

Behavioral Health: Activities of the National Mental Health and Substance Use Policy Laboratory

GAO-24-106760
Q&A Report to Committees

May 2024

Why This Matters

Legislation enacted since 2016 to address the nation's pressing substance misuse and mental health issues has led to an expansion of the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration's (SAMHSA) activities. SAMHSA, an agency within the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), leads federal efforts to advance the behavioral health of the nation. SAMHSA's outlays increased from about \$3.5 billion in 2016 to an estimated \$8.3 billion in 2023, according to federal budget documents.

SAMHSA has several offices that support and coordinate the work of the agency, including the National Mental Health and Substance Use Policy Laboratory (Policy Lab), which was launched in 2018. According to SAMHSA officials, the Policy Lab supports and coordinates the work of SAMHSA's four centers and its other offices, which carry out most of its programs and activities.

The Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2023, includes a provision for GAO to review the Policy Lab's activities and the extent to which it is meeting its statutory responsibilities as set forth in Section 501A of the Public Health Service Act.¹ This report provides information on the Policy Lab's work, including its role in SAMHSA, and examines its key activities and progress toward meeting its goals.

Key Takeaways

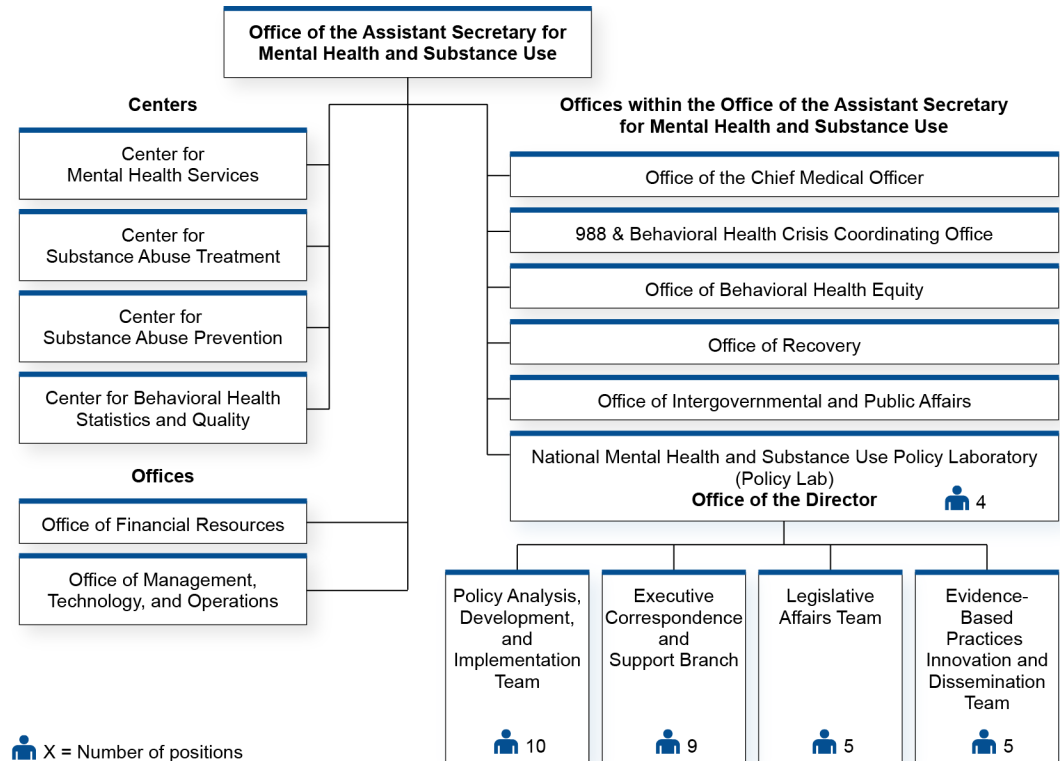
- The Policy Lab supports SAMHSA's efforts to implement policy changes, coordinate its programs, and disseminate information regarding evidence-based practices.
- We found that the Policy Lab performs activities that generally align with its statutory responsibilities. For example, according to agency officials, the Policy Lab facilitates SAMHSA's implementation of policy changes from multiple sources such as the White House, Congress, and HHS, including SAMHSA leadership. The Policy Lab also coordinates cross-SAMHSA and inter-agency policy efforts, and promotes coordination and collaboration of SAMHSA programs.
- The Policy Lab collaborates with entities within and outside of SAMHSA on various activities, including efforts to develop evidence-based practice written products and implementing laws.
- The Policy Lab assesses progress toward meeting its goals through its performance management activities.

What is the Policy Lab and how does it fit into SAMHSA’s organizational structure?

The Policy Lab is a support office within SAMHSA that focuses on policy, coordination, and evidence-based practices. The Policy Lab is part of the Office of the Assistant Secretary for Mental Health and Substance Use, and the Policy Lab’s director reports to the Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary.

- Broadly, SAMHSA is organized into four centers and eight offices, including the Policy Lab, all of which report to the Office of the Assistant Secretary for Mental Health and Substance Use. The Policy Lab is organized into five components: an Office of the Director that oversees four teams, each of which has distinct responsibilities and staff.² (See fig. 1.)

Figure 1: Organization of the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration and the National Mental Health and Substance Use Policy Laboratory, as of February 2024



X = Number of positions

Source: GAO analysis of Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration interviews and documents; GAO (icons). | GAO-24-106760

- According to SAMHSA officials, the Policy Lab generally supports and coordinates the work of SAMHSA’s four centers and its other offices, such as the 988 & Behavioral Health Crisis Coordinating Office.³
- The Policy Lab has varied responsibilities. The statute establishing the Policy Lab required it to continue to carry out the responsibilities of the former Office of Policy, Planning, and Innovation—including facilitating policy change and coordinating policies and programs.⁴
- The statute also gave the Policy Lab additional responsibilities related to promoting evidence-based practices. SAMHSA defines these practices as “interventions that are guided by the best research evidence with practice-based expertise, cultural competence, and the values of the people receiving the services, that promotes individual-level or population-level outcomes.”⁵ Examples of evidence-based practices include approved medications to treat opioid use disorders and strong follow-up plans following inpatient psychiatric hospitalization to prevent suicide.⁶

How does the Policy Lab work with entities within SAMHSA?

The Policy Lab's four teams routinely work with entities within SAMHSA to facilitate collaboration on cross-agency efforts, such as responding to congressional requests, facilitating the development of written products, and coordinating the development of SAMHSA's strategic plan. Within SAMHSA, the Policy Lab's teams most frequently collaborated with SAMHSA's four centers. For example:

- **The Legislative Affairs Team** works with the centers to respond to congressional requests, including requests for technical assistance. For example, one center official said the team was helpful in interpreting and communicating legislative intent. Recognizing the benefits of close collaboration, officials from most centers have hired staff to serve as liaisons between their center and the Legislative Affairs Team. Officials from one center said this led to more frequent interactions and facilitated greater involvement of the centers' subject matter experts.
- **Evidence-Based Practices Innovation and Dissemination Team** officials told us they work with the centers on topics for future evidence-based practice written products.⁷ For example, the team identifies subject matter experts from the centers to serve on technical expert panels for new products. One center official described the Policy Lab as "the incubator and coordinator of evidence-based practice" dissemination at SAMHSA.
- **The Policy Analysis, Development, and Implementation Team** worked closely with most of the centers to facilitate the development of SAMHSA's 2023-2026 Strategic Plan, according to SAMHSA officials.⁸ Additionally, team members serve as policy subject matter experts, and support and coordinate the development, analysis, and implementation of SAMHSA policies and programs.
- **Executive Correspondence and Support Branch** officials told us they work with the centers to provide comments on various SAMHSA and HHS documents, such as regulations, reports to Congress, and agency policy decisions.

How does the Policy Lab work with entities outside of SAMHSA?

The Policy Lab regularly works with entities outside of SAMHSA, including other federal agencies, to implement laws and develop evidence-based practice written products, among other activities. For example:

- The Policy Lab worked with several federal agencies outside of HHS to implement laws in recent years. For instance, Legislative Affairs Team officials told us they worked closely with the Drug Enforcement Administration to implement provisions in the Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2023. These provisions include a new requirement for substance use disorder training for certain providers who prescribe medications for opioid use disorder.⁹
- The Policy Lab has invited subject matter experts from several federal agencies to be members of technical expert panels to develop written products that include evidence-based practices.¹⁰ For example, an official from the National Institute on Drug Abuse said they worked closely with prior Policy Lab directors on the HEALING Communities Study.¹¹

Policy Lab officials told us they also regularly work with training and technical assistance providers, who are SAMHSA grantees that offer training and technical assistance to practitioners in the fields of mental health and substance use through webinars and other activities. For example, the Policy Lab hosts bi-monthly meetings for training and technical assistance providers. Most of the providers described these meetings as enabling opportunities for connection,

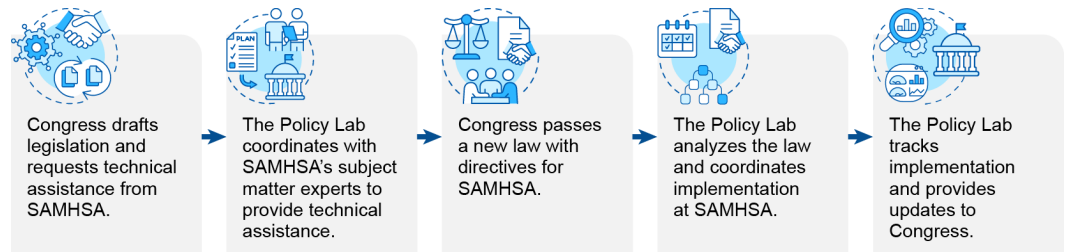
collaboration, and awareness of activities and publications among providers. A few providers suggested areas for improvement, such as assisting providers with dissemination efforts and better incorporating provider expertise into products and webinars.

Do the Policy Lab's activities align with its statutory responsibilities related to policy changes and coordination?

We found that the Policy Lab performs a number of activities that align with its statutory responsibilities related to policy changes and coordination. For example:

Facilitate the implementation of policy changes. According to SAMHSA officials, the Policy Lab facilitates SAMHSA's implementation of policy changes from multiple sources such as the White House, Congress, and HHS, including SAMHSA leadership. For example, the Policy Lab supported SAMHSA's efforts to implement the harm reduction grant program authorized under the American Rescue Plan Act, including identifying how grant dollars could be used.¹² (See fig. 2.)

Figure 2: The National Mental Health and Substance Use Policy Laboratory's (Policy Lab) Process for Facilitating the Implementation of Legislative Policy Changes



Source: GAO analysis of Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) interviews and documents; bsd studio/stock.adobe.com (illustrations). | GAO-24-106760

Coordinate policies and programs. The Policy Lab coordinates cross-SAMHSA and inter-agency policy efforts, and promotes coordination and collaboration of SAMHSA programs, according to SAMHSA officials. For example, according to SAMHSA officials, the Policy Lab led the development of SAMHSA's strategic plan and supports cross-agency workgroups, such as the HHS Behavioral Health Coordinating Council and the Interagency Task Force for Trauma-Informed Care.¹³ The Policy Lab also facilitates communication between SAMHSA's training and technical assistance providers.

Review SAMHSA activities and make recommendations. The Policy Lab reviews budget formulation and funding announcements to identify and develop recommendations to address SAMHSA programs that are potentially duplicative or not evidence-based or effective, according to SAMHSA officials. For example, the Policy Lab recommended the consolidation of some training and technical assistance programs.

Do the Policy Lab's activities align with its statutory responsibilities related to evidence-based practices?

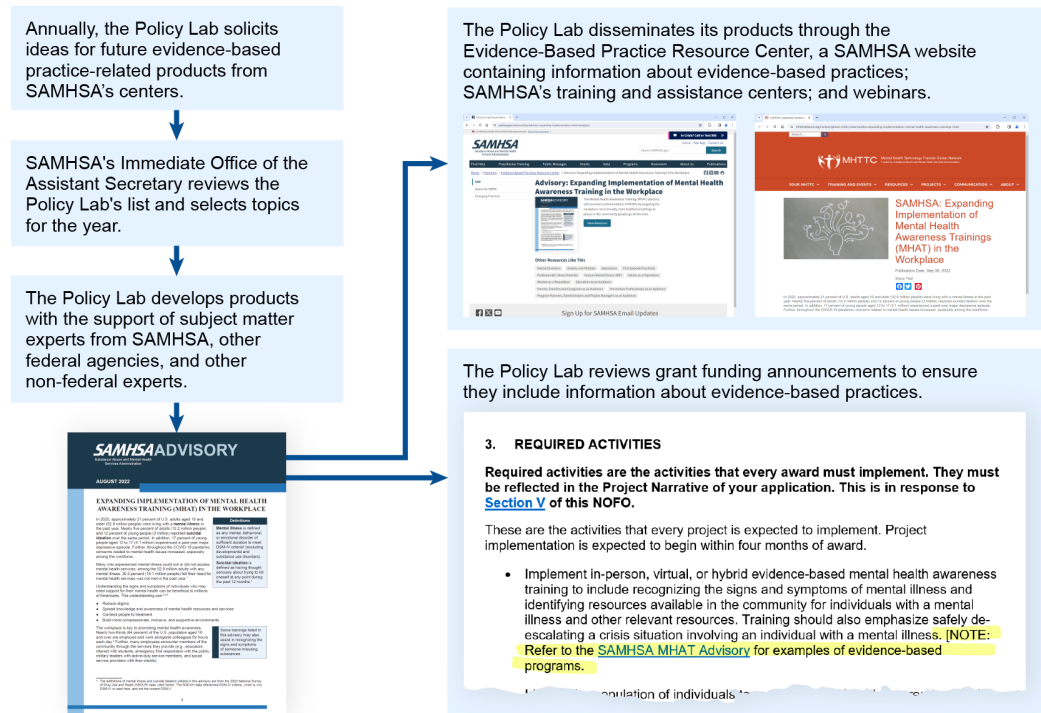
We found that the Policy Lab performs a number of activities that align with its statutory responsibilities related to evidence-based practices. For example:

Work with SAMHSA's Center for Behavioral Health Statistics and Quality to collect, evaluate, and disseminate information on evidence-based practices in consultation with other agencies and experts.

- **Collect and evaluate information.** SAMHSA's Center for Behavioral Health Statistics and Quality, among other things, is responsible for providing centralized planning and management of program evaluation across SAMHSA; the Policy Lab supports this center in these efforts. According to Policy Lab officials, the Policy Lab has worked with this center to develop an evaluation plan, which is estimated to be completed in June 2024.

- Disseminate information.** The Policy Lab manages the development of evidence-based practice products on topics of interest to SAMHSA's offices and centers in collaboration with federal and non-federal subject matter experts, according to SAMHSA officials. For example, in 2023, the Policy Lab published evidence-based practice products on topics including long COVID and trauma-informed approaches to providing social services.¹⁴ The Policy Lab disseminates products through SAMHSA's Evidence-Based Practices Resource Center website, training and technical assistance providers, webinars, listservs, and social media.¹⁵ (See fig. 3.)

Figure 3: The National Mental Health and Substance Use Policy Laboratory's (Policy Lab) Process for Developing and Disseminating Information about Evidence-Based Practices



Source: GAO analysis of Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) interviews and documents; SAMHSA (screenshots). | GAO-24-106760

Ensure grant applicants receive information regarding evidence-based practices. According to Policy Lab officials, the Policy Lab reviews evidence-based practice language in funding announcements for grant applicants. For example, the Policy Lab reviewed the funding announcement for SAMHSA's Center for Mental Health Services fiscal year 2023 Mental Health Awareness Training grants. The funding announcement requires grantees to implement an evidence-based mental health awareness training and refers applicants to a related Policy Lab evidence-based practice product.¹⁶

Award innovation grants. In the 21st Century Cures Act, Congress authorized SAMHSA's Assistant Secretary for Mental Health and Substance Use, in coordination with the Policy Lab, to award innovation grants to develop evidence-based interventions. According to Policy Lab officials, SAMHSA established one grant under this authorization using funds from the Center for Mental Health Services: the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer/Questioning, Intersex+ (LGBTQI+) Family Support grant program, which was awarded to the first four grantees in fiscal year 2023.¹⁷

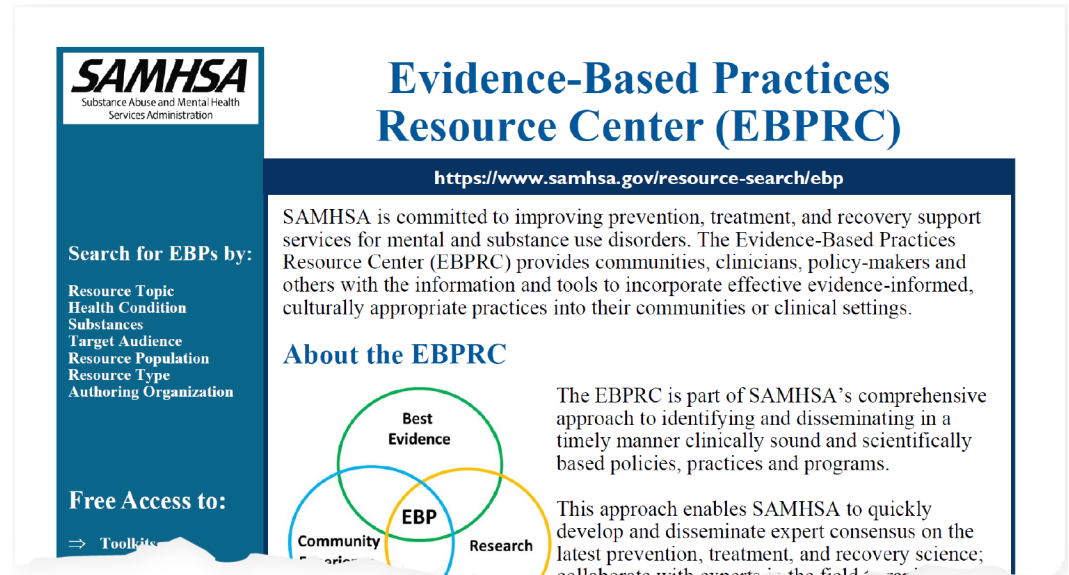
How does the Policy Lab set and assess progress toward meeting its goals?

According to Policy Lab documentation and officials, the Policy Lab's five components—the Office of the Director and four teams—have goals for which they are responsible.¹⁸ For 2023, the Policy Lab set 17 short-term goals. A Policy Lab official told us that due to its 2022 reorganization, the Policy Lab focused on short-term goals and accomplishments in 2023. The official said they plan to discuss long-term goals during a retreat in March 2024.¹⁹

The Policy Lab's components assess their performance using formal and informal mechanisms.²⁰ For example:

- The Evidence-Based Practices Innovation and Dissemination Team had a goal to increase utilization of the Evidence-Based Practices Resource Center website by 10 percent by the end of 2023. To assess progress toward reaching this goal, team officials told us they collected monthly website traffic data and used this information to make decisions. To increase website traffic, the team developed a one-page document about the website to share with regional staff and grantees at conferences, presentations, and webinars. (See fig. 4.)

Figure 4: Excerpt of One-Page Document on the Evidence-Based Practices Resource Center



Source: Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (screenshot). | GAO-24-106760

- The Evidence-Based Practices Innovation and Dissemination Team reviews formal feedback from webinar attendees after presentations featuring new products, according to Policy Lab officials; however, officials stated they lack key formal data on product usefulness. To address this, in fall 2023, the team issued a request for information for public input on improvements to the Evidence-Based Practices Resource Center website, including how SAMHSA can solicit feedback on the use of its products.²¹
- The Executive Correspondence and Support Branch had a goal to reduce the backlog of Freedom of Information Act requests by 30 percent by the end of fiscal year 2023. The team formally assesses progress toward reaching this goal by tracking requests in an electronic system. Team officials said that they also use this performance information to measure compliance with the act. In 2023, SAMHSA hired a staff member to assist the Freedom of Information Act officer.
- According to officials from the Office of the Director, and Legislative Affairs and Policy Analysis, Development, and Implementation teams, they receive

informal feedback about their performance and may use this information to make changes to their processes. For example, center officials told us the Legislative Affairs Team has used informal feedback to create more effective communication channels between the team and SAMHSA centers.

What are the Policy Lab's key accomplishments?

According to SAMHSA officials, the Policy Lab had several key accomplishments in recent years, including the following:

- **Developing SAMHSA's strategic plan.** The Policy Lab led the development of the agency's fiscal year 2023-2036 strategic plan.
- **Implementing legislation.** The Policy Lab facilitated the implementation of provisions from the Bipartisan Safer Communities Act and the Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2023.²²
- **Managing the Evidence-Based Practices Resource Center.** Since 2018, the Policy Lab has managed the Evidence-Based Practices Resource Center website. As of January 26, 2024, the website included 165 products published by the Policy Lab and other SAMHSA entities, other federal agencies, and professional societies. According to Policy Lab officials, product downloads from the website have grown in recent years from 171,523 downloads in 2021 to more than 400,000 in 2023.
- **Leading LGBTQI+ behavioral health initiatives.** The Policy Lab leads SAMHSA's LGBTQI+ policy and program efforts in collaboration with other SAMHSA centers and offices, according to Policy Lab officials. As part of this initiative, SAMHSA developed two products: the first was published in March 2023 and the second product has been under review. SAMHSA also developed and launched the LGBTQI+ family grant program.²³
- **Partially addressing SAMHSA's Freedom of Information Act request backlog.** In fiscal year 2023, SAMHSA reduced its backlog by 13 percent, according to SAMHSA officials.
- **Managing executive correspondence.** According to SAMHSA officials, the Policy Lab managed the approval process for more than 1,500 documents across SAMHSA in fiscal year 2023, and they achieved a 99 percent on-time completion rate for the subset of documents that required Policy Lab approval.
- **Responding to inquiries.** In fiscal year 2023, according to SAMHSA officials, the Policy Lab responded to 914 inquiries from Congress, HHS, the Congressional Research Service, and the Congressional Budget Office—more than three times the number of inquiries in 2022 (298).

Going forward, as the Policy Lab continues its efforts to support SAMHSA and builds on its accomplishments, it will be important to consider ways to continue to monitor its contributions to the implementation of evidence-based practices.

Agency Comments

We provided a draft of this report to HHS for review and comment. HHS did not have any comments on the report.

How GAO Did This Study

To obtain information about the Policy Lab and its five components' roles, processes, collaborative activities, and performance management activities, we reviewed relevant regulations and statutes, particularly section 501A of the Public Health Service Act, and Policy Lab documentation, including the Policy Lab's concept paper and 2023 priorities document. We also reviewed evidence-based practice products published by the Policy Lab. We interviewed officials from the

Policy Lab's five components to better understand the Policy Lab's activities. We also interviewed officials, including subject matter experts from SAMHSA's four centers, through which SAMHSA carries out most of its programs and activities, and the National Institute on Drug Abuse within the National Institutes of Health.²⁴ Additionally, we collected information from SAMHSA's Office of the Assistant Secretary for Mental Health and Substance Use and most of the training and technical assistance providers that participate in the Policy Lab's coordination calls.²⁵ We compared the Policy Lab's statutory responsibilities with its activities to determine the extent to which they align.

We conducted this performance audit from March 2023 to May 2024 in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards. Those standards require that we plan and perform the audit to obtain sufficient, appropriate evidence to provide a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives. We believe that the evidence obtained provides a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives.

List of Addressees

The Honorable Bernard Sanders
Chair
The Honorable Bill Cassidy, M.D.
Ranking Member
Committee on Health, Education, Labor and Pensions
United States Senate

The Honorable Cathy McMorris Rodgers
Chair
The Honorable Frank Pallone, Jr.
Ranking Member
Committee on Energy and Commerce
House of Representatives

We are sending copies of this report to the appropriate congressional committees and the Secretary of Health and Human Services. In addition, the report is available at no charge on the GAO website at <https://www.gao.gov>.

GAO Contact Information

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Endnotes

¹Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2023, Pub. L. No. 117-328, § 1121, 136 Stat. 4459, 5647 (2022).

²The Policy Lab has four teams. The Policy Analysis, Development, and Implementation Team supports and coordinates SAMHSA and interagency policies and programs. The Executive Correspondence and Support Branch manages executive correspondence, Freedom of Information Act requests, and national advisory committees. The Legislative Affairs Team serves as SAMHSA's liaison to Congress. The Evidence-Based Practices Innovation and Dissemination Team develops and manages evidence-based practice-related materials, and coordinates SAMHSA's training and technical assistance programs.

³SAMHSA's 988 & Behavioral Health Crisis Coordinating Office focuses on the behavioral health crisis care system, including the national 988 suicide hotline. Individuals can call, text, or chat the 988 number any time of day and connect with a trained crisis counselor.

⁴21st Century Cures Act, Pub. L. No. 114-255, § 7001, 130 Stat. 1033, 1220 (2016) (codified, as amended, at 42 U.S.C. § 290aa-0).

⁵See Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, National Mental Health and Substance Use Policy Laboratory, *Expanding Access to and Use of Behavioral Health Services for People Experiencing Homelessness* (Rockville, Md.: 2023).

⁶The Food and Drug Administration has approved three medications for the treatment of opioid use disorder: buprenorphine, methadone, and naltrexone.

⁷SAMHSA's evidence-based practice written products provide background information, describe the practice and the evidence supporting the practice, provide guidance on implementation and process improvement, feature case studies, and address barriers to uptake. These products are available in SAMHSA's Evidence-Based Practices Resource Center, which provides clinicians, policymakers, and others with information to facilitate the implementation of evidence-based practices. See Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, "Evidence-Based Practices Resource Center," accessed January 26, 2024, <https://www.samhsa.gov/resource-search/ebp>.

⁸See Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, National Mental Health and Substance Use Policy Laboratory, *Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration: Strategic Plan: Fiscal Year 2023-2026* (Rockville, Md.: 2023).

⁹The Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2023, also included a provision that removed the federal requirement for providers to obtain a waiver prior to prescribing buprenorphine for the treatment of opioid use disorder. It also requires almost all prescribers to obtain training in the identification and treatment of substance use disorders. Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2023, Pub. L. No. 117-328, §§ 1262, 1263, 136 Stat. 4459, 5681 (2022).

¹⁰For example, several Department of Justice officials served as technical experts for Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, National Mental Health and Substance Use Policy Laboratory, *Best Practices for Successful Reentry from Criminal Justice Settings for People Living with Mental Health Conditions and/or Substance Use Disorders* (Rockville, Md.: 2023).

¹¹The HEALing Community Study tests the integration of prevention, overdose treatment, and medication-based treatment in selected communities affected by the opioid crisis. The Policy Lab issued two publications drawn from this study, including Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, National Mental Health and Substance Use Policy Laboratory, *Engaging Community Coalitions to Decrease Opioid Overdose Deaths Practice Guide* (Rockville, Md.: 2023); and Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, National Mental Health and Substance Use Policy Laboratory, *Opioid-Overdose Reduction Continuum of Care Approach (ORCCA) Practice Guide* (Rockville, Md.: 2023).

¹²The purpose of the SAMHSA Harm Reduction Grant Program is to "support community-based overdose prevention programs, syringe services programs, and other harm reduction services." See Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration "Harm Reduction Grant Program," accessed January 30, 2024, <https://www.samhsa.gov/grants/grant-announcements/sp-22-001>. See also American Rescue Plan Act of 2021, Pub. L. No. 117-2, § 2706, 135 Stat. 4, 47.

¹³The HHS Behavioral Health Coordinating Council was launched in 2021 to address the nation's behavioral health needs and is composed of HHS senior leaders. The Interagency Task Force on Trauma-Informed Care is charged with making recommendations regarding best practices for children, youth, and their families experiencing trauma, and ways federal agencies can better coordinate the federal response to families impacted by trauma. See SUPPORT for Patients and Communities Act, Pub. L. No. 115-271, § 7132, 132 Stat. 3984, 4046 (2018).

¹⁴See Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, National Mental Health and Substance Use Policy Laboratory, *Identification and Management of Mental Health Symptoms and Conditions Associated with Long COVID* (Rockville, Md.: 2023); and Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, National Mental Health and Substance Use Policy Laboratory, *Practical Guide for Implementing a Trauma-Informed Approach* (Rockville, Md.: 2023).

¹⁵SAMHSA's training and technical assistance offerings are listed on its Practitioner Training website. See Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, "Practitioner Training," accessed January 29, 2024, <https://www.samhsa.gov/practitioner-training>.

¹⁶The purpose of the SAMHSA Mental Health Awareness Training Grant Program is to train individuals "to recognize the signs and symptoms of mental disorders and how to safely de-escalate crisis situations involving individuals with a mental illness." See Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, "Mental Health Awareness Training Grants," accessed January 29, 2024, <https://www.samhsa.gov/grants/grant-announcements/sm-23-002>. The grant funding announcement references Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, *Advisory: Expanding Implementation of Mental Health Awareness Training in the Workplace* (Rockville, Md.: 2022).

¹⁷The purpose of the SAMHSA LGBTQI+ Family Support Grant Program is to establish "LGBTQI+ family counseling and support programs" and train "providers on family counseling and support interventions." See Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, "Family Counseling and Support for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer/Questioning, Intersex+ Youth and their Families," accessed January 29, 2024, <https://www.samhsa.gov/grants/grant-announcements/fg-23-004>.

¹⁸In our prior work, we identified key practices for managing an organization's performance, including defining goals, and collecting and using information for decision-making. See GAO, *Evidence-Based Policymaking: Practices to Help Manage and Assess the Results of Federal Efforts*, GAO-23-105460 (Washington, D.C.: July 12, 2023).

¹⁹In our prior work, we have reported that federal entities should have goals that cover both short-term and long-term time frames. See GAO-23-105460.

²⁰Formal performance management activities could include systematically collecting and using data for decision making. Informal performance management activities may include unplanned conversations to solicit feedback from entities outside the Policy Lab regarding performance related to activities, such as providing subject matter expertise for SAMHSA centers.

²¹Request for Information; Potential Changes to its Evidence-Based Practices Resource Center, 88 Fed. Reg. 61,608 (Sep. 7, 2023).

²²According to Policy Lab officials, these included \$800 million for programs within SAMHSA's Center for Mental Health Services and 988 & Behavioral Health Crisis Coordinating Office, funding for state planning grants for community behavioral health clinics, and the removal of the federal requirement for practitioners to have a waiver to prescribe buprenorphine. See Bipartisan Safer Communities Act, Pub. L. No. 117-159, div. B, tit. II, 136 Stat. 1313, 1340 (2022).

²³See Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, Center for Substance Abuse Prevention, *Moving Beyond Change Efforts: Evidence and Action to Support and Affirm LGBTQI+ Youth* (Rockville, Md.: 2023).

²⁴We selected these entities because their subject matter experts were most frequently involved in the development of the evidence-based practice products published by the Policy Lab between 2021-2023 that included technical expert panels or worked with the Policy Lab to implement laws or policies, though other entities that we did not contact may have differing opinions from those expressed here.

²⁵The Policy Lab told us that 17 training and technical assistance providers participate in the Policy Lab's coordination calls; 13 of these providers responded to our request for information. We selected these providers because they were the non-federal entities that the Policy Lab identified as interacting with regularly.