



# **Analysis of Evidence-Based Health Promotion and Disease Prevention Program Review Processes**

**September 2023**

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# Background



Since 1987, Title III-D of the Older Americans Act (OAA) has authorized grants to states and territories to support programs that promote health and well-being among older adults (60+).



An FY2012 congressional appropriations law added a requirement that these health promotion programs funded via OAA must be evidence-based.



The Administration for Community Living (ACL) and key stakeholders worked to establish detailed criteria and evidence-based definitions to support Title III-D programming and create a formal ACL Evidence-Based Program (EBP) Review Process.



In 2022, ACL sought to examine the existing Review Process, facilitated by the National Council on Aging (NCOA), to explore whether any updates may be needed and to learn more about EBP review efforts employed across other federal entities.



ACL contracted with RTI International to conduct this exploratory study.

# Background: Research Questions

- What processes do other federal agencies use to determine evidence-based approval?
- What does the EBP application and review process include?
- What is the history of the Title III-D EBP Review Process?
- What was NCOA's process?
- What types of entities are developing programs? What are their protocols? What are their standards?

# Methodology

Between February and June 2023, the team conducted a rapid literature review and key informant interviews to address the research questions.




The **rapid literature review** provided details and historical context for EBP review processes, both within ACL and across other federal agencies and offices.




The **key informant interviews** offered specific details about how EBP applications are reviewed and how program applicants experience the EBP review process.

# Methodology: Literature Review

The team conducted a rapid literature review to investigate the history of the ACL EBP Review Process and current processes used to review and evaluate EBPs across federal entities.



The team identified 13 peer-reviewed publications and 32 gray literature publications for potential inclusion, screening each for relevance.



The team completed a qualitative thematic analysis on the final 27 publications selected for inclusion.

# Methodology: Stakeholder Interviews

The team conducted 33 virtual interviews with stakeholders including ACL staff, non-ACL federal staff, nonfederal partners, and program developers who either successfully obtained or did not receive EBP designation through the ACL-supported EBP Review Process. Interview transcripts were coded using NVivo.

Interviewee Group	Interviews Conducted (N)
ACL Staff	4
Other Federal Partners	6
Nonfederal Partners	7
Successful ACL EBP Developers	8
*Unsuccessful ACL EBP Developers	8
<b>Total</b>	<b>33</b>

**\*Note:** Two types of participants were classified as unsuccessful: ones who applied and did not achieve EBP designation ( $N=4$ ), and ones who considered applying but did not because they felt their programs would not be successful in earning EBP designation ( $N=4$ ).

# Findings: EBP Application Process

The ACL-supported EBP application consists of two separate stages. ACL funds NCOA to review applications at both stages and determine which programs should receive EBP designation.



**Stage 1** requires program developers to detail their research-based evidence, program effectiveness, and associated evaluation results. This stage is further divided by program focus, with one application for falls prevention programs and a separate application for all other health promotion and disease prevention programs. NCOA's Review Council, composed of experts in research and evaluation, reviews all Stage 1 applications.



**Stage 2** requires successful Stage 1 applicants to provide additional information on program implementation, training, and dissemination. Based on material submitted in Stage 2, NCOA's Review Council makes final determinations as to which applicant programs achieve EBP designation.



# Findings: EBP Review Process

The ACL-supported EBP Review Process, administered by NCOA, awards EBP designation to falls prevention and health promotion programs that demonstrate rigor through (1) use of experimental or quasi-experimental research designs, (2) demonstrated dissemination, and (3) published program outcomes in peer-reviewed journals.



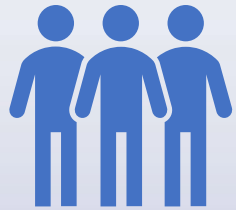
The purpose of the EBP Review Process is to identify programs that have proven success in designing and implementing a model that meets their stated goals to support their target population, and can be replicated in other communities with the same successful results.



Based on peer-reviewed and gray literature sources, ACL's EBP Review Process is similar to that used by other federal offices and agencies, such as CDC, SAMHSA, and HRSA.

# Findings: Definitions of EBP

When asked to define “evidence-based,” ACL and non-ACL federal staff interviewees cited traditional approaches to EBP review, like the ACL-supported EBP Review Process. Interviewees focused on the rigor of the research designs (i.e., randomized controlled trials or well-designed quasi-experimental studies).



Nonfederal partners and EBP program applicants also focused on robust research, but many added comments about the importance of including contextual factors and community perspectives.



Some interviewees also said that broadening the definition of EBP to include more diversity of research designs could increase the number and variety of applicant programs, in turn expanding the potential reach of EBPs to underrepresented populations.

# Findings: EBP Applicant Characteristics

**ACL, non-ACL federal, and nonfederal stakeholder interviewees described the profile of the most successful EBP applicant organizations.**



Successful EBPs have been designed either by (a) academic institutions with research staff leading the programs, or (b) larger community-based organizations that have partnered with research experts to design their programs and publish program evaluation findings in peer-reviewed journals.



Successful EBP developers tend to have a sizable resource base in terms of funding, staff, and population access compared to unsuccessful program developers, which tend to be smaller and less resourced and often serve smaller subpopulations.

# Findings: EBP Review Successes

EBP review successes include growing awareness of the importance of evidence in program design and greater priority given to applications that may increase support for diverse populations.



Most ACL and non-ACL federal interviewees referred to the evolution of EBP reviews as their greatest success, citing gains in efficiency, increased transparency, and efforts to make results more relevant to practitioners.



Some federal interviewees said that their EBP application and review processes have helped expand awareness of the need for evidence in program implementation, in turn expanding the number of EBP applicants and successful EBP designations.



Multiple nonfederal partner interviewees described successes in EBP application review structures, such as prioritizing applications that address gaps in specific health topics or populations served.

# Findings: EBP Review Challenges

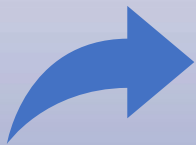
Issues of equity and inclusivity were cited by program developers as growing challenges with EBP reviews.



Many small and diverse organizations lack research staff, resources, and funding to support all the program implementation steps and analyses required to apply for EBP designation—potentially precluding some innovative programs from EBP consideration.



Rigorous experimental or quasi-experimental designs are time-consuming and expensive to implement and evaluate, and for some entities (e.g., Tribal communities), these research designs do not align with community-driven methods for implementing and assessing programs.



To achieve EBP designation, many programs include so many implementation steps and evaluation components that community organizations downstream lack the capacity to implement these programs on the same scale.

# Findings: The Future of EBP Review

Although the ACL-supported EBP Review Process is similar to processes used by other federal entities, some federal entities are transitioning to a tiered approach that promises to increase the number of EBPs.



Under a tiered EBP review structure, the most rigorous studies (i.e., those that meet traditional criteria, including rigorous research design) receive full EBP designation.



Approaches that do not meet all the standard EBP criteria may still earn recognition through a lower tier designation that acknowledges their potential as promising programs.

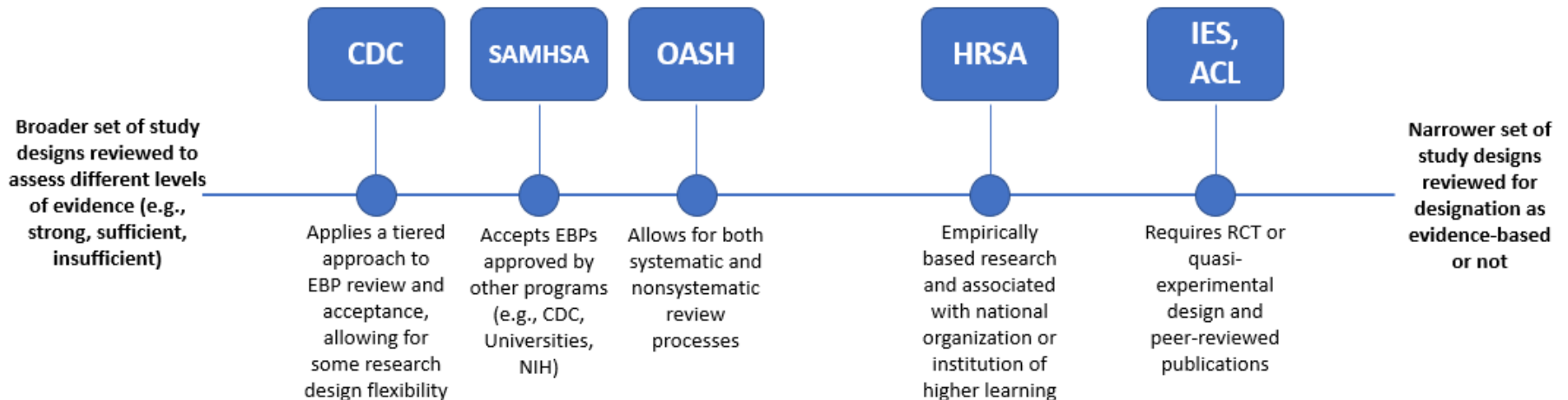
# Discussion

Through the literature review and interviews, the team explored the current landscape of EBP review processes and gathered feedback on future considerations.

- **Overall Structure**: There is general alignment between the systematic, multistage ACL-supported EBP Review Process that NCOA facilitates and the EBP reviews conducted by other federal offices and agencies. This structure ensures that designated EBPs are rigorous and well designed to support the needs of their intended audiences.
- **Barriers**: Although the requirement for experimental or quasi-experimental evidence results in a level of rigor that may enhance program credibility, it also serves as a barrier for many prospective program developers who cannot achieve EBP designation. Current EBP designation tends to be limited to academic institutions or larger organizations that have the capacity to meet stringent EBP review requirements; smaller organizations or those for whom control- or comparison-group designs may not be appropriate have had limited success in achieving EBP designation.

# Discussion, Cont.

All interviewees recognized the need to start transitioning EBP reviews to reduce barriers. Some federal offices and agencies are already making these transitions, most notably with tiered approaches that expand the breadth of studies that can apply for EBP designation.





# Discussion: Opportunities

**Federal offices and agencies may consider the following opportunities:**

- Review or update their definitions of evidence, potentially expanding their definitions to include other types of program designs (e.g., inclusion of qualitative studies).
- Work together with other federal offices to increase collaboration across federal EBP review processes to share lessons learned and new developments.
- Develop tiered approaches to retain the existing level of EBP rigor, while also extending a lower level of EBP designation to a broader range of program developers.