Design for Success

All too often, government programs fail in predictable ways. A new program's goals may be unclear, the program may duplicate one that already exists, or there may be scant evidence that the proposed approach will accomplish the program's goals. The program might be prone to fraud, or those responsible for implementation may be inadequately prepared. Or there may be no effective way to monitor whether the program is working.

The Center for American Progress has devised tools to help ensure that new programs avoid these common design flaws. These tools are based on the input of more than 200 experts.

The **Design for Success** tools ensure that those designing programs and those who decide which programs should get funding ask six key questions. We propose that these questions should be used for new programs that emerge in the legislative and executive branches. The tools are in our report "The Secret to Programs that Work."

Six key questions to ask of all new programs

- Are the program's **goals** clear and **cost estimates** accurate?
- Is this the **right approach** to address the problem?
- What **evidence** is there that the program is likely to achieve its goals?
- Does the program establish the right **incentives**?
- Is the **implementation** phase likely to be successful?
- How will the program **monitor** success?

How do the tools work?

There are **three** tools:
- A **program checklist** tool (overleaf), so that the person designing the program can ensure they consider the key components of a successful program.
- A **program details** questionnaire that proponents should fill in. It includes 25 detailed questions.
- A **program assessment** questionnaire completed by a neutral party that summarizes and assesses whether the program is likely to succeed.
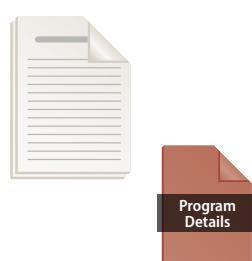

Step 1

Agency staffer or congressman member develops idea using Program Checklist tool

Step 2

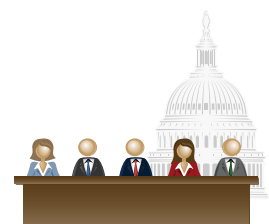Proponent develops program and fills out Program Details tool

Step 3

Neutral party (e.g. interagency panel) reviews proposed program and fills out Program Assessment tool

Step 4

Decision makers (e.g. in OMB or Congress) use the information to guide their scrutiny

Design for Success Program Checklist

A. Are the goals clear and the cost estimates accurate?

1. Clear understanding of the problem in measurable terms ☐
2. Clear goals expressed as outcomes over a defined time scale ☐
3. Accurate cost estimates ☐
4. Sufficient funds to achieve goals ☐

B. Is this the right approach?

5. Fills a clear gap in current government services ☐
6. Cannot achieve goals through expansion or modification of existing programs ☐
7. Little duplication or overlap with current federal programs ☐
8. Reasonable conclusion that this approach is the best option ☐
9. Reasonable total cost for expected outcomes compared to alternatives ☐

C. Why will the program work?

10. Reasonable expectation that key stakeholders will alter their ways of working or behavior ☐
11. Professional, independent research indicates approach will work ☐
12. Program expands on what worked on the smaller scale, or plan to test before rolling out on the large scale ☐

D. Does the program establish the right incentives?

13. Establishes clear incentives that are aligned with program goals ☐
14. Beneficiaries reasonably expected to change behavior ☐
15. Beneficiaries have been consulted and indicate that the program is likely to work ☐
16. Strong understanding of areas most prone to gaming, and risks mitigated in program design ☐

E. How will the program be implemented?

17. Reasonable timeline for program rollout ☐
18. Implementers have bought into the program and are prepared to carry it out ☐
19. Sufficient plan for hiring, training, and IT development ☐
20. Reasonable procurement strategy and sufficient staff to negotiate and manage contracts ☐
21. Design takes into account views from key outside stakeholders ☐
22. Clear strategy for minimizing impact on negatively affected parties ☐
23. Reasonable effort to minimize unintended consequences ☐
24. Strong risk-mitigation strategy in place ☐

F. How will you monitor success and rethink the approach?

25. Key indicators of success identified for each goal ☐
26. Clear plan for collecting timely, accurate data that reflects outcomes ☐
27. Takes advantage of existing data systems where possible ☐
28. Coordinates data collection with other programs where possible ☐
29. Reasonable plan for rethinking approach ☐
30. Low sunk costs ☐
31. Can be quickly phased out or terminated if deemed ineffective or no longer necessary ☐