STATE AND LOCAL INNOVATION COMPETITION

REQUEST FOR LETTERS OF INTEREST

The J-PAL State and Local Innovation Initiative is led by J-PAL North America, a research center at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT). The J-PAL State and Local Innovation Initiative (SLII) supports US state and local leaders in using randomized evaluations to generate new and widely applicable lessons about which programs work, which work best, and why. J-PAL North America is now calling for proposals from state and local governments to design a randomized evaluation. For this round of funding, proposals are due **Friday, April 30, 2021, 5 p.m. ET**.

For this Innovation Competition, J-PAL NA welcomes proposals in any area that relate to J-PAL's mission of reducing poverty by ensuring that policy is based on scientific evidence. This could include proposals across a wide range of sectors, including but not limited to racial equity, children and families, crime, education, employment, energy and environment, health, household finance, housing and homelessness, and governance.

Through this Innovation Competition, eligible applicants can apply for:

1. Technical support from J-PAL North America's staff of policy and research experts;
2. Flexible pilot funding of up to $50,000; and
3. Connections with J-PAL's network of leading academic researchers to explore a randomized evaluation.

J-PAL is anchored by a network of 227 affiliated professors at universities around the world who use randomized evaluations to design, test, and improve programs and policies aimed at alleviating poverty. Applicants who successfully partner with a researcher from J-PAL's network to design a high-quality randomized evaluation can jointly apply for pilot funding (up to $50,000) or full evaluation funding through the J-PAL North America State and Local Innovation Initiative Request for Proposals, typically in the range of $150,000-$250,000 to carry out the evaluation.

Selected finalists will receive scholarships to attend J-PAL's Executive Education course in the month of June, Evaluating Social Programs, and support from J-PAL North America staff in refining their ideas for evaluation and developing a full proposal and budget for funding.[1]

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[1] Due to the continued uncertainty and disruption caused by Covid-19, the course will be virtual.

The State and Local Innovation Initiative welcomes applications from state and local government agencies based in the United States who are interested in evaluating a program or policy through random assignment. For example, slots for a program with a waitlist might be allocated by a lottery; eligible beneficiaries of an undersubscribed program may be randomly encouraged to sign up; multiple versions of a program may be randomly assigned to individuals to test them against one another; and pilot programs or programs being expanded to new locations could provide opportunities to randomly select who receives the program first.

For examples of relevant randomized evaluations, please see a list of current government partnerships ([here](#)) and randomized evaluations funded by the State and Local initiative ([here](#)).

APPLICATION INSTRUCTIONS

Applicants should submit a 3-5 page letter of interest describing (1) the policy question that motivates your application or the innovative program that you hope to test through a randomized evaluation (2) how rigorous evidence would inform how your organization or agency makes decisions, and (3) how a partnership with J-PAL North America would advance their efforts to use evidence to inform decision-making.

Letters of interest should not be more than five pages (not including any letters of support) and include the following information:

1. _The applicant._ Please briefly describe your organization or agency and your major activities, including the key programs that you oversee or administer.

   The question. Please briefly describe one or more policy challenges or questions that motivate your application. Please provide some evidence of the challenge, including any relevant statistics.

2. _The intervention_. A brief description of the proposed policy or program you would like to examine. Please include the current status of the policy or program (e.g. undergoing development or ready to implement) in your description, as well as any preliminary evidence that suggests the program works or will work. Please also describe the primary outcome(s) you are interested in measuring.

3. _Opportunity for randomized evaluation_. Please provide the following information in order to help J-PAL North America assess which programs or policies are most suitable for a randomized evaluation:
   a. An estimate of how many people or other units are currently reached by the program or policy and over what timeframe (e.g. 400 students tutored each semester). If different, please also provide an estimate of how many people or

other units you estimate could potentially be reached, if resources were not a constraint.

    b. The primary outcomes you expect to change as a result of the program or policy and any existing sources of data that could be used for measuring outcomes (e.g. hospital admissions, student test scores, arrest records).

    c. An explanation of how individuals are selected to receive the program or policy, and any initial thoughts on how a fair lottery or other form of random assignment could be used to determine who gets access to the program or policy.

    d. Any practical or ethical concerns about carrying out a randomized evaluation and prior experience with randomized evaluations, if any.

4. *Access to data*. A description of existing data collection efforts related to the program, including data collected by the applicant and others on outcomes the program is thought to affect, and whether any of these data would also be available for individuals assigned **not** to receive the program. A successful applicant will have a way to access data to measure the outcomes of interest.

5. *Commitment to using evidence to inform decision-making*. Please describe your organization or agency's commitment to pursuing new opportunities for rigorous evaluation and using evidence to inform decision-making and how a partnership with J-PAL North America and academic researchers would advance these efforts.

    a. Please describe who in your organization or agency would play the lead role in developing a partnership with J-PAL North America and what other staff would be available to support the partnership.

    b. Please describe any experience with research and evaluation to date, including any partnerships with external researchers.

    c. Please provide any additional information on the potential scope of your organization or agency's partnership with J-PAL North America and how this partnership would support your organization or agency's priorities.

6. *Letters of support from outside stakeholders*: A description of whether the applicant has discussed the evaluation idea with partners who would need to be on board in order for the evaluation to happen (e.g. a school district leader). A letter of support from any external partner(s) necessary to conduct the evaluation is preferred. For representatives of government agencies, you are also encouraged to provide a letter of support for your application from executive leadership.

7. *Contact information*. The names and titles of the main contact(s) for this application. Letters must be submitted by an authorized representative of the agency or the organization. Applicants who have reached the finalist stage will be asked t) to submit a proposed budget.

J-PAL North America staff, who are not members of the initiative's Review Board, are available to provide support to help prospective applicants prepare stronger applications. Prospective applicants are encouraged to attend or view a recording of our informational webinar, which goes through the application process in detail. Please direct any remaining questions to Rohit Naimphally, at rnaimpally@povertyactionlab.org, or sign up for a 15-minute discussion here

NEXT STEPS

Please submit the completed cover sheet, letter of interest, and letters of support to slii@povertyactionlab.org. Letters must be submitted by an authorized representative of a U.S. state or local government (including states, counties, cities, and other municipalities).

TIMELINE

February 1, 2021	Request for letters of interest announced
February, 23, 2021, 11 a.m. ET	Webinar for prospective applicants (registration and recording available here)
April 30, 2021, 5 p.m. ET	Deadline to submit letters of interest
Week of May 17, 2021	Finalists selected and invited to submit full proposals for funding
October, 2021, date TBD	Deadline for full proposals
Week of November 8, 2021	Selected partners announced
November 2021 - November 2022	Selected partners work with J-PAL North America staff to develop one or more randomized evaluations, find an academic partner, and may apply for full funding to carry out the evaluation.

J-PAL North America may conduct phone interviews with select applications in order to clarify our understanding of your proposal.

WHAT IS J-PAL NORTH AMERICA LOOKING FOR?

J-PAL North America will consider the following general criteria in reviewing letters of interest:

1. **Clear description of an important policy question or challenge**

Does the proposal address questions crucial for state and local governments in understanding pressing social policy issues in the United States? Does the proposal align with J-PAL North America's objective of supporting studies of interventions that address issues with implications for low-income populations or populations living in poverty/populations that have risk factors associated with falling into poverty/ populations at risk of living in or falling into poverty due to economic marginalization produced through structural racism in North America, such as Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC)?

2. **Promising approach to addressing the question or challenge**

What is the current status of the policy or program (e.g. undergoing development or ready to implement)? Which entities fund, oversee, and/or administer the program, and which stakeholders would need to demonstrate buy-in for an evaluation?

3**. Feasible opportunity for a randomized evaluation**

Are there any practical or political concerns about implementing a randomized evaluation? Are the government's executive leadership and staff supportive of conducting an evaluation? What is the number of people who would be eligible for the program and the number of available spots, and over what timeframe?

4. **Commitment to using evidence to inform decision-making**

Is there demonstrated commitment from senior leaders within the government to use the evidence to inform decision-making?

5. **Potential contribution to the evidence base**
Would a randomized evaluation of an intervention addressing this policy issue make a significant contribution toward advancing the state of knowledge? How do the proposed intervention compare to approaches that have previously been studied?