



September 9, 2016

Dr. Katharine G. Abraham, Chair
Mr. Ron Haskins, Co-Chair
Commission on Evidence-Based Policymaking
U.S. Census Bureau
4600 Silver Hill Road
Suitland, MD 20746

Dear Chairwoman Abraham and Co-Chairman Haskins:

America Forward is writing to thank you both for your willingness to lead the important effort of the newly established bipartisan Commission on Evidence-Based Policymaking. We were advocates of the Evidence-Based Policymaking Commission Act when it was introduced by Speaker Ryan and Senator Murray and supported efforts to ensure its passage given its alignment with our belief that in times of greater demand for human and social services and tighter budgets, we must work together to direct government resources to programs that work and that measurably improve people's lives. We would like to offer our thoughts on the work before the Commission over the next 15 months and offer specific insights and recommendations based on our Coalition's experiences for how to ensure the promise of providing "the nation with guidance on ways to further expand our approaches to evidence-building in government"¹ is realized.

America Forward is a nonpartisan effort to unite social innovators with policymakers and advance a public policy agenda that fosters innovation, rewards results, catalyzes cross-sector partnerships, and translates local impact into national change. At America Forward, we champion innovative, effective, and efficient solutions that are helping to tackle our country's most pressing social problems. We do this through a network of more than 70 social innovation organizations, the **America Forward Coalition**, who are driving progress in areas such as education, workforce development, early learning, public health, pay for success, and national service in more than 14,500 communities nationwide, touching the lives of 8 million Americans each year. Our work is grounded in the real world, community-based experiences of these organizations and those they serve. This grounding, we think, serves us extremely well in not only identifying and championing policy solutions that will have real meaningful impact but our ability to point to tangible examples of these solutions in action, and to real people who these solutions have touched, sets us apart from other advocacy organizations.

Ensure Focus on Practice and On-the-Ground Implementation

The real promise for the Commission for us at America Forward is that the focus on bringing evidence and greater attention to outcomes will not only be in service to the creation of better policies and budgeting practices but that it will also serve to inform the improvement of existing federal programs, service practice and delivery. Better policies and more effective allocation of resources only fixes a part of the equation of having more evidence-based, government funded human and social services. The way those services are delivered is equally important to ensuring that we are measurably improving the lives of those who need to access these critical services at one point or another in their lives. Like our

¹ <http://www2.census.gov/about/linkage/meetings/2016-07-22/abraham-haskins.pdf>



approach to policy advocacy—it is not just about a good policy, it is about how that policy works on the ground and how it impacts those the policy is meant to help.

As with many Congressionally created commissions, there is the risk that this Commission will fail to include this practical lens to its work. State and local level government leaders and service providers, who are collecting data, using data, and ultimately serving the individuals who are behind the data points we need to build the evidence base around, are where the real promise of the Commission lies. It would be prudent for the Commission to include in its outreach and information gathering individuals outside of the traditional academic and research communities as well as to include a focus on how to make data available to inform real world service program design, delivery, and indicators of impact.

It is in fact the complementary combination of classic academics, applied researchers, and program facilitators and service providers that will ensure that the work of this Commission is as robust and significant as its promise holds. We think it is imperative that all of these perspectives, from all levels—federal, state and local—as well as across issue areas, are included and that a well-rounded group of experts is a part of the discussion that leads to this important Commission’s conclusions and recommendations.

Include Provider/Practitioner Perspectives on Data

America Forward Coalition members share a commitment to using data to track progress and ensure accountability. That is why we are particularly supportive of the focus of the Commission on developing a strategy for increasing the availability and use of data in order to build evidence about government programs. The availability and use of administrative data is of particular interest because, as we know from our members’ experiences, it is extremely important for engaging in meaningful evaluations and for driving down the cost of randomized controlled trials.

In addition to availability and use of data, our Coalition members have identified other challenges associated with data in the context of building the evidence of what works. These challenges include:

1. Even if data are collected and available, **antiquated data systems** particularly in the public sector make it difficult to efficiently access or engage in analyses of the data to measure outcomes and determine impact.
2. The challenges that millions of Americans face every day cut cross agencies and sectors. Allowing specific **datasets to “speak to” each other** is an important consideration for the Commission to explore. In order to adequately measure results and assess impact, data access and utilization must reflect the interconnected nature of the problems faced by Americans and the solutions being developed by organizations like those in the America Forward Coalition.
3. The mobility of Americans can make it difficult to track outcomes absent a **state or national database** that can accessed and used for building evidence and strengthening efforts by providers and governments to be more evidence-based. All of this must be done with an assurance of privacy and confidentiality.
4. Given the long time focus on compliance with rules rather than achievement of outcomes, both the **service delivery and government workforce are not accustomed to working with data** for purposes of evidence determination.



Encourage Federal Agencies to Adopt Relevant Data-Driven Innovations with Evidence of Effectiveness Identified through Innovation Fund and Tiered Evidence Programs

Tiered evidence models and innovation funds have been authorized across different agencies and included in various issue areas to develop and build the evidence base of what works in education and social services. One example, the Social Innovation Fund (SIF), makes grants to experienced intermediary organizations that are well positioned within communities to identify innovative, evidence-based programs with potential for expansion in the areas of economic opportunity, healthy futures, and youth development. Since 2010, the SIF has made awards totaling \$243 million with more than \$528 million in private and non-federal matching funds. In total, more than 400 nonprofit organizations are being funded by the SIF to conduct diverse interventions and evaluate results through highly rigorous models.

One challenge facing innovations funds like SIF and tiered evidence programs such as the Investing in Innovation program (i3) at the Department of Education is identifying a pathway to integrating and expanding approaches determined to have evidence of effectiveness under this funds in a manner that aligns with existing federal efforts to address national and local challenges. In fact, despite the SIF's widespread success and the bi-partisan support of i3, many federal agencies are unaware of the innovations supported by these funding streams that could help improve existing programs, yielding better outcomes for vulnerable communities. As the Commission builds out its priorities and scope of work, our Coalition suggests that you encourage federal agencies to adopt relevant data-driven programs/strategies with evidence of effectiveness currently supported by the Social Innovation Fund, the Investing in Innovation Fund and other similar programs whose evaluations, data, and experience of partner organizations are of particular value to federal agencies tasked with providing effective services in the areas of economic opportunity, healthy futures, and youth development.

America Forward stands ready to work with this important Commission to ensure that the concepts of evidence and outcomes are being used to develop policies and fund interventions. We believe this should become common practice at the federal, state and local level to address the current and future challenges we face as a nation.

Thank you for your leadership of the Commission on Evidence-Based Policymaking and for your effort to strengthen the government's evidence-building efforts.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Nicole Truhe".

Nicole Truhe
Government Affairs Director, America Forward
1400 Eye Street, NW Ste 400
Washington, DC 20004