



# THE EVIDENCE FORUMS

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## Forum on Living Approaches to Federal Agency Learning Agendas and Novel Approaches to Evidence-Based Policy

*Federation of American Scientists and White House Year of Evidence for Action*

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### Findings At A Glance

- A key challenge for public institutions is to adapt to the rapid pace of scientific progress. **Living Evidence** approaches can help by producing always-current summaries of scientific studies.
- Evidence is more than analysis of quantitative data and peer-reviewed science. For instance, **information on what the public values** has been shown to improve the efficacy and equity of policy implementation.
- **Connection** is essential to collaboration. Using tools like **unmet desire surveys** to formally assess staff needs for support from others can help leadership pinpoint where and how to invest in building cross-institutional relationships.
- **Intergovernmental research and evaluation consortiums** can make it easier to reliably determine which interventions are having the greatest beneficial impacts in key policy areas, given that many programs at the federal, state, regional, and local levels serve overlapping populations.
- **Improving access to federally held grantmaking data** (i.e., data on grant review, scoring, and funding) could yield insights that in turn could considerably boost returns on federal investments in science.

## Event Background and Synopsis

The Federation of American Scientists (FAS) and the White House Office of Management and Budget (OMB) co-hosted the fourth [Evidence Forum](#) in support of the White House [Year of Evidence for Action](#) on October 7, 2022. The FAS-OMB Evidence Forum showcased ideas developed through FAS's [Day One Project](#) and helped advance recommendations for their implementation. The Forum included a 90-minute webcast session followed by an hour-long in-person workshop.

The webcast session was attended by over 100 people, including representatives from more than a dozen federal agencies as well as universities, NGOs, publishers, and philanthropic funders. The session opened with remarks from Diana Epstein (Evidence Team Lead, OMB) and Erica Goldman (Director of Science Policy, FAS).

Part 1 of the session focused on “Living Approaches to Federal Learning Agendas,” and featured keynote remarks from Sir Jeremy Farrar (CEO, Wellcome Trust) and an armchair discussion between Julian Elliot (Co-Founder and CEO, Covidence) and Arlene Bierman (Chief Strategy Officer at the Office of the Director, Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality), moderated by Hannah Safford (Associate Director of Science Policy, FAS).

Part 2 of the session focused on “Novel Approaches to Evidence-Based Policy,” and included opening remarks from Angela Bednarek (Director of the Evidence Project, The Pew Charitable Trusts) followed by a series of lightning talks from three participants in the “[Evidence for Action Challenge](#)” co-hosted by FAS and the [Pew Charitable Trusts Evidence Project](#). These participants were:

- Nicholas Weller (Postdoctoral Research Associate, Arizona State University), who discussed [incorporating evidence on what the public values into policymaking](#),
- Adam Levine (Associate Professor of Health Policy and Management, Johns Hopkins University), who discussed [using unmet desire surveys to facilitate productive collaboration among federal agency staff and external experts](#), and
- Kathy Stack (Senior Policy Fellow at the Tobin Center for Economic Policy, Yale University), who discussed [launching an intergovernmental research and evaluation consortium focused on economic mobility](#).

The in-person workshop, designed as a deep dive on intersections between Living Evidence and federal agency Learning Agendas, was attended by more than two dozen stakeholders from within and outside of federal government. Participants were split into four groups, each organized to maximize institutional diversity and moderated by an FAS staff member. Within each group, participants worked in pairs to brainstorm about the core research questions at their respective organizations that could be addressed with a Living Evidence model.

## Key Insights

Below, we summarize key insights that emerged from the Forum, including webcast and working sessions.

**The Living Evidence model of evidence review can accelerate translation of research into practice and policy.** Scientific progress is being made at staggering speed. Conventional systematic reviews and meta-analyses are increasingly unable to keep pace. This reality not only constrains efforts to promote evidence-informed policymaking, but also leads to [research waste](#) and degrades the efficiency of the scientific ecosystem. A key challenge for public institutions is therefore to adapt to the pace and quantity of scientific knowledge production so that public decision-makers can take full advantage of available knowledge. [Living Evidence](#) is an emerging and powerful method for doing just that. While traditional approaches to knowledge synthesis are often static and can quickly go out of date in rapidly evolving fields, Living Evidence uses thoughtfully designed, [dynamic methodologies](#) to produce summaries of knowledge that are always current.

**Multiple core research questions at federal agencies could lend themselves well to Living Evidence approaches.** Living Evidence is best suited for topics where (i) new evidence is emerging rapidly, (ii) collective understanding of the evidence is evolving, and (iii) robust understanding of the evidence is needed to inform active decision making. Through facilitated discussion, federal agency representatives identified multiple core research questions that could lend themselves well to Living Evidence approaches, including:

- What types of stakeholder engagement strategies are most effective?
- How do various social determinants of health affect health outcomes?
- When should those suffering from long COVID be deemed eligible for disability benefits?
- How can government bridge local knowledge and academic research on climate adaptation strategies?

Living Evidence has already proven successful (e.g., to inform [COVID-19 clinical-practice guidelines](#)) and could be extended to support agencies in evidence-based policy and decision making. For instance, a Living Evidence resource on long COVID characteristics could simultaneously support CDC in issuing relevant guidance, CMS in ensuring adequate coverage for beneficiaries suffering from long COVID, SSA in determining eligibility for disability benefits, DOL in projecting economic impacts of long COVID, and so on. There are also opportunities for science-funding agencies (e.g., NIH and NSF) to establish new grant opportunities to support extramural Living Evidence projects in support of public objectives. Efforts like these could make it easier for agencies to fulfill President Biden's [directive](#) to "make evidence-based decisions guided by the best available science and data."

**Incorporating evidence on what the public values could improve evidence-based policymaking.** Basing policy design on public values collected through focus groups and surveys has been shown to improve the efficacy and equity of policy implementation.

Broadening capacity to collect and integrate evidence on public values can help institutions better execute on priorities. Accomplishing this at the federal level might involve (i) a high-level directive providing clear direction and strong support for agencies to collect and act on public value evidence, and (ii) a coordinated roadmap for integrating evidence about public values across government.

**Unmet desire surveys can facilitate productive collaboration.** An unmet desire survey is a tool that can prompt an institution’s staff to reflect on how execution of their programs relates to activities at partner entities, as well as consider what information about these other programs and organizations would help their work be more effective. Data from unmet desire surveys can also be used to “matchmake” between the institution’s staff and external experts who have the information they need to succeed.

**Intergovernmental research and evaluation consortiums (IRECs) could promote better data linking and evidence-building related to economic mobility.** IRECs respond to a common challenge in evaluating policies: overlapping populations. Economic mobility is an area where increased coordination and data-sharing could have a big impact, given the number of programs and jurisdictions involved. A new economic mobility IREC could therefore drive meaningful improvements in the delivery and impact of federal tax credits as well as benefits administered by state and local entities. Indeed, movement in this direction is already happening: a recent groundbreaking partnership between the Internal Revenue Service and state agencies can serve as a blueprint for linking sensitive data in a way that generates powerful insights while protecting individual privacy.

## **Future Directions and Opportunities**

The FAS-OMB Evidence Forum highlighted four nascent opportunities for the federal government to advance evidence for action: Living Evidence, public-values evidence, unmet desire surveys, and intergovernmental research and evaluation consortiums (IRECs). A fifth, thematically aligned opportunity was not presented at the Forum but was outlined in a Day One Project memo released shortly thereafter. It proposes that making it easier for researchers to access federally held data on grant review, scoring, and funding could [inform evidence-based scientific funding](#).

As Sir Jeremy Farrar noted in his keynote address, a confluence of factors (the COVID-19 pandemic, shifting geopolitical balances, economic instability) have created a moment deeply characterized by uncertainty—at the institutional, national, and global levels. This reality demands that we as a society strive to “Build trust in science, and ensure the scientific evidence that is available is fed into policymaking and the political system in a way that is accessible, usable, and appreciates the humility of science as well as the benefits.” The strategies elucidated at the FAS-OMB Evidence Forum can help achieve these goals.

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*A recording of the FAS-OMB Evidence Forum can be accessed [here](#), using the passcode `vm6?&rK%`*