

# Research and Evaluation Capacity

**Self-Assessment Tool and Discussion Guide  
for CCDF Lead Agencies**

OPRE REPORT #2017-63

*Monica Rohacek*

*November 2017*

## SUBMITTED TO

Meryl Barofsky, project officer  
Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation  
Administration for Children and Families  
U.S. Department of Health and Human Services

Contract Number: HHSP233201500064I

## SUBMITTED BY

Julia Isaacs, project director  
Monica Rohacek, project codirector  
Urban Institute  
2100 M Street NW  
Washington, DC 20037

This document is in the public domain. Permission to reproduce is not necessary. Adaptations require permissions from the Canadian Health Care Foundation and Informing Change. Suggested citation: Rohacek, Monica. (2017). *Research and Evaluation Capacity: Self-Assessment Tool and Discussion Guide for CCDF Lead Agencies*, OPRE Report #2017-63. Washington, DC: Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

## DISCLAIMER

The views expressed in this publication do not necessarily reflect the views or policies of the Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation, the Administration for Children and Families, or the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

This document and other publications sponsored by the Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation are available at <http://www.acf.hhs.gov/opre>.

## ABOUT THE CENTER FOR SUPPORTING RESEARCH ON CCDBG IMPLEMENTATION

This tool is a product of the Center for Supporting Research on Child Care and Development Block Grant (CCDBG) Implementation. The Center supports the Administration for Children and Families (ACF) in learning from research on policies implemented in response to the goals of the CCDBG Act of 2014. Through a contract awarded to the Urban Institute, ACF is helping Child Care and Development Fund lead agencies and their partners build capacity to conduct high-quality, rigorous research; informing the development of evidence on CCDBG programs; and facilitating learning from state-, territory-, and tribal-level research on the CCDBG.

## ABOUT THE URBAN INSTITUTE

The nonprofit Urban Institute is dedicated to elevating the debate on social and economic policy. For nearly five decades, Urban scholars have conducted research and offered evidence-based solutions that improve lives and strengthen communities across a rapidly urbanizing world. Their objective research helps expand opportunities for all, reduce hardship among the most vulnerable, and strengthen the effectiveness of the public sector.



# Introduction

Research and evaluation can play a key role in helping Child Care and Development Fund (CCDF) Lead Agencies understand child, family, and early childhood system needs; design and manage programs; assess program effectiveness; and make optimal policy, programmatic, and operational decisions. Yet even when agencies see the potential benefits of research and evaluation, many struggle with deciding how to allocate resources for evaluation or with generating timely, relevant, and actionable research results. This self-assessment and discussion tool is designed to support CCDF Lead Agencies interested in strengthening their capacity to carry out and use research.

## What does the tool contain?

The tool is divided into three parts. Part one invites users to consider how their organization is doing in seven major areas of research and evaluation capacity. Part two helps users define overarching goals for their research and evaluation capacity-building efforts. Part three offers users a chance to articulate key questions they have about how to address the gaps and goals identified in the first two parts.

## Why should we do a self-assessment?

Self-assessment is an opportunity to systematically reflect on your organization's strengths, identify key gaps, and set priorities for ongoing improvement efforts.

## How should we use this tool?

The tool assesses organizational rather than individual capacity, so we recommend a multidisciplinary team use the tool as a group. Team members might include research, program, and policy leadership and staff. It may be appropriate to invite input from outside research partners with whom you work closely.

You should use the tool in whatever way is most feasible and helpful for your needs. You can do a quick pass through the items to rapidly identify key gaps and priorities, or you can spend more time discussing the items in depth to reach shared understanding of what each item covers, where the organization stands on the item, and opportunities for improvement. Either way, we encourage you to focus on the discussion and reflection prompted by the tool and not on your organization's score.

## How was the tool developed?

We developed the tool by reviewing the literature on the topic of research capacity building and self-assessment and considering CCDF Lead Agencies' operational contexts and capacity-building needs. It represents a compilation of ideas and items drawn from several diagnostic tools developed for other purposes and target audiences (see the list of sources at the end of this document), with modifications made to fit the needs of CCDF Lead Agencies seeking a versatile tool that can be used for either quick reflection or for more in-depth self-assessment.

# Self-Assessment Items

For each statement, choose your level of agreement. Statements are grouped into seven major domains, one per page. You may add up the total for each domain in the gray row and use the notes space at the bottom of the page to record explanations or action steps for the domain as a whole or for specific items.

## 1. Does our organization value research use?

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
1.1. Our organization sees research and evaluation as a tool that is integral to our work.	4	3	2	1
1.2. Using research is a priority in our organization.	4	3	2	1
1.3. Our culture values and rewards flexibility, change, and continuous quality improvement with resources to support those values.	4	3	2	1
1.4. Our organization values learning, demonstrated by staff who actively ask questions, gather information, and think critically about how to improve their work.	4	3	2	1
1.5. Our organization involves staff in discussions on how research evidence relates to our main goals.	4	3	2	1
<b>Section Total</b>				

Notes

## 2. Have we made an organizational commitment to research and evaluation?

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
2.1. Key leaders in our organization support research and evaluation.	4	3	2	1
2.2. Our organization has a budget line item for ongoing research and evaluation activities.	4	3	2	1
2.3. Our organization has purposefully integrated research and evaluation processes into ongoing business processes, program activities, and organizational practices.	4	3	2	1
2.4. Our organization has committed resources to ensure staff access and communicate about research.	4	3	2	1
2.5. Our organization has dedicated staff with the skills, incentives, time, and resources to acquire research.	4	3	2	1
<b>Section Total</b>				

### Notes

### 3. Do our decisionmaking processes have a place for research?

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
3.1. Managers in our organization have <b>clearly communicated our strategy and priorities</b> so staff creating or monitoring research know what is needed in support of our goals.	4	3	2	1
3.2. <b>Evaluation findings are integrated into decisionmaking</b> on policy options and strategies to pursue.	4	3	2	1
3.3. Our organization <b>modifies its course of action based on research and evaluation findings.</b>	4	3	2	1
3.4. When we make major decisions, we usually allow <b>enough time</b> to identify researchable questions and to obtain, analyze, and consider research results and other evidence.	4	3	2	1
3.5. Staff responsible for providing evidence and analysis usually <b>participate in decisionmaking discussions.</b>	4	3	2	1
<b>Section Total</b>				

#### Notes

#### 4. Do program managers participate in research and evaluation activities?

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
4.1. Program managers and staff <b>understand the purpose of evaluation</b> and how it can support their work.	4	3	2	1
4.2. Program managers and staff have an opportunity to <b>give input on evaluation</b> frameworks by identifying issues of concern or interest or by being involved in working groups related to research and evaluation.	4	3	2	1
4.3. Program managers and staff are <b>involved in facilitating data collection activities</b> .	4	3	2	1
4.4. <b>Demand</b> for evaluation services <b>originates from all levels and areas</b> of the organization and extends beyond mandatory reporting requirements.	4	3	2	1
4.5. Research staff/partners build <b>trust and strong relationships</b> with program managers.	4	3	2	1
4.6. Program managers feel that <b>researchers understand key organizational issues</b> and are responsive to those issues in the organization's research efforts.	4	3	2	1
<b>Section Total</b>				

#### Notes

## 5. Have we defined key indicators and data sources for performance measurement?

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
5.1. Our organization has <b>identified indicators</b> that are appropriate <b>for measuring performance and how we do our work.</b>	4	3	2	1
5.2. Our organization has <b>identified indicators</b> that are appropriate <b>for measuring the impact of our policies and programs.</b>	4	3	2	1
5.3. Our organization <b>tracks both outputs and outcomes</b> that are important to our work. <sup>a</sup>	4	3	2	1
5.4. Our organization has <b>data systems in place to capture performance indicators</b> for our major programs and activities.	4	3	2	1
5.5. Because policy goals can take years to achieve, our organization <b>identifies and measures early indicators of change or success</b> that tell us if we are making progress and are on the right track.	4	3	2	1
5.6. Our organization <b>uses these indicators for program management</b> and improvement.	4	3	2	1
<b>Section Total</b>				

<sup>a</sup>For example, an output would be the number of family child care providers accessing training or technical assistance, and an outcome would be the number reaching a higher QRIS (Quality Rating and Improvement System) level. Outputs “show the quantity of work activity completed.” Outcomes are “the consequences/results of what the program did.” Outcomes include “characteristics relating to the quality of the service provided to clients, such as accessibility, response time, and overall satisfaction...and aspects of the client’s condition or behavior that the program seeks to affect.” Linda M. Lampkin and Harry P. Hatry, *Key Steps in Outcome Management* (Washington, DC: Urban Institute, 2003), 10.

### Notes

## 6. Do we have the necessary research knowledge and technical skills?

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
6.1. Our organization has staff with a <b>basic understanding of evaluation</b> .	4	3	2	1
6.2. Our organization can <b>identify which data collection methods are most appropriate for different needs</b> .	4	3	2	1
6.3. Our organization has staff or research partners with <b>experience designing evaluations</b> that take into account available resources, feasibility, and information needs.	4	3	2	1
6.4. Our organization has staff or research partners with experience <b>developing data collection tools and collecting data using a variety of methods</b> , such as focus groups, interviews, survey, observations, and document reviews.	4	3	2	1
6.5. Our organization has staff who can <b>evaluate the quality of methods</b> used in research projects.	4	3	2	1
6.6. Our organization has staff who know how to <b>analyze and interpret data</b> .	4	3	2	1
6.7. Our staff use <b>external resources to build their own technical research skills and knowledge</b> , including professional associations or networks, published standards, conferences, and professional development opportunities.	4	3	2	1
<b>Section Total</b>				

### Notes

## 7. Do we have mechanisms in place to effectively communicate our research?

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
7.1. Research and evaluation <b>products and findings are disseminated</b> appropriately to internal and external stakeholders.	4	3	2	1
7.2. Our organization has staff with <b>expertise presenting research results in concise and accessible language.</b>	4	3	2	1
7.3. Our organization has staff with the communication skills needed to effectively <b>link research results to key issues facing our decisionmakers.</b>	4	3	2	1
7.4. Our organization has advisory committees or other appropriate <b>mechanisms to inform and involve external stakeholders</b> in research and evaluation efforts.	4	3	2	1
7.5. We communicate internally in a way that ensures <b>information is exchanged across the entire organization.</b>	4	3	2	1
<b>Section Total</b>				

### Notes

## Comparing Self-Assessed Capacity Across Domains

You can use the following table to compare your results across domains. Write your total score for each domain in the second column and divide by the number of items to obtain average values that are comparable across domains. Higher average values represent areas of higher capacity.

Domain	Domain Total		Number of Items	Average
1. Does our organization value research use?		÷	5	
2. Have we made an organizational commitment to research and evaluation?		÷	5	
3. Do our decisionmaking processes have a place for research?		÷	5	
4. Do program managers participate in research and evaluation activities?		÷	6	
5. Have we defined key indicators and data sources for performance measurement?		÷	6	
6. Do we have the necessary research knowledge and technical skills?		÷	7	
7. Do we have mechanisms in place to effectively communicate our research?		÷	5	
<b>Total</b>		÷	<b>39</b>	

### Notes

# Capacity-Building Objectives

The following items are designed to support reflection on the organization's overarching goals for improving research capacity and use.

## 1. Establishing research as a priority in our organization.

**We think research in our organization should have...**

*(check one)*

- |   |  |
|---|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Much higher priority     | <input type="checkbox"/> Much lower priority     |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Somewhat higher priority | <input type="checkbox"/> Somewhat lower priority |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Its current priority     |  |

## 2. Integrating the use of research into the work of our organization.

**We think we need to...**

*(check one)*

- |   |   |
|---|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Integrate research much more often                 | <input type="checkbox"/> Integrate research much less often     |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Integrate research slightly more often             | <input type="checkbox"/> Integrate research slightly less often |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Maintain our current level of integrating research |   |

## 3. Encouraging the use of research by our decisionmakers.

**We think decisionmakers in our organization...**

*(check one)*

- |  |  |
|--|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Use research well/consistently enough | <input type="checkbox"/> Use research poorly         |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Use research with some consistency    | <input type="checkbox"/> Use research inconsistently |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Do not use research at all            |  |

## 4. Increasing our capacity to conduct and use research and evaluation for decisionmaking.

**We think we need additional...**

*(check all that apply – if more than one, rate your needs from 1 to 5, with 1 being highest priority)*

- \_\_\_\_\_ Skilled staff
- \_\_\_\_\_ Incentives to do research
- \_\_\_\_\_ External research partners
- \_\_\_\_\_ Time
- \_\_\_\_\_ Other resources

# Questions about Next Steps

What questions does your organization have about building capacity to conduct and use research and evaluation?

- 
- 
- 
- 
- 
- 
- 
- 

## Sample questions

- How do we help our organization understand the importance of research?
- How do we access skilled staff?
- How do we access outside research assistance?
- What training is available for writing research summaries?
- What case studies can we cite to emphasize the importance of research?
- What if we cannot afford research?

# Sources

This tool was adapted with permission from the following sources:

Canadian Foundation for Healthcare Improvement. 2014. *Is Research Working for You? A Self-Assessment Tool and Discussion Guide for Health Services Management and Policy Organizations*. Ottawa, ON: Canadian Foundation for Healthcare Improvement.

<http://www.cfhi-fcass.ca/PublicationsAndResources/ResourcesAndTools/SelfAssessmentTool.aspx>.

“Evaluation Capacity Diagnostic Tool,” Informing Change, accessed November 15, 2016,

<http://informingchange.com/cat-resources/evaluation-capacity-diagnostic-tool>.

The tool also draws on concepts and items from the following sources:

Bourgeois, Isabelle, and J. Bradley Cousins. 2013. “Understanding Dimensions of Organizational Evaluation Capacity.” *American Journal of Evaluation* 34 (3): 219–319.

Office of Child Care and Office of Head Start. 2014. “Elements to Build Capacity for Evaluation and Accountability: Discussion Guide.” Washington, DC: US Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families.

[https://childcareta.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/public/sss\\_n\\_assessingcapacityforevaluation\\_0.pdf](https://childcareta.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/public/sss_n_assessingcapacityforevaluation_0.pdf).