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Slide 1:

Slide 1

Welcome to the Evidence-Based Policymaking Intermediate Course: Using Evidence in Decision Making. This course is designed for those who use evidence in making decisions. Also, those that assist with developing evidence may find the discussion topics of interest and relevance.

Slide 2:

Slide 2, Course Overview

The purpose of this course is to help participants gain a better understanding of how to use evidence to make decisions. Participants will gain a deeper understanding of key concepts on how to use evidence to make decisions.

By the end of this course participants will be able to:

- Define what is evidence and the role it plays in Evidence-Based Policymaking

- Understand what a Learning Question is and how to develop one for their Line of Business

- Explain why evidence is needed to answer business questions and how research informs decision making

- Describe their roles and responsibilities in developing and utilizing evidence

Please note that the EBP 101 Introductory Course is not a prerequisite to learning and understanding any of the material in this course.

Slide 3:

Slide 3

Let's begin by understanding how data evolves into evidence. To do so we need to understand what evidence is.

Slide 4:

Slide 4, Evidence Definitions and Categories

Evidence is the available body of knowledge indicating if a concept is true or valid. OMB characterizes four broad categories as types of evidence: policy analysis, program evaluation, Performance Measurement and research.

- One, Policy analysis refers to analysis of data.

- Two, Program Evaluation is the systematic analysis of a program, policy, organization, or component.

- Three, Performance measurement is the ongoing tracking of information relevant to policies, goals, objectives, and other activities.

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- Lastly Four, research is the process of conducting an environmental scan, identifying areas where additional evidence is needed, reviewing data, and analyzing evidence received.

Once evidence has been identified, there are numerous ways of analyzing to develop findings and ultimately recommendations. For example, in Policy Analysis, one can provide a cost-benefit analysis of a new policy or program. This also can be used to examine alternative courses of action to address a problem.

Next, we will discuss Evidence-Based Policymaking.

Slide 5:

Slide 5, What is Evidence-Based Policymaking?

Evidence-Based Policymaking (also known as EBP), is a comprehensive approach to making effective decisions based on the analysis of reliable information. Even though the law references policymaking, our focus is to leverage and incorporate evidence into all kinds of decision-making. Being able to use evidence in policymaking and decision-making requires four elements: A Well-defined Question, Research & Data, Thorough Analysis, and Interpretation & Recommendations. Let's review each of them in a little more detail.

One, a Well-defined Question - Usually, but not always, the question is tied to the Learning Agenda and the questions are based on the organization's Strategic Plan. For this course we will focus on developing Learning Questions at the Line of Business Level.

Two, Research & Data – They are tied to the Evaluation Plan, which is how the organization is going to collect information to answer Learning Questions. It should be noted that data alone doesn't provide a complete answer.

Three, Thorough Analysis – Once research and data have been gathered, there is a need for thorough review of findings to determine alignment to the Capacity Assessment. Does the organization have the means to collect and analyze the data?

Four, Interpretation & Recommendations- Completing the cycle of the Capacity Assessment and Evaluation Plan to answer the Learning Questions.

The combination of each of these ultimately leads to improving decision making.

Next let's review the evolution of data to evidence.

Slide 6:

Slide 6, Evidence-Based Activities: Benefits and Outcomes

Evidence-Based Activities include all activities stemming from researched knowledge resulting in decision making supported by evidence collected along the way.

Evidence-Based Budgeting is one example of current Evidence-Based Activities being used within VBA. Evidence-Based Policymaking, the subject of this course, is another example and is being developed for near term use.

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There are many benefits associated with leveraging EBA. This may include:

- Driving fairer cross-organization assessments, providing a sound basis for budget allocations

- Formally testing assumptions provides better awareness of factors affecting our programs

- Formally testing approaches and solutions helps ensure decisions will be effective

- Building a strong base of shared knowledge speeds decision-making and leadership concurrence

As a result, VBA is aligned to a common vision and will create a robust evidence-based culture that will improve the overall effectiveness of delivery of benefits and services.

Slide 7:

Slide 7, Evolution of Data to Evidence

We have already established that evidence is the available body of knowledge indicating if a concept is reasonably true or valid. Additionally, the Evidence Act expands this further by defining it as information that is analyzed as a result of statistical activities. For the purposes of this course, we will review the process that helps to evolve data into evidence.

Data, by itself, is just data. No inferred meaning. However, once refined and informed by analysis, data evolves into evidence. This allows the ability to draw conclusions and ultimately make recommendations.

This illustration shows the process of evolving data into evidence. From the left move right from Data to Information to Evidence and finally to Knowledge. This occurs through the process first refining data, analyzing information then drawing conclusions from the evidence.

To evolve data into evidence requires a clear understanding of the type of evidence needed and the question you're attempting to answer. This course will walk through the different tasks associated with understanding sources of data, what's needed to analyze information and draw conclusions from evidence, with the goal of acquiring knowledge.

As we will illustrate later in the presentation, there are multiple types of evidence available.

Slide 8:

Slide 8, Evidence-Building Process Cycle

Understanding the role of evidence in the Evidence Building Process is essential.

Here are the six steps associated in the Evidence Building Process Cycle which aids in improving decision making. The course will focus on the first 4 steps in the cycle. As learning questions are created, it is important to understand the first three steps of the Evidence Building Process cycle:

Step 1 - **Conduct research to determine what evidence exists** and what key unknowns exist

Step 2 - **Categorize environmental scan** and focus on programs and functions with unknowns

Step 3 - **Define question(s), key approaches** to answering them

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After you have defined your learning question it is important to examine the availability and quality of data. This is covered in Step 4, which is where you **determine the people, process, technology, and data needs.**

Over the remainder of this course, the different aspects of these portions of the EBP Cycle will be described in further detail as well as the various activities associated with leveraging evidence and developing effective learning questions.

Slide 9:

Slide 9, Knowledge Check

Question one, What is Evidence?

The answer is, The available body of knowledge indicating if a concept is true or valid.

Question two, What are the four categories of evidence?

The answer is, Policy Analysis, Program Evaluation, Performance Measurement and Research.

Question three, What is evidence-based policy making?

The answer is, A comprehensive approach to making effective decisions based on the analysis of reliable information.

Question four, What is the evolution of data to evidence?

The answer is, *Data is refined into Information. Information is analyzed into evidence, and conclusions are drawn from evidence to form knowledge.*

Slide 10:

Slide 10

We will now shift to discussing why evidence is needed to assess courses of action.

Slide 11:

Slide 11, How Evidence Building Informs Courses of Action

When making decisions, often there is lot of information that must be taken into consideration. Evidence Based Decision Making Allows leaders to be better informed of environmental factors and business needs. In addition, it leverages thorough analysis to minimizes subjectivity in decision making. Lastly, it helps to Improves ability to gain insight through research and proven practices.

Overall, evidence building allows leaders to make better informed business decisions.

Slide 12:

Slide 12, Five key components to implementing Evidence-Based Policymaking

When implementing evidence-based policymaking and decision making there are key points to consider. As illustrated in the Pew-MacArthur Results First Initiative (2014) Evidence-based Policymaking: A Guide

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[for Effective Government](#) report, there are five key components to implementing evidence-based policymaking. This includes:

- **One, Program assessment.** Systematically review available evidence on the effectiveness of public programs.

- **Two, Budget development.** Incorporate evidence of program effectiveness into budget and policy decisions, giving funding priority to programs that deliver a high return on investment of public funds.

- **Three, Implementation oversight.** Ensure programs are effectively delivered and are faithful to their intended design.

- **Four, Outcome monitoring.** Routinely measure and report outcome data to determine whether interventions are achieving desired results.

- **Five, Targeted evaluation.** Conduct rigorous evaluations of new and untested programs to ensure that they warrant continued funding.

These five components all serve as the basis for providing evidence to aid the leader in making an informed and educated decision.

Additionally, they also help to minimize subjectivity by providing measurable information that can be leveraged to illustrate effectiveness. Allows the ability to determine interventions that may assist in achieving desired results and ultimately, each of these helps to provide evidence which informs the courses of action for leadership to undertake.

Slide 13:

Slide 13, Government-wide Mandate to Improving its EBP

The topic of Evidence-Based Policymaking is not new. In addition to the forementioned Pew-MacArthur Results First Initiative report of 2014:

A 2017 Bipartisan Commission provided numerous recommendations on how to further the use of evidence in government decision making. Many of those were codified into the Foundations for Evidence-Based Policymaking Act of 2018 (also known as the Evidence Act).

Federal Approach is based on the government-wide mandate. The Evidence Act of 2018 is aimed at improving the ability of organizations to make evidence and data-based decisions because it

- Allows organizations to justify decisions going forward, requesting increased funding, budgets, or staffing and

- Develops a phased approach to slowly build toward the development of a solid capacity for evidence-based policymaking

The Evidence Act requires agencies to produce key deliverables, iteratively, from 2019 to 2022.

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- Learning Agenda (LA) - the evidence-building strategies to answer priority short-term and long-term questions to inform programs, policies, regulations, and operations *What do we need?*

- Evaluation Plan (EP) - the specific approaches for gathering the evidence needed to answer the questions in the agenda *How will we get it?*

Slide 14:

Slide 14, VBA's Approach to Improving its EBP

The VBA Approach is designed to build internal capabilities, provide continuing support, implement in the Lines of Business, including in budget submissions. This includes:

- Three types of training supporting EBP

- Training specific to Evidence Based Budgeting process

- Lines of Business Self evaluations and VBA spot checks of budget submissions for good evidence.

Having covered the key components of Evidence-Based Policymaking and given background information on the Federal and VBA approaches to implementation, let's now turn to our next topic: describing the roles and responsibilities in defining research needs.

Slide 15:

Slide 15.

Next, we will describe the roles and responsibilities in defining research needs.

Slide 16:

Slide 16, What roles and responsibilities are needed to define evidence needs?

In thinking about your needs, start with the end in mind.

Ask, what decision will be influenced by the evidence and who will be responsible for the decision?

From there, think about the roles in your own organization in terms of the four factors listed. These may change as you refine your learning questions, but once you have the decision well-defined you should have a good idea of how to think about the other questions.

Understand who is developing the evidence. Will it be a single analyst, or a team? Will they be working independently, or with supervision? It would be wise to schedule a regular check-in with an analyst or team to ensure that a study is not getting sidetracked by a limitation or risk.

Who will manage planning and execution? No matter how good the question, you need to ensure you have a good project plan to execute the approach, with a clearly defined timeline and milestones.

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And what are the dependencies? Many times, particularly looking at strategic issues, there will be a need for collaboration and dependencies in data, as well as programs outside of VBA that contribute to the impact for a Veteran. For example, one of the most common interagency integration points with VA/VBA is DoD. There are others. The key is understanding there are various integration points that may need to be taken into consideration.

Slide 17:

Slide 17, Knowledge Check.

Question 1, What are five key components to implementing Evidence-Based Policymaking?

The answer is, Program Assessment, Budget Development, Implementation Oversight, Outcome Monitoring and Target Evaluation.

Question 2, What is VBA's approach to improving its EBP?

The answer is, A comprehensive approach to Train leaders and staff in Evidence Based Activities: VBA supports Lines of Business in their EBB & EBP activities and the VA Learning Agenda & Evaluation Plans.

Slide 18:

Slide 18, Develop a Learning Question

Next, we will review what is a Learning Question.

Slide 19:

Slide 19, Learning Question: Definition

A Learning Question defines the challenge you are attempting to clarify based on evidence. It guides how you proceed with research and ultimately analysis. Once answered, it influences decisions you will make regarding operations and performance.

Even in your everyday personal life, understanding the key question informs the evidence you will seek and analyze. For example, you have a TV that's old and needs to be replaced. Before going out to buy a new TV, you will think about your needs. You may consider such things as the quality of your current TV and any most important requirements for a new TV. You may compare functions of your current TV to what new models offer. You may do some research by looking up consumer reports, comparing prices of different TV models at different stores and ask some of your friends for recommendations. All of this becomes extremely important in your ultimate decision of what to purchase.

This is a similar process needed to define and answer Learning Questions. Defining a good question is the backbone of evidence-based decision-making. It is key to consider the decisions that will be needed AND what is needed to help make those decisions. If the question does not incorporate the right elements, then the data, evidence, and ultimately conclusions may not provide the needed answer. Consider questions both forward looking or prospective. For example, *What* should we do? Or backward looking also known as retrospective. For example, *How* did we do?

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So, using the TV scenario, an example Learning Question may be "What is the most effective replacement for my old TV"?

Now that we understand the concept of a Learning Question, let's cover the guiding principles and key considerations for developing Learning Questions.

Slide 20:

Slide 20, Learning Question: Key Considerations

In thinking about the Learning Question be sure you:

•**Understand the decision you're trying to achieve.** Some examples may include: Are you fundamentally asking if a program is necessary, what is completed within the program, or how the program or its operations are conducted? Are you trying to determine if a policy should be enacted, or analyze its effects?

•**Don't predetermine the recommendation.** This is a pitfall in many evidence-building activities. The question and the underlying plan are built in such a way as to predetermine the recommendation. Start with an objectively written question, and you will start yourself on the path to getting a more accurate, data-driven result.

•**Remember Evidence-based decision making is informed by looking both forwards and backwards.** Of course, some actions and decision already made can't be revisited, but evaluating existing programs helps us design a better program in the future. Deliberately studying approaches and alternatives before we implement them helps us to better design programs and operations.

Some key considerations to examine when developing a Learning Question may include:

•What are we trying to accomplish? This is your Strategic Plan Goals and Objectives – If a strategy already exists, it may serve as an input for learning question, especially if a strategy calls for a new capability or enhancement or expansion of a capability.

•Who are we trying to inform? This is the Line of Business or Staff Office Drivers or Influencers - In addition to who we are trying to inform it is good to understand what may be impacting decisions such as legislation, external reports, and other key factors.

•What influences VBAs future? This is the Current and Planned Activities – What are the current programs you currently operate or plan to operate, and how will they function? Do you find that there are areas where your organizational performance is lacking or the ability to measure performance is constrained by data?

•Lastly, What evidence is available? This is identified during the Environmental Scan. What are the key themes and trends identified? Do you have the basic foundational knowledge to be able to adequately address those themes and trends?

Next, we will walk though types of decisions aided by Learning Questions.

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Slide 21, Types of Decisions Aided by Learning Questions

The types of decisions that are aided by Learning Questions include:

- Strategy: Evidence is used for deciding what strategies and courses of action will be taken to achieve an objective. If a strategy can be shown as having a proven track record, that aids the decision-maker in his or her confidence that it will be successful.

- Resource Allocation: Evidence aids the decision-maker in better understanding what programs to fund and what programs to defund. This is a particular focus of the Evidence Act, and agencies at all levels, including VBA will be applying higher scrutiny over time on ensuring that budget requests (both for new and base resources) are justified with evidence.

- Policy and Regulations: Deciding to implement a policy or regulation can have many implications. Sound evidence helps the decision-maker to understand the costs, the benefits, and the potential implications and unintended consequences of a policy choice or proposed regulation.

- Program Operations: For the decision-maker, changes regarding improvements to executing the mission should be informed by clear evidence that the intended change will produce an operational improvement in terms of quality, cycle time, or other factor that improves the delivery.

Next, let's move to step 1 of the Research process: Environment Scan.

Slide 22:

Slide 22, Environmental Scan.

An Environmental Scan is a systematic process examining internal and external factors.

The environment includes current organizational policies, standard operating procedures, regulations, official communications, directives, and related documents. An environmental scan can assist in determining evidence and key unknowns that exist around projects, programs, or operations. It can also include reviewing prior evaluations that examined program effectiveness. In addition, interviews can be conducted to determine where evidence gaps might exist.

An Evidence Scan can assist in determining evidence and key unknowns that exist around projects, programs or operations.

After gathering the inputs for the environmental scan, organizing the findings will help tease out key themes. Such as:

- Organizational goals and objectives

- Functional areas (for example, areas of expertise)

- Business domains (for example, following the organization's structure)

The thematic analysis provides a way of organizing findings in a way that makes them useful for identifying key unknowns and questions.

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It can examine a broad set of results such as analyses, reports, studies, legislation, or previous evidence-building activities.

The findings form the basis of Learning Questions.

For more information, an Environmental Scan 1-page job aide is provided to download as part of this training.

Next, let's review techniques used to conduct an environment scan.

Slide 23:

Slide 23, Conducting an Environmental Scan

There are multiple techniques for conducting environmental scans. These may include interviews, research, performance analysis, and benchmarking.

Interviews may include discussions with both individuals and groups. For example, you may survey leaders to find out what challenges they encounter in making informed decisions as with the example of VBA's current data collection on longitudinal progress of the Veteran cohort.

Research helps to collect already identified problems that need evidence. There are several sources that can be leveraged from academic studies, GAO reports, and VSO reports just to name a few.

Performance Analysis or Performance Measures provide quantitative data to help with illustrating effectiveness. While helpful, they don't always reveal why there may be a performance deficiency.

Benchmarking from other agencies' studies is another technique often utilized.

Slide 24:

Slide 24 Develop and Organize Key Themes

The pyramid shown here are only a set of recommended guidelines. Let the findings to some degree guide the way you organize them.

Starting at the top of the pyramid and working down.

Once you've decided on the technique used to conduct the environmental scan, you will need to determine the level you're reviewing. This will inform how you organize your themes.

If your scan is focused on an entire Line of Business, then a logical structure would be to organize your themes by strategic objective based on VBA's strategic plan.

If your focus is in on a single program, then it may make sense to organize your themes by a particular function. VACO has a Business Reference Model that is currently used to depict an enterprise-wide set of business functions across the department and may serve as a useful guide for organizing.

If the focus is operational, then a logical organizational structure can be to organize themes by activity. There is no one repository or inventory for activities, so these are likely to be contained in Operating Procedures or other documentation at a more tactical level.

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Slide 25, Knowledge Check

Question 1, What is a learning question?

The answer is, A Learning Question provides a way of framing the challenge you are attempting to clarify based on evidence. It influences decisions made regarding operations and performance.

Question 2, What is an Environmental Scan?

The answer is, A systematic process examining internal and external factors. The environment includes current organizational policies, standard operating procedures, regulations, official communications, directives, and related documents.

Question 3, What levels are analyzed in an Environmental Scan?

The Answer is, Operational, programmatic and strategic.

Slide 26:

Slide 26, SWOT: The Environmental Scan

 Once evidence from the environmental scan has been reviewed and categorized into themes, you can leverage a SWOT analysis structure to label findings as strengths, weaknesses, opportunities or threats.

A SWOT analysis in this context is different from one used for strategic planning. In strategic planning, the focus is on a future trend or change identified. In this case, it is focused on the gap in knowledge.

These questions are the ones that the analysis should answer.

Strengths: Where is there high-quality evidence and where is it utilized in decision-making? Where is our analytic capability robust?

Weaknesses: Where are there evidence gaps and where does leadership seek better evidence for decision-making?

Opportunities: Where can better evidence improve performance and aid decision-makers? Where can better data be obtained?

Threats: What challenges will hinder development and usage of evidence and the improvement of our capability to analyze data?

Slide 27:

Slide 27, Theory of Change

A theory of change is the appropriate selection when you want to evaluate the impact of an existing program. You can also use it if you're considering whether to introduce a new program.

The way the question is framed depends on if you're looking forward (prospective) or looking at past performance (retrospective).

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Retrospective theory of change focuses on whether a program achieved its intended effect and whether it can be proven that the program was the cause.

Prospective theory of change deals with the question – if we implement a program, is it likely that the intended effect will happen? This relationship is best tested by simulation.

Also, the type of evaluation and the tools will differ significantly if you are looking at an existing program or looking to develop a new program.

Slide 28:

Slide 28, Foundational Research

Foundational Research is used when you already are aware of or discover an unknown during your environmental scan process. These can often be framed in terms of a "how" question.

For example: How can we adapt to x? How do we better understand x?

In thinking about developing an overall strategy, this type of question can aid in thinking about where your organization needs to pivot and re-prioritize.

Slide 29:

Slide 29, Scenario Planning

Scenario Planning is designed to look at many different alternative or combinations of alternatives, including the effects of external impacts.

Scenario Planning can be used for both strategic and operational questions. It helps with refining the question to ensure the data requested align with the question so you're able to produce the correct evidence.

Similar to an analysis of alternatives, a scenario planning question allows you to examine different courses of action.

Slide 30:

Slide 30, Learning Question Development Process

This is an overview of the Learning Question Development process.

Once you have identified key themes and clarified the type of learning intended you will have initiated the first part of the Learning Question Development process by setting the context.

Next, you will be prepared to start developing and prioritizing Learning Questions. This is accomplished by using criteria based on what changes are most important to improving VBA outcomes. You will also leverage the criteria to prioritize questions.

Finally, determine and apply learning methodologies intended to support the learning question. Identify the evidence that you will need to address the question, consider potential results and the course of action that will be necessary to gather the needed evidence.

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Slide 31, Knowledge Check

Question 1, Why is a SWOT used in an Environmental Scan

The answer is, to label findings as strengths, weaknesses, opportunities or threats to help decision makers identify areas that may need immediate attention and ultimately provide answers to your Learning Question.

Question 2, What are the three major steps in the Learning Question Development Process?

The answer is, set context; Develop and prioritize Learning Questions; Determine and Apply Learning Methodologies

Slide 32:

Slide 32,

Next, we will discuss how to assess data by analyzing quality, validity and relevance.

Slide 33:

Slide 33, Evidence-Building Process Cycle Determining Availability and Quality of Data

Once you have your Learning Questions developed, it's now time to assess if you have the right elements to conduct the evaluation. This means you'll need to make sure you are assessing the data to effectively meet your needs. This outlines the portion the Evidence Building Process Cycle specific for determining data needs. Here we are going to talk about data and analysis, which are among the major elements needed for an evaluation.

Slide 34:

Slide 34, How to Assess Data: Analyze Quality, Validity and Relevance

Data quality, validity, and relevance will be covered in more detail in the Advanced course, where the assessment framework will be discussed in further detail.

Here, are some questions that decision-makers can ask as they look at the data provided to address Learning Questions.

Data Quality and Validity Questions.

- Does the data come from a trusted source?
- Are the underlying design and data collection methods sound?
- Has data been independently validated and verified?

Data Relevance Questions.

- Is the question clear about what course of action you're trying to influence?
- Is the question clear about what impact you're trying to achieve?
- Can you draw conclusions that is actionable from the data that addresses the question?

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Data quality and validity are important, but data relevance is equally important. In the end, can you draw a conclusion from the data that not only addresses the question but helps to make an important decision?

Slide 35:

Slide 35, EBP Development Tool - Purpose

For this next section, please refer to the EBP Development Tool, which is an Excel workbook that provides useful guidance for developing an Environmental Scan, SWOT, Learning Question and defining Evaluation Elements. The purpose of this workbook is to aid with the development of a set of Learning Questions (also known as a "Learning Agenda") and the steps to then turn the question into a study ("evaluation plan").

The tool is not intended to be a compliance exercise to fill out; it is meant to help capture and synthesize a thoughtful process of understanding where the Line of Business and Staff Office lacks knowledge to aid in its decision making.

We will review the worksheet tabs in the file and briefly illustrate how the tool can be used for a Veteran program related situation.

Slide 36:

Slide 36, EBP Development Tool

The Programs Tab, utilizing a logic model format, is designed to aid in the definition of the Line of Business or Staff Office programs and or major functions. Also included are sections to define the key capabilities that contribute to each program or function, as well as the outcomes that the programs are designed to achieve. The program should also define its alignments to VA and VBA's strategic plans as a way of identifying how these programs contribute to overall mission impact.

The information in this tab is organized by: Program, Outcome, Key Capabilities, Current Means of Assessing Impact, Current Means of Assessing Operations, Current Means of Assessing Policy, and Current Means of Assessing Resource Allocations and Budget Development.

Programs are simply a way of organizing your activities by their contributions to an outcome, and an

outcome helps to define what a program hopes to achieve

Key Capabilities aid in describing the key elements of the program. What does it deliver to the Veteran or to VBA?

The next four tabs allow you to document if you currently assess the program across these different dimensions. If, for example, the program processes claims, then how will it assess the effectiveness of its claims operations?

Slide 37:

Slide 37, EBP Development Tool Continued

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The Environmental Scan tab aids in documenting the findings from your scan. As mentioned previously in the course, the environmental scan in an EBP context focuses on gaps in knowledge.

The information in this tab is organized by Theme, Sub-Theme, Source, Current Gaps in Knowledge, and Impact

Theme describes how you categorize your findings.

Sub-Theme allows you to categorize findings in manageable groups. Homelessness or poverty, for example, are large topics and may involve many different facets that require sub-themes.

Source describes where the finding emerged. For example, did you determine the finding from an interview, a report or a previous scan?

Current Gaps in Knowledge specifies the specific evidence that is needed for this area.

Impact in the example depicts the implication of not having the evidence.

Slide 38:

Slide 38, EBP Development Tool Continued

Once an environmental scan is complete, and you've grouped your findings into themes and sub-themes, now it's time to examine the potential advantages, challenges and opportunities by conducting a SWOT analysis.

In traditional strategic planning, a SWOT is designed to look at future trends and how the organization will adapt to them or plan for them. In an EBP context, SWOT is more of an aid in looking at a specific areas where you've found that there is an evidence gap and the potential to obtaining the evidence.

The information on this tab is organized by Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats.

Strengths would entail the potential benefits of obtaining the evidence. What value will it provide? What decision will it aid?

Weaknesses would characterize the known challenges to obtaining the evidence. What has prevented it from being collected in the past?

Opportunities characterize potential ways of obtaining the evidence at a high level – this will be examined in more rigorous detail in the evaluation plan; here you should be thinking about what immediate means, methods, partnerships or innovation could help to obtain the evidence.

Threats can be characterized as barriers to executing on the opportunities that you've identified. In addition, would there be barriers to utilizing the evidence in decision-making?

Slide 39:

Slide 39, EBP Development Tool continued

Learning Questions - This tab is designed to aid in the structuring of your Learning Questions. Learning Questions are a term used to characterize the types of questions that an organization develops as a result of its environmental scan. Questions should be written in an objective manner (for example, Does

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program x improve the outcome y for Veterans) and form the basis for an evaluation. For a review on Learning Questions, please refer to the Section on Evidence-Building Process Cycle, Learning Question Development.

The information on this tab is organized by question type, question, duration, element, methodological approach, evidence type, applicability.

Question Type specifies the category of question; for example, Theory of Change is one type of question.

Question specifies the question being asked.

The Duration specifies the period of time it will take to answer the question.

The Element incorporates the scope of the question – If it is strategic, for example, it would mean that it is focused on an entire program.

Methodological Approach describes the proposed analytical method or methods that will be used to gather the evidence

Evidence Type tells you what category of evidence this study will produce; you'll recall that we referenced types of evidence previously, and those can also be found in OMB guidance on Evidence-Based Policy

Lastly, Applicability informs the type of decision this question, when answered will influence. Often, a study may influence more than one type of decision.

Slide 40:

Slide 40, EBP Development Tool Continued

Now that we've developed the Learning Question in depth, we are going to turn our attention to developing the building blocks of the study.

The **Evaluation Elements** tab is designed to aid in the development of an evaluation plan. The evaluation plan provides the approach, methodology, data, process and timelines for completing the study. VBA Lines of Business are encouraged to develop a formal, written Evaluation Plan to aid in their evidence-building processes.

The information on this tab is organized by learning question, data required, decision-maker, evaluation manager, decision targeted for evidence.

We developed the Learning Question in the previous tab, and we repeat it here for reference.

Data Required highlights the specific data collection required to complete the study.

Analysis Required details the techniques used to turn the data into findings.

The next tabs are administrative in nature but are important in organizing your study. Defining the key roles of the Decision-Maker, Evaluation Lead and Evaluation Manager are essential to organizing a strong study. Finally, the tool highlights the Decision targeted for evidence. What decision will be influenced by the findings and recommendations of the study.

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Slide 41:

Slide 41, Applying Evidence in Practice

Now you have an opportunity to practice what you learned in this course. Using the EBP Development Tool is an opportunity to apply the concepts discussed today.

The example is an actual one based on a literature review of recent approaches related to Transition Stress. While it is not under current consideration, it provides an interesting situation to examine how we might introduce evidence-building and develop a Learning Question. In listening to the scenario ask the following questions.

- What are the Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats within this finding?

- Given the context of the situation, what is the more appropriate type of question? Why?

The scenario:

"An environmental scan reveals that the Canadian Veterans Service has piloted a transition strategy known as "Third Location Decompression," where an active-duty military member transitions to a retreat location before moving to his or her civilian environment* VBA leadership want to potentially advocate for this approach and develop a program with DoD."

Slide 42:

Slide 42, SWOT Exercise

For this example, there could be numerous benefits and weaknesses to the idea. In this SWOT, we characterize those through an evidence-base lens. Some examples are provided here.

The **Strength**, in this case, is that we have a specific study that shows the program has proven effective.

The **Weakness** is that the study's sampling was limited, so our confidence that this can be extrapolated to a broader population.

Understandably, if this approach were to work, then the ability to ease transition and alleviate the stress it causes could be an **opportunity**

However, lack of understanding about unknown impacts and possible differing results in a different context, could be a **threat**

Again, SWOT analysis can aid in thinking about the type of study that will best aid you in gathering evidence.

Slide 43:

Slide 43, Learning Question Exercise

Because we have limited evidence of success, and some concerns about potential threats, we design a question that supports being able to gather additional evidence to support the decision whether to offer this third location decompression approach.

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In this case, we actually propose developing a pilot program. In research terms, this is often called a **trial,** much like a vaccine trial. We select a sample of Veterans to undertake this pilot, and we study the impact compared to the group who had the traditional military-to-civilian transition. That is a **randomized controlled trial.**

In thinking about your Learning Question, consider these aspects:

- What are we trying to accomplish?

- Who are we trying to inform?

- What evidence is available?

- What decision needs to be made?

- If you were a VBA leader, what would you want to know before making a decision?

Slide 44:

Slide 44, In Summary

Evidence is the available body of knowledge indicating if a concept is true or valid. OMB characterizes four broad categories as types of evidence: policy analysis, program evaluation, research and performance measurements.

Evidence can be leveraged to inform business decisions and reduce subjectivity.

A Learning Question provides insight into the root issue on which you are attempting to gain clarity based on evidence. Once answered, it influences decisions made regarding operations and performance.

Developing Learning Questions includes setting context, prioritizing questions, and determining and applying learning methodologies.

To effectively use data, you must be able to assess quality, validity, and relevance.

Thank you for your participation in today's training!

If you have any questions regarding this material, please send them to VBA Strategic Initiatives dot VBACO at VA dot gov.

Slide 45:

Slide 45,

See all references provided as a download with this training

Slide 46:

Slide 46, Key Terminology

There is a broader glossary of terms available however we will review some key terminology

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Analysis - The process of breaking a concept down into more simple parts, so that its logical structure is displayed.

Data - Discrete, unorganized, unprocessed measurements, or raw observations.

Evaluation - An assessment using systematic data collection and analysis of one or more programs, policies, and organizations intended to assess their effectiveness and efficiency.

Evidence -1) Information produced as a result of statistical activities conducted for a statistical purpose, as defined by the Evidence Act. 2) More broadly, evidence is the available body of facts or information indicating whether a belief or proposition is true or valid. As such, evidence can be quantitative or qualitative and may come from a variety of sources, including foundational fact finding, performance measurement, policy analysis, and program evaluation.

Evidence-based policymaking - The application of evidence to inform decisions in government.

Independence - The state of mind that permits the conduct of an engagement without being affected by influences that compromise professional judgment, thereby allowing an individual to act with integrity and exercise objectivity and professional skepticism (independence of mind); the absence of circumstances that would cause a reasonable and informed third party to reasonably conclude that the integrity, objectivity, or professional skepticism of an audit organization or member of the engagement team had been compromised (independence in appearance).

Slide 47:

Slide 47, Key Terminology continued.

Information - Organized or structured data, processed for a specific purpose to make it meaningful, valuable, and useful in specific contexts.

Knowledge - A mixture of experience, values and beliefs, contextual information, intuition, and insight that people use to make sense of new experiences and information.

Reliability - The degree to which a measure is consistent or gives very similar results each time it is used.

Theme - Pattern of meaning that can be identified within qualitative data.

Transparency (research) - Openly disclosing information that concerned parties would want to know, such as financial interests or methodological assumptions.

Validity - The degree to which an estimate is likely to be true and free of systematic errors or statistical bias (the systematic deviation of an estimated value from the true value as a result of a specific design).

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