

Strength of Evidence Checklist: *Using Evidence to Justify Policy + Budget Decisions*

Melissa Garrido, PhD
Elsa Pearson Sites, MPH

VA



U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs

Veterans Health Administration
Health Services Research & Development Service

PEPReC

Partnered Evidence-based Policy Resource Center
A VA QUERI Center



VA Quality Enhancement Research Initiative
EVIDENCE INTO PRACTICE

Bottom Line Up Front

- Evidence Act requires cabinet-level agencies to tie their budgets and policies to evidence
- **Strength of evidence checklist is an example of the “law in action”**
- Assesses legislative and budget proposals across five domains of evidence – **need, feasibility, effectiveness, cost, comparison to alternatives**

- **Evidence Act – overview, goals**
- Strength of evidence checklist – overview
- Strength of evidence checklist – uses
- Strength of evidence checklist – improvement process

Evidence Act

- Enacted in 2019 to ensure cabinet-level agencies use evidence to justify their budgets and policies
 - **Title I – Federal Evidence-building Activities**
 - Title II – Open Government Data Act
 - Title III – Confidential Information Protection + Statistical Efficiency
- **VA implementation** – Office of Management + Budget (OMB), Office of Enterprise Integration (OEI)
- **VHA implementation** – Quality Enhancement Research Initiative (QUERI), Partnered Evidence-based Policy Resource Center (PEPReC)

Evidence Act – Title I

- Requires an agency-wide **capacity assessment**
- Requires a quadrennial **learning agenda**
 - Big picture evidence development plan
 - What topics does VHA want to learn more about?
- Requires an annual **evaluation plan**
 - Highly detailed document describing how VHA will develop evidence for the topics outlined in the learning agenda

VHA Implementation of Evidence Act

- Evidence Act reinforced requests from OMB
 - “Agencies are encouraged to allocate resources to programs and practices backed by strong evidence of effectiveness while trimming activities that evidence shows are not effective” (OMB Memo M-13-17)
- How best to quickly achieve linkages between evidence and policy and budget decisions?
 - **Processing and approval of legislative and budget proposals**

Legislative + Budget Proposal Review Process

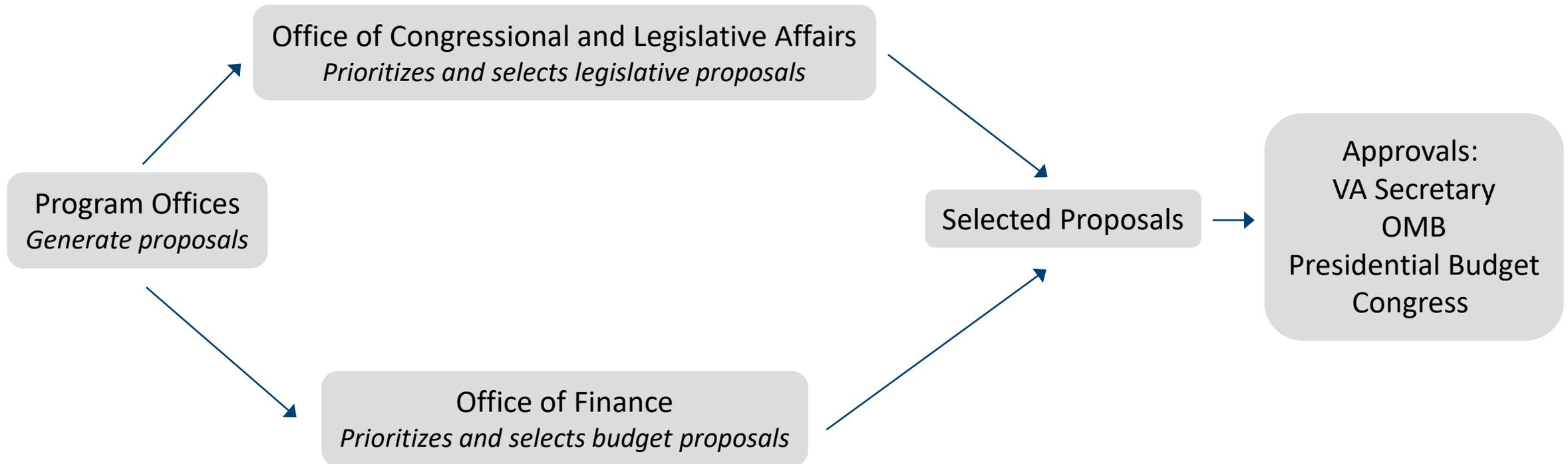


Figure adapted from Garrido, Pearson, Avila, & Pizer 2022 – Value In Health

Legislative + Budget Proposal Review Process

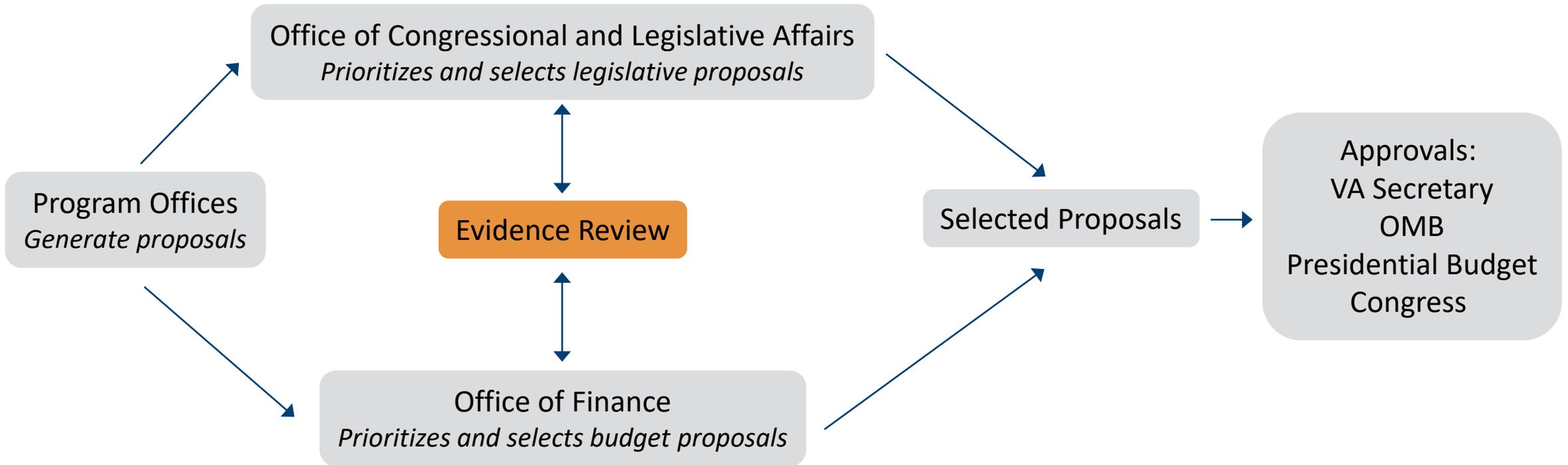


Figure adapted from Garrido, Pearson, Avila, & Pizer 2022 – Value In Health

Evidence Review – Choice of Criteria

- **Goal:** Balance the realities of policy and budget decision-making processes with the need to ensure that justifications for changes are sound and based on the most rigorous evidence available
- Focus on relevance, recency, consistency, and independence of evidence

- Evidence Act – overview, goals
- **Strength of evidence checklist – overview**
- Strength of evidence checklist – uses
- Strength of evidence checklist – improvement process

Strength of Evidence Checklist



Need



Feasibility



Effectiveness



Cost



Comparison to Alternatives



Need

- Demonstrate the policy and technical needs for a novel approach or additional resources

NEED	
Explain the clear policy need for a new approach or additional resources in this area <i>at this time</i> .	
Explain the clear operational need for <i>this specific</i> proposed approach or <i>these</i> additional resources.	
Ensure that the evidence included to demonstrate need is clearly linked to the question at hand.	



Feasibility

- Demonstrate that the proposal can be implemented in the identified setting and timeframe; include a clear metric of implementation success

FEASIBILITY	
Explain the current context or logistical environment in which the proposal will be implemented (e.g., political environment, external markets, clinical and administrative priorities, VA strategic plan).	
Explain the <i>political and policy</i> feasibility of this proposal (mention any anticipated opposition).	
Explain the <i>operational</i> feasibility and implementation of this proposal (mention any anticipated barriers).	
Explain the proposed method for quantifying <i>implementation</i> success (with specific metrics).	
Ensure that the evidence included to demonstrate feasibility in the current context or logistical environment is clearly linked to the question at hand.	



Effectiveness

- Demonstrate that the proposal will be effective among the Veteran population and in achieving the intended outcome; include a clear metric of outcome success

EFFECTIVENESS	
Explain if elements of this proposal have already been implemented (inside or outside VA) and why or why not.	
Explain the direct, indirect, and/or unintended impacts of this proposal on the Veteran population, including specific subpopulations.	
Include a clear statement of intended outcome for the proposed program or policy.	
Explain the proposed method for quantifying effectiveness and <i>outcome</i> success (with specific metrics).	
Ensure the evidence included to demonstrate whether the proposal will be effective in achieving the intended outcome is clearly linked to the question at hand.	



Cost

- Identify the impacts on internal and external budgets; define, explain, and support all included budget items

Clearly define and estimate internal (i.e., VHA) budget impacts.	
Clearly define and estimate external (e.g., CMS, private sector, DoD, VBA) budget impacts.	
Ensure that the evidence included to estimate and justify costs is clearly linked to the question at hand.	



Comparison to Alternatives

- Demonstrate that alternative approaches and the status quo were explored and justifiably excluded

Explain alternative approaches and why they are excluded based on evidence.	
Explain the status quo and why it's inadequate based on evidence.	
Ensure that the evidence included to compare the new policy/program to alternative solutions and the status quo is clearly linked to the question at hand.	
Ensure that all evidence included with the proposal is the timeliest available and relevant .	

Grading

- Checklist graded on a scale of 1-100
- Each element graded on a scale of 1-5
 - 5 = evidence is robust, relevant, sufficient, and supports proposal approval
 - 3 = evidence is adequate, relevant, and may support proposal approval
 - 1 = evidence is minimal, unrelated, and may not support proposal approval
- 2 independent reviewers (masters-level); then reconcile scores
- Any disputes settled by third reviewer (masters- or PhD-level)

- Evidence Act – overview, goals
- Strength of evidence checklist – overview
- **Strength of evidence checklist – uses**
- Strength of evidence checklist – improvement process

VHA Use of Checklist

- Checklist has been used for three years to grade legislative and budget proposals (FY22-24)
- About 75 legislative proposals per cycle
- About 30 budget proposals per cycle
- Annotated scores are provided to VHA leadership to use as they decide which proposals to approve each cycle

Non-VHA Use of Checklist

- PEPRc has briefed many non-VHA entities on the checklist
 - Department of Veterans Affairs
 - Office of Enterprise Integration
 - Veterans Benefits Administration
 - National Cemetery Administration
- Many have adopted it (with modifications) for their own use
- Emphasizes the checklist's **flexibility and adaptability**

- Evidence Act – overview, goals
- Strength of evidence checklist – overview
- Strength of evidence checklist – uses
- **Strength of evidence checklist – improvement process**

Lessons Learned

- PEPRc reassesses and revises the evidence checklist after each use



Regular challenge areas – comparison to alternatives, success metrics, external costs



Null or “not applicable” answers are often missing



Assumptions of knowledge are common

Checklist Improvements



Clarify language – external costs, impact on Veterans, statements of intent, comparison to status quo



Total score – out of 100 points



Up-to-date evidence – scored only once



Success metrics – both implementation and outcome success



Include model proposal

Conclusion

- Strength of evidence checklist is the Evidence Act “in action”
- Five domains of evidence – need, feasibility, effectiveness, cost, comparison to alternatives
- Used by VHA for three years for legislative and budget proposals
- Details in [Value in Health](#) article led by Garrido and Pearson Sites
- melissa.garrido@va.gov
- elsa.pearson@va.gov