

Managing Toward Evidence

State-level Evidence-based Policymaking and the Results First Initiative

By Patrick Lester
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Partly because evidence-based policy is rooted in rigorous research and partly because such research is viewed as a federal core competency, much of the focus on evidence-based policy in the United States has thus far focused primarily on federal efforts.¹ As the field has advanced, however, this has begun to change.

While much of the attention has been devoted to building evidence, more attention is now being paid to how it is being used. This shift in attention has also produced a change in focus. By necessity, much of the work of translating research into concrete policies and program implementation will be done by states and local governments, which are much closer to the social issues that evidence-based policy is intended to address.

Unfortunately, whatever advantages come with proximity to the issues appear to have been offset in many cases by lower resources and less expertise. In 2010, the Pew Charitable Trusts and the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation launched the Results First initiative to address this gap.

This paper reviews the early results and lessons of Results First. After summarizing the initiative and the current level of evidence use in the states, it describes obstacles that have faced similar efforts in the past and how the initiative is addressing them.

It concludes that rational top-down policymaking describes some of what is taking place in states – and that Results First appears to be having some success making such policy decisions better informed. However, it also argues that there is a second model – evidence-based management – that may be just as important. This second strategy may help evidence-based policy avoid some of the pitfalls that have faced previous efforts at government reform.

Evidence Use in the States: Modest Progress

How is evidence-based policy faring in the states? According to a report released by Results First in January 2017, all 50 states have adopted at least some evidence-based policies and practices.² For most, however, these efforts have been modest.

The study rated the states according to six measures across four different policy areas (behavioral health, child welfare, criminal justice, and juvenile justice), or 24 measures in all. The study assigned 0-2 points to each measure based on whether the state met the report's minimum (one point) or advanced (two points) standards, for a total of 48 possible points.

In the analysis, five states stood out – Washington, Utah, Minnesota, Connecticut, and Oregon – with Washington topping the list. The other 45 states and the District of Columbia lagged behind, however, with each averaging less than one point (the minimum standard) across each of the 24 measures. Many fared much worse, averaging less than half a point on each measure.

Summary results for the six measures can be found in **Figure 1**. According to the study, most states engage in basic information collection activities, such as defining levels of evidence and inventorying existing programs – categorizing them either according to their evidence level (advanced) or providing more basic data on funding, performance, design, or location (minimum). Only a third of states (17) report on program costs and benefits,

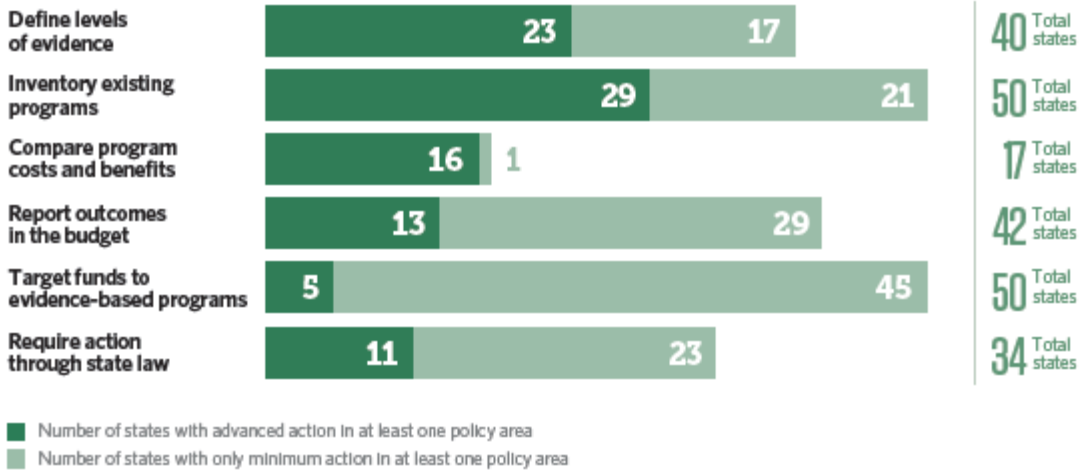
¹ Ron Haskins and Greg Margolis, *Show Me the Evidence*, Brookings Institution Press, 2014.

² Pew-MacArthur Results First Initiative, "How States Engage in Evidence-Based Policymaking: A National Assessment." January 2017. http://www.pewtrusts.org/~media/assets/2017/01/how_states_engage_in_evidence_based_policymaking.pdf

although most (42) provide information on program outcomes.

Many states have also taken the next step, translating evidence into state policy, but such activity has not been very pronounced. Every state targeted at least some funding to evidence-based programs. Most states (34) have enacted evidence-based policies into law. Relatively few, however, met the study's highest standard in these two action-oriented categories.

Figure 1
Most States Are Engaging in Evidence-Based Policymaking
 Fewer states utilize advanced forms of the six actions



Source: Pew analysis of statutes, administrative codes, executive orders, and state documents

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The Results First Framework

With states showing substantial interest in evidence-based policy, but most falling well short of their potential, The Pew Charitable Trusts and the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation formed a partnership in 2010 to address the gap. The initiative, Results First, is partly modeled on the work of the Washington State Institute for Public Policy, which has done pioneering work for more than 30 years and is considered a leader in the field.

To date, Pew and MacArthur have committed over \$30 million to Results First. As of June 30, 2017, the initiative has partnered with 26 states and ten counties to support the greater use of evidence, in most cases with a significant focus on criminal justice issues.³ In each of these partnerships, the initiative has supported work that aligns with the following framework (see **Figure 2**):⁴

- Program Assessment:** The first step in the framework is to conduct a program assessment, which involves three distinct stages: (1) creating an inventory of current programmatic interventions; (2) reviewing research that has been validated by third-party clearinghouses to determine what works; and (3) conducting a benefit-cost analysis to determine which interventions can be expected to generate a high return on investment.⁵

³ Communication with Results First, June 15, 2017. A public list of current Results First partners can be found at:

<http://www.pewtrusts.org/en/projects/pew-macarthur-results-first-initiative/where-we-work>

⁴ Pew-MacArthur Results First Initiative, "Evidence-Based Policymaking: A Guide for Effective Government," November 2014.

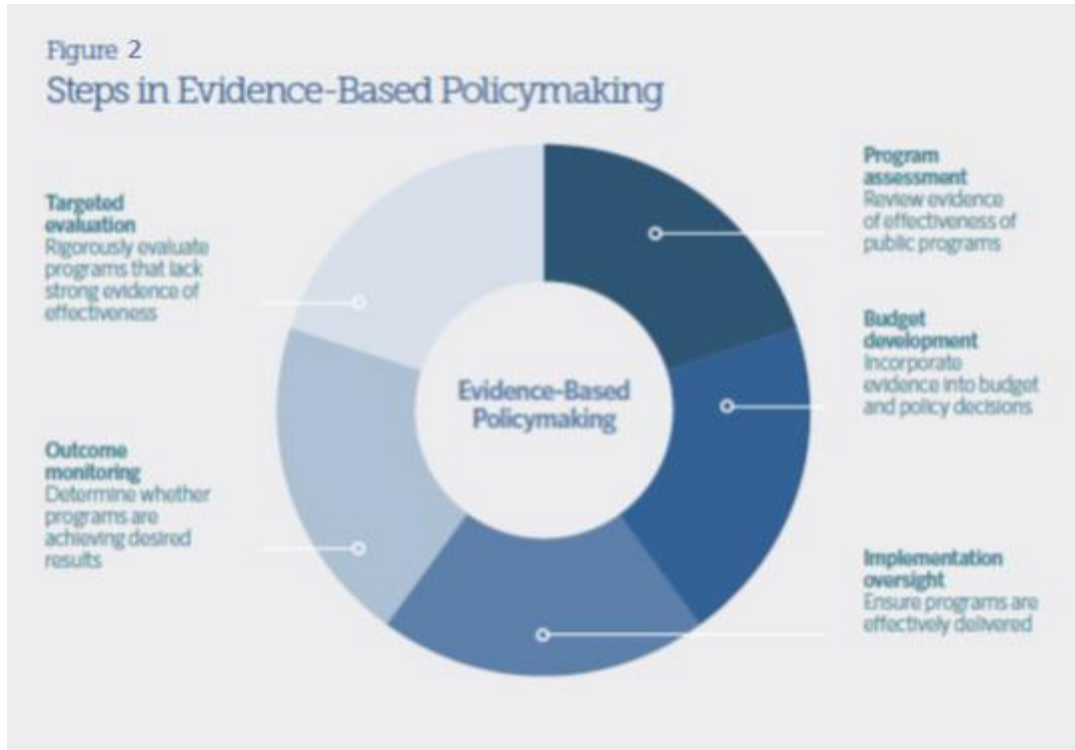
<http://www.pewtrusts.org/~media/assets/2014/11/evidencebasedpolicymakingaguideforeffectivegovernment.pdf>

⁵ Pew-MacArthur Results First Initiative, "Program Assessment: Identifying What Works in Your State or Locality," June 2015.

<http://www.pewtrusts.org/~media/assets/2015/06/resultsfirstprograminventorybrief.pdf>; Pew-MacArthur Results First Initiative, "Defining Levels of Evidence," November 2015. <http://www.pewtrusts.org/~media/assets/2015/11/defininglevelsevidence.pdf>; Pew-MacArthur

- **Budget and Policy Development:** After the current inventory of programs has been assessed, this information is then used to shape budgets and other legislative and executive branch policies.⁶
- **Implementation Oversight:** After policies have been approved, they are then monitored to ensure that they are being implemented effectively. This can include establishing quality standards, monitoring program fidelity compared to the original evidence-based models, and conducting data-driven reviews to track performance.⁷
- **Outcome Monitoring:** Program outcomes are tracked, first by developing appropriate measures, and then conducting regular audits and reporting results to policymakers.
- **Targeted Evaluation:** New and untested programs are assessed to determine their impact. This information is then incorporated into the program assessments and used as part of a continuous cycle of improvement.⁸

Within this broad framework, the bulk of Results First's work is focused on the first two steps: program assessment and budget/policy development.⁹



Results First Initiative, "Results First Clearinghouse Database," June 23, 2015. <http://www.pewtrusts.org/en/research-and-analysis/issue-briefs/2014/09/results-first-clearinghouse-database>; the latest benefit-cost analyses from the Washington State Institute for Public Policy can be found at: <http://www.wsipp.wa.gov/BenefitCost>

⁶ Pew-MacArthur Results First Initiative, "A Guide to Evidence-Based Budget Development: How to Use Research to Inform Program Funding Decisions," July 2016. <http://www.pewtrusts.org/~media/assets/2016/07/aquidetovidencebasedbudgetdevelopment.pdf>; Pew-MacArthur Results First Initiative, "Legislating Evidence-Based Policymaking," March 2015. <http://www.pewtrusts.org/~media/assets/2015/03/legislationresultsfirstbriefmarch2015.pdf>

⁷ Pew-MacArthur Results First Initiative, "Implementation Oversight for Evidence-Based Programs: A Policymaker's Guide to Effective Program Delivery," May 2016. http://www.pewtrusts.org/~media/assets/2016/05/rf_programimplementationbrief.pdf

⁸ For example see WSIPP, "Outcome Evaluation of Washington State's Early Childhood Education and Assistance Program," December 2014. http://www.wsipp.wa.gov/ReportFile/1576/WSipp_Outcome-Evaluation-of-Washington-States-Early-Childhood-Education-and-Assistance-Program_Report.pdf

⁹ Pew-MacArthur Results First Initiative, "An Overview of the Pew-MacArthur Results First Initiative," July 2015. <http://www.pewtrusts.org/~media/assets/2015/07/pewmacarthurresultsfirstinitiative2015.pdf>

Obstacles to Evidence-based Policymaking

As designed, the Results First framework appears to be a rational response to the existing gaps in the use of evidence by state policymakers. The success of such efforts cannot be assumed, however. Recent attempts at government reform, including tracking programmatic outcomes and instituting performance-based budgeting, have run into significant obstacles.

At the federal level, such efforts have generally failed. These have included early attempts at outcomes-driven budgeting, such as performance-based budgeting during the Johnson, Nixon, and Carter administrations.¹⁰ It also includes the Program Assessment Rating Tool (PART), an explicitly evidence-driven effort during the administration of President George W. Bush.¹¹

Similar challenges have been experienced by states. A 2014 paper on state-level performance-based budgeting by the National Association of State Budget Officers found that “despite widespread interest and growing use of performance budgeting practices, the process of actually tying performance information to funding decisions in an effective, meaningful and practical manner continues to be a major challenge for all levels of government.”¹²

In general, barriers to such efforts have tended to fall into two categories, information-related and political, and such challenges may also be a problem for Results First. Possible information-related barriers include:

- **Limited Evidence:** Evidence-based policy depends on the existence of reliable, well-implemented studies of policies and interventions, but for most policy areas this evidence is still nascent.
- **Misleading Outcomes Information:** Program outcomes are often driven by factors other than the program’s effectiveness, such as participant characteristics or external factors, such as the economy. For this reason, simple outcomes are usually not a reliable indicator of program effectiveness.¹³
- **Replication Problems:** Even when they are evidence-based, interventions frequently do not produce expected results when they are replicated, often due to differing local contexts or poor implementation.¹⁴
- **Mismatched “Programs”:** Most rigorous evaluations are conducted on specific interventions (for example, the Nurse-Family Partnership), while most policy and budget decisions involve larger government programs that commonly fund or involve many different kinds of policies and interventions.

The Washington State Institute for Public Policy, which developed the benefit-cost model used by Results First, uses computer simulations to estimate such risks, but they remain estimates.¹⁵ The Congressional Budget Office, which performs similar work at the federal level, openly admits that its estimates face substantial uncertainty.¹⁶

Efforts to translate evidence into policy can also face substantial political and administrative barriers, including:

- **Partisan Politics:** The most significant political barrier to evidence-based policymaking may be partisan differences. In the United States, Democrats are usually seen as the party more likely to use government to address social issues. Republicans are the party of smaller government and are often

¹⁰ U.S. Government Accountability Office, “Performance Budgeting: Past Initiatives Offer Insights for GPRA Implementation,” March 27, 1997. Available at: <http://www.gao.gov/products/AIMD-97-46>

¹¹ Donald P. Moynihan, “Advancing the Empirical Study of Performance Management: What We Learned from the Program Assessment Rating Tool,” February 20, 2013. Available at: <http://www.lafollette.wisc.edu/images/publications/workingpapers/moynihan2013-003.pdf>

¹² National Association of State Budget Officers, “Investing in Results: Using Performance Data to Inform State Budgeting,” Summer 2014. Available at: <http://www.nasbo.org/mainsite/reports-data/investing-in-results>

¹³ Patrick Lester, “The Promise and Peril of an ‘Outcomes Mindset,’” *Stanford Social Innovation Review*, January 13, 2016. Available at: http://ssir.org/articles/entry/the_promise_and_peril_of_an_outcomes_mindset

¹⁴ Mary Ann Bates & Rachel Glennerster, “The Generalizability Puzzle,” *Stanford Social Innovation Review*, Summer 2017. Available at: https://ssir.org/articles/entry/the_generalizability_puzzle

¹⁵ Washington State Institute for Public Policy, “Benefit-Cost Technical Documentation,” May 2017, pp. 177-178. <http://www.wsipp.wa.gov/TechnicalDocumentation/WsippBenefitCostTechnicalDocumentation.pdf>

¹⁶ Congressional Budget Office, “Communicating the Uncertainty of CBO’s Estimates,” December 15, 2014. Available at: <https://www.cbo.gov/publication/49860>

distrustful of government officials, who they often view as liberal and hostile to conservative goals. While there has been substantial bipartisan agreement that evidence can be useful, the two parties often disagree on those uses, with Democrats commonly using evidence to expand or improve government programs¹⁷ and Republicans using evidence to justify spending cuts, privatization, or devolving services to lower levels of government.¹⁸ In an era of growing political polarization, simply being willing to work across party lines can be politically hazardous.

- **Interest Group Politics:** Policy decisions often create winners and losers and most policies and budget items have a political constituency. Evidence-based policymaking is not immune to the forces of interest group politics, which commonly reinforce the status quo.
- **Electoral Politics:** While elected officials often pose as supporters of good government, it is not clear how many votes are won by these positions. Evidence-based policy is unlikely to rank high on the list of issues that are most important to the voting public. The lack of strong electoral incentives can make political support for evidence-based policies weak and ephemeral, subject to change from one administration to the next even when officials share the same political party.
- **Bureaucratic Politics:** Bureaucratic politics are usually rules and compliance-based, risk averse (which can inhibit innovation), and slow – with multiple veto points that must be overcome before a policy can be adopted.
- **Incremental Budget Processes:** Because budgets are large, complicated, and among the most political of policy decisions, budget-making is frequently an incremental process, with small changes made from one year to the next based on the previous year's budget. The incremental nature of budget making can hinder major policy changes that are driven by evidence.
- **Federal Legal Barriers:** Even when local political forces are aligned, federal legal barriers can hinder the adoption of evidence-based policies at the state and local levels.

Moreover, in a 2013 analysis, Results First specified several other potential obstacles, including resource limitations such as staff capacity, data limitations, timing issues, policymaker and staff turnover, policymaker inattention and distrust, and conflicting political priorities.¹⁹ Altogether, these political, administrative, and informational barriers, combined with a track record of failure for similar federal and state efforts, suggest that the success of an initiative like Results First is far from certain.

Impact on High-level Policymaking

Given these potential obstacles, what has the initiative accomplished? A complete answer would require a more thorough review, but the initiative has thus far documented several successes in both its case studies and briefs that appear to be either partly attributable to Results First or that at least suggest its potential.

One early indicator of its potential can be found in its 2013 review of the use of cost-benefit analysis by states. The study found that the cost-benefit methodology had been influential in legislation or funding decisions in 29 states.²⁰ Most of these state actions predated Results First involvement or occurred in states where Results First was not active, but the initiative has since achieved several notable successes of its own.

One was in Illinois, where the state Sentencing Policy Advisory Council (SPAC) used the Results First model to

¹⁷ *Government Executive*, "Obama Administration's New Performance Grade: Improved, But Work Remains," April 19, 2016. Available at: <http://www.govexec.com/excellence/promising-practices/2016/04/obama-administrations-new-performance-grade-improved-work-remains/127610/>

¹⁸ *Government Executive*, "Republicans Deploy an Old Tool in Combating Poverty: Evidence," June 14, 2016. Available at: <http://www.govexec.com/excellence/promising-practices/2016/06/republicans-see-silver-bullet-combating-poverty-evidence/129068/>

¹⁹ Pew-MacArthur Results First Initiative, "States' Use of Cost-Benefit Analysis," July 2013.

http://www.pewtrusts.org/~media/legacy/uploadedfiles/pcs_assets/2013/pewresultsfirst50statereportpdf.pdf

²⁰ Ibid.

analyze several sentencing bills.²¹ Another was in New Mexico, which has directed \$161 million in funding to evidence-based programs, partly in response to work done under Results First.²² As of June 2017, the initiative reported that at least ten partner states and counties had used the Results First framework to shift \$285 million in funding to more effective programs.²³

While noteworthy, however, these success stories do not, by themselves, provide a definitive answer on the initiative's effectiveness. What would have happened in these states without the initiative's evidence-driven analyses? What other political forces were at play? The counterfactuals are murky.

Given that these decisions were being made by high-level policymakers in a highly politicized environment, the most likely answer is that analyses supported by Results First helped *inform* these decisions, but did not by themselves *determine* the final policy outcomes.

Evidence-Based Management

If the sole objective of Results First was to influence high-level policymakers, its impact would likely be positive, but marginal – helping most when the political stars were already aligned to support major policy-related changes. The great majority of policy-related decisions, however, do not rise to the level of governors, state legislators, and their staff. Many are everyday decisions made by lower level administrative officials housed within the executive branches of state and local governments.

While evidence for this is also anecdotal, the early work of Results First suggests that this may be where it is having its greatest impact. In its case studies and briefs, the initiative has documented numerous successes that are fundamentally *managerial* in nature, such as:

- **Including Evidence Requirements in General Provider Guidelines:** Some states, such as Hawaii and New York, have embedded requirements to use evidence-based programs in their general provider guidelines.²⁴
- **Including Evidence Requirements in Contracts and Grants:** Some state and local agencies have directed providers to adopt evidence-based interventions through contract and grant requirements.²⁵
- **Monitoring Program Fidelity:** Evidence-based programs that are implemented with fidelity to the original model are more likely to achieve their intended goals. Tennessee and Washington both require state agencies to track and report on this information. Such monitoring can be included as part of ongoing audits and inspections.
- **Adopting Planning Processes:** Some states have adopted planning processes that require greater use of evidence. For example, in 2013 the Colorado state legislature updated its State Measurement for Accountable, Responsive, and Transparent Government (SMART) Act, which directs each department to develop a set of measurable goals and a plan to achieve them.

Managerial activities such as these do not normally occur spontaneously. In most cases, they must first be authorized and funded by higher level policymakers. However, these policy decisions are fundamentally different from those that were described earlier, where high-level policymakers and their staff reviewed the evidence themselves. Instead, these policies usually involve enacting or authorizing broad evidence *mandates*, with discretion given to managers to determine what meets the associated standards. The initiative has cited several examples in its work, including:

²¹ Pew-MacArthur Results First Initiative, "The Pew-MacArthur Results First Initiative in Illinois," May 20, 2014. <http://www.pewtrusts.org/en/research-and-analysis/fact-sheets/2014/05/20/the-pewmacarthur-results-first-initiative-in-illinois>

²² Pew-MacArthur Results First Initiative communication, June 15, 2017.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Pew-MacArthur Results First Initiative, "A Guide to Evidence-Based Budget Development: How to Use Research to Inform Program Funding Decisions," July 2016. <http://www.pewtrusts.org/~media/assets/2016/07/aquidtoevidencebasedbudgetdevelopment.pdf>

²⁵ Pew-MacArthur Results First Initiative, "How to Use Evidence in the Contracting Process," December 06, 2016. <http://www.pewtrusts.org/en/research-and-analysis/issue-briefs/2016/12/how-to-use-evidence-in-the-contracting-process>

- **Adopting Evidence Requirements:** State policymakers can require the use of evidence-based interventions. For example, in 2014 Massachusetts policymakers dedicated approximately \$2.5 million of federal funds from the Edward Byrne Memorial Justice Assistance Grant program to initiatives identified as highly effective by the Massachusetts Results First model.²⁶
- **Adopting Funding Percentage Mandates:** State policymakers can require specific percentages of program funds to be spent on evidence-based interventions.²⁷ Such policies can also be implemented administratively, as occurred when the New Mexico Corrections Department adopted a policy that required 70 percent of program funds to be directed to evidence-based programs.²⁸
- **Authorizing Pay for Success Contracts:** Some states, such as Colorado and New York, have authorized the use of pay-for-success contracts that tie payments to results.
- **Funding Pilots and Evaluations:** Evidence-based policy often draws on evidence from outside the state, where conditions may vary substantially from those experienced locally. Some states, such as Iowa and Colorado, have addressed this by providing funding for local pilots and evaluations.

This model – evidence-based management – is thus a two-pronged strategy. It appears to overcome many of the political barriers facing higher profile legislative and budget choices by: (1) relying on higher-level policymakers to adopt broad and general policies that authorize and drive administrative action, and (2) shifting important evidence-based decisions out of the political realm and into the realm of implementation, where the influence of politics may be lessened and the importance of managerial expertise may be maximized.

Conclusion

This paper has suggested that evidence-based policy at the state level can be supported by two different strategies, one that relies primarily on high-level state decision makers who make policy decisions that are informed by evidence, and another that instead relies on these actors to empower lower-level managers who make these decisions. Evidence-based policymaking is frequently viewed in terms of the first strategy, but the second – evidence-based management – may be just as important and may often be more effective.

To its credit, Results First is supporting both strategies. While its focus has been on supporting evidence-based decision making by policymakers, it has been flexible about what constitutes a policymaker. The definition includes high level legislative and executive branch officials, but many of its closest partners – the audience for its evidence reviews, benefit-cost analyses, and training – are lower level executive branch officials. Moreover, several of its briefs have focused on implementation-related issues.

Still, if evidence-based management is as important as has been suggested here, the model could be further improved. For example, more emphasis could be placed on developing model legislation or administrative language that could be more widely adopted by the states. A greater focus could be placed on other supportive policies, such as investing in data infrastructure and local evaluations. The initiative could also further study the interaction between states and the federal government to determine how their efforts could better synchronized through federal waivers, data sharing, or other policy changes.

Regardless of whether it pursues such changes, however, the Results First initiative appears to have made significant progress. It has already demonstrated that there is tremendous appetite at the state level for evidence-based policy. As the still-nascent evidence base advances across the numerous issues that affect states and their citizens, the ongoing efforts of initiatives like Results First may turn that appetite into a reality.

²⁶ Pew-MacArthur Results First Initiative, "The Pew-MacArthur Results First Initiative in Massachusetts," May 20, 2014.

<http://www.pewtrusts.org/en/research-and-analysis/fact-sheets/2014/05/20/the-pewmacarthur-results-first-initiative-in-massachusetts>

²⁷ Pew-MacArthur Results First Initiative, "How Policymakers Prioritize Evidence-Based Programs Through Law," April 2017. http://www.pewtrusts.org/~media/assets/2017/04/rf_how_policymakers_prioritize_evidencebased_programs_through_law.pdf; Pew-MacArthur Results First Initiative, "Legislating Evidence-Based Policymaking," March 2015.

<http://www.pewtrusts.org/~media/assets/2015/03/legislationresultsfirstbriefmarch2015.pdf>

²⁸ New Mexico Corrections Department, "Evidence Based Programs," September 15, 2015. <http://cd.nm.gov/policies/docs/CD-100000.pdf>