

Results That Bring Change

The Results First partnership between Pew and the MacArthur Foundation is helping states spend their tax dollars more effectively to better serve the public.

BY DANIEL LEDUC

THE IOWA DEPARTMENT of Corrections has a long tradition of using an evidence-based approach to evaluate its programs. But it was lacking crucial information about what alternatives might reduce recidivism and what their long-term costs and benefits might be.

So the department partnered with the Pew-MacArthur Results First Initiative to develop a system tailored to Iowa's specific needs that helped policymakers evaluate programs' effectiveness, cost, and expected benefits.

The good news? Some of the state's drug treatment programs in prisons and in the community were returning \$8 in savings for every dollar invested. Cognitive therapy, a relatively inexpensive program for Iowa, was returning \$35 for every dollar the state spent.

The bad news? A domestic violence program, long thought by Iowa officials to be a model of its kind, was costing the state \$3 more for every dollar spent on the program. A department report based on the Results First analysis summed it up this way: "a waste of taxpayer dollars." Officials have replaced it.

"The Results First program really narrowed our focus ... and it challenged us to do better," says John R. Baldwin, director of the Iowa Department of Corrections. "We, like almost every correction system in the United States, can't

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afford to be running programs that have a negative return on investment."

Results First emerged from Pew and the MacArthur Foundation's shared interest in helping state governments better serve citizens and offer greater return on the investment of tax dollars. Launched in 2011, it is now working in 15 states and four large California counties, with an intermediate goal of being in half of the states and expanding to additional California counties.

"We take seriously the notion that democracy is imperiled when citizens see their governments as ineffective. So Pew and MacArthur share a goal of not only making government more effective today but of helping states and local governments take a longer view so they can be even more successful tomorrow," says MacArthur's interim president, Julia Stasch. That sort of transformative change is possible through well-developed partnerships between like-minded organizations with the experience, resources, and ambition necessary to succeed. The Chicago-based MacArthur Foundation and Pew have a long history of working together and currently have projects on election administration, state health care spending, ending illegal fishing, and survey research on aging and international trends.

They decided to collaborate on Results First three years ago. MacArthur has a continuing interest in applying social

cost-benefit analysis to public policy, and Pew has ongoing efforts to improve the performance of government and make it responsive to the public. Results First meant the two organizations could directly focus energy and resources on state government, which touches the lives of millions of Americans each day. "There is ample room for debate about the size of government," says Pew Executive Vice President Susan Urahn, who has worked on state policy issues since the 1980s. "We leave decisions about that to policymakers. But whatever its size, the public expects its government to be effective—delivering needed services in a fiscally responsible way. With a strong partner like the MacArthur Foundation sharing that view, we have a great collaboration in Results First that will make real differences in the states."

The project taps a growing body of research that is identifying the most-effective public programs. Washington state has been a leader in the approach and attracted Pew and MacArthur's attention early on. The Washington State Institute for Public Policy created a sophisticated cost-benefit computer model to analyze state programs, and Republican and Democratic leaders there report that the new approach has helped produce bipartisan policies that improved results while saving more than a billion dollars.

"I came from the business sector, where we relied on evidence on what was a good investment. In the Legislature, I realized we needed to do the same thing. Otherwise, you make decisions based on opinions and anecdotes or one person's favorite study that may be the exception," says Skip Priest, the former ranking Republican on Washington's House Committee on Education.

Seeing the value of Washington state's approach, Pew and MacArthur worked with the Washington State Institute



Policymakers in Iowa have used Results First to evaluate adult criminal justice programs and policies.

for Public Policy to adapt its model and develop Results First as a tool that can be applied to other states.

Policymakers are finding that the Results First cost-benefit analysis is essential for many states still grappling with the lasting effects of the Great Recession. Limited revenue has to be spent wisely, and Results First helps state leaders:

- Systematically identify which programs work and which don't.
- Calculate potential returns on investment of funding alternative programs.
- Rank programs based on their projected benefits, costs, and investment risks.
- Identify ineffective programs that could be targeted for cuts or elimination.
- Predict the impact of various policy options.

Recognizing that no single approach works for everyone, the project collaborates closely with policymakers to tailor the analysis to meet the individual needs of each state.

For example, Results First started working in New Mexico in 2011 and has helped policymakers there calculate “the cost of doing nothing” if current corrections trends continued. An analysis of offenders released in 2011 showed that this single group would cost the state \$360 million over 15 years if current recidivism patterns persisted. The study guided lawmakers, who chose to shift funds from an ineffective corrections program to one predicted to produce strong outcomes.

“Results First is trying to inform the process and give policymakers information so they know the impact of their spending choices—that is information they have not had before,” explains the project’s director, Gary VanLandingham. “We want this to become part of the way they do business, to be part of the budget process.”

And while programs’ financial costs are a central consideration, VanLandingham says the human benefit of effective programs is paramount: “the crimes avoided, the people being kept safe, the kids who won’t be abused because we’ve looked at

what works to help them.”

Pew and MacArthur work closely together on the project with representatives meeting regularly to assess progress, refine strategy, and plan for growth. The strengths of the two organizations complement each other. MacArthur has deep experience applying cost-benefit analysis to policy and Pew’s institutional structure allows it to have staff working directly with state officials.

“We’ve got a nice relationship among the two teams. We’ve played off each other’s ideas, strengths, and enthusiasm,” says Valerie Chang, MacArthur’s director for policy research. “We’ve become thought partners.”

This summer Results First is creating a new central clearinghouse for much of the research on effective state programs. It will be a one-stop database that makes information from eight research clearinghouses easily available. Policymakers, who often must make critical budget decisions on tight timelines, will have a new resource. It will tell them what works and what doesn’t in many policy areas, including adult criminal justice, juvenile justice, mental health, substance abuse, early education, K-12 education, and child welfare.

More than halfway to the intermediate goal of working in 25 states, Results First has moved at a rapid pace. “I’ve enjoyed how we’ve challenged each other to make Results First as big and as powerful as it can be,” MacArthur’s Stasch says. “Together we want states in this country to fundamentally change how they budget based on evidence and, in the process, become better stewards of taxpayer dollars and provide the excellent services their constituents deserve and should expect.” ■

For information about philanthropic partnerships at Pew, please contact Senior Vice President Sally O’Brien at 202-540-6525, sobrien@pewtrusts.org.