



# Evidence Commission A Funder's Perspective DRAFT

November 4, 2016

# Overview



The Edna McConnell Clark Foundation has over a decade and a half's experience helping nonprofits use data and build evidence of their programs' effectiveness and improve and expand them to lift the life prospects of greater numbers of economically disadvantaged youth in the U.S. Since 2007, we have leveraged \$155 million of our own resources to help 16 grantees secure nearly \$487 million in additional private and public funding.

Our grantees and the communities, families and young people they serve have benefited from the increased emphasis that OMB, federal agencies and Congress have placed on evidence-based programs.

We are proud to have partnered with the federal government in the Social Innovation Fund, an initiative enlisting private intermediaries to help expand evidence-based programs.

We are pleased that the Evidence Commission is advancing the "what works" agenda by setting clear standards and expectations for the use of data and evidence in policy and procurement.

And we are honored by the opportunity to share our thoughts and recommendations for your consideration.

# Constraints for Using & Building Evidence



EMCF has learned from long experience and recent interviews of over 80 thought leaders that despite increased demand for evidence-based programs, the current approach to **"evidence building"** – amassing empirical data measuring impact, ideally through third-party evaluation – is often too slow, expensive, incremental and insufficient for **non profits and their funders** due to current limitations.

- Funding for evidence building and supportive capacities (technology, data, and policy) is limited and too often in the hands of third parties. Nonprofits are forced to take a "pay as you go" approach rather than follow consistent and embedded practice.
- The current roles and incentives of evaluation researchers are not well aligned with practitioners' needs or local context. *Too often non profit providers are the "caboose" of the evidence-building train when they should be the engine.*
- Policy-makers' demand for programs that work runs ahead of nonprofits' ability to deliver such evidence-based programs. *We need a greater supply of organizations and leaders equipped to build and use evidence-based solutions.*
- While policy-makers, government and funders are demanding evidence, they seldom understand the operational, data and funding realities that nonprofits face *AND* they do not use such evidence consistently to set policy or award contracts.

In sum, limited innovation in evaluation, constrained data access and weak links between evidence, public policy, implementation, and financial sustainability constrict the pipeline of evidence-based programs worthy and ready for large-scale investments by philanthropy, government, and not-for-profits.

# Potential Solutions



Drawing on our grantmaking experience and recent research, we offer the following ideas for consideration by the Evidence Commission.

- Service providers are often on the front line of implementing federal programs, but they lack a close connection to government that would make it easier for them to innovate, contribute to, take advantage of, and execute evidence-based policy decisions
  - Encourage better understanding of the **role and magnitude of the private providers' network** in the development and delivery of evidence-based practices.
    - Alliance for Strong Families and Communities estimates 109,515 human services agencies.
    - \$750m budget for services in Child Welfare in NYC alone for preventive and foster care service procured through the private sector.
    - Wisconsin has >100 agencies providing foster care
  - Consider a platform for engaging nonprofits and educating the field on the **process of evidence building** as a way to extend and expand beyond its statutory lifetime the Commission's efforts to reach this important sector.
- Support efforts to promote, prioritize and **incentivize the use of evidence in procurement**. Help ensure a clear and unambiguous link of funding to the building & use outcomes.
  - Use evidence to accurately match programs to the needs of target populations, avoiding one-size-fits-all thinking.
  - Support efforts to promote providers' **evidence building & outcomes, not just compliance**.
- Set clear **evidence and data standards and requirements** that can be shared across government and the private sector.
- Remove **barriers to accessing federal, state and local data** and **promote the linkage and aggregation of data by all stakeholders**.
  - Service providers need to access data from various public programs (including, but not limited to, the programs to which they may be directly connected) in order to tailor and track the outcomes of interventions for the communities they serve.
  - Pooled data creates healthy, affordable comparison groups that facilitate evaluation and learning.

# Partners in Building Evidence



The Evidence Commission can encourage both public and private funders to support the “what works” agenda in the following ways:

- Fund data collection, evaluation, and learning as ongoing **standard operating procedure**. Evidence building is a continuous rather than intermittent, one-study-at-a-time process. Far from overhead, it is integral to a nonprofit’s success and requires investment in:
  - Talent (leadership, data scientists, analysts, evaluators)
  - Technology and tools
  - Strategic evaluation planning
- Build or buy **the capacity to use data** to generate evidence, and ensure that service providers and communities have access to these assets.
- Foster a better **understanding and use of different levels of evidence** and **prioritize investment decisions based on data and evidence**.
  - Entry evidence reviews
  - Clearinghouses
  - Inform and align policy priorities with federal data and evidence standards
- Use data to identify and then **fund gaps in evidence** where it is critically needed to address policy priorities.
- Incentivize **innovation of less costly tools and more timely approaches** to evaluation.
- Understand where federal and state government is constrained and leverage philanthropy to **expand the pipeline** of policy-relevant evidence-based programs.
- **Hold researchers and technical assistance providers accountable** for designing evaluations appropriate to the stage of organizational development and the capacity of nonprofits and to the communities they serve.