

THE CASE FOR OUTCOMES FOCUSED TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE (OFTA):

A CENTRAL COMPONENT OF THE OUTCOME-FOCUSED GOVERNMENT (OFG) PARADIGM

500% increase in workforce enrollment and program completion for previously underserved youth in a workforce development program in Virginia

33% reduction in psychiatric emergency room visits by chronically homeless in California

50% fewer days in jail and 61% fewer arrests for high-risk, high-need criminal offenders in Utah

22% improvement in speedy access to mental health services for underserved clients in Oregon

When state and local government agencies have the necessary support to change the way they design, deliver and assess human services, people served by public systems measurably improve their lives.

Technical Assistance (TA) contracts and grants are widely used by federal human service agencies (HHS, USDA, HUD, DOL, DOJ, CNCS) to assist states, counties, tribal nations, nonprofits and other state and local entities to design, implement and evaluate federally funded human service programs. Consequently, TA has the potential to be a powerful tool for helping state and local entities achieve improved and more equitable outcomes for the people they serve. President Biden's Jan 20, 2021 executive order on racial equity and underserved communities imparts new urgency to the need for government to focus on outcomes, since it is **only by assessing and addressing disparate outcomes that the federal government can achieve success in eradicating systemic racism in public systems.**

To the extent that agencies, programs and grantees are committed to establishing a government structure that directly supports improved and more equitable outcomes over the long term, they need to **re-orient governance policies, practices and behaviors in direct support of those outcomes.** The [Outcomes Focused Government \(OFG\) paradigm](#) is an organizational change model that is proven to yield impact on peoples' lives. The OFG paradigm encompasses eight components with Outcomes Focused Technical Assistance (OFTA) representing a ninth and central element since it provides a facilitated structure in which to work through change in the other components.

Current use of TA at the federal level

Most federal spending on public services (close to \$1 trillion/year) is passed through to states through entitlement, block grant and discretionary grant programs. For entitlement and block grants, states are responsible for developing plans for how they expect to spend funds and are then responsible for executing these plans and providing reports on programmatic and financial progress at regular intervals. Discretionary grant funds are awarded based on competitive applications from eligible entities which

include a variety of federal, state, tribal, non-profit and other entities that vary based on a particular grant. TA is typically provided by federal agencies to support all of these types of funding programs that are administered at the state and local level. But current TA efforts often fail to bring about lasting change in the knowledge, attitudes and practices surrounding human service delivery. In particular current TA faces the following limitations:

- **Compliance Focus:** Much of the TA currently provided focuses on educating and supporting recipients to understand and meet statutory and regulatory requirements rather than achieve program outcomes. Other TA simply provides education about program topics of emerging interest. While this assistance is valuable and necessary, the federal government needs to shift emphasis so that the majority of TA dollars are used to help state and local governments assess and re-orient their own data, policy, funding, service delivery, external relationships and internal culture levers towards improved and more equitable outcomes.
- **Fragmented:** Increasingly, federal agencies have been providing TA that addresses one of the components of the OFG paradigm such as implementing evidence-based service models, improving data systems or designing and implementing evaluations and learning agendas. Absent in these efforts is comprehensive TA that allows states and local agencies to address ALL of the OFG paradigm components in support of a specific program or population goal.
- **Top-down:** Traditional TA involves teams of senior (mostly white) subject matter experts developing tools, templates and other resources and then disseminating these to state and local levels through training, resource centers and webinars. Rarely does TA include co-creation and supported implementation with diverse stakeholders which is necessary to ensure buy-in, full understanding, and lasting system change.
- **Lack of Accountability:** TA providers have not been held accountable and evaluated on their ability to foster knowledge and behavior change among recipients in service of improved and more equitable outcomes.

OFTA and the OFG Paradigm

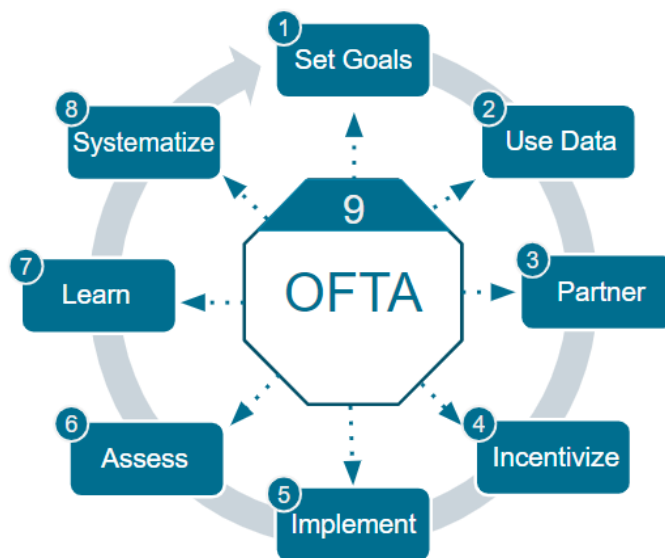
Outcomes Focused Technical Assistance¹ OFTA is a capacity building approach with the explicit purpose of facilitating and building capacity of recipient organizations to adopt the **OFG Paradigm**.

The OFG paradigm starts by establishing a clear goal for a given population. The goal can be as small as improving kindergarten readiness for pre-k children in a given county and as big as improving economic mobility for all racial minority youth in an entire state. OFTA is the ninth and central element as it makes it possible to systemically and sustainably work through and facilitate change management with the other components. Addressing one component without the others runs a high risk of perpetuating silos or making a narrow adjustment to a single process or program that doesn't last over time.

¹ The OFTA concept was first introduced in 2015 when the White House Office of Social Innovation convened federal, philanthropic, private and non-profit providers and funders to discuss how TA could be deployed to help government and nonprofit service providers focus on and achieve better outcomes.

The components of the OFG Paradigm include:

1. **SET GOALS:** Build consensus among key stakeholders on the most important **outcomes** to be improved for a given population with explicitly focus on equity for underserved communities.
2. **USE DATA:** Analyze existing quantitative data from administrative sources and qualitative data from stakeholders in order to understand current outcomes, uncover inequities, and establish key outcome metrics
3. **PARTNER:** Develop and implement strategies to **overcome barriers** caused by **program silos** through partnerships and collaboration around funding, enrollment, service delivery and data
4. **INCENTIVIZE:** Create meaningful **incentives** for the achievement of both near- and longer-term outcome goals, including the use of **outcomes-based funding**
5. **IMPLEMENT:** Identify and implement a set of **evidence-informed, cross-cutting practices** that have the greatest potential to drive better outcomes and address inequities
6. **ASSESS:** Develop and implement an **assessment strategy** to determine the impact of system change against the stated goals and metrics of success
7. **LEARN:** Create a robust **continuous improvement** process to regularly review data and adapt as needed to keep improving results
8. **SYSTEMATIZE:** Devise strategies to **sustain and scale** revised management policies, practices and behaviors once feasibility and impact is established
9. **OFTA:** Utilize **outcomes focused technical assistance** at adequate dose and frequency to support implementation and change management of all of the above components



OFTA requires an equity lens

To achieve the Biden Administration’s goal of “advancing racial equity and support for underserved communities”, OFTA should help TA recipients at each component of the OFG paradigm uncover and dismantle racist policies, practices and behaviors. In particular, OFTA should:

- **Advocate for policies and practices** that prioritize underserved individuals and groups
- **Center the voices and perspectives** of underserved and marginalized individuals in decision making in ways that build accountable relationships
- **Build systems** to continuously understand and address implications of decisions (including unintended consequences) on underserved and marginalized individuals and groups
- **Use an anti-racist engagement approach** with clients, partners and communities with a particular focus on empathy, inclusivity, and equity.

Recommendations to increase the use of OFTA

There are multiple ways that the federal government can increase the use of OFTA at the agency implementation, executive regulatory, and legislative levels. Below are six concrete steps that the Biden administration can take.

1. Create an OFTA learning platform

To establish federal parameters for OFTA and enable OFTA administrators, providers and recipients to share and develop knowledge about effective OFTA practices, OMB or the DPC should establish a learning platform which should include (at minimum) the following components:

- **Listening forums:** These are forums where federal OFTA administrators routinely hear from state and local leaders to understand barriers that may be preventing programs or services from achieving outcomes and where OFTA may help address these barriers.
- **Community of practice:** This is a community of practice between federal OFTA administrators and providers to discuss challenges and successes in developing, managing, implementing and evaluating OFTA.

2. Pilot and evaluate OFTA initiatives

DPC and OMB should work with human service agencies to identify programs that are most suitable for OFTA. Within individual agencies, suitable programs are those where the outcomes are within the single agency's control such as Dept. of Ed programs that strengthen teachers' capacity and DOJ programs that help law enforcement officials address racial bias. Because so many outcomes (such as economic mobility, health, and education) cut across programs and agencies, it is also important to pilot cross-cutting OFTA initiatives. Efforts underway within HHS (the Economic Mobility Council and Remaking the Safety Net initiative) as well as DOL, Dept of Ed, and USDA (workforce integration) are good starting points for these cross-cutting initiatives.

Cross-cutting OFTA pilots can be national in scope, or regionally focused. For these pilots, DPC and OMB should work with agencies and OFTA providers to make sure they can help state and local governments take full advantage of existing flexibilities that they may not be aware of, and to dispel myths about what activities and approaches are allowed and not allowed. For example, many state and local officials -- fearing audit findings and federal clawbacks -- have failed to take advantage of flexibilities that allow programmatic funds to be braided and used to support improved service coordination, data infrastructure, analytics and evaluation, staff training, and outcomes funding.

Pilot OFTA projects will provide a sound basis for demonstrating best practices in helping state and local governments achieve better outcomes. To maximize learning, each OFTA pilot should also be evaluated based on state and local grantee customer experience, evidence of fidelity to the OFG paradigm and, ultimately, improvements in outcomes.

3. Build federal capacity to manage and provide OFTA

Because federal public service agencies provide TA in part through its own staff and in part through contracts and grants with TA firms and organizations, an increase in the use of OFTA involves training public agency staff in OFTA while including it as a required competency in TA procurements and grants. To train staff as OFTA providers and/or managers, OPM and the Federal Executive Institute should develop a suite of courses and professional development opportunities for federal TA providers and managers to learn about the OFG Paradigm and what it means to take an equity lens in TA. These courses should include techniques for successfully engaging, managing and evaluating OFTA third-party contractors and grantees. They should also practice adult learning theory and be case-based so that federal public service agencies can easily apply the learnings to their every-day work.

4. Develop formal guidance on OFTA

Based on the insights gained from the learning platform and pilot activities in 1 and 2 above, OMB should issue guidance to federal agencies to expand the use of OFTA. This guidance should include:

1. **Definition and measurement:** Defining OFTA and establishing a metrics and measurement framework that clarifies the difference between OFTA and other TA.
2. **Strategic Planning:** Requiring agencies in their strategic plans to detail how they plan to provide OFTA to state and local agencies for each public service program, as well as how they will collaborate with other agencies to address common barriers and achieve joint outcomes.
3. **Financial targets:** Recommending an appropriate level of funding to be put towards OFTA, ideally as a percent of a program's total value.
4. **Evaluation:** Setting up a common framework for evaluating OFTA based on the extent to which state and local TA recipients have been able to implement the OFG Paradigm.
5. **Training:** Requiring a commitment and schedule by which agency staff will complete relevant training courses at the FEI
6. **Authority:** Revising Title 2 of the Code of Federal Regulations to provide explicit authority and encouragement to state and local public service agencies to use direct or indirect program funds to engage an OFTA provider
7. **Reporting:** Requiring that grantees report on the impact of OFTA in relation to their programs' ability to achieve improved and more equitable outcomes.

5. Embed OFTA into authorizing legislation

The DPC should work with congress to develop standard legislative language around OFTA that can be included in appropriations and public system re-authorization bills. Similar to set-asides for research, evaluation and administration, a small percentage should be set aside on any human service program or appropriations for OFTA. Only by codifying OFTA into statute, can the Biden administration ensure that it becomes a priority component of every public service program.