The objective of this research study was to examine whether, how, and why research evidence is used in state-level decision-making about policies related to childhood obesity in Minnesota.

The study participants were 51 stakeholders who were interviewed: 16 in legislative roles, 16 in advocacy roles, and 19 in state agency roles.

The interview questions included: 1) How stakeholders use research; 2) the barriers they face; and 3) their recommendations for improving a system that facilitates stakeholder use of evidence.

So, what did we find? State agency staff at the Department of Health (MDH), Department of Education (MDE), and Department of Transportation (DOT) currently use research evidence in designing and evaluating programs, but many face organizational or administrative barriers in communicating evidence to other key stakeholders.

What’s happening now?

State agency staff use research to 1) determine best practices; 2) motivate or support action within their own agencies or in collaboration with other stakeholders; and 3) determine whether a policy or program is achieving its goals and can be sustained in the long run.

What are the challenges?

Lack of communication between groups.

› Agency staff feel limited in their ability to present research evidence to legislators and staff due to restrictions on lobbying.

› Agency staff feel excluded from the planning stages of research, which makes it difficult for them to shape research questions and priorities.

Access to research resources.

› Agency staff often have limited access to research articles, especially after the closure of the MDH library.

› While the University of Minnesota is seen as a source of high-quality, non-partisan research evidence, agency staff find it difficult to connect with researchers at the University.

What can we improve?

Expand infrastructure to communicate evidence.

› Set up a web-based clearinghouse as a centralized resource for research summaries on policy-relevant topics.

› Create a topic-specific list of research experts at the University of Minnesota, state agencies, and other local organizations who are willing to be contacted for information.

Bridge research and communication gaps.

› Evidence should appear in more accessible formats—such as one-page executive summaries, infographics, and bullet points.

› Agency staff recommend more investment into program evaluation, as well as research that produces cost-effectiveness and outcomes data, especially at state and local levels.

› A listserv or email list that connects different stakeholders would be valuable in sharing research evidence and resources.

Broaden approaches to research.

› Researchers should involve external stakeholders—such as state agency staff—in the design and planning stages of their studies.

› Agency staff believe that research institutions should increase opportunities for networking between researchers and external stakeholders to establish and maintain professional relationships.

For more information or to contact the research team, visit the project website: http://z.umn.edu/obesitypolicy

Citation: Jou J, Gollust SE, Nanney MS. Report on “Using Obesity Research More Effectively to Shape State Policy,” based on findings from Evidence Translation for Childhood Obesity Prevention in Minnesota, funded by the NIH (R03 5R03HD0711560-02, Co-PI’s Gollust and Nanney) and the University of Minnesota Healthy Foods Healthy Lives Institute.

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Anything that opens up communication, lines of communication between different agencies and different advocacy groups' work, is very helpful.

—MDE Staff

There could be more centralization or consistency as to choosing strategies, narrowing the scope in terms of what is our agenda for the next two years...so that our messages are more consistent.

—MDH Staff