

Developing a State Learning Agenda: The Maternal, Infant, and Early Childhood Home Visiting Program

Evaluation Brief

Design Options for Home Visiting Evaluation

January 2019

At the federal level, the Maternal, Infant, and Early Childhood Home Visiting (MIECHV) Program has engaged in a strategic approach, known as the MIECHV Learning Agenda, to develop a portfolio of evidence about the implementation and impacts of MIECHV in multiple settings and contexts. The agenda includes a variety of activities, including performance measurement, continuous quality improvement (CQI), systematic reviews, descriptive research, and implementation evaluation.

MIECHV encourages state awardees to develop their own learning agendas to ensure that they use the best available evidence to improve performance. This brief will help state MIECHV program staff and evaluators to do that. It explains what a learning agenda is, how to develop one, and how to integrate it with programmatic and research and evaluation activities.

What Is a Learning Agenda?

A learning agenda is a strategic approach for building an evidence base to inform decision making.¹ It typically includes three components:

- ▶ **Learning questions** that identify gaps in knowledge
- ▶ **Learning activities**, which may include research and evaluation activities, that are designed to answer the questions
- ▶ **Learning materials** that are developed and disseminated to increase the utility of the findings²

Learning agendas are used to “continually improve program performance by applying existing evidence about what works, generating new knowledge, and using experimentation and innovation to test new approaches to program delivery.”³ They should incorporate feedback loops in which new evidence is gathered and used to refine questions of interest, thus ensuring the learning process is continual and evolving.

MIECHV funds the development and implementation of evaluations by awardees. MIECHV is administered by the Health Resources and Services Administration in partnership with the Administration for Children and Families.



For MIECHV awardees, a state learning agenda can generate a portfolio of evidence related to their work.⁴ Learning questions may pertain to the state MIECHV program or to issues at the system or organization level. For example, what type of families are enrolling in the program? What are facilitators and barriers to enrollment? What strategies increase enrollment? Learning activities may include literature reviews, performance measurement, CQI, or evaluation. For example, interviews and surveys can be used to identify the characteristics of eligible families and reasons why they do or do not enroll in the program.

The answers—such as what works best for whom and under what conditions—may improve program efficiency and effectiveness of MIECHV-related activities and build the broader home visiting knowledge base.

What Are the Benefits of a Learning Agenda?

A learning agenda can help you tell a story about your program's services and outcomes and inform improvement. It can address topics of importance to your strategic plan by focusing questions on short- and long-term priorities that cut across funding cycles. It can also ensure that activities build on each other, avoid duplication, and yield useful results (see box, next page).

A recent study identified two primary benefits of a learning agenda: the identification of knowledge gaps and the use of evidence to drive decision making.⁵ Other benefits include—^{6,7}

- ‖ **Building a continuum of evidence.** Evidence gathered through learning activities may help refine learning questions or inform new ones. For example, an awardee's CQI project focused on ways to link families to community resources may raise additional questions around collaboration and gaps in services: How do community providers

collaborate to provide seamless services to families? Do community providers have the capacity to address diverse family needs? These questions could be explored through a systems evaluation that describes the system of care and how services are coordinated to address needs and improve family outcomes.

- ‖ **Driving efficient use of resources.** Learning activities are aligned with learning questions to address program needs. The activities are prioritized and sequenced to leverage evidence. For example, a learning agenda may help an awardee prioritize an implementation evaluation of a promising practice prior to conducting an outcome evaluation of a model.
- ‖ **Reinforcing strategy and policy.** Learning activities provide evidence to inform funding and programmatic decisions. For example, findings from an awardee's statewide home visitor survey may reveal that home visitors lack awareness of how their experiences and perceptions impact their work, indicating a need for more supervisor support and training on reflective practice and supervision.
- ‖ **Supporting organizational change and learning.** Learning agendas strengthen organizations through data-informed decision making. For example, high rates of family attrition may lead an awardee to conduct a descriptive study that examines reasons for attrition and strategies to increase retention.
- ‖ **Fostering adaptive management.** Evidence guides adjustments that are necessary to achieve goals. For example, an awardee may be interested in improving caregiver-child relationships but identifies low caregiver-child interaction scores and high caregiver depressive symptoms. The awardee may then pilot an enhancement to concurrently improve caregiver-child interaction and reduce caregiver depressive symptoms rather than focusing solely on strategies to improve the caregiver-child relationship.

How Can You Develop a Learning Agenda?

There are a number of recommended steps to develop a learning agenda.^{4,6,8,9}

1. Engage Stakeholders

Stakeholders play a key role in the development and implementation of a learning agenda:

- ▮ **Internal stakeholders**, such as program staff, home visitors, families, and evaluators, can ensure that the learning agenda reflects the program's needs.
- ▮ **External stakeholders**, such as state partners and policymakers, have a vested interest in the program's success.¹⁰

Engage stakeholders through in-person meetings, conference calls, emails, and other means. Then keep them engaged throughout the process to obtain their input on learning questions, activities, and materials.

Case Example

The Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment engages stakeholders in identifying and prioritizing questions of interest to inform practice and evaluation. Colorado recently examined evidence across its program (e.g., model enhancements, professional development) to identify gaps in knowledge and, as a result, prioritized learning questions about mental health services.

The Colorado evaluation team met with the state MIECHV program director and program manager, state intermediaries that oversee model implementation, home visitors, the state early childhood mental health director, Colorado Project LAUNCH representatives, and University of Colorado at Denver researchers to refine its evaluation approach and align it with Project LAUNCH. The team and its stakeholders determined that an evaluation was the best approach to examine mental health services.

A previous Colorado evaluation examined the use and perception of two home visiting enhancements: mental health consultation and the Infant Mental Health Endorsement (IMH-E). It found that home visitors viewed mental health consultation favorably but did not use IMH-E. The evaluation team and stakeholders decided to build on these results in a subsequent evaluation by examining how mental health consultation is implemented, how the role of the consultant is defined, and barriers and facilitators to implementing consultation in home visiting.

To inform future practice and learning, Colorado shares its findings with participants, local implementing agencies, state intermediaries, and other MIECHV awardees to discuss the interpretation of findings and gather their perspectives. Learning materials disseminated to internal stakeholders include briefs, resource documents, and newsletters. The materials focus on key takeaways from data collection stages and interim findings. Colorado also presents findings to external stakeholders—such as other MIECHV awardees and the broader home visiting community—at the Home Visiting Summit, grantee meetings, and state and regional public health conferences.

2. Develop or Refine Your Theory of Change

A theory of change is a road map that identifies program goals and assumptions or conditions necessary to achieve those goals.¹¹

Many home visiting models have theories of change, but your state MIECHV program should have its own theory of change. It will inform the learning agenda, as you will map key questions back to it.^{4,7,12} To develop or refine your theory of change, draw on models' theories of change and on existing knowledge from prior activities, such as performance measurement or evaluation activities.

Include the following components in your program's theory of change:

- ‖ **Problem statement.** Describe the status of child and family health and well-being (e.g., maternal and newborn health, child development, family self-sufficiency) within the state and the rationale for the program.
- ‖ **Program components.** Describe the program, including the home visiting models being implemented and the state-level strategies, goals, and assumptions.
- ‖ **Influential factors.** List internal and external supports and barriers to achieving goals.
- ‖ **Outcomes chain.** Visually depict program activities linked to short-term, intermediate, and long-term outcomes, as supported by the literature.¹³ A well-defined logic model may be substituted for the outcomes chain.

3. Identify Learning Priorities

Identify learning priorities that are pertinent to your program, state, and the communities you serve.

Start by—

- ‖ Reviewing the theory of change to identify gaps in knowledge or evidence to support assumptions
- ‖ Reviewing past performance measurements, evaluation findings, CQI results, and program data
- ‖ Scanning the home visiting literature and policy landscape
- ‖ Obtaining stakeholder input through meetings or surveys
- ‖ Compiling questions program leadership frequently receive from policymakers, constituents, and others⁷

Then organize the information by topic (e.g., scale-up, model refinement, family engagement) and begin articulating priorities. Include topics that will inform implementation and outcomes and reflect the needs of key stakeholders.⁹

4. Generate Learning Questions

Use the learning priorities to articulate high-level learning questions that address each topic. Then develop detailed, specific, measurable questions to inform the high-level questions. For example—

- ‖ **High-level learning question.** What are the facilitators and barriers to family engagement in home visiting?
- ‖ **Detailed learning questions.** What strategies do families and home visitors identify as most effective to families' initial engagement in home visiting services? What activities contribute to greater family involvement within the home visit?

Consider the following when prioritizing questions:

- Which questions are feasible to address?
- Which questions are most likely to contribute new evidence to guide decision making?
- When is it necessary to have the evidence?
- Can the questions be answered with available resources?
- Is there buy-in among key stakeholders to address the questions?

Continue to generate and refine questions as you obtain additional evidence. Questions may be further refined to serve as research questions for evaluation activities.

The remaining steps focus on integrating learning activities with the learning agenda.

5. Crosswalk Learning Questions With Potential Learning Activities

Work with internal or external evaluators to examine the learning questions and crosswalk them with learning activities (table 1). The evaluators can provide valuable input into which types of activities can address the questions and what data are needed.

Also consider the methodological rigor of learning activities and the frequency with which new evidence is needed to inform strategic planning and decision making. Different questions may be answered with different levels of methodological rigor. For example, performance measures can generate evidence frequently, providing insight into progress toward a goal. Evaluation, however, may be more appropriate for determining effectiveness using a comparison group.

Table 1. Sample Learning Questions and Activities

| Learning Questions | Learning Activities |
|---|---|
| What evidence-based service models and strategies exist to address intimate partner violence in families? | Literature review Conference or summit with experts and stakeholders |
| Does the mental health enhancement improve mental health outcomes for children and families participating in the home visiting model? | Implementation and fidelity evaluation Rigorous outcome evaluation using comparison groups |
| Is the number of home visits for pregnant mothers increasing over time? | Quarterly performance data collection and reporting |
| Is the program linking data across multiple state systems (e.g., health, education, child welfare) to address family needs? | CQI project |

6. Align Data Collection

Identify the appropriate measures to answer the questions in the learning agenda and ensure that data systems and data collection procedures are in place. Determine the data needed for each question and its respective activity. The sequencing of activities will inform your timeframe.

7. Sequence Learning Activities

Sequence learning activities according to the learning priorities and the following considerations:

- ‖ **Availability of data.** Some questions and activities (e.g., performance measurement, CQI, data analyses) may lend themselves to using existing data rather than collecting new data, saving valuable time and resources.
- ‖ **Logical order.** Certain activities need to occur before others. Activities build on one another to address detailed questions before high-level questions. For example, an implementation evaluation should be conducted before an outcome evaluation, as lack of implementation fidelity may influence desired outcomes.
- ‖ **Emergence of new evidence.** As new evidence is generated, questions may be answered, but new questions may arise. Be open to adapting your learning agenda to respond to new information by adding, revising, or removing questions and activities.
- ‖ **Availability of funding.** Some activities may require more funding than others. This is important to consider when prioritizing questions and activities. Many MIECHV awards have a 2-year period of availability. A learning agenda with short-, intermediate-, and long-term outcomes can allow for an evaluation to be conducted in phases across funding cycles.

8. Develop and Disseminate Learning Materials

Learning materials provide opportunities to disseminate evidence gathered from learning activities. Engaging stakeholders in developing clear, accessible materials to communicate the

findings can provide valuable context to findings. Develop a plan to disseminate findings and materials to stakeholders prior to public distribution to encourage discussion and inform decision making.⁹

Consider which formats may best convey the findings to various audiences (e.g., program staff, administrators, families, policymakers, model developers). Examples include the following:⁵

- ‖ **Reports**, briefs, and infographics
- ‖ **Media** such as websites and videos
- ‖ **In-person events** such as summits and communities of practice

Additional Resources

- ‖ [Learning Agenda Guidance and Template](#).¹⁰ The U.S. Agency for International Development Learning Lab conducted a “landscape analysis” of government and non-government agencies to learn more about their learning agendas and how they use them. This resource includes information on how to develop a learning agenda, sample learning agendas, a template, and the landscape analysis report.
- ‖ [Learning Agendas Toolkit](#).⁷ This toolkit from the Evidence-Based Policymaking Collaborative reviews learning agendas and their benefits, explains how to develop a learning agenda, and provides examples.
- ‖ [Engaging Stakeholders in Learning Agenda Development](#).¹⁴ This brief from the Evidence-Based Policymaking Collaborative reviews approaches to engage stakeholders in the development of a learning agenda.

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³ U.S. Office of Management and Budget. *OMB memorandum M-13-17: Next steps in the evidence and innovation agenda*. Washington, DC: Executive Office of the President, Office of Management and Budget.

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¹² MasterCard Foundation Rural and Agricultural Finance Learning Lab. (2015). *Key components of the MasterCard Foundation's rural and agricultural finance portfolio learning agenda*. Retrieved from <https://www.rafllearning.org/about/agenda>.

¹³ Michalopoulos, C., Faucetta, K., Warren, A., & Mitchell, R. *Evidence on the long-term effects of home visiting programs: Laying the groundwork for long-term follow-up in the Mother and Infant Home Visiting Program Evaluation (MIHOPE)*. OPRE

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