**WorkforceGPS**

**Transcript of Webinar**

**An Evaluation Readiness Assessment Tool - Prioritizing Efforts to Measure Effectiveness**

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*Transcript by*

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JENNIFER JACOBS: And now, without further ado, I'd like to turn things over to our moderator today, Gloria Salas-Kos, senior research and evaluation analyst at the U.S. Department of Labor's Employment and Training Administration. Gloria?

GLORIA SALAS-KOS: Thank you, Jen. Good afternoon and welcome everyone. First I'd like to say, that this is the first in a series of proposed evaluation and research help flash 30-minute webinar.

And with that, I'd like to show you – or demonstrate – what our new proposed website is going to look like. This session is one of several recent activities and products developed for our new community of practice, evaluation and research hub, or, Eval Hub, as we plan to call it. And soon to be launched on workforce GPS.

The Eval Hub was developed with feedback seeds from our peer learning community or PLC, which is comprised of state and local workforce agency representatives. In the last year we listened, polled, and interacted with this PLC to identify technical assistance needs related to building or extending evaluation capacity. The Eval Hub CoP is an online tool developed to help create evidence to improve workforce opportunity. And once we launch the CoP we invite you to sign up and to receive regular information updates that will include new peer learning activities, resources and tools.

To help us continue and develop the resources, it will help us a little bit to know about your level of experience with research and evaluation. So if you could, select the answer in the poll that best reflects your experience. So it looks like we have a broad range of experience. And it's wonderful to see that everyone has interest in research and evaluation, that's attending today.

Our objectives for today's session includes background information to set the context for the evaluation readiness assessment tool. We will describe the evaluation readiness tool and explain how and why it was primarily developed to help state workforce agency programs and policy managers. We also want to share a state's perspective about their effort to conduct an evaluation readiness assessment. And lastly we will ask you to think about accepting an evaluation readiness challenge. We will also share other useful resources and gather your feedback about the assessment and our new peer learning approach.

Participating in the flash webinar with us today are –

WAYNE GORDON: Wayne Gordon, division director for research and evaluation with the Employment and Training Administration.

KAREN ARMSTRONG: Hi, I'm Karen Armstrong. I'm from Impact International and I'm the project director for this project.

GARY KAMIMURA: Good afternoon, I'm Gary Kamimura, policy manager with the State Employment Security Department.

MS. SALAS-KOS: And with that we'll turn it over to Wayne Gordon.

MR. GORDON: Thank you, Gloria. And thanks to all participating today. It's hard to believe it's been four years since the passage of WIOA in 2014. And no doubt everyone on the call today has been neck-deep in WIOA implementation activities for your state.

In the meantime ETA's division of research and evaluation has been focused on Section 169, evaluation and research, and its implications for us at the federal level, and of course our partners in the states. Some of this effort is found in Section 682.220 of the WIOA regs that went out. And certainly our efforts, under Gloria's lead, evidenced today, to provide support for states – is evidence in the work of the PLC.

Tangible efforts of recent support to state and local research and evaluation activities are found in the Workforce Innovation Fund and the TAACCCT Grant Initiative, where grantees were enlisted – where grantees were expected to enlist and did enlist a third-party evaluator. And findings from those efforts are forthcoming.

We've worked with our Office of workforce Investment and other program office colleagues to weave an opportunity for dialogue with the states on their research and evaluation efforts within the WIOA state plans and annual reports. And while we have referenced before the NASWA scan of state research and evaluation capacity, which is a publication on our website. We here at the Department of Labor also have taken steps to bolster our capacity.

And while we have worked in close collaboration with the chief evaluation office since its creation in 2010, establishing a set of evaluation principles, seen there with rigor, relevance, transparency, independence, and ethics; developing learning agendas. We, too, have more to do, I believe, in fostering a culture of evidence here. We do have external support and motivation in equal measure, including from OMB guidance, the work of the bipartisan commission on evidence-based policy making, as well as GIO, and other – and nonprofits, for example, the Arnold Foundation has really been supportive in this effort.

Returning to our work of the peer learning community – we take seriously our mission to support state workforce agencies in their efforts to use and choose evaluation and research to help inform program policy. Our approach, you see here, is distilled into identifying what states may need, in the form of technical assistance and mutual – and I should say, peer support, in order to choose and use evidence. Which simply is, identify evidence that already exists, and choose what applies to their situation. And where evidence does not exist, take efforts to create or develop evidence. And of course apply it. And in the end, disseminate findings and actions.

Going to move to another poll. We'd like to hear a little bit about how you and your colleagues use research and evaluations to inform decisions. I'll read the question. To what extent do you use research and evaluations to inform decisions? Post your answer. Got about fifteen seconds for that. Generally are your agency staff familiar with available resources – (inaudible) – research, and evaluations and, or do they regularly review recent studies to inform decisions? We're selecting the best answer. We're rotating around the middle. The bell curve is looking nice on our responses. And we thank you.

Move on to another poll question. To what extent do you choose to integrate research and evaluations into your program activities? Again, use the next fifteen seconds. Please select the answer that best reflects your knowledge about your organization. Once again our bell curve is revealing itself, right around the middle. Good on average.

MS. SALAS-KOS: Looks like we have a good mix of individuals right in the middle.

MR. GORDON: Yeah. Well, thank you everyone.

MS. SALAS-KOS: Now, Karen, can you help our audience see how these questions connect to the evaluation readiness assessment tool and the – our larger toolkit of resources?

MS. ARMSTRONG: Sure. Thanks, Gloria. So Gloria stated, and Wayne, the idea of having an evaluation readiness tool came out in discussions in our PLC meetings last year. We sort of had a pilot evaluation PLC group last year. We heard a lot about the challenges around conducting evaluations in your states from that group. For instance we heard PLC members talked about how people are working so hard to provide quality service to your customers, that the idea of implementing evaluations kind of takes a backseat.

And then for staff who really are interested in conducting evaluations, it's hard to just get a seat at the table with leadership, to encourage leadership to fund evaluations and to make it a priority. And then finally, even states that have the leadership support for conducting evaluations, it's hard to know where to start.

So from there we have – so out of those discussions, DOL responded and created a set of three interrelated resources; an evaluation toolkit, an evaluation readiness assessment tool, an evaluation design and implementation tool. So the toolkit is a great resource for all things related to evaluation. And it's the content from which we drew for the assessment. The assessments compliment the toolkit. They help you identify your strengths and areas of improvement so that you can use the toolkit intentionally. So only using the sections that are most relevant to your needs.

The first assessment helps you identify to what extent you are prepared to consider and build a planning agenda that includes evaluation. And then once you've decided that you can move forward with evaluation, the second tool helps you think about all the steps to implementing an evaluation successfully.

So the focus today is on the evaluation readiness assessment tool. I'm going to quickly describe the purpose of it and its intended audience, walk you through the sections of the tool, and then propose a way in which you can use the tool. And then Gary's going to follow-up and tell you how it works in his state.

So the purpose of the tool is really to help you, your staff, and your WIOA partners identify areas of strengths and challenges around using and choosing evaluation for workforce activities. So the primary audience for this assessment is hopefully all of you who are on this webinar. Its representatives from state and local workforce agencies and as well as all the partner agencies.

So the first thing you might notice as you look at the assessment tool is if you ever – if you use some of the WIOA quick start action planners, we've based it – the format on those quick start action planners. So this assessment and the other assessment are in the same format. So each one has several sections.

So in this first section, you'll see that this is about evaluation culture and awareness. And then the guiding question here is, do agencies, staff, and partners understand the benefits of evaluation? Do they use evidence-based results to inform decisions and do they plan to conduct evaluations to add to the existence evidence base? So all these are things that DOL hopes that states will eventually do.

In this assessment we have five sections; evaluation culture and awareness, funding strategies, data management, staff skills capacity and knowledge, and strategic planning. For each statement you – for each section, we have statements. So in this case you'll notice that by looking at this four – it's hard to see, so we've got a blow-up there. When planning to implement newer revamped programs and services, agency staff and partners regularly consider effective evaluation strategies.

So you'll notice that was actually the last poll that Wayne took you through. And so the response answers are all the way from not at all to all the way to in place and exceeding. Then you have a section where you can write down notes. So when you're comparing your answers with your partners, you can remember why you chose that rating. And then finally, at the end, there is a reference section. And that section is directly related to the toolkit. And so if you have questions about what the statement is saying or if you just want to learn more about that, then you can go directly to that section in the toolkit.

So how to use this assessment. We recommend that you share this assessment and the toolkit with your staff and with your partners. Then ask each person to independently complete this tool and to really emphasize that there's no wrong answers. The point here really is to find out what people's perspectives are on these different statements. Then we encourage you to meet with everyone who went through the toolkit and explore your responses.

We recommend that you start with the strengths. Where did you guys rate yourselves as threes, fours, and fives? And then look for areas of consensus. Where do you all agree that you all have strengths? And then conversely, where do you all believe that you have areas where you can improve? And also, as importantly, where are there areas in which you have a lot of variation in answers; where some of you rated high and some of you rated low? All of that can give you some really important information to generate a really important discussion.

Then we encourage you to take – to discuss those responses and make a decision about at least one small step that you can take, based on that information. So it might be that you feel like you needed to improve communication about what is already currently being done. There might be evaluations that you all – that were happening in some areas that others don't know about. It might be that you want to share the assessment tool with a wider group of stakeholders so you can kind of broaden up the conversation.

Or it might – you might want to take one statement that you all agree needs improvement and develop a plan to move it to a four or a five. Or finally, you might just be planning another meeting – you might just want to plan another meeting to discuss next steps with the very same group. The main point here is that we really want this assessment exercise to be authentically useful to you in moving toward using and choosing evaluations. (Inaudible.)

MS. SALAS-KOS: Thank you, Karen. The tour of the tool is a good segue. So now that we've learned about the context of this session, polled our audience to understand their evaluation capacities and described the evaluation readiness tool and toolkit, let's hear from someone who's tested these tools. Gary, can you tell us what you learned from piloting these tools?

MR. KAMIMURA: Okay. Great. Well, thanks, Gloria. Appreciate that introduction. And good afternoon, everyone again from Washington State. As here was mentioned, I'm here to relate Washington's experience field testing this evaluation tool.

Let me say right up front that as a former program administrator and researcher, and now as a policy manager who's focused on agency relevance and effectiveness, as well as compliance, I was excited for the opportunity to test these tools. And can tell you that that excitement hasn't waned since undertaking this exercise. And I think you'll appreciate where I'm coming from as you hear my comments.

Allow me to open with a couple of quotes from individuals who participated in the assessment here in Washington. One, as you can see, was a contract manager; the other, a researcher. I'm not going to read these quotes, but you will hear me speak to these themes as I go. I think that these quotes do a pretty good job of framing or encapsulating the key issues that surfaced during our use of the tool. So again, take a look at these quotes and keep these in mind as we go.

So how did we use the evaluation readiness assessment tool? So we were one of two PLC members, the other being Missouri, that volunteered to do the field testing. To that end, what I did here in Washington was convene both program and research staff from both the employment security department which is the state workforce agency; and our workforce training and education coordinating board, which is the state board under WIOA.

I enlisted these two entities because both currently lead major initiatives that are funded by WIOA statewide activities funds. One of those is called Curritech Washington (sp) and the other is called The Upscale Backfill Initiative. Both, frankly, are the kinds of projects that I believe DOL wants and expects to see evaluated.

So why were we interested in doing the assessment? As I've mentioned, we were increasingly aware of DOL's expectation that states do more evaluative research. We see it in the law, of course, and as Wayne mentioned. But also we see it in federal pronouncements, for example, around the reemployment services and eligibility assessment program, RESEA. For any of those of you who might have been on yesterday's DOL Webex around RESEA, you probably saw that probably a good fifth of the webinar was focused on the requirement to do evaluative research and build that into our plans.

And here in Washington we are also recipients of one of those new opioid nationally dislocated worker grants. And the planning requirements for that grant also include a requirement for evaluative research. So again, we're getting that message loud and clear.

So per that expectation, we wanted to assess our current state. So the tool's availability really proved timely for us. And then finally, to extend – we rate low in any category. And you'll see that we did in a couple. We wanted to understand what it would take as it's framed up in the assessment, to achieve a better future stage. And for us that would be, how do we get to a rating of four or five in that tool?

So what did we learn from our assessment? Well, by way of higher ratings, we affirmed that we do, in fact, have a solid research and evaluation research info structure here in Washington. We have experienced research and evaluation staff who have the right knowledge and the right skills. And we also know that we have access to the data we need – beyond our own rich administrator data, we have access to state longitudinal data, which in Washington includes education data. And we're also part of the national workforce quality initiative collaborative. So that came out loud and clear as something we are doing well.

By way of mixed or lower ratings, we found our program understanding of evaluative research was mixed. So program staff had varied grasp and understanding of research and evaluation as it was laid out in the tools. For example, some staff saw research evaluation as say, reviewing data, to see an actual enrollment plan targets. Now that's important, but it's not evaluative research, right? One staff individual was pretty well versed in evaluation, but was relatively new to the agency and didn't actually know that the agency had a research evaluation unit. So again, connections, right? So the tool served to some of these issues.

So did any of this come as a surprise? From where I was sitting, as the individual who initiated this connection, no, not really. I played a bit of a hunch. I poured through some of my old project and contract and grant management books and manuals. And you know what? Evaluative research wasn't referenced once in any of them. So I note this, if only to argue that we all probably need to be very intentional about connecting program and evaluation. Because it's not necessarily top of mind for program staff.

So that said, while we have research and evaluation units. And we certainly want to take greater use of their expertise. They are small teams, both in the state workforce agency and at the state workforce board. So they don't necessarily have the capacity – at least not presently to commit to every new initiative. And to a point that's where we would revise, actually, section four of the tool, which appears to assume that in-house evaluation units, if they exist, are appropriately resourced and that the research question need only be asked if the work is being contracted. In Washington, that wasn't the case.

So here's some of our key takeaways. So one, the tool was a good vehicle for educating our program managers, in particular, about what it means, and what it takes to do evaluative research. I think we recognize that program managers and program evaluators come from two different worlds and the assessment tools certainly service those differences. And again, it wasn't about good or bad or right or wrong. They're just different. But I think we recognized that they're a very potent partnership when there's an understanding of the value that the later brings to the table.

So our program folks now realize that program and evaluation does need to be at the table when they're designing projects, especially big-ticket innovative pursuits, around which there may be little or no evidence of efficacy. So we all understand that innovation's a good thing, right? For WIOA connected staff, I mean it's right there in the name.

But I think we all acknowledge that one definition of innovation, the one that's seldom noted is something untested or unproven. So I think we all need to think about that and about how research and evaluation can show that an innovative idea may warrant recognition of an evidence-based practice, but only if it's put that rigorous evaluative test.

So finally, we all recognize that inviting researching evaluation to the table means very little if those teams don't have sufficient bandwidth which raise really some very good questions – appropriate questions about resource and capacity.

So what's next in Washington? Well, having worked with the assessment and reached a common understanding, we have several next steps. One, we need elevate that discussion to our state or – (inaudible) – agency and state board leaders, about the importance and value of evaluative research, because they, by-in-large, don't come from research backgrounds. And they need to be educated, just like our program staff, about what it means to do evaluative research and what those expectations are.

Next, we need to have a hard discussion with leadership about adequately funding the capacity, so we can know whether or not our investments are effective and make a difference. And that, in our state, includes the governing office, because of its authority over WIOA's statewide activity funds, which required to use, as you may be aware, if conducting state sponsored evaluations, under Section 116 of WIOA.

And we also know that we had two major initiatives in Washington that I sited earlier that were launched without evaluation components. So that tool really impressed upon us, again, the need to make again, our research and evaluation top of mind when we do project define.

Let me leave you with one final thought. If you know for a fact that your teams are absolutely on the same page and measure up in all aspects of the assessment, great. If you have even the slightest doubt, I'd recommend that you take advantage of this tool. You have to pose some tough questions and assess your true readiness. We did here in Washington and it's already paying dividends.

With that, I thank you for attention. And Gloria, back to you.

MS. SALAS-KOS: Thank you, Gary. And your experience with the assessment is a great example about how we can learn from this process.

MR. GORDON: And if I can add, Gary. Each time we worked over the slides, the last couple of days, and we've seen your slides, as I read through them again, and more than once I get another insight. I get another question that I want to ask you. I get another idea. So I do appreciate you and your colleagues' effort on testing this tool.

MR. KAMIMURA: Very welcome.

MS. SALAS-KOS: And with that being said, we think that you can also, the audience attending today, use and learn from this assessment tool. And we would like for you to accept an evaluation readiness challenge, if you think this is something you'd like to try.

So what we have is a few parameters for this challenge and think that the challenge will be beneficial for both the general audience attending and our peer learning community members. For those of you who are from other organizations, please feel free to use this tool to build or enhance your knowledge. Give us your feedback on these tools. They're works in progress and we value any insights that will improve them. Share the tools with your organization. Ask for their feedback on their usefulness.

Lastly, if you are a workforce board member, state, or local workforce agency representative, please join the peer learning community. For the peer learning community, current and new members, please share the tool with the staff and partners and discuss its usefulness. Ask state representatives or other representatives to complete it and share their feedback. Find some time to discuss findings. Select one or two elements that need improvement. Identify actions to improve evaluation capacity. And then plan to attend our October 16th forum so that you can have an opportunity to share experiences and discuss ideas with other PLC members.

Measuring effectiveness through evaluations requires many different skills, performance measures, and thoughtful research approaches and methods. With that being said, we believe that anyone who has interest in evaluations may have useful takeaways from this session. Whether you're just learning or interested in taking the challenge, the assessment tool and evaluation toolkit are good resources to move you along that path.

Again, for members of the audience who are workforce board members, state and local workforce agency representatives, we invite you to participate in the PLC forum. To indicate your interest, please send an e-mail to workforcepractices@dol.gov by next Tuesday, October 9th, 2018. We encourage state workforce agency representatives to invite their colleagues and workforce agency partners to take part in the assessment. While the PLC forum is limited to 40 participants, if we receive a lot of interest, we may schedule an additional forum to accommodate additional participants.

Over the next couple of months we are working to schedule two more events on the dates that appear on the slide. Current and new members will receive invitations to the October 16th event where we will take a more in-depth look at the assessment tools from your perspective. The webinar on October 28th will be open to the general public. So please look for that invitation to come from workforce GPS in the next couple of weeks.

To help you think about how you might use or choose to identify, disseminate, apply, and create evidence, we invite you to explore the evaluation and research resources on workforce GPS and at the Department of Labor. On this slide you'll find the hyperlinks to a few you'll find useful. And you'll find more on our soon to be launched evaluation research hub, available in workforce assistance strategies and more information about WIOA-related resources are found at the DOL website on the slide.

We also invite you to ask questions via the chat room. We deliberately created this 30 minutes flash webinar with your busy schedules in mind. Therefore we encourage you to ask your questions and in return will develop written responses to send back to you. We will also determine how to address any questions related to your technical assistance needs, as appropriate.

Lastly, please feel free to follow-up with either Karen Armstrong or myself, via the contact information. Again, if you have an interest in joining the PLC or have questions about technical assistance, please contact me no later than October 9th, 2018, at workforcepractices@dol.gov.

Please note that if you're already a PLC member, or recently invited to participate in the PLC and have questions about using the Evaluation Readiness Assessment, or want more information about the next PLC forum, please an e-mail to EPA\_ResearchDisseminationPLC@impaqint.com.

With that, we'd like to bring this session to an end and want to thank Wayne, Gary, and Karen for sharing your knowledge and expertise on this content. And thank you to everyone who attended the session.

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