

Testimony of Robert Shea
Commissioner, Commission on Evidence-Based Policymaking
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Committee Chairman Gowdy, Ranking Member Cummings, and esteemed members of the Committee, my name is Robert Shea and I am pleased to be here today with my fellow Commissioners testifying on behalf of the Commission on Evidence-Based Policymaking. I am currently a Principal and lead the Public Sector Strategy practice at Grant Thornton. I also bring to bear, in my role as a Commissioner, my former experience both as Associate Director for Management at OMB, as well as several years of experience on Capitol Hill, including with this very Committee.

You've already heard the testimonies of my colleagues that highlight the set of recommendations put forward by the Commission related to improving data access in support of evidence-building, as well as modernizing and strengthening the privacy protections for data used in evidence building. Implementing the features of the Commission's vision to improve the use of data for evidence building requires more than just improving access to data and privacy protections, however. The capacity to analyze data inside and outside government must exist in order to apply insights to inform policymaking. I'd like to focus my remarks on the Commission's recommendations that relate to strengthening the Federal government's capacity for evidence-building, which may include partnering with organizations and individuals outside of government.

Today, evidence building about government policies and programs occurs unevenly. Some departments have developed robust approaches and procedures for routinely generating evidence. But these are the exception rather than the rule.

The Federal evidence-building community includes those who generate, manage, and analyze data, those who transform information into evidence, and those who support those functions through the routine processes of government. Within the Federal evidence-building community, Principal Statistical Agencies (PSAs) and other statistical programs, program evaluation and policy research offices, program administrators, performance management offices, policy analysis offices, and privacy offices all play an important role in evidence building. During the Commission's fact-finding phase, both governmental and non-governmental witnesses identified numerous administrative barriers within the Federal government that hamper the efficient production of evidence.

To maximize evidence building, Federal departments must have the capacity to support the full range of analytic approaches required for evidence building, including the development of statistics, program evaluation, and policy research. These functions must be operational, appropriately resourced, and well-coordinated within and across departments. Strong leadership within government that prioritizes evidence building and creates the demand for evidence is vital for institutionalizing these functions. Without a strong institutional foundation, other recommendations

related to improving data access, establishing the National Secure Data Service, and implementing enhanced privacy protections will not have the comprehensive impact desired and envisioned by the Commission.

The Commission's recommendations related to capacity acknowledge the particular need to grow the program evaluation function across Federal agencies. As such, the Commission recommends that Federal departments identify or establish a Chief Evaluation Officer, in addition to needed authorities to build a high performing evidence-building workforce. The Chief Evaluation Officer would be charged with establishing department-wide evaluation and research policies, the coordination and provision of technical expertise for evaluation and research across the department, leadership in identifying priorities for departmental program evaluation and policy research, and the establishment of human capital strategies that expand the department's capacity for program evaluation.

A second capacity recommendation directs Federal departments to develop multi-year learning agendas to support the generation and use of evidence. A learning agenda is essentially a strategic plan for evidence building, identifying short- and long-term research and policy questions relevant to a department's mission and legal responsibilities. The learning agenda can be used by leadership to prioritize the set of research and policy questions to be pursued by the department, and also as a public document, alerting external audiences to the priority research and policy questions of interest to a department. In addition, the learning agenda can be used as a mechanism for organizing various units within the evidence-building community in a department in order to determine the best approach to answering a priority research or policy question and to allocate the work appropriately across the different evidence-building functions. The Chief Evaluation Officer and the Senior Agency Official for Data Policy would provide leadership for the development and implementation of a learning agenda.

Several of the examples of evidence building that have been referenced today involve the linking of data sources that are administered by different Federal departments. Efficiently implementing evidence-building activities across government requires a strong coordination function to address such crosscutting research and policy questions, minimize duplicative efforts, and reduce the burden on the public. The Commission, therefore, recommends improving the coordination of government-wide evidence building. Specifically the Commission recognizes that the Office of Management and Budget is well situated to help coordinate these activities. We recommended that OMB facilitate cross-government coordination and consider how a greater commitment to foundational information policy responsibilities can be achieved, including through any consolidation or reorganization at OMB that might be necessary.

In addition to increasing cross-governmental coordination, to generate a greater volume of evidence in a more efficient manner, foundational administrative processes must be aligned and tailored to better support evidence building. The Commission identified a specific set of actions related to procurement and streamlining the review and approval processes for new data collections that

would require little cost, but offer substantial benefits and savings while making it easier to produce evidence.

Finally, through the course of the Commission's research and deliberations, the topic of resources repeatedly emerged as a major perceived need for the evidence-building community and a challenge for improving the volume and quality of evidence produced. The Commission believes that a responsible investment of resources in more and better evidence holds the potential to yield substantial savings in the longer term as programs that are improved become more cost-effective, and as programs that are not effective are discontinued. The Commission recognizes that resource prioritization is essential to ensuring the goals of the Commission are achieved. Thus, the recommendations of the Commission balance the need to prioritize evidence building while recognizing fiscal constraints. In some departments, sufficient resources already exist to enable evidence building, though such resources may have use restrictions that inhibit the most cost-effective approach for evidence building.

These capacity recommendations are small steps that government can take to ensure the institutional foundations are present to support evidence building and use in policymaking. More broadly, all of the Commission's 22 recommendations present a comprehensive strategy for addressing the greatest problems facing evidence building today: unintentional limits on data access, inadequate privacy practices, and insufficient capacity to generate the amount of quality evidence needed to support policy decisions. The Congress, the President, and the American people are ill-served by this state of affairs. The Commission believes that fully implementing the Commission's recommendations will lead to substantial progress in addressing these challenges, enabling more and better evidence for our society, generated in a more secure fashion.

We appreciate the role that this Committee plays in reforming and overseeing the operations of the Federal government. It occurs to me that the Committee can drive implementation of the Commission's recommendations in both of these roles. Some number of recommendations will require legislation to codify requirements for access and privacy, and this Committee can make sure those requirements have the force of law. But this Committee's oversight function can be also be a valuable tool for ensuring that OMB and Federal departments use their existing capacity and authorities to begin to increase access, enhance privacy, and expand capacity.

We look forward to answering questions from the Committee both today and into the future as you consider the implications of this important report on advancing evidence-based policymaking.



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Robert Shea is a principal and a member of the Public Sector practice at Grant Thornton, LLP. He leads Strategy and Communications for Grant Thornton Public Sector and provides performance improvement services to international, federal, and state and local government agencies. Before joining Grant Thornton, Shea served as Associate Director for Management at the U.S. Office of Management and Budget (OMB). Before joining OMB, Shea served as counsel to the Senate Committee on Governmental Affairs, legislative director for Congressman Pete Sessions (TX), and professional staff member for the House Committee on Government Reform and Oversight.