

Identifying Departments

Tips & considerations

It can be daunting to determine which departments within your city will make the ideal candidates for an evaluation partnership. This document is designed to provide you guidance for which departments to reach out to and discuss this opportunity with. This is an exciting chance to get more people in your city excited about the use of evaluation! We have found three key considerations when selecting departments to conduct evaluations:

- Potential Impact
- Staff Capacity & Commitment
- Program Visibility

For each of these areas, we have a series of questions to prompt more thought about whether a department can fulfill these expectations. Some of these questions may require a meeting with a representative from the department to provide more information.

Potential Impact

Finding opportunities that have a clear pathway for impact ensures that the evaluation will provide value for the department and, in turn, the city. Reflect on who stands to benefit if you were to evaluate the program or a potential improvement to the program.

Does the department have an area of work where there is an identified need for improvement?

- This is a good sign there will be more buy-in around the project, which can set you up to be running an evaluation project that will get the support it needs at every level.
- This is also a good sign that you can design an impactful evaluation: there is the potential to make large improvements if the program is underperforming.
- It allows the team to build on pre-existing exploratory work that demonstrates a need for improvement in a process, policy, or program.

Example: Code Enforcement has been struggling to get property owners to fix violations on time, or Utilities needs overdue customers to pay their bills.

Does the department have an area of work where there is a planned change to a process, policy, or program or are they planning to pilot something new?

- It takes time to get an evaluation fully scoped, so it can be helpful to start with an existing plan to make a change or do something new within the department.
- There are many different types of research questions you could ask about a new program, so it will allow you to be flexible in the methodology that you choose.
- There is often much attention paid to new initiatives, so there is likely to be greater interest in using the results after the evaluation is completed.

- Cities are sometimes more willing to experiment on a pilot program or a new initiative. There can be more buy-in to make changes to improve the program early on or desire to ensure the city isn't spending resources on an ineffective program.

Example: Business permits are moving from a paper to online registration and renewal system or the waste management department has received grant funding to support a composting program.

Does the department have a longstanding process, policy, or program that hasn't previously been evaluated?

- If the evaluation shows the program is working well - fantastic. This can provide insight into how, why, or for whom it is working well and drive insights to other city programs. It can also potentially open up funding opportunities that require a demonstration that a program is achieving the outcomes it's designed to impact.
- If the evaluation shows the program isn't working well - this is also important. Your long standing programs are likely fully scaled ways that you are reaching your residents and adjusting or re-directing them can have large potential impact.
 - To mitigate departmental concerns about negative results, you can define research questions and measures that will paint a richer picture of potential options to adjust and improve the program, rather than painting a binary picture of "working" or "not working".
 - It will be important to identify the potential adjustments (ranging from small to major revisions) that leadership is likely open to and interested in exploring, and include measurements that would aid in making those changes.

Example: The city's summer jobs program is popular for local high school students while other programs are underutilized so the city wants to understand drivers of the jobs program success.

Who is served by the programs or policies in the department?

- Programs that serve a lot of residents have the potential to have a lot of impact -- so it's important to evaluate them and make sure they're effective!
- Prioritizing evaluations for programs that serve otherwise underserved populations is a way to promote and advance equity to make sure those residents are receiving the services as intended.

Example: The department has two programs that could be evaluated: a jobs training program focused on an underrepresented area of the city or engagement with its monthly newsletter about the jobs center's upcoming events. The evaluation of the jobs training program has the potential to be more impactful given the scope of benefits/services provided in the program compared to the newsletter.

Staff Capacity & Commitment

Staff capacity is the true enabler for running a successful evaluation project. We estimate that you could need up to .25 FTE (with potential spikes during busy periods) support from department staff to design and implement an evaluation.

Does the department have staff time available to commit to supporting an evaluation?

- The core evaluation team will rely on department staff to input into evaluation design, oversee implementation, and transfer data collected during the trial.
- Department staff will need slack within their current responsibilities to support the evaluation work.
- Consider how well resourced the department is: are there staff shortages in particular roles, is there a time of year that the department is busier and will have more difficulty participating in an evaluation?

Example: The Parks & Recreation department's programming peaks in the summer months while children are out of school and they are only able to conduct an evaluation during the school year when staff have more slack in their day to day workload.

Does the department have stable leadership and organizational structure?

- Starting a new project in the middle of a leadership transition or department restructuring can make it much harder to generate and maintain buy-in for the work.
- There is a greater risk that a new department head would want to change the planned evaluation, staff could be reallocated to other roles, etc.
- Further, it is important to have a commitment from leadership to act on the results of the evaluation after it is completed. This can be more difficult if leadership changes during the course of the evaluation.

Example: The Director of the Economic Development Office has recently moved to another position within the city. The Deputy Director is serving as the acting director while a search commences to replace the Director position.

Are department staff enthusiastic about participating in an evaluation?

- Staff interest in the work is another strong indicator that a potential evaluation will have buy-in when it comes down to execute the project.
- Departments who have embraced other forms of process improvement or innovation activities often make for good candidates for evaluation, they've already started the process of making a change!
- This may be dependent on what program, policy, or initiative that is evaluated and should be considered when prioritizing multiple opportunities.

Example: Staff that run the city's WIC program monitor the attendance for recertification appointments and regularly modify the content of reminders to families to improve the attendance rate. They haven't ever run an RCT to determine if the different reminders have a causal impact on whether families attend their appointments. They're interested to learn and believe they could adopt the practice into their on-going work with support to run their first evaluation.

Program Visibility

It is key to align your goals with the interests and incentives of other stakeholders. For evaluation projects, city leadership and residents are particularly meaningful stakeholders. It is also important to consider stakeholders such as community groups, academics, non-profits, etc. who have an interest in the department or topic who you could involve or share the results with to multiply your impact.

Is the department's work integral to achieving the mayor or city manager's strategic priorities?

- Consider how an evaluation with this department could help achieve metrics that the mayor is monitoring or has committed to improve.
- This will provide the evaluation champion more leverage to activate stakeholders to support the evaluation and provide continued momentum throughout the project.
- This can be a way to decide which of many evaluation opportunities to pursue.

Example: The mayor has committed to reduce eviction rates in the city and the city has funding to pilot new programs to provide support to keep residents in their homes.

Does the department have multiple resident-facing programs or processes and/or do they serve a large portion of the city's residents?

- This provides the opportunity to scope multiple projects for your evaluation. Further, one evaluation can provide insights to apply across programs or lay the foundation for another successful evaluation.
- This can increase the interest in seeing the evaluation through and activate additional stakeholders to support the work throughout the evaluation process.
- If residents will be able to see the impact of the change and/or the evaluation, it may help generate more buy-in for future evaluations.

Example: A department that oversees services that all residents use (e.g. Public Works department that manages trash removal, utilities, etc.) or a department that administers large-scale services to a subset of residents (e.g. Human Services department that manages elderly outreach, after-school programs, etc.) may be ideal partners.