



KING COUNTY AUDITOR'S OFFICE

November 28, 2017

BSK Evaluation: Leverages Limited Budget but Could Improve Transparency and Reliability

TO:

Metropolitan
King County
Councilmembers

The Best Starts for Kids (BSK) Evaluation and Performance Measurement Plan leverages the funds allocated for BSK evaluation in a reasonable way and follows several best practices. However, due to limited evaluation funding and the general limits of performance measurement, the planned approach will not be able to determine the effectiveness of BSK as a whole.

The plan uses a variety of measurement and evaluation methods that fit within the budget. For example, BSK plans to track performance measures for all programs since performance measures are relatively less costly, while only a few programs will receive more costly program evaluations.

FROM:

KyMBER WAltmunson,
County Auditor

This is a reasonable approach given that resources available for evaluation and data are limited up to five percent of BSK funds. While the approach is pragmatic, the plan is not set up to determine the overall success of the BSK levy, as the required evaluation would be resource-intensive and infeasible within the budget. Despite these challenges, the planned measurement and evaluation activities do have the potential to help programs improve in real time, determine if program participants improve, and evaluate a small subset of BSK programs in greater depth.

This letter answers two questions about the BSK evaluation plan. First, what questions will the planned measurement and evaluation be able to answer? Second, will the information generated be useful and reliable for policy-makers and the public? We make recommendations to align program measures with the BSK framework, improve data collection procedures and quality control, protect the independence of the results, and increase the transparency of evaluation decisions.

What is BSK?

BSK is a six-year property tax levy, approved by the voters in 2015, that raises over \$400 million over the life of the levy for a variety of programs to improve the health and wellbeing of children, youth, families, and communities. The levy specifies that no more than five percent of the funds can be used to plan, fund, and administer evaluation and data collection activities. The BSK evaluation team has developed an evaluation plan with the goals of strategic learning and accountability.



King County

What questions will planned BSK measurement and evaluation activities be able to answer?

BSK will track three types of information—indicators, performance measures, and the results of program evaluations. Indicators track information about all children in King County while performance measures and program evaluations focus on BSK participants and the direct results of BSK programs (see Exhibit A).

EXHIBIT A: Indicators give information about children’s wellbeing throughout King County, and performance measures and program evaluations give information about BSK programs and participants.



POPULATION INDICATORS

- Countywide outcomes to which BSK programs intend to contribute
- Not program-specific



PERFORMANCE MEASURES

- Data points about how BSK programs and program participants are performing
- All programs will have performance measures



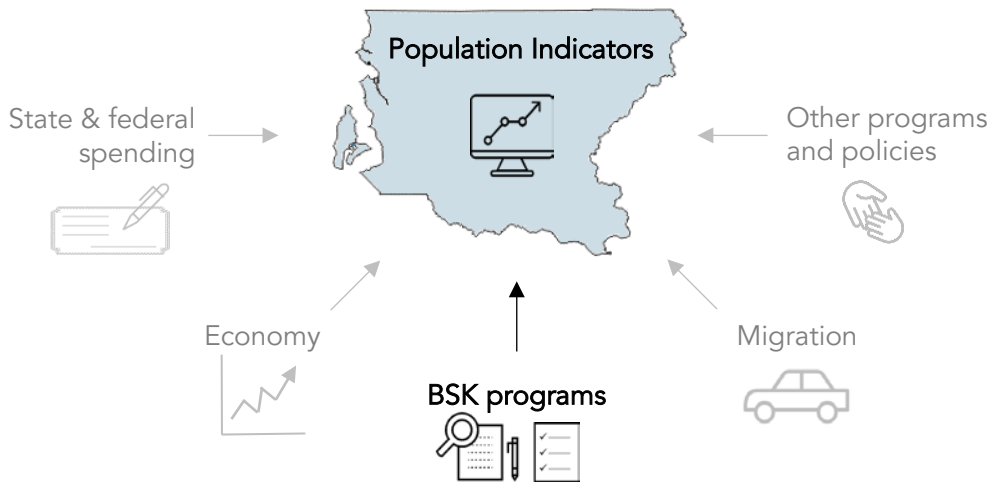
PROGRAM EVALUATIONS

- Analyses to attribute participants’ improvements to BSK programs and to determine what programs can do to improve
- Some programs will have program evaluations

Source: Auditor’s Office analysis

The plan is not set up to quantify or prove the impact of BSK on countywide indicators. To determine that BSK caused any observed changes in the population-level indicators over the span of the levy, an evaluation would need to isolate the impact of BSK from other factors that influence health and wellbeing. For example, economic changes, external funding changes, or other new programs and policies (Exhibit B) could also impact health outcomes in King County. Program evaluations that attribute causality can be expensive and difficult given the wide scope of BSK programs and population indicators. Instead, the BSK implementation and evaluation teams are relying on its theory of change and pre-existing research to explain how BSK programs could contribute to changes in the countywide indicators.

EXHIBIT B: Multiple factors can influence population indicators, either by changing people's health and economic situation or by changing the pool of people in the county. This makes it difficult to isolate BSK's impact.



Source: Auditor's Office analysis

The planned approach will be able to provide some information about the effectiveness of most, but not all, BSK programs, which could limit data available to decision-makers and the public. The BSK evaluation team intends to make sure all programs have performance measures that follow the Results-Based Accountability model (RBA). This model allows BSK implementers and evaluators to think through how the program will achieve change and target performance measures to monitor whether that change is occurring. This is a best practice. The model specifies three types of performance measures that answer the following questions:

- How much did the program do?
- How well did the program do it?
- Is anyone better off?

Because the BSK implementation team is still developing programs, we have only seen a few examples of performance measures from four new BSK funded programs and from six existing programs, which received enhanced funding from BSK funds. The four new programs have performance measures that follow the RBA framework.

However, we found that some existing programs funded by BSK do not follow the RBA performance measurement framework, reducing information about how effective the programs are. These existing programs, operated by the Department of Public Health – Seattle & King County, have performance measurement and data collection systems that predate BSK and are not aligned with the BSK RBA framework. Two of the six existing programs funded by BSK do not have outcome measures, and for others that do have outcome measures, some measures do not answer the question, "Is anyone better

off?"¹ Two of these six programs also have no measures that answer the question, "How well did we do it?" (Exhibit C).

EXHIBIT C: Some programs have performance measures for all three RBA components, but others have no or insufficient measures.²

	How many did we serve?	How well did we serve them?	Is anyone better off?
THEFT 3 AND MALL SAFETY PILOT PROJECT	Number of youth enrolled	% of participants engaging with case manager and progressing on service plan	% of participants with improved grades
FIRST STEPS MATERNAL SUPPORT SERVICES	Number of clients served	Number of visits delivered by ancillary programs	None
FAMILY PLANNING HEALTH EDUCATION	Number of youth reached	None	None

Source: Auditor's Office analysis of BSK contracts

BSK evaluation staff explained that the pre-existing public health programs work within a state evaluation and performance measurement framework, have existing research demonstrating the effectiveness of the service delivery model, and that imposing the BSK evaluation framework would add to costs. However, the lack of outcome measures for some programs, and outcome measures that do not answer the question, "Is anyone better off?" could result in a lack of information on the effectiveness of these programs.

Recommendation 1

The Department of Public Health – Seattle & King County and the Department of Community and Human Services should develop performance measures that adhere to the results-based accountability model for all programs receiving Best Starts for Kids funding.

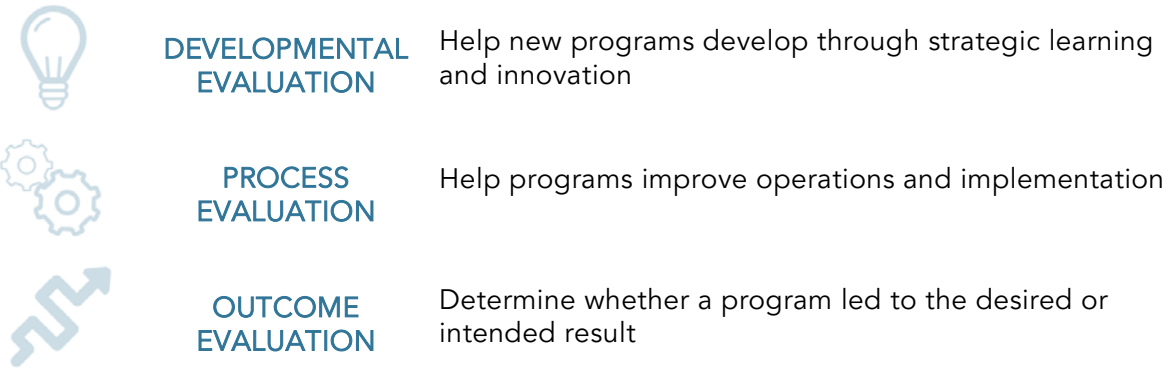
Program evaluations will likely give more detailed information about results and performance, but evaluation will be limited to a small subset of programs and not all evaluation types are intended to provide information about outcomes. Program evaluations can build on a program's performance measures to give more detailed and rigorous information about program effectiveness or

¹ A Washington state agency may calculate outcome measures for these programs using data provided by King and other counties.

² For example, the School Based Health Center program has outcome measures that partially answer the question "Is anyone better off?" because the measure is a threshold, which can provide an indication of achievement, but can miss increases and decreases in performance that do not cross that threshold.

implementation. The BSK evaluation team has identified three types of evaluations that it will use (Exhibit D).

EXHIBIT D: The three evaluation types have different purposes and provide different types of information.



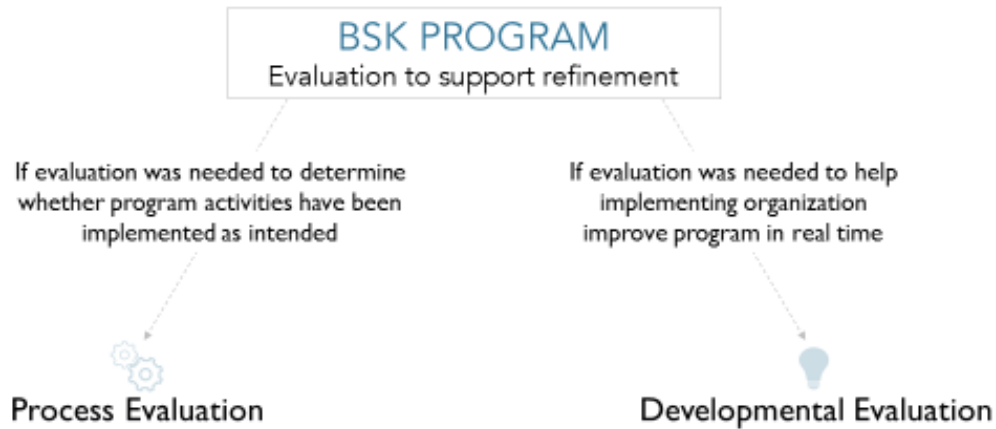
Source: Auditor's Office analysis

While some stakeholders may be most interested in understanding program effectiveness through outcome evaluation, developmental evaluations and process evaluations can help participating organizations improve and develop innovative strategies to better serve participants.

The BSK evaluation team has not yet fully developed how it will make decisions about what type of evaluation a program will receive. Continuing to develop and document the decision-making process will reduce the possibility that scarce evaluation resources are not used strategically. The BSK evaluation team must make two decisions about program evaluations: 1) whether a program receives an evaluation, and 2) what type of evaluation it will receive. For the first decision, the team has outlined some criteria it will use in the plan including, for example, interest from stakeholders and existing evidence. As of the time of this audit, the evaluation team is developing more specific steps to score potential programs against these criteria. This will help increase the transparency of its decisions and could help the team apply its criteria with consistency.

However, the BSK evaluation team has not determined specific steps for the second decision. The evaluators plan to select the type of evaluation based on the stages of program implementation, but have not yet developed a scoring system or more detailed criteria. This increases the possibility that the criteria for selecting the evaluation type or methodology may not be applied consistently or strategically, which could reduce the usefulness of evaluation results. For example, the plan states that for programs that are underway, but undergoing modifications, evaluation will support program refinement and improvements in quality or efficiency. However, multiple types of evaluation could be appropriate for this purpose (see Exhibit E) and the current criteria do not address how evaluators will handle potentially conflicting choices.

EXHIBIT E: Different types of evaluation and methodologies could be appropriate for the same program.



Source: Auditor's Office analysis

Without specifying what additional criteria will be used for decisions on evaluation types and methodology, the BSK evaluation team might use resources less effectively and stakeholders could lose transparency into how these decisions were made.

Recommendation 2

The Department of Public Health – Seattle & King County and the Department of Community and Human Services should develop, document, and apply a plan with detailed criteria for selecting the appropriate types of evaluation for different programs.

The BSK evaluation team plans not to select programs for evaluation that meet the criteria for being evidence-based, but some of this evidence may be older or less relevant to local conditions. Programs with this type of evidence could benefit from an evaluation. The evaluation team intends to focus evaluation resources on programs without underlying evidence, which can be a strategic way to allocate scarce resources. In some cases, however, a program's evidence base may be older and/or not specific to King County. For example, the evidence supporting the First Steps Program is based on data no more recent than 2002 and looked at such programs statewide without providing evidence for local effectiveness. The current approach to choosing programs for evaluation would likely exclude this program from consideration. Without including the applicability of the existing evidence as criteria for whether programs receive an evaluation, the evaluation team may miss opportunities to use evaluation to improve programming when evidence exists, but has limitations.

Recommendation 3

The Department of Public Health – Seattle & King County and the Department of Community and Human Services should modify the existing criteria to identify programs for program evaluations to include the applicability of existing evidence.

Will the information generated be useful and reliable for policy-makers, the public, and participating organizations?

The BSK evaluation team has taken several steps to improve data accuracy and reliability, but further documentation and planning would help ensure that decision-makers can draw accurate conclusions. The evaluation team's planned data procedures meet several best practices. For example, the team explained that it plans to collect data at regular intervals and check data quality by tracing source documentation and reviewing the data for common errors. Organizations will report performance measures quarterly, contract monitors will review source documentation, and the BSK evaluation team will check the aggregate and individual-level data for red flags or common errors.

However, the evaluation team has not documented these procedures. Documentation can help to define responsibilities and ensure consistent procedures across all organizations. This consistency is particularly important for organizations within the same programs using the same measures, since the evaluation team may aggregate results to determine the overall program effectiveness. Without consistent data, the evaluation team cannot draw accurate conclusions about a program's effectiveness.

Recommendation 4

The Department of Public Health – Seattle & King County and the Department of Community and Human Services should document and communicate their data quality control procedures for the current data system.

The BSK evaluation team is planning to implement a new data system during the course of the levy, which it will use for data entry, analysis, and sharing. Since the new system will automate some data quality checks and others will continue to be performed manually, the system will need a data control plan to ensure that the collected data is accurate and reliable. The system will also require training for organizations to ensure that staff input data consistently. The BSK evaluation team has not yet fully planned how it will train organizations to collect and enter data in the new data system. This is important because the aggregated data will only be accurate if organizations interpret and report performance measures consistently.

Recommendation 5

The Department of Public Health – Seattle & King County and the Department of Community and Human Services should update quality control practices for the new data collection system, including service provider training, before the new system is implemented.

The BSK evaluation team has taken first steps to safeguard independence, but more can be done to create transparent and impartial results. Although the County will contract some evaluations out to external groups, an internal BSK evaluation team oversees all evaluations and may conduct or take part in some evaluations. Since internal evaluators are by definition employees of the organization, they may face pressure to report the desired results. This could decrease public trust in the accuracy of the evaluation. BSK has already taken a step to mitigate this risk. Evaluation best practices recommend some form of external oversight, which BSK is achieving through the Evaluation Advisory Group. This group, made up of representatives from the community, local organizations, and evaluation groups, is reviewing and providing feedback throughout the evaluation process. Other workgroups and advisory groups will also weigh in on the evaluation methods and findings, which creates some incentives and accountability to make sure that the results align with the data.

Despite this positive step, two areas where the County could strengthen impartiality and transparency are conflict of interest and precise reporting. First, the BSK evaluation team does not have a process for identifying potential or perceived conflicts of interest. According to best practices, evaluators should identify their potential conflicts of interest, determine how to mitigate these conflicts, and disclose the decision to ensure transparency for the public and decision-makers.

Second, best practices indicate that evaluators should have final discretion over evaluation findings or reports to ensure precise, accurate reporting of findings. The current publication process for BSK reporting does not align with this best practice. Before publication, the evaluation team submits its drafts for managerial and executive reviews. These reviews do not have documented policies and procedures that explain who has final discretion over the report or how to resolve differences of opinion. This lack of clarity reduces the evaluation team's ability to ensure that the final reports align with the evaluation findings. Given the review and publication process, BSK can still take steps to safeguard the independence of the evaluation team and increase transparency about the process for decision-makers.

Recommendation 6

The Department of Public Health – Seattle & King County and the Department of Community and Human Services should require that all individuals conducting the Best Starts for Kids evaluation identify potential conflicts of interest and document their mitigation strategies as early as possible in order to increase transparency.

Recommendation 7

The Department of Public Health – Seattle & King County and the Department of Community and Human Services should put procedures in place to protect the independence of the evaluation team. These procedures should include maintaining documentation of any report changes that they or the Executive propose and setting up a process to resolve disagreements with the evaluation team.

Larry Brubaker, Senior Principal Management Auditor; Elise Garvey, Senior Management Auditor; and Mia Neidhardt, Management Auditor, conducted this review. Please contact Larry at 206-477-1034 if you have any questions about the issues discussed in this letter.

- cc: Dow Constantine, King County Executive
Michael Fong, Chief Operating Officer
Rachel Smith, Chief of Staff, King County Executive's Office
Dwight Dively, Director, Office of Performance, Strategy & Budget
Adrienne Quinn, Director, Department of Community and Human Services (DCHS)
Patty Hayes, Director, Department of Public Health – Seattle & King County
Caroline Whalen, County Administrative Officer, Department of Executive Services
Ken Guy, Division Director, Department of Executive Services, Finance & Business Operations Division
Michael Gedeon, Chief Administrative Officer, Department of Public Health – Seattle & King County
Josephine Wong, Deputy Director, DCHS
Melani Pedroza, Clerk of the Council
Shelley Harrison, Administrative Staff Assistant, King County Executive Office

Executive Response



King County

Dow Constantine
King County Executive
401 Fifth Avenue, Suite 800
Seattle, WA 98104-1818
206-263-9600 Fax 206-296-0194
TTY Relay: 711
www.kingcounty.gov

KING COUNTY AUDITOR
Nov 03 2017
RECEIVED

November 3, 2017

Kymer Waltmunson
King County Auditor
Room 1033
COURTHOUSE

Dear Ms. Waltmunson:

Thank you for the opportunity to review and comment on the proposed final report “BSK Evaluation: Leverages Limited Budget but Could Improve Transparency and Reliability.” We appreciate the work of your team and their recognition of the reasonable and pragmatic approach that utilizes best practices that is outlined in the Best Starts for Kids (BSK) Evaluation and Performance Measurement Plan. The County concurs with the audit recommendations.

As you know, the BSK Evaluation and Performance Measurement Plan was developed as the BSK strategies and programs are being refined and finalized. It provides a high-level overview of the evaluation frameworks, principles, and plans for how to approach performance measurement and evaluation as the portfolio of programs are implemented.

BSK evaluation and performance measurement is based on three guiding principles: Equity, high professional evaluation standards, and transparency in interpreting and reporting findings. The BSK data and evaluation staff have been developing strategies to apply these guiding principles in the BSK evaluation efforts.

The audit recommendations in this report including adhering to the result-based accountability model, refining evaluation criteria, and documenting processes of data collection and quality control are consistent with what the BSK data and evaluation team intends to develop as the BSK strategies evolve and the data collection system is in place. The County concurs with the audit recommendations and implementing them will help us to better plan in advance when possible and strengthen our existing processes to ensure transparency and accountability.

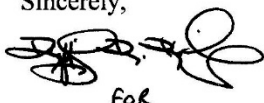
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and complies with the Americans with Disabilities Act*



KyMBER Waltmunson
 November 3, 2017
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Thank you again for collaborating on this important work. If you have any questions regarding our audit response, please contact Adrienne Quinn, Director of the Department of Community and Human Services, at 206-263-9100 or Patty Hayes, Director of the Department of Public Health-Seattle & King County, at 206-263-8285.

Sincerely,



for
 Dow Constantine
 King County Executive

Enclosure

cc: Mike Fong, Chief Operating Officer, King County Executive Office (KCEO)
 Rachel Smith, Chief of Staff, KCEO
 Dwight Dively, Director, Office of Performance, Strategy and Budget
 Adrienne Quinn, Director, Department of Community and Human Services
 Patty Hayes, Director, Public Health—Seattle & King County

Recommendation 1

The Department of Public Health – Seattle & King County and the Department of Community and Human Services should develop performance measures that adhere to the results-based accountability model for all programs receiving Best Starts for Kids funding.

Agency Response

Concurrence	Concur
Implementation date	April 2018
Responsible agency	PHSKC and DCHS
Comment	Program implementation is expected to continue in 2018. Performance measures will be developed as each strategy's portfolio of programs is known, and developed in partnership with grantees as described in the Evaluation and Performance Measurement Plan.

Recommendation 2

The Department of Public Health – Seattle & King County and the Department of Community and Human Services should develop, document, and apply a plan with detailed criteria for selecting the appropriate types of evaluation for different programs.

Agency Response

Concurrence	Concur
Implementation date	April 2018
Responsible agency	PHSKC and DCHS
Comment	Detailed criteria will be refined and finalized after series of meetings with the BSK Evaluation Advisory Group and the internal BSK program staff.

Recommendation 3

The Department of Public Health – Seattle & King County and the Department of Community and Human Services should modify the existing criteria to identify programs for program evaluations to include the applicability of existing evidence.

Agency Response

Concurrence	Concur
Implementation date	April 2018
Responsible agency	PHSKC and DCHS
Comment	The same timeline for the Recommendation 2 will apply for this recommendation.

Recommendation 4

The Department of Public Health – Seattle & King County and the Department of Community and Human Services should document and communicate their data quality control procedures for the current data system.

Agency Response

Concurrence	Concur
Implementation date	February 2018
Responsible agency	PHSKC and DCHS
Comment	

Recommendation 5

The Department of Public Health – Seattle & King County and the Department of Community and Human Services should update quality control practices for the new data collection system, including service provider training, before the new system is implemented.

Agency Response

Concurrence	Concur
Implementation date	4 months after the new data system is in place
Responsible agency	PHSKC and DCHS
Comment	Timeline for the new data collection system is pending.

Recommendation 6

The Department of Public Health – Seattle & King County and the Department of Community and Human Services should require that all individuals conducting the Best Starts for Kids evaluation identify potential conflicts of interest and document their mitigation strategies as early as possible in order to increase transparency.

Agency Response

Concurrence	Concur
Implementation date	April 2018
Responsible agency	PHSKC and DCHS
Comment	Implementation will occur after the evaluation criteria are finalized and the evaluators are identified.

Recommendation 7

The Department of Public Health – Seattle & King County and the Department of Community and Human Services should put procedures in place to protect the independence of the evaluation team. These procedures should include maintaining documentation of any report changes that they or the Executive propose and setting up a process to resolve disagreements with the evaluation team.

Agency Response

Concurrence	Concur
Implementation date	April 2018
Responsible agency	PHSKC and DCHS
Comment	This recommendation will be first implemented during the review process of the second BSK annual report, which is due to Council on June 1, 2018

Statement of Compliance, Scope, Objective & Methodology

Statement of Compliance with Government Auditing Standards

We conducted this performance audit 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.

Scope of work on Internal Controls

We assessed the planned processes and controls for data reliability and evaluation independence. Since this was an audit of a plan and many of the controls are still being developed, we did not test the controls themselves. Instead, we compared the planned approach with best practices to determine if they are likely to be effective.

Scope

This performance audit reviewed the Best Starts for Kids (BSK) plan for evaluation and performance measurement and the preliminary work performed through fall of 2017.

Objectives

1. What questions will the planned BSK measurement and evaluation be able to answer?
2. Will the information generated be useful and reliable for policy-makers, the public, and participating organizations?

Methodology

To address the audit objectives, we reviewed BSK plans, ordinances, budgets, requests for proposals, and contracts. We interviewed BSK staff and the lead evaluators to gain a more detailed understanding of the plans and to learn how they have begun implementing the plan. We reviewed program evaluation literature for information about the strengths and limitations of different evaluation approaches and methodologies. We also used these sources to collect best practices for internal evaluation, data collection, and data reliability.



KING COUNTY AUDITOR'S OFFICE

Advancing Performance & Accountability

KYMBER WALTMUNSON, KING COUNTY AUDITOR

MISSION Promote improved performance, accountability, and transparency in King County government through objective and independent audits and studies.

VALUES INDEPENDENCE - CREDIBILITY - IMPACT

ABOUT US The King County Auditor's Office was created by charter in 1969 as an independent agency within the legislative branch of county government. The office conducts oversight of county government through independent audits, capital projects oversight, and other studies. The results of this work are presented to the Metropolitan King County Council and are communicated to the King County Executive and the public. The King County Auditor's Office performs its work in accordance with Government Auditing Standards.



This audit product conforms to the GAGAS standards for independence, objectivity, and quality.