America Forward Policy Platform on
Social Innovation and Evidence-Based Policy
Ratified February 2026

Introduction

Every day, social entrepreneurs across the country pursue innovative, evidence-based strategies to empower people to succeed in school, work, and life. These dedicated social entrepreneurs strive to develop, assess, and continually improve their programs by incorporating insights from a wide array of sources – from rigorous research, to community-based expertise, to the insights of program participants themselves. Our country's successful social entrepreneurs offer unique expertise that can help inform and improve policy nationwide. Policymakers should incorporate the perspectives and entrepreneurial strategies of effective social innovators and their high-impact partners and leverage the potential of community-based solutions.

America Forward is a national nonpartisan policy and advocacy organization that unites social entrepreneurs with policymakers to promote a public policy agenda that fosters innovation, rewards results, and catalyzes cross-sector partnerships. America Forward leads the America Forward Coalition, a network of 100+ of the nation's most impactful and innovative non-governmental organizations that develop and advocate for more effective public policies to advance opportunity and move all of America forward. The America Forward Coalition includes leading non-governmental providers and intermediaries at the forefront of innovation and evidence-based practice, ranging from the development and delivery of novel education and workforce strategies, to performance management and program improvement efforts in partnership with state and local governments, to innovative financing strategies that scale effective early learning and public health interventions.

We call on our nation's policymakers to invest in practitioner-driven solutions and support the development of innovative strategies; elevate outcomes-focused, evidence-based decision making; invest in data infrastructure that supports improvement; elevate community input in public decision-making; and eliminate rigid rules and outdated policies that prevent resources from flowing efficiently to nongovernmental programs with proven impact and groundbreaking promise. The America Forward Coalition urges policymakers to support our nation's leading social innovators by advancing reforms in three areas:

1) Invest in Practitioner-Focused Research and Development and Scale What Works
2) Strengthen Capacity for Innovation and Impact
3) Advance a More Responsive and Effective Government

1) Invest in Practitioner-Focused Research and Development and Scale What Works

First, to respond effectively to the changing needs of a changing world, policymakers should deepen public investment in research and development (R&D) of new approaches for social programs. Innovators need flexible, dedicated funding to research, develop, evaluate and refine new approaches. Policymakers should:

- **Invest in evidence funds to support practitioner-led innovation, learning, and scale-up.** Federal evidence funds have supported practitioner-led innovation, learning, and scale-up of high-impact social programs – with more than $10 billion in investments since 2009 that have yielded tremendous returns.[1] Policymakers should increase investment in existing models, like the Perkins Innovation and Modernization program and the Maternal, Infant, and Early Childhood Home Visiting (MIECHV) program, as well as increase investment in new models, like the Workforce Development Innovation Fund, as proposed in the Better Jobs Through Evidence and Innovation Act last Congress. Policymakers should also ensure that these programs are accessible to a range of applicants; include targeted support for early-stage program development and formative research; emphasize cost-effective, scalable strategies; and support long-term growth, sustainability, and ongoing learning – including adapting models to new populations and settings and providing continuing support for the highest-impact programs. Finally, we support investment in the aligned Small Business Innovation Research program that has offered critical, complementary support for innovative solutions across federal agencies.

- **Encourage ongoing evidence-building.** Policymakers should include priorities and incentives for evidence-building across federal funding streams, ranging from early learning to child welfare to workforce development. One promising example is the Re-Employment Services and Eligibility Assessment (RESEA) program, authorized in the Bipartisan Budget Act of 2018, that requires states to use an increasing portion of funds for either evidence-based strategies or approaches under rigorous evaluation. Policymakers should also prioritize strong implementation of the new Uniform Grants Guidance reforms, that clarify grantees' ability to leverage federal funding for learning and evaluation, including data system investments. In addition, agencies should explicitly clarify that research and evaluation are allowable costs under federal grants, and should establish grant timelines with sufficient runway to support intentional, rigorous evidence-building and evaluation.

- **Strengthen support for foundational research.** We also encourage policymakers to expand investments in foundational research that sets the stage for groundbreaking approaches. We support statutory provisions enabling agencies to set aside a percentage of funding to jumpstart research and development that furthers program improvement – from qualitative research to large-scale descriptive analyses to causal studies. Agencies should direct investments in alignment with a learning agenda designed with input from stakeholders, including social innovation organizations and community leaders. And when agencies receive set-aside authority for research, Congress should set minimum bars for spending on evidence-building to encourage them to make use of that authority.

Second, policymakers must increase direct investment in proven strategies while implementing incentives for state and local governments to adopt such approaches. Despite significant advances in the creation, identification, and scale-up of evidence-based strategies over the past twenty-five years, major untapped opportunities remain to leverage proven programs and, in turn, dramatically improve outcomes – from early learning to workforce development. Policymakers should:

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[1] Sackett, Covell, and Lopez (2023), *Unlocking Innovation: Advancing the Continuous Improvement of Evidence Funds*, America Forward, https://www.americaforward.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/America-Forward-Unlocking-Innovation-in-Evidence-Funds-October-2023.pdf.

- **Directly invest in proven approaches**. Across policy domains, policymakers should shift funding streams to provide direct, sustained investment for approaches that are strongly supported by evidence but that receive limited dedicated support, such as sectoral employment programs, comprehensive postsecondary advising, whole-learner strategies, and supportive housing.

- **Sustain and strengthen existing incentives for states, local governments, and educational institutions to direct dollars to proven approaches**. An array of incentives already in law. One promising example is the Re-Employment Services and Eligibility Assessment (RESEA) program's gradually-increasing requirement that states direct funds to evidence-based programs. Policymakers should incorporate such provisions into additional legislation, such as the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) and the Higher Education Act (HEA).

- **Leverage innovative financing to invest in evidence-based programs.** Building on lessons learned from more than 15 years of public and private pay-for-success investments across the nation, policymakers should use innovative financing structures to scale evidence-based strategies. These financing structures enable governments to maximize returns for the public while addressing the "wrong pockets" problem (for example, housing programs that also reduce healthcare costs) that often leads to underinvestment in strategies across policy domains. In particular, Congress should refine and reinvest in the landmark $100 million Social Impact Partnerships to Pay for Results Act (SIPPRA) pay-for-success fund that has invested in a wide array of high-impact, evidence-based projects in communities around the nation since SIPPRA's creation in 2018.

- **Revise how the federal government accounts for the long-term costs and benefits of evidence-based programs**. Today, federal budget scoring models, such as the Congressional Budget Office's (CBO) framework, do not sufficiently account for the benefits of evidence-based approaches and accordingly lead policymakers to underinvest in these models. We support revising the Congressional Budget Office's budget scoring model to incorporate the proven long-term benefits of investments in evidence-based social programs, such as increased tax revenue from job training programs that increase participants' employment and earnings.

2) Strengthen Capacity for Innovation and Impact

Impactful innovation that delivers results in communities requires deep intentional investment in the field – including investment in nongovernmental organizations that are responsible for a disproportionate share of programmatic innovation.

First, federal policymakers should expand and improve support to states, local governments, and their nongovernmental partners that facilitates innovation and stronger outcomes. We call on policymakers to:

- **Invest in outcomes-focused technical assistance, including a federal coordinator.** Federal agencies should partner with social innovation organizations to provide effective technical assistance that enables states, local agencies, and their nongovernmental partners to strengthen their performance systems and to develop, identify, adopt, and scale innovative and effective strategies. This assistance should include robust support for pay-for-success approaches, such as performance-based contracting, that empower governments and their

private partners to align on key outcomes, incentivize serving high-priority vulnerable populations, and break down barriers to leveraging an array of tools to improve outcomes. We encourage the federal government to create a central office that champions and facilitates the use of outcomes-focused practices across policy areas by, for instance, managing a repository of vetted performance-based contracts and offering direct assistance to federal, state, and local agencies.

- **Encourage the use of performance-based contracting authorities.** In addition to more robust support, policymakers should address cumbersome regulatory requirements, such as unnecessary funding caps, and unclear guidance that have too often stifled participation in performance-based strategies, despite strong interest. Policymakers should address these barriers and provide incentives, like bonus funding and enhanced matching provisions for states and local governments, to leverage such approaches.

- **Strengthen evidence-based decision making.** Over the past decade-plus, federal agencies have developed many resources to support the development, identification, and use of evidence-based strategies in the field. We strongly support efforts to implement the Evidence Act of 2018, a major achievement that has strengthened the capacity of federal agencies to measure and improve programs' outcomes while facilitating culture change across government. We urge policymakers to deepen investment in these resources while strengthening accessibility. For example, we encourage agencies to align standards across evidence clearinghouses and to better translate evidence-based materials for policymakers and practitioners by publishing practice guides written in plain language. We also support recent bipartisan efforts to establish a new Commission on Evidence-Based Policymaking that would incorporate evidence-based decision-making in the lawmaking process.

- **Build on lessons learned about cross-program flexibilities and waivers, and prioritize leveraging waivers for improvement purposes**. Congress and federal agencies should build on efforts, such as the Performance Partnerships Pilots, which provided flexibility for states, localities, and social innovation organizations to cut down on red tape and better coordinate across federal funding streams to serve opportunity youth. We similarly encourage federal policymakers to partner with states, localities, and social innovation organizations to leverage an array of already-available waiver and innovation authorities to test transformative new programs and policies.

Second, we urge policymakers to invest in administrative data infrastructure that facilitates transparent reporting of program participation and outcomes, program management and continuous improvement, and rigorous evaluation of innovative approaches. Despite major strides over the past twenty years, too often barriers to the use of administrative data – ranging from lack of human capacity, to technical limitations, to procedural or legal constraints – have increased costs, slowed progress, and stifled reasonable access to data. We recommend that policymakers:

- **Invest in administrative data capacity.** As a starting point, policymakers must enhance support for data capacity at the federal, state, and local levels. This includes increasing investment in programs such as the Statewide Longitudinal Data System (SLDS) program at the U.S. Department of Education and Workforce Data Quality Initiative (WDQI) program at the U.S. Department of Labor, and adopting the federal Advisory Committee on Data for Evidence

Building's proposal to create a new block grant for state, territorial, local, and tribal funding to support cross-program data infrastructure improvements and data modernization. We also support incentives for states and localities to leverage funding streams to improve data capacity, such as the incentives the RESET for America's Future Act would provide in the SNAP Employment & Training program.

- **Break down barriers to the use of data.** Policymakers should clarify that agencies can, and must, leverage privacy-protecting, secure technologies to link data across federal, state, local, and private sources to facilitate access and analysis. For example, Congress should clarify that the Department of Labor can and should leverage National Directory of New Hires workforce data to support implementation of the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA). In addition, we support the development of federal resources to provide clarity and achieve economies of scale, including fully funding the National Secure Data Service pilot, created by the CHIPS and Sciences Act, to support secure data linkages and funding data technical assistance centers, in the model of the Privacy Technical Assistance Center at the U.S. Department of Education.

- **Ensure access to non-governmental participants.** Too often, access to data depends on personal relationships, not accessible and efficient systemic processes. Federal, state, and local agencies should enable nongovernmental intermediaries and providers to use secure, privacy-protecting processes to leverage administrative data for program management, continuous improvement, and research.

Third, policymakers must recognize the importance of the nongovernmental sector in developing, implementing, and scaling innovative, high-impact strategies across policy domains. Persistent barriers often hinder some of the most effective and innovative organizations' ability to access and leverage public funding. Policymakers should:

- **Ensure nonprofit eligibility for federal grants.** Far too often, federal grant opportunities have excluded nongovernmental organizations from participating. This approach poses a serious threat to innovation, as nongovernmental organizations often have greater ability to experiment, and clearer incentives to pursue scale-up of effective strategies. In addition, prohibiting nongovernmental organizations from serving as lead grantees – and requiring them to partner with a state or local government, or educational institution as the lead – stifles the development of many high-impact projects.

- **Strengthen accessibility at the application stage.** We support a new federal interagency effort focused on outcomes, transparency, and fairness in federal contracting and grants, building on the transformative 2024 revisions to the federal Uniform Grants Guidance. Federal agencies should conduct broader outreach to share information on funding opportunities, ensure application materials are easily accessible, and provide an array of resources to demystify requirements and the process. We urge agencies to invest in pre-application support from intermediaries who are well-positioned to identify and support strong applicants. Agencies should also support matchmaking, whether for program delivery, evaluation, or financing, to promote the development of innovative proposals.

- **Ease administrative burden for providers.** Government agencies' disproportionate focus on compliance can hinder program innovation and disincentivize organizations from participating in federal grants. Policymakers should prioritize reforms that ease administrative burden on applicants and participants, such as shifting towards performance-based payment structures over rigid line-item cost monitoring. In addition, for federal programs for which states sub-grant funds, the federal government should set more consistent, streamlined standards across states to support easier expansion for national providers who are forced to navigate disparate, contradictory systems across states (e.g., SNAP Employment and Training, Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act Eligible Training Provider Lists).

- **Deepen technical assistance for grantees.** Agencies should prioritize more effective and responsive support throughout grant processes, including for organizational capacity building, learning, and long-term expansion, as well as communities of practice.

- **Invest in nongovernmental capacity.** Policymakers should directly invest in the nongovernmental sector to support transformative innovation and impact. This includes increasing the number of national service participants, including through AmeriCorps, to respond to communities' needs (such as through the Youth Mental Health Corps that provides mental health supports to young people while providing Corps members with on ramps to behavioral health fields); investing in the Federal Work-Study community service set-aside; and breaking down barriers for the nonprofit sector. In addition, we support efforts to build a more inclusive lending and financing system to foster the development and sustainability of social innovation organizations, particularly those operated in underserved communities and without established access to credit, through programs such as the Community Development Financial Institutions (CDFI) Fund and Economic Development Administration assistance.

3) Advance a More Responsive and Effective Government

We call on policymakers to adopt policies that create more responsive and effective governmental systems across policy domains. Our cross-cutting recommendations draw on the deep body of evidence developed by America Forward Coalition members and their partners over the past 15+ years.

First, we call for policymakers to protect and advance government capacity, including expanding access to entering public service. Policymakers should:

- **Build government capacity and pursue reform with intention.** We urge policymakers to pursue an intentional, evidence-based process to any federal agency reform initiatives, including at the U.S. Department of Education and the Institute of Education Sciences. Abrupt and unpredictable cuts to staffing and projects threaten serious negative impacts on our constituents, communities, and partners.

- **Advance skills-based hiring policies.** We support efforts to encourage skills-based hiring across government agencies, among government contractors, and in the private sector, recognizing that bachelor's degree requirements can serve as an unnecessary barrier to opportunity. We applaud recent state and federal actions to advance skills-based hiring and encourage expansion of these policies alongside strong implementation efforts to ensure such policy changes ultimately shift hiring practices.

- **Adopt an effective and responsive approach to government personnel.** To strengthen public capacity and responsiveness, we urge all levels of government to address hiring processes that are too often inaccessible, ineffective, and slow. We also encourage agencies to prioritize engaging leaders with personal experience and direct expertise with relevant issues, both as full-time employees and for flexible opportunities such as fellows, advisors, and reviewers.

- **Support access to national service.** Policymakers should increase national service living allowances to ensure all Americans can serve in AmeriCorps regardless of their financial circumstances. In addition, we call on policymakers to increase funding for the AmeriCorps program to expand opportunities and allow more national service organizations to innovate and utilize the power of community members to tackle our nation's most pressing challenges.

Second, policymakers should redesign policymaking processes to incorporate the voices of social entrepreneurs and eliminate barriers to incorporating community input. Key steps include:

- **Strengthen outreach and responsiveness.** For too long, policy processes have been inaccessible to the people who will be most affected by changes to social programs and those who serve them. Policymakers should engage in clearer and more specific outreach and provide more accessible venues for input, as well as direct agency engagement of community leaders, program participants, and social entrepreneurs, whether through advisory groups, listening sessions, or temporary staffing details.

- **Reform the Paperwork Reduction Act.** We urge policymakers to reform the Paperwork Reduction Act, which poses a major burden to community engagement and efficient agency operations. For example, policymakers should streamline or eliminate the requirement that the Office of Information and Regulatory Affairs review every information collection that involves the same question posed to ten or more people.

Conclusion

Across the federal policy landscape, there are countless opportunities to advance more innovative, effective, and equitable solutions to the most pressing challenges facing our communities. To achieve the greatest impact, federal policymakers can support policy frameworks that foster innovation, scale what works, focus on outcomes, and increase organizational capacity. We look forward to working alongside our Coalition members, partners, and policymakers to make this vision a reality.

About America Forward

America Forward unites social entrepreneurs with policymakers to promote a public policy agenda that fosters innovation, rewards results, and catalyzes cross-sector partnerships. America Forward leads the America Forward Coalition, a network of 100+ of the nation's most impactful and innovative non-governmental organizations that develop and advocate for more effective public policies to advance opportunity and move all of America forward.

America Forward Coalition members achieve high impact, measurable outcomes in more than 15,000 communities nationwide, touching the lives of over 9 million Americans each year, and driving progress

in early child care and learning, K-12 and post-secondary education, youth mental health and wellbeing, economic mobility and workforce development, evidence-based policy, social innovation, national service, and civic participation. Since 2007, America Forward's community of entrepreneurs has played a leading role in driving the national dialogue on social innovation policy and impact.