Budgets will be tight in Washington for the foreseeable future, and the federal government urgently needs a systematic process to evaluate program effectiveness. Otherwise, there is a risk that budget cuts fall on programs that work well while programs that achieve little are left untouched.

The Reviewing What Works tools set out in our report “The Secret to Programs that Work” provide a way for the federal government to evaluate programs across a policy area such as homelessness.

How do the tools work?

There are three tools:

• A policy strategy tool defines common goals across a policy area and lists programs that contribute.

• A program effectiveness questionnaire that program managers should fill out for every program across a policy area. This includes 25 detailed questions.

• A program evaluation questionnaire completed by a neutral party that summarizes and assesses the effectiveness of a program.

Six key questions to ask of all existing programs

• What goals across government is the program contributing to?

• What impact does the program have on achieving those goals?

• Does the program work well with other programs to maximize collective impact and minimize duplication?

• How cost effective is the program compared to others?

• Is the program well run? Have there been delays or cost overruns?

• Does the program learn from experience and improve in response?

(Turn over for a full list of questions)
### Reviewing What Works: Key Questions

**A: What goals across government is the program contributing to?**

1. Clear understanding of the outcome goals that the program is contributing to
2. Goals are a high priority for the government

**B: Is the program working?**

3. Program successfully alters ways of working or behavior of stakeholders or beneficiaries
4. Reliable evidence the program is contributing to observed outcomes
5. Impact validated by rigorous independent evaluation

**C: How does the program work alongside other programs?**

6. Little or no duplication of activities or services with other federal programs
7. Where overlap exists, program leverages and coordinates with similar programs whenever possible

**D: What does benchmarking show about the costs and effectiveness of the program?**

8. Costs are reasonable relative to similar programs with similar beneficiaries
9. Managers have a strong understanding of drivers of cost and effectiveness, and have taken actions to learn from comparisons

**E: Is the program well run?**

10. Implemented in line with the expected timeline
11. All necessary staff, skill base, and IT infrastructures are in place, or still on track to be in place as anticipated by timeline
12. Those in charge of implementing the program are fully committed to and working toward the program’s goals
13. Strong risk management plan that has proven effective at predicting mitigating risks
14. Actual costs less than or consistent with initial cost estimates
15. No issues obligating funds, with reasonably consistent spending throughout the year
16. Procurement costs less than or consistent with expectations
17. Necessary contract staff and review structures in place
18. Low instance of fraud with a strong strategy to mitigate these risks in the future

**F: Has the program sought to learn from experience?**

19. Unintended impacts and ways to cheat the system closely monitored
20. Effective steps have been taken to respond to unintended consequences and cheating
21. System in place for beneficiaries or administrators to submit feedback and suggestions for improvement, and for managers take feedback into account
22. Managers keep abreast of relevant developments at the state level, internationally, or in the private sector, and they improve the program accordingly
23. Accurate and timely data being collected that reflects program performance toward achieving outcomes
24. Coordinates data collection with similar programs where possible
25. Effective process for evaluating program progress, and improvements are made based on the results