

Testimony of Ron Haskins
Co-Chair, Commission on Evidence-Based Policymaking
House Committee on Oversight and Government Reform
Hearing of September 26, 2017

Committee Chairman Gowdy, Ranking Member Cummings, and Members of the Committee: My name is Ron Haskins; I'm pleased to be here today in my role as the Co-chair of the Commission on Evidence-Based Policymaking. I am also a Senior Fellow and hold the Cabot Family Chair in Economic Studies at the Brookings Institution, where I also co-direct the Center on Children and Families.

For most of my professional career I have focused on the importance of generating evidence to support policymaking. So when Speaker Ryan appointed me to serve as Co-Chair of the Commission on Evidence-Based Policymaking, I seized the opportunity.

The bipartisan Commission has produced a final report that documents a set of recommendations that were endorsed by all 15 members of the Commission. There are many issues in our country today that generate conflicting views – so we are really pleased that the need for more and better evidence, and our strategy for getting there in a privacy protective way, was unanimously approved by the full Commission.

I request that the final report of the Commission on Evidence-based Policymaking be entered into the record.

The Commission was established by the bipartisan Evidence-Based Policymaking Commission Act of 2016, which was jointly sponsored by Speaker Ryan and Senator Patty Murray, and signed into law in March 2016. The legislation directed the appointment of 15 Commissioners with a broad range of expertise, including academic researchers, data experts, seasoned administrators, and experts in computer science, data privacy, and privacy law. The Commission was provided just over one year to study and develop a strategy for strengthening government's evidence-building and policymaking efforts.

Decision makers rely on having reliable and timely information to guide their examination of how current programs and policies are working and how they can be improved. In establishing the Commission, Congress rightly acknowledges that today, too little evidence is produced to meet this need.

Most of the nation's social programs produce modest or no impacts on the problems they were meant to address. Wisely, in recent years Congress has been asking for and paying for careful evaluation of some programs, but we still don't know enough about the effectiveness of many of the nation's programs. To help address this gap, the Commission was charged with developing a

strategy for increasing the availability and use of data to build evidence about government programs, while also protecting privacy and confidentiality. We took both charges seriously.

We wanted to make sure that our recommendations were rooted in—well—evidence—and so we completed an exhaustive fact-finding effort before launching into serious discussion of how to improve evidence building. This fact-finding phase extended for eight months and included seven public meetings, three public hearings with the public presenting information to the Commission, a Request for Comments through the Federal Register, and a survey of Federal offices that generate or use evidence. In all, we received input from more than 500 individuals or organizations.

The feedback we received during our fact-finding process, in combination with the expertise of the Commissioners, enabled us to better understand the barriers to the effective use of government data to generate evidence.

Our report includes 22 recommendations designed to address these barriers. The recommendations fall into three broad categories:

1. Improving data access for evidence-building projects,
2. Modernizing and strengthening the privacy protections for data used in evidence-building, and
3. Strengthening the Federal government's capacity for evidence-building.

I am delighted to be joined on the panel today by my fellow Commissioners who will provide a brief overview of the recommendations that we developed under each of these three categories. First, Katharine Abraham, the Chair of the Commission, will highlight some of our recommendations that relate to streamlining and improving data access for evidence-building. Second, Latanya Sweeney will describe the kinds of increased privacy protections and transparency that the implementation of our recommendations would yield. And third, Robert Shea will discuss the set of recommendations related to strengthening the Federal government's capacity for evidence-building.

Their testimony will show that members of the Commission share a vision in which rigorous evidence is created efficiently, as a routine part of government operations, and used to construct effective public policy.

The Commission was charged by our statute to evaluate “if and how to create a clearinghouse for program and survey data” to support Federal program evaluation and policy as a possible solution for increasing access to data. We considered the establishment of a “data clearinghouse” in the sense of a data warehouse where large amounts of linked data are stored, but we rejected the idea of a clearinghouse, which could raise substantial risks for privacy. Instead, we are recommending the creation of a service to facilitate access to data and linking of data needed for statistical projects relevant to informing Federal programs and policies. This service -- which we have named the

National Secure Data Service -- would build on and reorganize existing resources within government to facilitate secure access by those inside and outside of government to government data, and especially to data sets created by linking information from multiple agencies.

The Commission views the proposed National Secure Data Service as a vital component in support of the Commission's recommendations for improved data access, strong privacy protections, and increased transparency.

Our full report lays out the Commission's vision for the future and the steps we believe are needed to ensure that we maximize every opportunity to produce better evidence in support of government policies and programs.

We hope our recommendations will be implemented as quickly as possible, and we look forward to partnering with the Congress and the Administration to advance the recommendations of the Commission and to achieve a future built on evidence-based policymaking.