Slide 1 - Title

Welcome to the Evidence-Based Policymaking Advanced Course: Developing Evidence for 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.

Note: The comprehensive draft builds upon the developmental draft and feedback provided to date. The comprehensive draft has revised content that reflects shifts in approach based on feedback. The comprehensive draft includes high level talking points, complete scripting, and has been reviewed by a tech editor. Selected comments are provided for feedback and decision. Please provide comments and edits directly in the document, where possible.

Slide 2 - Course Overview and Objectives

The purpose of the Advanced Course is to provide participants with the introductory knowledge needed to develop evidence and enable data-driven decision-making at the Veterans Benefits Administration or VBA. By the end of this course, participants will be able to:

1. Understand the background and purpose of Evidence-Based Policymaking or EBP
2. Develop evidence to answer a Learning Question
3. Determine considerations when conducting a study
4. Identify data and activities needed to answer a Learning Question, and
5. Explain the importance of quality, validity, and relevance of data collected

The topics we will cover include: the Foundations of the EBP Act, VBA's approach and focus on Evidence Based Policy Making Benefits; the categories of evidence including policy analysis, program evaluation, performance management, and foundational fact finding; questions to ask when conducting a study, the framing approach to designing a study, learning question considerations, resource considerations and how to set up a team; how to identify needed data, leveraging data to answer a learning question, categories of data and common methods of obtaining data and finally, technical considerations when building evidence from data.

Let's move on to the first section of this course.

Slide 3 - Section 1 UNDERSTAND THE BACKGROUND AND PURPOSE OF EVIDENCE-BASED POLICYMAKING (EBP)

Let's begin with background information on the topic of Evidence-Based Policymaking (also known as EBP) and an explanation of the purpose of EBP. By the end of this section, you will understand the following concepts:

- The government-wide mandate for EBP
- VBA's commitment to building this capacity, and
- VBA's plan to grow our skills

This course is about developing evidence to better answer questions.

Next, we will discuss when Evidence-Based Policymaking was established.

Slide 4 - Government-wide Mandate for Evidence-Based Policymaking

The government-wide mandate for Evidence-Based Policymaking was established when Congress passed the Foundations for Evidence-Based Policymaking Act of 2018. Although the title of the Act only states Policymaking, the intent and subsequent guidance from the Office of Management and Budget also known as OMB incorporated all aspects of decision-making, such as program operations, and not just policymaking. The law requires agencies to develop annual systematic plans for identifying and addressing policy questions, and OMB budgetary guidance has specified the use of evidence in formulating agency budgets. The plan must include questions for developing evidence to support policy making; data the agency intends to collect or otherwise acquire to facilitate the use of evidence in policy making; and any challenges to developing evidence to support policymaking such as statutory restrictions or access to relevant data.

The aspects of these plans that are most relevant to this course include the requirements for agencies to create procedures for collecting and using data to develop evidence and using that evidence to support budgeting and program operations. This emphasis on building data into evidence to support policymaking is the focus of this course.

Next, we will discuss VBA's commitment to Evidence-Based Policymaking.

Slide 5 - VBA Is Committed to Building Our Capacity

The Principal Deputy Secretary for Benefits Memorandum dated Jun 24, 2020 stresses the importance of VBA leadership to build the agency's capacity for Evidence-Based Policymaking. In 2020, the PDUSB emphasized the importance of the concept we'll be focusing on in this course which is building evidence into VBA's policies, programs, and budgets. On the next slide, we will look at the initial steps VBA has taken to implement Evidence-Based Policymaking.

Slide 6 - VBA Has an Approach to Grow Our Capability

We can see VBA's Approach to developing its EBP capabilities in the chevron timeline, which shows the sequence of training from the initial EBP training classes to the Advanced Course. Following this advanced course VBA Lines of Business also known as LoBs will begin developing their learning questions to ultimately conduct studies and assess their results. There is separate, focused training on Evidence-Based Budgeting also known as EBB that is provided to those who develop agency budgets. The next courses will be for Lines of Business to develop Learning Questions, a subject that was covered in the Intermediate EBP Training which is available in the Talent Management System also known as TMS.

The history and background of Evidence-Based Policymaking was covered in both Foundational and Intermediate EBP training. Let's now dive deeper into the topic of developing evidence.

Slide 7 - This Course: Developing Better Evidence

Evidence-Based Policymaking is a comprehensive approach to making effective decisions based on the analysis of reliable information. Being able to use evidence in policymaking and decision-making requires four elements. These are A Well-defined Question, Research and Data, Thorough Analysis, and Interpretation and Recommendations.

Whereas the Intermediate Course, Evidence-Based Policymaking for Decision Makers, focused on the development of Learning Questions, this course focuses on the second and third stages of the process: Research and Data and Thorough Analysis. Through these two concepts, we will focus on how to identify and collect data and then analyze and develop that data into evidence to answer a Learning Question.

Next, we will discuss the benefits and outcomes to Evidence-Based Policymaking.

Slide 8 - 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 or EBA being used within VBA. Additionally, evidence-based policymaking is being developed for near-term use.

Evidence-based activities are gaining support through public and private sectors as they see value in consistent and rigorous outputs from research and analysis-informed decision making. According to the Pew Results First Initiative Clearinghouse Database, more than 87% of almost 2,000 social policy programs tracked showed positive impact based on “most rigorous evidence” or “high-quality evidence”.

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 to provide better awareness of factors affecting our programs
- Formally testing approaches and solutions to help ensure decisions will be effective, and
- Building a strong base of shared knowledge to speed decision-making and leadership concurrence

Evidence based activities generate trust in VBA, ensure good stewardship of public funds, allow staff to work efficiently together, and demonstrate growth as required by law. 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 the delivery of benefits and services.

Next, we will begin our discussion on learning questions.

Slide 9 - Learning Question

In the previous slide, we showed the entire formula for developing Evidence-Based Policymaking.

A large part of the Intermediate course focuses on the development of the question itself because it is so foundational to the rest of the effort.

As a reminder, Learning Questions are developed and constructed using an environmental scan and a Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats or SWOT analysis.

Having covered an overview of Evidence-Based Policymaking, let us move on to the topic of developing evidence to answer a Learning Question.

Slide 10 - Section 2 DEVELOP EVIDENCE TO ANSWER A LEARNING QUESTION

By the end of this section, you will understand the following concepts:

- The different categories of evidence, and
- How to determine which category of evidence is needed to develop varying types of data and answer different Learning Questions

First, let’s discuss the categories of evidence.

Slide 11 - Categories of Evidence

OMB identified four major categories of evidence: Policy Analysis, Program Evaluation, Performance Measurement, and Foundational Fact Finding in its guidance for EBP. Many different types of analyses exist that can develop these categories of evidence.

Selecting the right type of evidence is a mixture of science and art. There are numerous ways of analyzing data that bring evidence to answer a question. For example, in Policy Analysis, one can compare alternatives across a range of criteria. In many cases, more than one type of analysis or study might be necessary, especially for questions with larger scopes.

The first area we will cover is Policy Analysis.

Slide 12 - Policy Analysis

Policy Analysis is using data to generate and inform policy choices, or really, almost any choice. Policy analysis helps think through and document the anticipated outcomes of taking alternative actions.

The evidence used in policy analyses can be thought of in four groups that answer key questions. The first question this type of analysis wants to answer is "What do we get?" by choosing each alternative. We often simply call these the "pros", advantages, or benefits of an alternative.

The second question we want to ask is "What do we give up?" by taking an action, which might be called "cons", disadvantages, or costs.

Together, this is a familiar way of thinking—comparing the Pros and Cons or advantages and disadvantages of an action. Even Benjamin Franklin used this method, listing reasons both for and against an action side by side on a single piece of paper.

Some impacts are not clearly an advantage or disadvantage. They may just be a consequence or feature of the action. Sometimes, the perception of whether the impact is good or bad depends on who you are. The key point for us to remember is that all impacts need to be incorporated into the analysis.

But estimating the Pros and Cons structure alone isn't what all policymakers need to consider. Therefore, there is a third question we ask, "How hard is it to do?" Is one alternative more likely to be successful, has fewer risks, or has all the needed legal authority in place.

The last question that is asked in a policy analysis is "Whom does it affect?" There may be differences in equity among groups, for example there may be very different impacts on female and male Veterans, or perhaps the advantages flow mostly to well-situated Veterans with access to computers and the internet verses those with less access to those resources.

When comparing alternatives, it is important to address all these questions together—no one aspect alone is sufficient.

Next, let's discuss a particular form of policy analysis—one that looks at the overall impact of a program.

Slide 13 - Program Evaluation

A program evaluation is an assessment using systemic data collection and analysis of one or more programs, policies, and organizations intended to assess their effectiveness and efficiency. Program evaluations are typically the most rigorous category of evidence. There are several types of evaluations. For example, a formative evaluation is focused on whether learning or improvement has occurred and the feasibility of an approach. Unlike performance measures or policy analysis, an evaluation can, but does not always, provide evidence that a program is directly responsible for a changed outcome. When it does, this is called impact evaluation.

Although impact and outcome evaluations are similar, the important difference in the impact evaluation is in the ability to demonstrate that the program was responsible for the outcome. This requires careful design to isolate the effect of the program.

Lastly, along with addressing formative, impact, and outcome, there may be a need to evaluate process and implementation. Did the program, policy, or organizational approach (also known as intervention) deliver results based on its theory? Or how was it improved?

Let's move on to a discussion of performance measurement.

Slide 14 - Performance Measurement

Performance measurement is the continuous, systematic tracking of information relevant to policies, strategies, programs, projects, goals/objectives, and/or activities. Although performance measurements are frequently used in VBA, here we are focusing on their ability to provide evidence of a program's impact. Often, we measure process and output, but in this case, we want to demonstrate through measurement if the program is achieving an intended effect.

- Interim Outcomes performance measures provide evidence to understand the progress and value of measures in short intervals. For example, the customer's experience is being improved by a program or policy change.
- Long-Term Outcomes performance measures provide evidence to understand if the condition of the customer has been improved or changed over time. Veteran's homelessness is one example of a long-term outcome.

Next, we will discuss what you need to do when you don't understand the problem or environment for your learning question.

Slide 15 - Foundational Fact-Finding

When we don't understand the problem or environment, it is the appropriate time to conduct Foundational Fact-Finding research.

Foundational Fact-Finding is research and analysis used to help answer questions that will help an organization better understand the needs and conditions or help you better understand the preferences or characteristics of a group.

Several types of approaches may be used for foundational fact-findings. Some common examples are an exploratory study, which examines the potential of possible courses of action, another example is descriptive statistics which reviews data to understand a given population or environment, and lastly basic research which is designed to help support or reject a hypothesis or theory about a condition.

The types of foundational studies listed here are but a small subset of the types of activities used for foundational fact-finding.

Next, let's review what we have covered so far in this course.

Slide 16 – Section Two Summary

In summary, the four categories of evidence are one policy analysis, two program evaluation, three performance measurement, and four foundational fact-finding.

Selecting the correct category of evidence that is needed to answer a Learning Question is the key to developing evidence.

Multiple categories of evidence will often be required to answer a Learning Question.

Having reviewed the summary for this section, let's have a quick knowledge check to reinforce your understanding of these concepts.

Slide 17 - Knowledge Check Number One

What would be the best type of evidence to develop to answer the question – how much do different factors contribute to veteran homelessness?

A. Policy analysis
B. Program evaluation
C. Foundational-fact finding

Slide 18 - Knowledge Check Number One Answer

If you checked C, foundational-fact finding, you are correct. Foundational-fact finding is best used to understand a condition or help you better understand a group. Program evaluation would have been the answer if the Learning Question was examining the impact of a new program that was initiated to reduce veteran homelessness. Policy analysis would have been the answer if the Learning Question focused on the impact of a potential new policy aimed at reducing veteran homelessness.

Slide 19 - Knowledge Check Number Two

What would be the most appropriate type of evaluation to use when examining the feasibility of a new veteran transition to a civilian employment program?

A. Outcome
B. Process/Implementation
C. Formative

Slide 20 - Knowledge Check Number Two Answer

You are correct if you checked C, formative. When examining the feasibility of a new program, a formative program evaluation is the most appropriate method to choose. If the purpose of the program evaluation was to examine whether a program was achieving its intended effect, the correct answer would be A, outcome. Answer B, process/implementation, would have been the correct choice if the aim of the program evaluation was to examine whether a new program was being implemented as intended.

Having completed this section, we will now move on to considerations for conducting a study.

Slide 21 - Section 3: DETERMINE CONSIDERATIONS WHEN CONDUCTING A STUDY

Now that we've covered the categories of evidence and how to select the right approach to answering a Learning Question, let us examine the considerations for conducting a study. By the end of this section, you will understand the following concepts:

- The initial questions to ask when designing a study
- The Learning Question and resource considerations to examine when designing a study
- The roles and responsibilities of a typical study team

We will first begin by discussing designing a study.

Slide 22 - Designing a Study – What do you need to know?

You've been asked to examine a policy question or evaluate the feasibility of a new program. You will need to determine:

What decision is needed?

What resources are available?

Who is best situated to provide the needed data?

What data is needed to answer the question?

What is the timeline for answering the question?

This section will walk you through how to approach a new Learning Question and determine how to study the issue. The first step in this process is to ask elemental questions that identify the issue at hand and the scope of the study needed. Instead of asking these questions at random, it's best to frame them around two categories of considerations x, and x. In this section, we'll show you how to take this approach.

Slide 23 - Framing Your Approach to Design a Study

When framing your approach to design the study there are key questions you may need to ask yourself, such as "What answers do we need?" and "What resources do we have at our disposal to find those answers?" These are the two fundamental questions that analysts must address when answering a Learning Question. Analysts can use them to categorize all other study design inquiries as either a consideration related to the Learning Question itself or consideration related to resources.

When looking at the Learning Question, analysts must consider:

- What category or categories of evidence is needed to answer the question?
- What skills will be needed to develop that evidence?
- Which stakeholders will be needed to supply data?
- What is the timeline for this Learning Question?

Resource considerations are the other driver to designing a study. An analyst must determine:

- What level of funding will be needed?
- What data is needed to answer the question?
- Are there staff available with the skills needed to answer the question?
- Does this study have the support and sponsorship of leadership?

We'll examine these two fundamental questions in greater detail on the next two slides. First, let's look at the Learning Question considerations.

Slide 24 - Learning Question Considerations

There are four considerations related to Learning Questions that need to be examined. These include evidence needed, required skills, involvement of internal and external stakeholders, and timelines.

The first consideration we'll address is that of evidence. As we discussed in the previous section, determining which category of evidence is needed will guide your approach to answering the Learning Question.

Slide 25 - The second consideration is required skills. What skills will be needed to develop the evidence? When approaching a Learning Question, it is important to understand whether the Learning Question will require extensive analytical skills or is an operational problem that will need a deep knowledge of VBA operations and programs. Often a combination of several skills will be needed to answer a Learning Question.

Slide 26 - The third consideration is which stakeholders will need to be involved in the study. Will this study require the involvement of representatives from just one VBA line of business, multiple lines of business, or both VBA and external parties? If the Learning Question affects multiple federal agencies and external non-government partners, then the study will need to include stakeholders from these groups as well.

Slide 27 - The final consideration is the timeline of the Learning Question. Does the Learning Question require a longitudinal study that will span several years? or is a new regulation being discussed and policy analysis is needed in three months? These are the timeline questions that will help frame the design of a study.

We've covered the Learning Question considerations for designing a study. Let's now look at the other side of this approach, what resources will be required to meet these Learning Question needs.

<u>Slide 28 - Resource Considerations</u>

The four resource considerations that need to be examined include funding, data, staffing, and leadership support.

The first resource consideration to address is that of funding. Will the study require specialized analytical tools? Will members of the study team need to travel to interview study participants? The study team will need to be supplied with the necessary resources to be successful.

Slide 29 - Next, does the existing data answer the Learning Question? Is the data relevant and accessible? If not, the study will need to be designed to collect the necessary data through interviews, observation, and other methods that will be covered in the next section of this course.

Slide 30 - The third consideration is staffing. On the previous slide, we discussed the skills that will be required to develop evidence to answer the Learning Question. Now we need to examine whether there is staff available that have those skills. If the Learning Question requires specialized analytical skills, then the study team will need to have analysts with those skills.

Slide 31 - The final category to examine is leadership support. Studies need to align with agency priorities and have the support of agency leadership. If a study is not connected to VBA's learning agenda or does not have a decision-maker sponsoring the study, it will not be initiated.

Now that we've examined how to frame your approach to designing a study, let's look at the roles and responsibilities of a typical study team.

<u>Slide 32 - Setting Up a Team</u>

Setting up a team is essential, however, not all studies will require each of the following roles. Some studies will be small enough in scope that they will require a single analyst. Others will need a team of analysts as well as a project manager, external and internal stakeholders, and a decision-maker. After examining the Learning Question and resources considerations of a study, the designer of that study will have a better idea of the team needed.

Let's look at the roles and responsibilities of a typical study team.

The first position is project manager. This person will be responsible for managing and planning the execution of the study. The project manager also oversees the operations of the team and update leadership on the progress of the study.

Slide 33 - The next position is the analyst. Analysts are responsible for the collection and interpretation of the data. They may use both qualitative and quantitative methods to collect the data they need. Methods for identifying and obtaining data will be covered in greater detail in the next section.

Slide 34 - The third position is VBA decision-maker. The decision-maker will sponsor the study. This sponsorship will prove especially helpful when studies require the cooperation of multiple VBA lines of business and external stakeholders. The decision-maker will also use the finding of the study to make program, personnel, and policy decisions.

Slide 35 - One or more VBA lines of business will typically be involved in a study. They provide information and data to the team as well as often collaborating with the study team through an Integrated Project Team also known as an IPT.

Slide 36 - The final role is an external stakeholder. External stakeholders can include federal, state, and local government partners as well non-government partners such as non-profits and academic institutions.

After this examination of the study design considerations, you should now be able to ask the questions needed to design a study as well as identify the roles needed on a study team. Let's move on to a summary of this section and then a knowledge check.

Slide 37 - Section Three Summary

In summary, the first consideration for designing a study is identifying the evidence and resources needed to answer the Learning Question.

To identify these needs, you'll need to ask yourself the right questions. Displayed on the screen are a couple of key questions to consider.

Study teams typically include a project manager, decision-maker, and an analyst or analysts. Teams will often need to collaborate with stakeholders to collect the evidence and information they require.

Now that we've reviewed the key points for this section, let's have a quick knowledge check to reinforce your understanding of these concepts.

Slide 38 - Knowledge Check Number Three

Which of the following is a Learning Question consideration?

A. Funding
B. Category of Evidence needed
C. Staffing

Slide 39 – Knowledge Check Number Three Answer

The correct answer is B, category of evidence needed. Answers A, funding, and C, staffing, are both examples of resource considerations.

Slide 40 – Knowledge Check Number Four

Resource considerations include: (check all that apply)

A. Data
B. Leadership support
C. Timeline

Slide 41 – Knowledge Check Number Four Answer

The correct answers are A, data, and B, leadership support. Timeline is an example of a Learning Question consideration.

Let’s now move on and discuss how to identify data needed to answer a learning question.