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Issue BRIEF

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Aligning Federal Performance Indicators Across Programs Promoting Self-Sufficiency: Key Considerations for Policymakers

The EMPOWERED study, conducted on behalf of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation (ASPE) at the Department of Health and Human Services, examines the use of performance measures, work requirements and child support cooperation requirements across human services programs. This issue brief is one of three briefs that examines the challenges and opportunities for cross-program alignment of performance indicators. Our findings are based on discussions with national and federal stakeholders, state program administrators in three states, and local program staff in three sites.

Based on discussions with key stakeholders and program staff at the federal, state and local levels, four key considerations emerged for creating a framework of performance indicators that can align with program goals and be used across human services and workforce programs:

- Create a flexible framework of performance indicators from which programs can select those that best reflect their needs, services, and definition of progress toward self-sufficiency.
- Develop methods for setting performance targets that account for differences in program services.
- Align performance indicators of similar concepts and then create consistent definitions within those indicators.
- Provide resources, guidance, or technical support that can promote accurate and consistent collection and reporting of performance indicators across programs.

Individuals and families frequently qualify for multiple human services and workforce programs that are funded, regulated, and administered by different federal agencies—each with their own eligibility criteria, program requirements, and performance indicators. These programs often share similar goals in promoting employment and self-sufficiency, particularly among low-income individuals, though the specific services and supports provided to participants to help achieve these goals vary. Each program uses its own terminology related to performance measures, reporting, and indicators. For the purposes of this brief, we use “performance indicators” to refer to all approaches to measuring and tracking performance using program-specific indicators. Federal-level performance indicators are a policy tool that can send a strong message to states and localities about the goals and priorities of a program.

Recent steps have been taken at the federal level to align performance indicators across some programs that promote self-sufficiency with the intent of facilitating coordinated program management and service delivery approaches. To gauge program accountability and inform management and service delivery, aligned performance indicators can provide information about services and participants’ experiences and progress across programs. In addition, measuring performance in each of these programs occurs within a varying and dynamic labor market, creating the need to develop accurate performance indicators that can account for these differences within and across programs. Performance indicators suggest whether a program is on track in supporting participant goals, but they cannot determine a program’s impact on participant outcomes.

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The programs of interest included in this study are: Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program Employment and Training (SNAP E&T), Family Self-Sufficiency (FSS), Jobs Plus, Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) Title I Adult and Dislocated Worker Programs, WIOA Title I Youth Program, WIOA Title II Adult Education and Family Literacy Act (AEFLA) program, and WIOA Title IV Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) program.¹

This brief provides an overview of the current set of federal performance indicators and key policy considerations for policymakers and administrators within federal and state agencies for building a framework for coordinated performance measurement, based on semi-structured discussions with key stakeholders and program staff at the federal, state and local levels, a review of administrative data, and in-depth cases studies of approaches to performance measurement. The considerations for policymakers included in this brief acknowledge that both state and federal agencies are bound by federal statutory requirements when initiating changes to performance measurement. This framework could increase performance indicator alignment across programs in order to aid program coordination and reduce redundancy in data collection. A companion brief shares information on actionable steps that program designers can take toward using aligned measures in ways that might improve program management and increase service coordination.

substantially (Figure 1). Five of the eight programs (TANF, SNAP E&T, FSS, Jobs Plus, and the Youth Program) focus on low-income individuals, a sixth (Adult and Dislocated Worker Programs) assigns priority to individuals with low incomes, one program (Vocational Rehabilitation (VR)) serves eligible individuals with disabilities, and one other (AEFLA) serves individuals not enrolled or required to be enrolled in secondary education and who lack mastery of basic skills. In addition, different federal agencies administer the programs and different entities implement the eight programs at the state and local levels, including state agencies, contracted service providers, nonprofits, and public housing agencies, among others.

Five of the eight programs (Adult and Dislocated Worker Programs, AEFLA, TANF, VR, and Youth Program) have long histories of incorporating performance indicators in their federal regulations and policies, while the other three have more recently adopted federal-level performance indicators.² Currently, these programs' indicators fall in three main categories (Table 1):

- Employment (participants' employment status and their level of earnings)
- Skill gains (increase in participants' skills or credentials, as measured by program completion or passing credentialing assessments)
- Process (number of people who complete or participate in certain program activities)

PROGRAM CHARACTERISTICS AND USE OF PERFORMANCE INDICATORS

All the programs examined in this study serve low-income populations; are designed to improve self-sufficiency and employment through education, training, or employment services; and rely on established performance indicators at the federal level. The programs' target populations and numbers served differ

Table 1. Types of federal performance indicators required across programs³

Program	Employment indicators	Skill gains indicators	Process indicators
Adult and Dislocated Worker Programs	X	X	
AEFLA	X	X	
FSS	X		X
Jobs Plus	X	X	X
SNAP E&T	X		X
TANF			X
VR	X	X	X
Youth Program	X	X	

Source: Scan of publicly available documents, data, and reports conducted by Mathematica, November 2017–January 2018.

	 Adult and Dislocated Worker Programs	 AEFLA	 FSS	 Jobs Plus	 SNAP E&T	 TANF	 VR	 Youth Program
Federal administering agency	DOL	ED	HUD	HUD	USDA	HHS	ED	DOL
Target population	All adults age 18 and older Adult: Priority to low-income individuals or those with barriers to employment Dislocated Worker: Individuals who are unemployed due to a business closure or general economic conditions in area in which they reside	Individuals age 16 and older who are not enrolled or required to be enrolled in secondary school and who are basic skills deficient, do not have a secondary school diploma, or are an English language learner	Public housing residents	Public housing residents	SNAP recipients between the ages of 16 and 59	Work-eligible individuals who are adults age 18 or older or single minor parents who receive assistance for both themselves and their children	Individuals with disabilities	Low-income out-of-school youth, ages 16–24 and in-school youth, ages 14–21
Range of implementing entities	State and local government employees, local workforce boards, contracted service providers	Education agencies, community-based organizations, volunteer literacy organizations, institutions of higher education, nonprofit agencies, libraries, public housing agencies	Public housing agencies	Public housing agencies	State and local government employees, contracted service providers	State and local government employees, contracted service providers	State and local government employees, contracted service providers	State and local government employees, local workforce boards, contracted service providers
Number of participants	Adult: 1,108,201 Dislocated Worker: 467,508	1,427,339	65,000	Not available	629,000	1,406,410	972,000	156,520

Source: Scan of publicly available documents, data, and reports, conducted by Mathematica November 2017–June 2018. The number of participants is the most recent available data from the federal administering agency.

Notes: This figure briefly summarizes federal characteristics and rules for each program, the details of which are not fully conveyed. For example, target populations may further vary based on state discretion for some programs.

DOL= U.S. Department of Labor; ED = U.S. Department of Education; HHS = U.S. Department of Health and Human Services; HUD = U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development; USDA FNS = U.S. Department of Agriculture, Food and Nutrition Service.

Figure 1. Program-administering agencies, target populations, and implementing entities

However, no category of federal indicators is required for all programs, and the types of indicators included within a category differ. For example, federal employment indicators for the WIOA programs measure employment at different intervals after program exit, while those for Jobs Plus measure job placement. In addition, many of these programs collect information on participant characteristics that is used to inform performance indicators.

The use of performance indicators is specified in the authorizing legislation for six of the programs (Adult and Dislocated Worker

Programs, AEFLA, SNAP E&T, TANF, VR, and Youth Program). Box 1 provides a brief history of performance measurement across the study programs.

KEY CONSIDERATIONS FOR POLICYMAKERS

Policymakers have an opportunity to set policies and program requirements across human services and workforce programs in ways that promote alignment of performance measurement. This complementarity can encourage

Box 1. Brief history of performance measurement across study programs

Enacted in 2014, WIOA, which replaced the Workforce Investment Act, purposefully aligned definitions, streamlined the number of performance indicators, and standardized performance reporting across the six core WIOA programs in order to support the collection and reporting of comparable data. WIOA established performance indicators and reporting requirements to gauge the progress of states and local areas toward achieving positive outcomes for individuals served by the workforce development system (DOL 2016). Four of the programs included in this study (Adult and Dislocated Worker Programs, AEFLA, VR, and Youth Program) use the primary indicators of performance that are in the WIOA legislation. The federal agencies that administer these programs (DOL and ED) took a substantial step toward measures alignment by working together to implement aligned performance indicators.

The Agricultural Act of 2014, which reauthorized the SNAP E&T program, required FNS to develop national reporting measures based on the common measures of performance for federal workforce training programs. FNS requires states to report annually on these measures, using definitions developed by DOL and ED with slight modification. States submitted the first annual report on these outcomes in 2018. In addition to using three of WIOA's primary indicators of performance, FNS requires states to collect data on participant characteristics such as education levels and the percentage of participants for whom English is a second language.

The Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996 created TANF and required states to meet a Work Participation Rate (WPR). All states are required to have families with a work-eligible individual⁴ participate in approved work activities. Federally approved work activities include job search and job readiness, vocational educational training, and unsubsidized employment, among others. States are required to meet a WPR of 50 percent for single-parent families and 90 percent for two-parent families, though they may be reduced by means of a caseload reduction credit. These WPR targets have been the same since the inception of TANF. However, some changes to the target population, the definition of allowable activities and the way the target work rates are calculated have been instituted. The WPR is currently the only performance indicator required in TANF.

The two housing programs, FSS and Jobs Plus, have more recently implemented performance indicators in their programs. FSS is in the process of adopting a composite score that will measure employment, graduation, and participation in the program. Jobs Plus included a set of indicators in the Notice of Funding Availability in 2014 for the grant program, and has continued to revise this list for subsequent grantee cohorts. Jobs Plus indicators include job placement and retention; education and training; educational advancement; and financial literacy, among others.

increased service delivery coordination, reduce redundancy in data collection, and improve programs' effectiveness. Four key considerations for policymakers emerged from discussions with key stakeholders and program staff at the federal, state and local levels.

Key consideration 1: Create a flexible framework of performance indicators from which programs can select those that best reflect their needs, services, and definition of progress toward self-sufficiency.

Policymakers could create a performance measurement framework of indicators for use across human services and workforce programs that aim to improve self-sufficiency. This framework could lay out a menu of indicators from which policymakers or program administrators could select those that would best

serve the needs of programs and participants. This approach could increase the indicators used across programs over time, but could also increase the value of the information provided. However, policymakers must work within statutorily-defined performance measurement regulations, including using established performance indicator definitions. States and localities are likely to already have some of this data collection in place, but a more intentional menu of core measures could align the various programs. The flexibility of a performance framework could meet the need for federal accountability in the use of public funds as well as allow for differences across programs in the design and delivery of services for target populations with different characteristics and needs. The framework could help develop a shared focus, through common indicators, that could move programs toward greater service delivery and data collection alignment (Figure 2).

The framework could specify a set of long-term, short-term, and immediate indicators that focus on the goal of progress toward self-sufficiency and provide programs the tools to manage and improve services. Building on the common indicators specified by WIOA, the framework could include performance indicators across different content categories that capture various concepts and cover different timeframes for measuring services or outcomes.

- Long-term outcome indicators (such as employment status one year after program completion) show participant progress and demonstrate program accountability. However, they can be difficult for program administrators to use for program management, service delivery, and gauging immediate program goals because they are typically measured after program participation ends.
- Short-term progress indicators (such as skill gains) can be important to assess program performance and management and occur during or shortly after program participation. However, these indicators can be difficult to

ascertain because they require participants to provide documentation, such as completion certificates, to frontline staff in order to document progress made.

- Immediate indicators (such as process or participant characteristics) can inform daily service delivery and ongoing program management, but risk becoming overly cumbersome given the extent of services that a program provides. If used alone, they may have limited value since they do not focus on larger program goals.

Based on the components of the study programs, indicators in the framework could include:

1. employment, 2. skill gains or other interim measures, 3. well-being and financial stability, 4. program participation, and 5. participant characteristics. These categories measure different aspects of self-sufficiency and, when combined, can provide a complete picture of the program and its participants' progress. We include examples of indicators currently used in each category as illustrations of relevant indicators. A framework of aligned indicators would not necessarily include these specific examples.

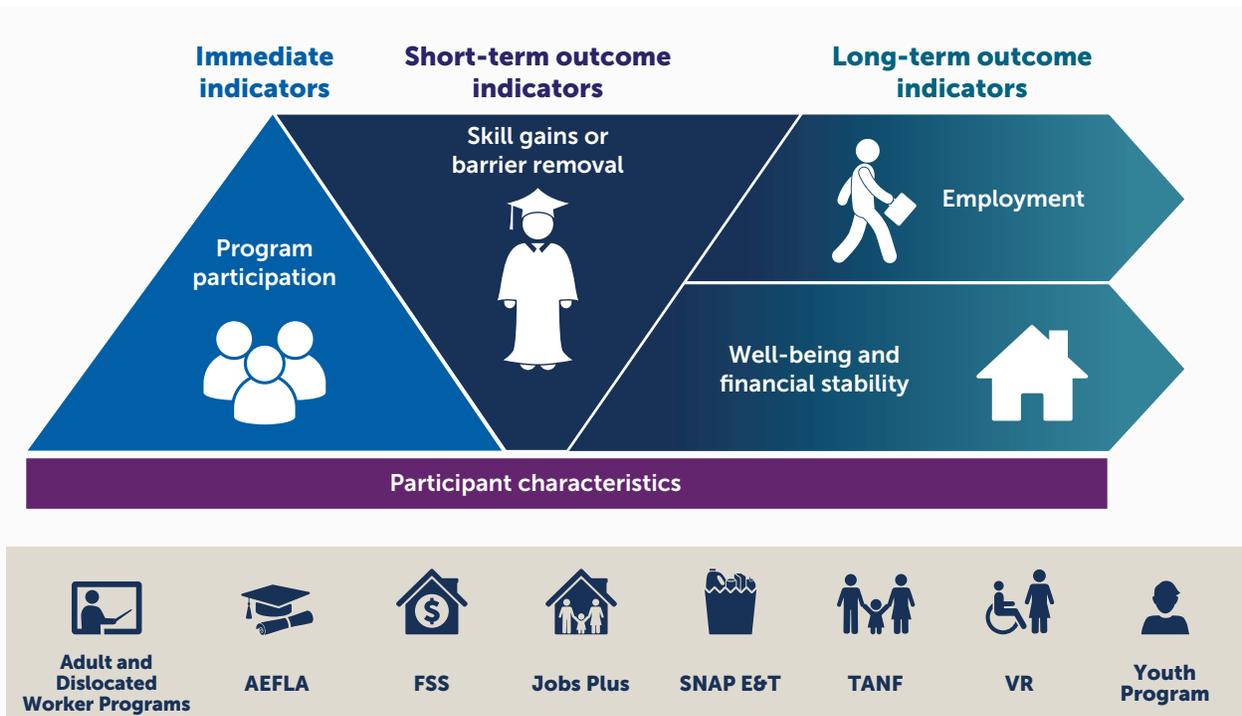


Figure 2. Flexible performance framework for accountability in achieving self-sufficiency for program participants



Examples of employment indicators:

Employment one year after program exits, job retention for 30 days, job entry, and wage growth.



Examples of skill gains or other interim indicators:

Attainment of an industry recognized credential, access to child care services or transportation assistance.



Examples of well-being and financial stability indicators:

Reaching financial savings goals such as establishing a bank account or escrow account, attending counseling services over a period of time, or social network support.



Examples of program participation indicators:

Number of participants who are in job training in an in-demand industry program or the number of participants who are attending life skills classes.



Examples of participant characteristics indicators:

Number of participants who receive cash assistance or the number of participants who have a criminal background.

Employment indicators. Employment indicators show participants’ progress toward finding and keeping work that may lead to self-sufficiency. WIOA includes indicators of participants’ employment during the second and fourth quarters after program exit. These measure the longer-term (or “lagged”) outcomes of participants and can be useful for determining the employment of participants after they have completed a program. However, these indicators are not helpful for program management because, program staff reported, they are too far into the future to assess current program activities and make adjustments to better serve program participants. In addition, in programs such as VR, Jobs Plus, or FSS that provide essential, often long-term resources for individual or family stability, staff find that these indicators may not capture the outcomes of services provided. At a local level, states and localities also collect short-term employment retention outcomes, measured at either 30, 60, or 90 days. In addition, programs at the local level tended to use more immediate measures such as job placement to guide service delivery and program management.

Skill gains or barrier removal. At the state and local levels, several programs include measures of skill gains, particularly in education programs and those programs that serve populations with multiple barriers. One of the WIOA primary indicators of performance is measurable skill gains. This indicator aims to measure progress toward a documented academic, technical, occupational, or other form of progress towards a credential or employment (DOL 2017). AEFLA and VR program staff in particular noted that skill development, such as obtaining GED and credentials, more closely matched their programs’ goals than employment indicators. For TANF participants, gains in skills more broadly defined to include life skills or executive function skills⁵ could provide information on whether a participant is moving on the path to self-sufficiency. In addition, other measures such as barrier removal could point toward participant progress. Barrier removal could include activities that participants pursue to make progress toward employment readiness, such as attendance at counseling sessions.

Well-being and financial stability. Well-being and financial stability indicators can show participants’ progress toward self-sufficiency and increased stability. At the local level, programs took different approaches to defining these

indicators. For example, administrators in one state noted that for the Youth Program, they measure how their services have influenced family stability. As many of their youth are experiencing homelessness, involved with the justice system, experiencing substance use disorders, or parenting or pregnant, services that improve their family stability can have lasting effects on their future self-sufficiency and need for additional services. Similarly, the housing programs and TANF staff discussed the importance of well-being measures for their participants. These programs can often serve the whole family, and in the case of housing, for longer periods of time. For example, some housing programs measure the educational outcomes of residents’ children and whether they move out of public housing upon adulthood.

Program participation. All programs use measures of program participation such as entry, engagement or participation in activities, and completion of programs. State and local program administrators reported that program participation measures can be useful for program management, particularly in determining how to assign staff and assessing their workloads. In addition, these measures help programs target services and reach their intended populations. For example, local workforce staff in one study site set enrollment and service targets and timeframes for their providers to ensure that they were serving the city’s diverse population in a timely manner.

Participant characteristics. Characteristics of program participants help inform policy-makers and program administrators on the similarities and differences of the populations served across programs to inform program accountability and budgeting. It is also useful for administrators to understand who they are serving, the range of participants’ needs, and barriers to employment to plan and manage programs. Characteristics might be used to manage caseloads and help programs make referrals to other services based on participants’ needs.

Key consideration 2: Develop methods for setting performance targets that account for differences in program services.

Policymakers could promote a shared set of indicators while acknowledging that some programs may have more of a connection to

certain indicators than others by setting different performance targets for different programs. While they have a shared end goal, programs inherently approach self-sufficiency differently based on the program requirements, length of program participation, and target population. For example, the housing programs serve residents for long periods of time and staff may view self-sufficiency through a generational lens whereas the Adult and Dislocated Worker Programs focus on the more immediate employability of participants. To reflect these differences, short-term employment targets may be higher in Adult and Dislocated Worker programs, while long-term financial stability targets are higher for housing programs.

For the WIOA programs, states negotiate targets across programs with the federal agencies based on a variety of factors such as the number of participants previously served and participant characteristics.

SNAP E&T, AEFLA, and VR program staff report that their participants have more barriers to employment than participants in the Adult and Dislocated Worker Programs and that skill attainment and well-being may be the outcomes for which the most gain can be expected. Setting lower employment indicator targets for programs that serve more vulnerable populations than for those that serve more work-ready populations allows programs to use aligned indicators that acknowledge their individual program goals and target populations, while still working toward common goals. Performance targets could be set using baseline information collected about the program and its participants and be informed by research about the connection of services to outcomes. The effort could also build on work that already exists for the WIOA programs.

Key consideration 3: Align performance indicators of similar concepts and then create consistent definitions within those indicators.

Policymakers can help decrease the inconsistencies in performance measurement that exist across programs by promoting shared language. At a state and local level, program administrators operate multiple programs with different funding sources that require unique performance indicators measuring the same concept in different ways. These concepts are often defined in statutes, regulations, or program guidance. For example, WIOA programs, Jobs Plus, and FSS each measure what they call “employment.” However, the statutorily defined WIOA primary indicators track employment status at specific points in time, the Jobs Plus program measures job retention,

and the FSS program includes a measure of whether an individual reaches 12 months of continuous employment. Although each measures participants’ employment, the inconsistency in the way the term is defined across programs inhibits alignment and use of a common indicator. State and local administrators suggested that common definitions across programs, as realized for the WIOA core programs, would ease their burden of having to measure the same concept in multiple ways for different programs.

Using research and existing indicators, policymakers and program staff could determine how to best measure employment and other concepts in performance indicators. Rather than create new definitions from scratch, federal agencies could consider the definitions programs currently use to avoid multiple layers of indicators and definitions. For example, WIOA established common definitions of indicators based on indicators already in use by the core programs; the administering federal agencies (DOL and ED) issued extensive joint guidance and technical assistance on the definitions. Clearly defining the numerator and denominator of performance indicators would help to reduce state and local confusion about what to include and how to measure the concepts. WIOA accomplishes this goal for five of the programs included in this brief; however, TANF and other programs administered by HHS still have opportunities to establish these common definitions.

Key consideration 4: Provide resources, guidance, or technical support that can promote accurate and consistent collection and reporting of performance indicators across programs.

Policymakers are in the unique position to craft legislation that signals through performance indicators that produce the appropriate incentives, the desired program outcomes and ways to measure program performance. State and local program administrators reported the need for clearer legislative guidance on how to collect and report on performance indicators. Creating a balance of allowing local flexibility in the use of performance indicators, but also providing guidance and resources for data collection and practices, could help states and localities navigate the often complex relationships between their data requirements, systems, and reporting mechanisms. Policymakers could designate resources

State and local administrators recommended that if policymakers could create clear definitions that measure similar concepts across programs, it would ease their burden on a programmatic level of measuring the same thing, such as employment, in multiple ways.

Across programs, state and local program administrators reported that they would welcome more guidance and resources from policymakers to support data collection and reporting.

to states to create systems across programs, maintain them, and train staff in their use. This could also facilitate steps towards aligned service delivery and coordinated data collection efforts.

A reliable and accurate performance measurement system should have standards for the type of data system and ways of collecting and reporting those data. Data collection should support consistent measurement and accountability but not contribute to differences across programs or geographic areas. Inconsistent and incomplete data can hinder programs' ability to accurately assess participants' outcomes. The quality and consistency of data vary considerably across states and programs, largely due to inconsistencies in capacity. Some states continue to use legacy data systems that have little ability to accommodate modifications or produce the kind of data reports that are useful for program reporting or management. If one program is using a sophisticated system and another an Excel spreadsheet, it is difficult to have confidence in the consistency of the data across programs. For example, if employment indicators rely on staff follow-up, then one program may invest more time and resources in collecting this information than another so the indicator may better capture progress than an area that cannot make this investment.

FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Creating a framework for the selection of and targets for indicators, developing shared concepts and use of common definitions, and creating systems capacity to promote consistency in collection and reporting could help with indicator alignment and move toward service coordination. Policymakers have the opportunity to create an infrastructure that aligns performance indicators and promotes service coordination across programs. Developing a flexible framework for gauging program accountability, service coordination, and participant success would acknowledge programs' diversity with respect to target population, services, and contexts while working toward compatible performance measures.

State and local program administrators look to the federal government to set the policies that will guide and facilitate alignment across programs and ease the challenges to coordination that programs face. At a local level, program administrators face competing demands on their time and resources to collect and report data. A framework for performance measurement that encourages alignment across programs has the potential to ease some of this burden, and improve outcomes for clients.

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Overview of data sources for the EMPOWERED performance measurement study

The EMPOWERED performance measurement study component explored perspectives and practices focused on the question of how performance measurement may achieve accountability across programs that share similar goals and support efficient program management and service coordination. To identify programs to include in the study, we reviewed human services and workforce programs that promote self-sufficiency and employment, serve low-income populations similar to those served by TANF, and rely on established performance or reporting indicators at the federal level. Data collection occurred between November 2017 and October 2018 and included these steps:

- A scan of publicly available documents describing human services and workforce programs and policies related to performance indicators to summarize information across programs
- Reviews of federal program administrative data
- Semi-structured discussions with 29 national and federal stakeholders and 15 state program administrators in three states
- In-depth case studies of approaches to performance measurement across select programs in three localities

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ENDNOTES

¹The study included programs that provide education or training services, often coupled with employment services. WIOA Title III Employment Service (Wagner-Peyser) was not included among the study programs because it provides employment services only.

²The six core WIOA programs are: three programs authorized under WIOA Title I, the Adult, Dislocated Worker, and Youth programs that are administered by DOL; the AEFLA program authorized under WIOA Title II and administered by ED; the Employment Service (ES) program authorized under the Wagner-Peyser Act, as amended by WIOA Title III and administered by DOL; and the VR program authorized under Title I of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, as amended by WIOA Title IV and administered by ED. The Adult and Dislocated Worker Programs are typically administered at both the state and local levels together. For this reason, they are considered one program for the purposes of this study. WIOA's six core all use the same six performance indicators.

³Unlike other programs included in this brief, SNAP Employment and Training programs follow reporting requirements, rather than performance measures.

⁴More information on the definition of a work-eligible individual is available at <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/CFR-2015-title45-vol2/pdf/CFR-2015-title45-vol2-sec261-2.pdf>.

⁵Life skills are defined as psychosocial abilities for adaptive and positive behavior that enable individuals to deal effectively with the demands and challenges of everyday life (UNICEF 2003). Executive function helps people (1) stop automatic or inadvisable actions in favor of more appropriate behaviors (through the specific skill called inhibitory control), (2) remember critical information while conducting complex tasks or activities (through the specific skill called working memory), and (3) hold multiple ideas at a time and switch between them as necessary (through the specific skill called cognitive flexibility) (Zelazo and Muller 2002; Alvarez and Emory 2006).

