November 30, 2021

The Honorable Maria Cantwell
Chairwoman
Committee on Commerce, Science, and Transportation
United States Senate
Washington, D.C. 20510

The Honorable Eddie Bernice Johnson
Chairwoman
Committee on Science, Space, and Technology
U.S. House of Representatives
Washington, D.C. 20515

The Honorable Roger Wicker
Ranking Member
Committee on Commerce, Science, and Transportation
United States Senate
Washington, D.C. 20510

The Honorable Frank Lucas
Ranking Member
Committee on Science, Space, and Technology
U.S. House of Representatives
Washington, D.C. 20515

Chairwomen Cantwell and Johnson, and Ranking Members Wicker and Lucas:

We are the former Co-Chairs of the U.S. Commission on Evidence-Based Policymaking, appointed respectively by then-President Barack Obama and then-House Speaker Paul Ryan. The Commission members included fifteen politically-appointed data and privacy experts. Our report, released in September 2017, contained a set of findings and recommendations endorsed by all of the Commission’s members for more effectively leveraging existing government data assets while also enhancing privacy protections.

In 2018, Congress acted to implement about half of the Commission’s recommendations by passing the Foundations for Evidence-Based Policymaking Act (P.L. 115-435). The experience since that time has made clear the benefits for government transparency and accountability of implementing the Evidence Act’s provisions. Thanks to newly appointed Chief Data Officers and the increased emphasis on program evaluation as a core function of government, among other changes, the government has made significant progress towards more effectively using the data it holds.

While the Evidence Act put many of our recommendations into law, other important recommendations remain for the Congress to address. One that we believe is a critical priority is the establishment of a National Secure Data Service (NSDS). Earlier this year, the House of Representatives approved the bipartisan NSDS Act as part of the National Science Foundation reauthorization. As the former leaders of the Evidence Commission, we endorse the NSDS Act as a means to address one of our most important recommendations, establishing a secure data linkage resource that can facilitate addressing broad policy and research questions while protecting privacy and confidentiality. We strongly encourage Congress to include the NSDS Act in the conferenced version of the United States Innovation and Competition Act (USICA).

The NSDS Act was based on the Evidence Commission’s 2017 report, research from the National Academy of Sciences, and subsequent research carried out by a Commission member and senior staff.

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Many of the original Commissioners also provided direct feedback on and agreed with that subsequent proposal. In May 2021, NSF’s Assistant Director for Social, Behavioral, and Economic Sciences said in a public statement that NSF is already beginning efforts to establish the infrastructure to operate the data service. More recently, the Federal Advisory Committee on Data for Evidence Building established by the Evidence Act released its interim recommendations calling for the creation of a data service and presented an implementation framework that aligns with the NSDS Act.

The establishment of an NSDS would substantially contribute to strengthening the analytical capabilities of the Federal Statistical System, provide a resource and expanded capacity for conducting program evaluation, and, at a practical level, create an infrastructure for more rapid responses to congressional policy inquiries about outcomes and programmatic impacts. This can be achieved within the strong privacy framework laid out in the Confidential Information Protection and Statistical Efficiency Act (CIPSEA) reauthorized by the Congress in 2018, consistent with what is proposed in the NSDS Act.

In our view, the National Secure Data Service is a necessary part of modernizing our country’s data infrastructure. We encourage the Congress to include this bipartisan proposal in the conference agreement for the House NSF reauthorization bill and the Senate USICA. We are happy to speak with you or your staff on any questions about the Evidence Commission’s recommendations or the NSDS Act.

Respectfully,

Katharine G. Abraham
Former Chair
Commission on Evidence-Based Policymaking

Ron Haskins
Former Co-Chair
Commission on Evidence-Based Policymaking

cc: Members of the Senate Committee on Commerce, Science, and Transportation

Members of the House Committee on Science, Space, and Technology

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