The Pew Charitable Trusts and the Chicago-based John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation teamed up in 2010 in the “Results First Initiative” to help states implement and make use of cost-benefit analyses. The goal was (and is) to help them identify policies and programs which evidence shows are working.

By 2014, the initiative identified five key components of evidence-based policymaking: program assessment, budget development, implementation oversight, targeted evaluation and, especially, outcome monitoring.

Earlier this year, Pew singled out Illinois and Minnesota for their use of outcome monitoring and evidence-based decision-making during their respective budget cycles.

Illinois was noted for its “Budgeting for Results” performance-based system, established by SB 3660 of the 2010 legislative session (signed into law by then-Gov. Pat Quinn on July 1 of that year). In its own language, the Budgeting for Results law requires “a method of budgeting where each priority must be justified each year according to merit rather than according to the amount appropriated for the preceding year.”

This process has been incrementally implemented in seven “result areas”: education, economic development, environment and culture, government services, health care, human services and public safety.

The BFR Commission, established by HB 5424 of the same session (signed by Gov. Quinn in February 2011), uses the Pew-MacArthur Results First cost-benefit analysis as one of three measurements of program effectiveness, along with the Illinois Performance Reporting System — which tracks performance measures from 400 different state programs — and the State Program Assessment Rating Tool.

Per its annual report for FY 2018, the commission assessed Illinois’ adult criminal justice programs — a process deemed successful enough to warrant its expansion into assessments of juvenile justice and substance abuse programs.

Minnesota was cited for the “Minnesota Dashboard” — a website maintained by the Management and Budget agency that tracks 40 key indicators of how well the state’s government, economy, education and public health systems are performing.

Policies and programs resulting from the dashboard include the Results for Children dashboard, which tracks outcomes for key populations from early childhood through postsecondary education, and the Homework Starts with Home initiative to end student homelessness.

Outcome monitoring also helped legislators allocate $12 million in additional funding in the state’s current biennial budget for home-visiting services for pregnant and parenting teens, to help reduce the number of babies with low birthweight and lower rates of maternal depression while increasing the number of mothers who breastfeed for at least eight weeks.

Across the Midwest, many state agencies maintain their own performance data dashboards. Some states provide a portal with links to agencies’ dashboards rather than making a user look agency-by-agency. Examples include Data Iowa, KanTrack (Kansas), OpenMichigan and Nebraska’s Open Data page.

Data dashboards are high-profile and a good way for the public to see what’s going on, but they’re “really a tool in the greater-outcomes monitoring system,” says Sara Dube, director of the Pew-MacArthur Results First Initiative.

For example, Wisconsin Gov. Scott Walker, in a March 2016 executive order, directed agencies under his control to...
develop dashboards that report on each agency’s performance on core agency functions and put them online for the public to see.

Dube says Wisconsin is also a Midwestern leader in outcome monitoring, not only because all agencies report their data quarterly, but because the state goes a step further: Agency heads meet on a semi-annual basis to discuss progress, and agency staffers who review the data also attend those meetings, which means they can elucidate or explain discrepancies in the data, she adds.

“There’s an incredible appetite for all things evidence-based. I think outcome monitoring is a good example of that,” Dube says.

Capital Closeup is an ongoing series of articles focusing on institutional issues in state governments and legislatures. Information on the history of Kansas’ law on citizen-initiated grand juries came from the June decision of the state Court of Appeals.

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