The Social Innovation Fund (SIF): Utilizing a Range of Research Designs

Lily Zandniapour, Ph.D., Office of Research and Evaluation
September 23, 2016

OPRE/ACF/HHS 2016 Innovative Methods Meeting--Building Strong Evidence in Challenging Contexts: Alternatives to Traditional Randomized Controlled Trials
About the Social Innovation Fund (SIF)

- The SIF combines public and private resources to grow the impact of innovative, community-based solutions that have promising evidence of improving the lives of people in low-income communities throughout the United States.

- SIF Focus Areas: Youth Development, Economic Opportunity and Healthy Futures

- Since 2014, SIF Pay for Success program was added to the SIF “Classic” Grant Program
SIF’s Key Features

- Grantmaker Intermediaries
- Evaluation of Every Program Model
- Evidence Required for Selection
- Leverage Private Dollars
- Growing Impact/Scaling
- Knowledge Sharing

SIF Features
SIF “Classic” Grantmaking Structure

HOW IT WORKS:

CNCS/SIF
SUPPORT: $1–10 MILLION GRANT AWARDS

INTERMEDIARIES
MATCH $1:1
SUPPORT: $100,000+ GRANT AWARDS

NONPROFITS
MATCH $1:1

REACH MORE PEOPLE
BUILD RIGOROUS EVIDENCE OF WHAT WORKS
SIF By Numbers (as of March 2016)

$295+ million through 43 grant awards → $600+ million in match funding → 389 local orgs funded → 625,000+ individuals benefitting
Central Role of Evidence in SIF

1. All programs must demonstrate a minimum level of effectiveness (preliminary) to receive funding

2. All grantees must commit to conducting independent and rigorous evaluations of all funded interventions/program models within their portfolio, targeting moderate or strong level of evidence

3. Long term goals of the SIF are to:
   - infuse evidence in programming and grantmaking decisions
   - Increase the evaluation capacity of grantees and subgrantees
   - Advance the base of evidence of funded interventions and increase the number of programs with moderate or strong level of evidence
Studies that establish causal impact and are generalizable to more diverse geographies and populations also contribute to the strength of evidence.
SIF Evaluation Plan (SEP) Designs

SEP Designs of 2010-2014 Cohorts

- Experimental (n=31) 29%
- Quasi-Experimental (n=62) 58%
- Non-Experimental (n=13) 12%

Number of SEPs
SIF Evaluation Study Designs of 2010-2014 Cohorts

- RCT (n=31): 29%
- QED-Propensity Scores (n=43): 41%
- Matched Comparison (n=6): 6%
- QED-Interrupted Time Series (n=5): 5%
- QED-Other Statistical Technique (n=3): 3%
- QED-RDD (n=2): 2%
- Short Interrupted Time Series (n=2): 2%
- Lagged-Cohort (n=1): 1%
- Pre-post (n=6): 6%
- Other (n=6): 6%
- Cost Studies (n=1): 1%
Steps in the Evaluation Program Process

Year 1

1. Evaluation Program Orientation
2. Subgrantee Selection
3. Select an External Evaluator
4. Draft a Portfolio Evaluation Strategy
5. Draft/Redraft SIF Evaluation Plan (SEP)

CNCS/SIF SEP Approval

Years 2-5

Implement Plan (Collect Data; Analyze Findings)/Report/Receive Feedback

2-step evaluation planning process

CNCS and the SIF evaluation TA team provide guidance, feedback, technical assistance to grantees, subgrantees and their evaluation partners, and monitor their activities. (wrap-around services)
SIF Evaluation Technical Assistance

- Individual technical assistance consultations
- Written feedback on Portfolio Evaluation Strategy (PES), two drafts of the SIF Evaluation Plan (SEP), all Evaluation Reports; and SEP Amendments
- Response to questions by phone or e-mail at any point
- Evaluation Webinar Series (live & recorded) and group calls for “hot topics” of importance to the SIF evaluation work
- Development and roll-out of guides, tip sheets, checklists, tools, and other resources such as Self-paced Modules (tutorials) to assist grantees in evaluation planning (http://sep-tutorials.org/), implementation and reporting
- Support of Evaluation Workgroup, peer learning, evaluation-focused sessions at convenings
- Access to resources and expert advice on the SIF Knowledge Network
Challenges – Meeting the High Bar

- Assessing evidence-base of program models/interventions
- Finding the right evaluation partner
- Budgeting for rigorous evaluation
- Evaluation readiness of subgrantees
- Developing evaluation designs, plans, and reports that meet SIF requirements/SIF evaluation readiness
- Recruitment of participants
- Identifying a counterfactual
- Access to administrative data
- IRB approval
- Subgrantee investment
Ex. of Evaluation Resources

Guides/Working Papers/Other:

• The SIF Evaluation Plan (SEP) Guidance Document
• Budgeting for Rigorous Evaluation: Insights from the Social Innovation Fund
• SIF Rubric – Assessing levels of evidence
• Evaluation planning tutorials: Self-paced Modules (http://sep-tutorials.org/)
• The Reporting Guidance Document (under development; soon to be released)

Tools, Tips, Checklists:

• Evaluator Screening Tips
• Impact Evaluability Assessment Tool
• Secondary/Administrative Data Use and Reporting Checklist
• Propensity Scores Matching (PSM) Reporting Checklist
• Implementation Reporting Checklist
• Outcomes/Impact Reporting Checklist
• Working with Institutional Review Boards (IRBs)
Technical Assistance Case Examples: Hand-Out 3

- U.S. Soccer Foundation
- Share Our Strength (SOS)
- Methodist Health Ministries of South Texas, Inc. (MHM)
SIF Opportunities and Challenges

**Opportunities:**
- Elevating evaluation and putting resources behind it
- Good position to influence the sector
- Wealth of information on programs and evaluations (100+ evaluation plans submitted to date using a range of methodologies and approaches); and a national assessment examining the program cross-grantees

**Challenges:**
- State of the nonprofit sector around evaluation/Strength of existing evidence
- Tension between proving and improving
- Establishing causality is not always possible
Thank you!

Questions?

For more on SIF please visit: 
http://www.nationalservice.gov/programs/social-innovation-fund/

To access evaluation resources and reports please visit: 
http://www.nationalservice.gov/impact-our-nation/evidence-exchange

Contact Info: lzandniapour@cns.gov; (202) 606-6939