BRIEF

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Ideas into Action

The Colorado Health Foundation™

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ASKING THE RIGHT QUESTIONS: A TOOL FOR INITIATIVE PLANNING AND ADAPTATION

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Acknowledgements

This paper is the result of a partnership between Center for the Study of Social Policy (CSSP) and the Colorado Health Foundation (CHF). It was authored by CSSP Senior Fellow Steve Cohen, CSSP Director of Learning & Evidence Sarah Morrison, and Colorado Health Foundation Senior Director of Learning & Evaluation Kelci Price, in collaboration with and Senior Learning & Evaluation Officers Yen Chau and Nick Stuber.

About CSSP

The Center for the Study of Social Policy works to achieve a racially, economically, and socially just society in which all children and families thrive. We do this by advocating with and for children, youth, and families marginalized by public policies and institutional practices.

About CHF

The Colorado Health Foundation works to improve the health of Coloradans.

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Background and Purpose

Policymakers, system leaders, directors of philanthropies, and leaders in organizations that provide human services are regularly encouraged to pursue evidence-based policies and implement evidence-based programs and practices. This worthy goal poses many challenging questions, such as: ***What constitutes evidence? What kinds of evidence should staff be gathering and analyzing—and under what circumstances? How can organizations tell whether they are making good use of the evidence? Who gets to decide what evidence is relevant and what conclusions should be drawn from the evidence?***

We present here a tool (Figures 1 and 2, on pages 9 and 12) and background information, which together can be used to help address these questions. These resources were developed in a collaboration between the Center for the Study of Social Policy (CSSP) and The Colorado Health Foundation (CHF). CHF asked CSSP to help develop a working definition of evidence broad enough to capture the Foundation's commitment to learning from many sources without sacrificing rigor, and then to think through ways to help staff apply this new thinking in their practice. For both organizations, this work was part of a larger process of examining how they use evidence and learn, with a focus on equity.

This work was done in 2018, and our thinking has continued to develop since then; we will note in several places below additional considerations related to equity that we hope to more fully incorporate into these tools in the future.

CHF's evolution is described in A Shift Toward Equitable Evaluation Means Starting Small by Kelci Price, Senior Director for Learning and Evaluation, a blog post which reflects, in part, the organization's commitment to the Equitable Evaluation Framework.

CSSP has written extensively to promote the use of a broad range of evidence in service of achieving more equitable outcomes.

A Definition for Two Applications

The approach to evidence that CHF and CSSP decided upon centered on two considerations. First, of the many definitions of evidence, we chose one that highlights the link between evidence and action: ***evidence is information relevant to a decision.*** Second, we divided the decisions we were examining into two applications based on timing: ***critical decisions come both during the planning stage when an initiative is being developed and during implementation when adaptation should be occurring.***

For CHF, working backwards from decisions to the evidence needed to support them was a powerful way to keep evidence-gathering aligned with strategy, and to appropriately plan for evidence gathering and sense-making activities.

Formulating a definition that links evidence to decision-making encourages leaders to start by carefully framing the problem they are trying to solve. Starting here allows them to identify the decisions they will need to make, and then to specify the kinds of information they will need to make those decisions well. We found this approach useful because it focuses attention first on decisions, and then on the active process of gathering and making sense of information to understand how it should impact those decisions. For CHF, working backwards from decisions to the evidence needed to support them was a powerful way to keep evidence-gathering aligned with strategy, and to appropriately plan for evidence gathering and sense-making activities.

[1] We chose to talk about "the problem they are trying to solve" because this language is simple and familiar. Other formulations are possible, for example "the opportunity they are trying to create" or even "what they are trying to accomplish."

The second part of the approach guides staff to think about the evidence they will need to support two connected but distinct kinds of decisions.

(1) Planning

We use this label to describe decisions that reflect choosing a course of action, for example: developing a strategy; identifying the activities needed to carry out a strategy; determining a policy agenda to pursue; or establishing new ways of doing business, such as more intentionally engaging community stakeholders.

(2) Adaptation

We use this label to describe decisions that adapt a course of action in order to improve the likelihood of success. These adjustments may range from minor refinements to significant re-design or, if there is no adaptation that seems likely to achieve the desired result, to exiting a program or a strategy.

Here again the connection to strategy was particularly important, with CHF recognizing that strategies entail cycles of planning and adaptation decisions. While these may overlap with one another, especially in complex initiatives, more clearly identifying the nature of an individual decision can help prioritize the kinds of evidence to consider.

This approach to evidence is, we believe, at once more specific and significantly broader than the norm. For example, consider these two formulations of an inquiry. (1) What is the evidence about effective substance abuse treatment programs for mothers with young children? (2) What is the evidence needed to decide how best to support specific communities in Denver as they work to reduce substance abuse among mothers with young children? The second version narrows the focus (in this example, to specific places) and simultaneously opens up many additional questions about the communities involved, requiring attention to their history and culture, the experience of people who live in them, and the systems that operate there.

Evidence to Support Planning Decisions

Much discussion of evidence-based policy, programs, and practices begins (and ends) with solutions: What does the evidence show about the effectiveness of various efforts to solve important problems? CHF and CSSP found this approach too narrow. It is devoid of context and does not address the need to deepen understanding in ways that will support good decisions about what solutions are likely to be effective, for whom, under what circumstances.

As shown in Figure 1 below, we chose to highlight three types of evidence relevant to planning decisions:

(1) Evidence about the problem.

Before we try to solve the problem, we need to understand it and see how it relates to other problems. ***What causes it, including root causes, such as systemic inequities and discrimination? Who experiences it, with particular attention to inequities across population groups? What alternative ways of framing the problem would reveal different ways of thinking about the problem and highlight the need for other kinds of evidence?***

Since developing this tool, we have increasingly come to ask two additional questions, which logically precede the others.

- **First, who gets to decide what the problem is?** This is, of course, a question about power as well as a question about evidence. Unless the people and communities most affected by an issue are part of defining the problem and determining what evidence is relevant to deciding how to solve it, we are unlikely to make much progress in achieving greater equity. Given that different stakeholders will have different understandings and perspectives on a problem, there is a not a simple recipe to follow for how to reach the problem definition. But it's critical for organizations to consider the multiplicity of perspectives and to be explicit about the values they're bringing to bear in deciding how to prioritize stakeholder perspectives when they define the problem they are seeking to solve.

Unless the people and communities most affected by an issue are part of defining the problem and determining what evidence is relevant to deciding how to solve it, we are unlikely to make much progress in achieving greater equity.

- **Second, how might we approach this work in a way that would contribute to undoing racism and other sources of inequity?** For organizations seeking to achieve equitable outcomes, it is important to consider how the way in which we do the work can serve to undo oppression or can unintentionally reproduce inequitable practices and structures. We must be explicit about the choices we make about both process and outcomes and how we see this as reflecting principles of equity.

(2) Evidence about the context(s) in which the problem is to be addressed.

Problems can't be solved in the abstract. In human services and community change efforts, which were the focus of the work done by CSSP and CHF, problems always have to be solved in the context of systems such as health care, child welfare, or education, that will change their way of working and of the communities which are supposed to experience better outcomes as a result of the change. What is known about the history and characteristics of the communities and systems working to solve the problem? This includes context like policies, regulations, and resource distribution that affect opportunities or marginalize communities.

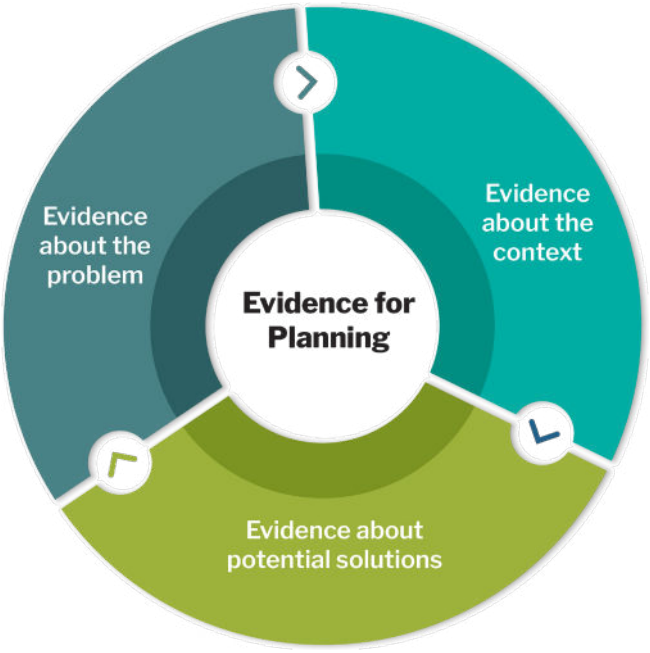
(3) Evidence about solutions.

What is the evidence about past efforts to solve this problem or one like it? What is known about the effectiveness of these efforts, for whom, and under what circumstances? What is known about their effect on equity and whether they have been effective for the population groups experiencing the most adverse outcomes? What is needed to implement these solutions successfully?

We tried to build into this set of questions several elements designed to promote attention to equity. These include the centrality of (1) understanding the lived experience and perspectives of those who experience a problem; (2) digging into evidence to reveal and examine inequities; (3) of attending to community history and context; and (4) of questioning whether proposed solutions, tried elsewhere, have been developed and implemented with attention to equity and produced more equitable outcomes.

Here again our practice is evolving, and we now place greater emphasis on additional factors not yet fully captured by the tool: ensuring diversity in the group of people engaged to make meaning from this evidence; being intentionally informed by others when arriving at a proposed plan of action; ensuring that community participants are adequately compensated for their time and insights; and explicitly addressing power-sharing and its implications as decisions are made.

Figure 1



Gathering and Analyzing Evidence About...		
The Problem	**The Context**	**Potential Solutions**

• What are people experiencing?
• How widespread is the experience?
• How acute is the issue for those who experience it?
• What inequities exist across population groups?
• What are the causes of the problem, including systemic and institutional factors?
• What alternative ways of framing the problem would lead us to understand the problem differently, or consider additional evidence?
	• What are the characteristics of the community with whom we are working to solve the problem? Including:
	  • Cultural
	  • Social
	  • Political
	  • Economic
	• What perspectives do different groups have about the problem (e.g., residents, community leaders, organizations, elected officials, etc.)?
	• How might contextual characteristics and perspectives affect potential solutions?
	• What has made other efforts successful or unsuccessful in this community?
		• How well do existing programmatic solutions fit? How large an effect do they have, for whom, and under what circumstances? What do we know about what promotes successful implementation?
		• What if any common elements have been identified across interventions that have shown success?
		• What has been learned from past system and community change efforts to solve the problem both about impact and addressing inequities?
		• Given community context, which potential approaches are more likely to be successful and why?

To provide feedback and comments on this report and our evidence tool, click here.

Evidence to Support Adaptation Decisions

Our thinking about adaptation is rooted in the belief that what happens after a new policy, program, or practice is chosen is at least as important as the initial choice, if not more so. Even the best ideas, poorly implemented, are unlikely to produce the intended changes. Moreover, we see adaptation as a continuous process, particularly critical in complex initiatives that have many elements. The world keeps changing, and interventions need to continue to change as well to meet new needs and new contexts. A single planning decision is likely to lead to many adaptation decisions that will have to be made over time.

Much discussion about evidence-based policy, programs, and practices begins (and ends) with a leap to impact: is the intervention leading to a change in outcomes? CHF and CSSP found this approach too narrow. As shown in Figure 2 below, we chose to highlight three types of evidence relevant to adaptation decisions:

- **Evidence about implementation.** Inevitably, when planning encounters reality, what occurs looks different from what was planned. The more complex the change, and the greater the number of actors involved, the greater the divergence is likely to be. What did we do, and how does it compare to what we planned to do? What accounts for the differences? What are the implications of these differences for our future work?

- **Evidence about consequences.** Changes always produce unintended consequences and second- and third-order effects that can't reliably be predicted. What happened in response to the changes we made? How did the people involved—workers asked to do something differently, community members offered a different kind of service, other actors in the systems making the change—react? What kinds of broader repercussions were felt in these communities and systems? Which consequences were beneficial, and which may be problematic or even unacceptable to the people involved?

- **Evidence about impact.** What changes in outcomes and in inequities have occurred? What changes in systems, dynamics, and structures of power have occurred? What is the evidence that the intervention contributed to these changes?

This set of questions also helps to draw attention to equity. It keeps the focus on the lived experience of those who are intended to benefit from changes; draws attention to multiple sources of evidence about both the change process and its outcomes; and reminds us to consider what unintended consequences may have occurred. It also prompts examining the data to understand variation in experiences and to determine whether disparities are being meaningfully affected.

Here again our practices continue to evolve. Future iterations of the tool will further emphasize the importance of diversity in the group brought together to decide what the evidence means and how best to proceed, and more broadly about how power can be shared in the service of better decision-making and greater equity.

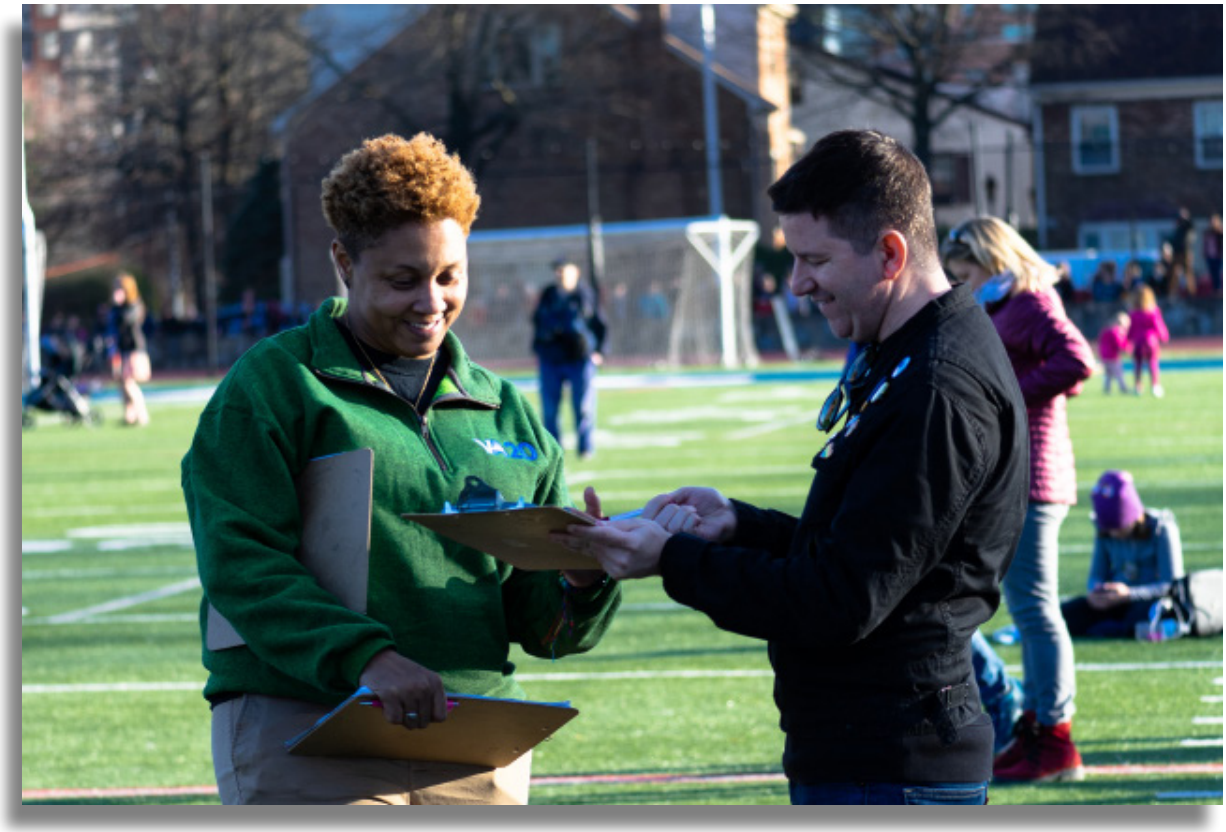
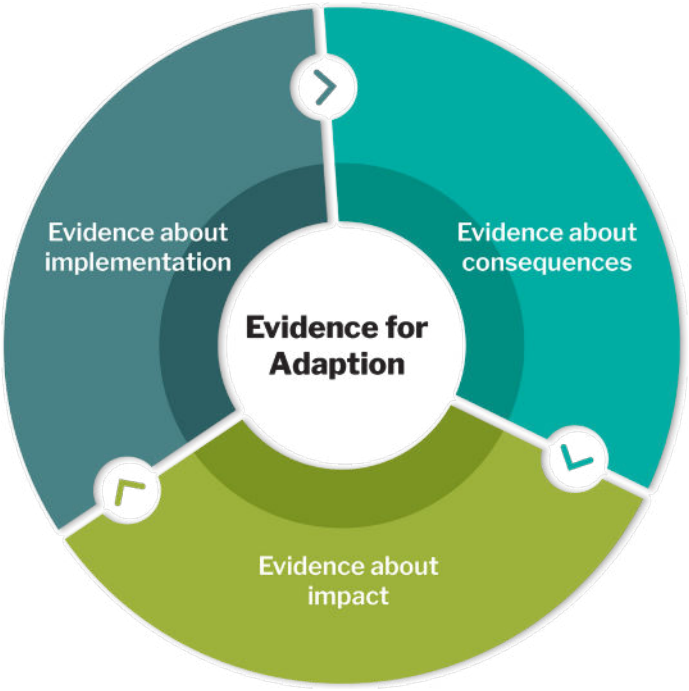


Figure 2



Gathering and Analyzing Evidence About...		
Implementation[2]	**Consequences**	**Impact**

• What have we done?
• How does it compare to what we planned?
• What accounts for any differences between what we planned and what we did?
	• How have people responded to implementation?
	  ◦ Practioners
	  ◦ Recipients/ participants
	  ◦ Other stakeholders
	• What broader effects has implementation had?
	  ◦ On systems
	  ◦ On communities
	• What unintended consequences have occurred, both positive and negative?
		• What changes in outcomes have occurred, and how substantial and meaningful are they?
		• What changes in inequities have occurred, and how substantial and meaningful are they?
		• How strong is the evidence that the intervention contributed to these changes?

To provide feedback and comments on this report and our evidence tool, click here.

[2] The implementation questions are drawn from the U.S. Army's After Action Review methodology and its adaptation by others. See, for example, the work of Fourth Quadrant Partners, http://www.4qpartners.com/

Using the Evidence

In thinking about how this tool could be used to support improved decision-making, we decided to highlight the interaction between evidence and judgment. We offer here three propositions, adapted from the work done by CSSP and CHF.

(1) Evidence often provides guidance but rarely provides answers.[3]

Problems are complex. Solutions that are effective in one context are likely not equally effective in other settings. Implementation is hard, and it's often difficult to distinguish operational challenges (we aren't doing what we hoped to do) from strategic ones (the approach we selected, even well implemented, isn't producing the results we wanted). Evidence is often generated in a particular place by and for specific people and shouldn't be generalized to other places and people without careful consideration.[4]

For all these reasons, evidence is unlikely to lead to a single, definitive course of action. It can help rule out some possibilities, and it may suggest promising directions. But there are likely to be multiple paths to impact, each of them uncertain, with the evaluation of which is most promising rooted in the worldviews of those who are making strategic choices. Even the best efforts to gather and analyze evidence will leave important judgments to be made about which of several potentially impactful paths to pursue—and will leave open the possibility to sometimes pursue paths about which there is little existing evidence.

[3]This formulation was developed by Mark Greenberg, while serving as Acting Assistant Secretary at the Administration for Children and Families.
[4]See, for example Anthony Bryk's argument in Redressing Inequities: An Aspiration in Search of a Method: "assuming the study is well done and a positive effect was found, then the program presumably had to work somewhere for some students in order for this average difference to emerge, but we don't know for which kinds of students nor in what kinds of contexts. This means I don't know whether it will work for me under my circumstances, and that is really what I want to know. ...My point is that this so-called "program effect" is just an average, but there is no average child or average school context."

(2) In planning decisions, the strength of the case depends significantly upon the alignment of different types of evidence.

It's common to talk about the "weight" of evidence, and this makes the most sense when evidence is of the same type. For example, there may be multiple research studies on the effects of a program, each showing different results. To weigh this evidence is to decide what conclusions to take away from the entire set of studies and how confident to be in that conclusion.

When we think across different types of evidence, however, it's important to consider alignment. Suppose, for example, a community indicates strong support for a particular solution ("evidence about context"), but research ("evidence about proposed solutions") has shown that similar approaches in the past have failed to produce much benefit. Both pieces of information are critical to good decision-making; it wouldn't make much sense to ignore one of them because it "weighs" less than the other.

In this situation, the evidence is not yet aligned, and there may not yet be a course of action that would be consistent with all the major types of evidence that need to be considered. A potential remedy is to make further efforts to achieve alignment. For example, staff might engage in deeper discussions with community members to explore the research findings, delve more deeply into the thinking that led them to propose a particular set of ideas, and see if there are alternative ways to meet their goals that may be better aligned with what has been learned from other types of evidence.

(3) In adaptation decisions, the strength of the case depends on the "why" behind the evidence.

Organizations regularly have opportunities to continue what they are doing, make minor adjustments consistent with the current strategies, or make more substantial changes in strategy (potentially including abandoning an approach that now seems deeply flawed, or even a goal that now seems unreachable or undesirable). Part of our purpose in discussing adaptation is precisely to cast these opportunities as decisions, equally important as planning decisions and equally in need of careful attention to evidence.

We identify the relevant types of information for adaptation decisions as concerning implementation, consequences, and impact.

This information is likely to be:

- Extensive (many things have happened);
- Incomplete (it's not possible to gather all relevant information, or to know all of the consequences);
- Conflicting (perhaps some stakeholders responded positively to the change while others opposed it); and
- Evolving (we have some preliminary information about impact, but less than we'll have in another six months.)

Decisions about adaptation take root in the meaning we make as we explore and attempt to reconcile and make sense of this diverse range of evidence. For example, suppose it has taken a year to accomplish something that was originally expected to be done in only a few months, and that the facts associated with the delay are relatively clear. This is "evidence about implementation." There is still a need for interpretation. Do the facts reflect a one-time problem that has now been solved, which would lead to the expectation that the work can now go forward with little or no further adjustment? Are they indicative of a deeper set of challenges to implementation such as lack of capacity among some important participants, or opposition from those who perceive the change as harmful, that may require significant adjustments? Or do they reveal a problem with the underlying strategy so severe as to raise the question of whether to continue at all?

Decisions in this context are the result of how we interpret and make sense of a multitude of evidence. This again reinforces the importance of "we"—ensuring that those who are supposed to benefit from a new policy, program, or initiative take part in examining the evidence and making sense of it. Considering a variety of perspectives and "answers" may be a useful aid to decision-making, as is a set of follow-up questions. If a proposed explanation were true, what else would we expect to see? Is that happening? What evidence would tell us that this explanation isn't likely to be true?

Where do we go from here?

Developing this guidance helped both CHF and CSSP advance our capabilities around how to think about and use evidence. Having questions about both planning and adaptation expanded our thinking about what to pay attention to during both the development and the implementation of strategies. For CHF, this material also served as a jumping off point for staff to build their capacity to more consistently treat information from community conversations and engagement as evidence that can be gathered, tested, and used to inform important decisions.

We have noted in this brief a number of ways in which our thinking about the role of equity in learning and evaluation has evolved in the years since we first did this work and highlighted some potential changes that we hope to make in a future iteration of these tools. We will be guided in part by feedback from readers about this and other issues, and we would particularly like to learn about the experiences of those who try out these ideas or would like to do so.

To provide feedback and comments on this report and our evidence tool, click here.