitoring activities can be grounded in logic

Figure 2. Types of program assessment



models that define program inputs, activities, outputs, and outcomes. Program staff can use logic models to coherently articulate the theoretical relationship between program activities and intended outcomes, aligned with the agency's mission and vision.

Facilitators then guided participants through a series of sessions on increasingly sophisticated evaluation methods, starting with performance measurement and building to a session on outcome and impact evaluations, which can be used to understand the results of a program and identify correlational or causal relationships between program activities and outcomes. The training's final session offered learners an opportunity to bring knowledge together: facilitators discussed mechanisms staff can use to identify, plan, and implement assessments and evaluations, then offered interactive opportunities for participants to discuss how to apply various mechanisms in real-world scenarios.

One or two OPRE staff led each of the seven sessions, including several staff who had been involved with past cohorts of Evaluation and Monitoring 101. Presenters brought diverse experience, perspectives, and expertise, representing the range of OPRE's divisions and substantive issue areas. Participants in the 2022 training cohort described facilitators as knowledgeable, engaging, and well prepared. Participants provided positive feedback about the presenters' efforts to scaffold content and provide opportunities for engagement, with one learner noting, "The flow and engagement by facilitators created a clear objective for each section."

Approach to continuous improvement

OPRE is committed to incorporating participant feedback to continuously improve the Evaluation and Monitoring 101 training. One OPRE staff member shared, "We have continued to revise several of the sessions over time, partly in response to how materials land with participants." To the extent possible, facilitators address questions and feedback in real time. For example, to wrap up the first day of the 2022

training, participants used Mentimeter polling software to respond to the prompt, “What is one question you still have?” Then, to kick off the second day of training, facilitators discussed and answered unresolved questions from the first day. OPRE staff also monitored the Zoom chat throughout sessions to respond to questions or comments.

To gather data on which elements of the training are well-received and which could be improved, facilitators ask participants to fill out brief feedback forms after each of the seven sessions.³ Breaks of 15 minutes or longer are built into the virtual agenda after every session to promote completion of the feedback forms and support learners’ well-being. After the training concludes, OPRE staff thoroughly review comments on feedback forms for key themes and identify potential changes for future cohorts. For example, OPRE staff observed that participants in past trainings struggled to grasp the distinction between performance monitoring and program evaluation. This led to the development of the program assessment framework (Figure 2), which anchors each session and orients learners to where each topic fits into the array of program assessment methods.

OPRE also added case studies over time to help learners understand how to apply new concepts. For example, in the first session of the 2022 training, learners were prompted to consider what kinds of questions various audiences would have about the effectiveness of an example program. Then, to illustrate how different methods of assessment are appropriate to answer different questions, the presenter categorized questions according to where they fit into the program assessment framework (Figure 3). One participant in the April 2022 cohort noted, “I liked that the session was informative and interactive. The part where we were asked to provide questions, and then the presenter categorized those questions, was particularly helpful.”

Figure 3. Different methods can help staff answer common program assessment questions

Types of program assessments	Methods include...	Can answer questions such as...
Performance monitoring and improvement <i>Ongoing monitoring and reporting of program performance</i>	Performance measurement	How many individuals enrolled in the program?
	Continuous quality improvement	How can we increase the number of individuals who enroll in the program by 20 percent?
Program evaluation <i>Systematic studies to assess how well a program is working</i>	Process and implementation evaluations	How consistently is the program being implemented across the region?
	Outcome and impact evaluations	Are program participants experiencing improved outcomes?

Learning outcomes

OPRE staff report that the Evaluation and Monitoring 101 training has led to meaningful, sustained collaboration with program offices. For example, several staff from the Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR) attended past trainings, which generated enthusiasm for evaluation and monitoring within ORR. To further expand staff knowledge, skills, and abilities related to concepts covered in the training, ORR reached out to OPRE to develop performance measure training for field specialists who oversee the administration of ACF grants. OPRE worked with ORR subject matter experts and ACF’s Office of Administration to design specialized, interactive exercises to enable field officers and program leaders to collaboratively develop **SMART measures** (see callout) relevant to their programs, including plans for assessing progress toward their goals.

Participants in recent training cohorts indicated that they anticipate opportunities to apply new knowledge to their work. One participant shared, “I now understand why the particular language in our Funding

Good performance measures are **SMART**

Specific

Measurable

Actionable

Realistic, Relevant

Timebound

³ Data collected through the 2022 training feedback form occurred as part of OMB #0970-0401.

Opportunity Announcements is included. I will be able to better critically review grant applications, especially the sections on the performance evaluation plan.” Another participant said the information will be useful in “supporting states in developing effective strategies for program improvement efforts.” Participants in the 2022 training cohort shared that they are excited to apply logic models to clearly define intended program inputs and outcomes, create SMART goals with grantees, and “instill a culture of learning and continuous quality improvement” throughout their organizations.

Building momentum

The Evaluation and Monitoring 101 training is just one way OPRE builds momentum toward a culture of learning and continuous improvement within ACF. In addition to providing staff training, OPRE helps program offices develop learning agendas and design evaluation projects, provides technical assistance for grantee-led evaluations, and consults with program offices on data use, data governance, and other topics related to program evaluation. One participant in the 2022 Evaluation and Monitoring 101 training shared, “I gained a clear understanding of the resources and support available from ACF to endeavor toward meaningful evaluation and monitoring.” We encourage ACF staff interested in partnering with OPRE on evaluation projects to reach out to OPRE, and to stay tuned for future training opportunities.

The Evaluation and Monitoring 101 training can also serve as a model for other agencies looking to improve data collection and analysis practices to ultimately improve service delivery. Information in this brief about learning outcomes, training design, and program delivery may be especially relevant for agencies looking to build staff knowledge around evaluation and monitoring concepts, develop staff skills to consistently monitor and improve programs, or expand the use of formal program evaluations. To learn more about OPRE’s other efforts to build capacity for monitoring and evaluation, visit www.acf.hhs.gov/opre.

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