TIERED EVIDENCE GRANTS

Opportunities Exist to Share Lessons from Early Implementation and Inform Future Federal Efforts

What GAO Found

Tiered evidence grants are a new policy tool federal agencies are using to incorporate evidence of effectiveness into grantmaking. Under this approach, agencies establish tiers of grant funding based on the level of evidence grantees provide on their models for providing social, educational, health, or other services. Smaller awards are used to test new and innovative service models; larger awards are used to scale service models with strong evidence. To implement tiered evidence grants, agencies add evidence and evaluation requirements throughout the federal grant life cycle, including conducting independent evaluations of the grantees’ service models and disseminating the evaluation results.

Overview of a Tiered Evidence Grant Model with Three Tiers

- **Preliminary Evidence Tier**: Test promising practices
- **Moderate Evidence Tier**: Build on practices with moderate evidence
- **Strong Evidence Tier**: Replicate practices with strong evidence

Source: GAO analysis of agency documents | GAO-16-818
Note: Some programs have two tiers—preliminary evidence and strong evidence.

Agency officials identified several potential benefits of using tiered evidence grants, such as providing incentives for grantees to implement service models supported by evidence and conducting evaluations to build the evidence base. Officials from the agencies in GAO’s review and grantees also identified various challenges with tiered evidence grants. In some cases the agencies identified factors to mitigate the challenges. For example, grantees told GAO that they encountered challenges drafting evaluation plans (which describe the methodology and are generally required for the grant applications). As an example of how agencies addressed this challenge, the Department of Labor contracted with a program evaluation firm to provide grantees with technical assistance and increased the time for grantees to draft evaluation plans that accurately reflected their service models.

What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that OMB establish a formal means for federal agencies to collaborate on tiered evidence grants. OMB had no comments on the recommendation.

View GAO-16-818. For more information, contact Michelle Sager at (202) 512-6806 or sagerm@gao.gov.