

Evidence Tiers in SIF

The Social Innovation Fund (SIF) is one of six federal tiered innovation and evidence initiatives that prioritizes evaluation and building evidence of effectiveness. The focus on evidence in SIF goes beyond confirming that the funded programs achieved their intended outcomes and impacts; it includes understanding how they are successful and how they can be improved. By developing a strong evaluation process, putting resources towards supporting quality evaluations and encouraging our grantmaker intermediaries and subgrantees to do the same, the SIF increases the evaluation capacity of all stakeholders and transparently offers best practices and lessons learned to the broader social sector.

A demonstrated track record of using evaluation to make programmatic decisions is a requirement for SIF grantmaker intermediaries. In addition, all funded programs being implemented in communities must complete a rigorous evaluation to strengthen their base of evidence and to document and assess whether their approach works more effectively, costs less, or leads to better results for our country's communities. Through its investment in evaluation, the SIF will increase evidence on what works to support economic opportunity, boost youth development, and promote healthy futures.

A key goal of the Social Innovation Fund is to build the evaluation capacity of nonprofit organizations so they can successfully assess whether their programs are truly creating impact. To do so, we have developed the Social Innovation Fund Evaluation Plan (SEP) Guidance. This document provides a common framework and shared understanding of what rigorous evaluation means, the elements and criteria against which SIF grantees and subgrantees plans are assessed and approved, and suggestions other organizations can use as they develop their own evaluations.

The CNCS Evidence Exchange is a virtual repository of reports intended to help our grantees and other interested stakeholders find information about evidence- and research - based national service and social innovation programs.

What are Evidence Tiers?

The SIF relies on a framework that organizes evidence levels into three categories: preliminary, moderate, and strong. This framework is very similar to those used by other federal evidence-based programs such as the Investing in Innovation (i3) program at the Department of Education



Preliminary evidence means the model has evidence based on a reasonable hypothesis and supported by credible research findings. Examples of research that meet the standards include: 1) outcome studies that track participants through a program and measure participants' responses at the end of the program; and 2) third-party pre- and post-test research that determines whether participants have improved on an intended outcome.



Moderate evidence means evidence from previous studies on the program, the designs of which can support causal conclusions (i.e., studies with high internal validity) but have limited generalizability (i.e., moderate external validity) or vice versa - studies that only support moderate causal conclusions but have broad general applicability. Examples of studies that would constitute moderate evidence include: (1) at least one well-designed and well-implemented experimental or quasiexperimental study supporting the effectiveness of the practice strategy, or program, with small sample sizes or other conditions of implementation or analysis that limit generalizability; or (2) correlational research with

strong statistical controls for selection bias and for discerning the influence of internal factors.



Strong evidence means evidence from previous studies on the program, the designs of which can support causal conclusions (i.e., studies with high internal validity), and that, in total, include enough of the range of participants and settings to support scaling up to the state, regional, or national level (i.e., studies with high external validity). The following are examples of strong evidence: (1) more than one well-designed and well-implemented experimental study or well-designed and well-implemented quasi-experimental study that supports the effectiveness of the practice, strategy, or program; or (2) one large, well-designed and well-implemented randomized controlled, multisite trial that supports the effectiveness of the practice, strategy, or program.

How Does the SIF Apply these Evidence Tiers?



Preliminary evidence is the threshold for entry. All programs funded by SIF must demonstrate a minimum of preliminary evidence of effectiveness. SIF grantmaker intermediaries, who select programs through a competitive subgrant process, must ensure that the programs they fund also meet this minimum evidence requirement.

Once funded, programs must build on their level of evidence. A program must conduct a rigorous evaluation by partnering with an independent evaluation team that will help build the evidence supporting its effectiveness and potentially move it to a higher tier of evidence.

Programs with higher levels of evidence are prioritized for greater expansion. We expect programs with stronger levels of evidence will receive more financial support (i.e. larger grants) so that they can scale up their programs. Scale for organizations with preliminary levels of evidence will allow for limited expansion to support evaluation efforts by testing interventions with new populations or locations, whereas scale for organizations with moderate and strong levels of evidence will allow for more substantial growth to provide services to larger numbers of people in the current or new geographic area(s).