

Foundations for Evidence-Based Policymaking Act: Making federal policy and programs more effective and efficient

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Grant Thornton ask

We urge co-sponsorship of the Foundations for Evidence-Based Policymaking Act (S. 2046) to expand the evaluation of Federal programs and the use of such evaluations in the management and improvement of agency performance. The Act is championed by Rep. Paul Ryan (R-WI) and Sen. Patty Murray (D-WA) and is currently in the Senate after having been referred to the Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs (as of June 14, 2018). The companion bill, H.R. 4174, passed the House in November 2017.

Based on Grant Thornton's decades of experience in both the public and private sectors, we can attest that results-driven work leads to measurable improvement in a program's performance and efficiency. We encourage enactment of this legislation to accelerate adoption of these best practices in the Federal government.

Why Pass the Foundations for Evidence-Based Policymaking Act?

Grant Thornton strongly supports the bipartisan Foundations for Evidence-Based Policymaking Act (H.R. 4174 and S. 2046) because it would improve the ability of researchers, evaluators, and statisticians both inside and outside government to securely use the data the government already collects in order to better inform important policy and management decisions. The bill would also strengthen government's capacity for evidence-building, ensuring rigorous evidence is created efficiently and as a routine part of government operations.

Although the Federal Government routinely designs and funds programs to solve the nation's biggest problems, it rarely evaluates those programs to determine whether they are meeting program objectives or can be improved. The Foundations for Evidence-based Policymaking Act would create Chief Evaluation Officers across government to oversee program evaluation and the use of the results to make better policy. Their role would focus on making program changes to improve results, redirecting funding to what works, and proposing whole new approaches to improve effectiveness. The bill would also facilitate data sharing so it's easier and cheaper to rigorously evaluate programs. Evidence-based policymaking makes sense – the Foundations for Evidence-based Policymaking Act would advance its adoption across the federal government.

In addition to the provisions of the bill that would strengthen data transparency, the legislation includes ten of the recommendations offered to Congress by the U.S. Commission on Evidence-Based Policymaking (CEP), established in 2016 by legislation jointly sponsored by Rep. Ryan and Sen. Murray seeking to build evidence about government programs while protecting privacy and confidentiality.

Highlights of the Foundations for Evidence-Based Policymaking Act

The Act incorporates ten high-priority CEP recommendations in part, or in full. The bill as it stands now would:

- Require strong privacy protections for using data for statistical purposes.
- Develop a streamlined process for researchers to securely access government data for approved projects.
- Require departments to conduct a comprehensive risk assessment on de-identified confidential data before public release.
- Assign senior officials with responsibility for coordinating access to and stewardship of data resources for evidence building.
- Codify existing administrative guidance in the Office of Management and Budget's Statistical Policy Directive #1 to protect public trust in statistics.
- Establish a representative committee to advise on the policies of the National Secure Data Service.
- Increase efforts to acknowledge what data government collects and make available documentation on those data.
- Establish Chief Evaluation Officers in major government agencies.
- Develop "learning agendas" to identify evidence-building priorities and needs.
- Coordinate evidence-building activities across government.

This bill also includes strong provisions on data transparency. Per CEP recommendation, the Act requires government to ensure full transparency on how data are used by government agencies and qualified researchers. It establishes a new requirement that the public be informed about how agencies and qualified researchers are using their information to enable evidence-based policy. This legislation would neither create a new database nor allow for new data collection. Additionally, the bill does not modify any existing bans on data collection or use.

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