

## Capabilities Statement

### Prepared for:

US Department of Agriculture (USDA) Food and Nutrition Service (FNS)  
Braddock Metro Center II  
1320 Braddock Place  
Alexandria, VA 22314  
Attn: Dr. G. Ra'Shadd III, Small Business Coordinator

### Prepared by:

#### Optimal Solutions Group, LLC

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## Corporate Overview and Capabilities

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Located in the University of Maryland's Discovery District, Optimal is a rigorous, innovative policy research, data analytics, and technical assistance firm. Since 2014, we have completed several projects with the Food and Nutrition Service (FNS). We have experience with FNS programs and frequently collaborate with the University of Maryland and other universities and research organizations for additional capacity and expertise.



Innovative, Non-Partisan,  
Rigorous, Small Public  
Policy Research Firm  
UMD Research Park

Optimal has 20+ years of experience using quantitative and qualitative methods to conduct evidence-based research from over 300 federal contracts and task orders in food and nutrition, health, education, workforce development, and housing/economic development.

As a result of this experience, we have developed a Real-Time Framework which enables real-time data-driven public policy decision-making by automating data collection, analysis and reporting. Our approach emphasizes upfront multidisciplinary and human-centered design, rigorous research methods, streamlined standards-based processes and innovative, proven technology tools.

Optimal's staff includes qualitative researchers, research analysts, data scientists, evaluators, economists, statisticians, communications specialists, and certified Project Management Professionals (PMP). Our research staff brings domain expertise and experience in health, education, public health, and agriculture. Should the need for more specialized knowledge arise, Optimal and its partners can draw on their vast professional network of researchers to provide technical, operational, and subject-matter expertise. Optimal has strong connections with researchers and specialized centers at the University of Maryland (Department of Nutrition and Food Science) and Michigan State University (Department of Food Science and Human Nutrition).

In 2017, Optimal obtained Level 3 appraisals for the Capability Maturity Model Integration (CMMI) for software development and services. Optimal's standard operating procedures, project management guidelines, records management plans, security plans and other operational guidance and their implementation were assessed to be on par with best practices with international standards. In terms of accounting, Optimal has an approved accounting system and uses Deltek CostPoint. In addition, Optimal has robust infrastructure including Amazon Web Services, JIRA helpdesk, SharePoint, high-speed Internet, high-capacity printers, and statistical and analytics software.



**CMMISVC / 3**<sup>SM</sup>  
Exp. 2020-08-30 / Appraisal #29439



**CMMIDEV / 3**<sup>SM</sup>  
Exp. 2020-08-30 / Appraisal #29439

**Relevant Past Performance**

Optimal has conducted numerous evaluations and studies that are aligned with the following forthcoming FNS solicitations:

- WIC & FMNP Outreach, Innovation, and Modernization Evaluation
- SNAP - Support for Assessment of State Waivers for Demonstration Projects
- Designing a Pilot to Measure the Impact of Restricting SNAP Purchases
- Examining the Use of SNAP-Ed Priority Indicators and Targeted Interventions
- Assessment of Mobile Technologies for Using Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) Benefits
- Assessment of Serving SNAP Applicants and Participants with Limited English Proficiency
- Understanding the Relationship Between Poverty, Well-Being, and Food Security

This section includes brief descriptions of selected contracts that demonstrate Optimal’s experience successfully completing comparable contracts. We consider “extensive” to be over 10-15 years of experience. In addition to our corporate experience with National School Lunch Program (NSLP), Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP), and Summer Food Service Program (SFSP), Optimal has also recently hired senior researchers with demonstrated experience working on FNS evaluations (mostly impact evaluations) on the following topics:

- Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program
- Summer Electronic Benefit Transfer for Children (SEBTC)
- Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC)
- School Breakfast Program (SBP)

Area of Relevant Experience	Degree	Description of Experience
Domain Expertise in SNAP, WIC and Related FNS Programs	Limited	Optimal has experience conducting studies of multiple FNS programs including the Child and Adult Care Food Program, National School Lunch Program, Summer Food and Service Program, and Child and Adult Care Food Program. We do not have corporate past performance on WIC. Nevertheless, Dr. Stephen Bell, our new Adjunct Scholar, has experience conducting studies of WIC while at the Urban Institute and Abt Associates. And Mr. Jacob Klerman has direct experience working on multiple FNS projects including the Summer Food for Children Household-Based Demonstrations on Food Insecurity while he was at Abt Associates.
Domain Expertise in food and nutrition evaluations	Extensive	Conducted multiple food and nutrition studies under the USAID Learning Evaluation Analysis Project. For instance, Optimal designed and implemented the Liberia Feed-the-Future population-based survey that assessed the food and nutritional resources of a nationally representative sample of household in Liberia. For other examples, see the Selected Past Performance section below.
Experience Recruiting and Coordinating Technical Working Groups	Extensive	Optimal has recruited and coordinated dozens of TWGs since 2005 starting with the ED Institute of Education Sciences Administrative and Logistical Services contract.

Area of Relevant Experience	Degree	Description of Experience
Experience Preparing Evaluation Plans for Process and Impact Studies	Extensive	Optimal has conducted comparable process evaluations at many federal government agencies including FNS, USAID, ED, HHS, SBA, and Commerce. Optimal has also conducted impact evaluations that include both quasi-experimental and experimental designs.
Experience Preparing and Piloting Testing Data Collection Instruments	Extensive	Projects with the SBA BPAs and IDIQs (since 2010) have required preparing and pilot testing data collection instruments. For instance, Optimal conducted a survey of 10,000 small firms on the SBA Microloans program.
Experience Preparing OMB PRA ICR Packages	Extensive	Optimal has obtained OMB PRA packages for the SBA (for over ten years), for U.S. ED (since 2005) and for other agencies.
Experience Configuring Secure Web Platforms for Data Collection	Extensive	Optimal has configured and implemented secure web-based platforms at multiple federal government agencies (i.e., CMS, USAID) for those that have obtained Authorizations-to-Operate (ATO) at the FISMA-Low and FISMA-Moderate Levels.
Experience Collecting Data via Multiple Modes	Extensive	Optimal has extensive experience collecting data using web surveys, household surveys (in-person and telephone), conducting in-depth interviews, site visits, focus groups, and desk reviews. Our analysts also have experience creating data platforms (many with ATOs) to collect and harmonize administrative data.
Experience Providing Technical Assistance to State Agencies (around data collection)	Limited	Optimal has conducted multiple studies collecting information from State and Tribal Nations, such as the SFSP Participant and Program Characteristics Study. We have also collected data from quasi-governmental agencies, State grantees, non-profit service providers, and businesses for nationally representative studies.
Experience Designing and Implementing Data Governance and Quality Assurance Protocols	Extensive	Optimal developed protocols and a system for USAID and for CMS to collect, validate, ingest, and curate data for millions of participants participating in quality improvement and reporting projects.
Experience Conducting Qualitative and Quantitative Analyses	Extensive	Optimal has conducted over 300 qualitative and quantitative analysis types of contracts over 20 years. For instance, for USAID, Optimal performed 24+ task orders in over 20 countries. For the SBA, Optimal has conducted these types of work for over 20 task orders.
Experience Preparing Public-Use and Restricted Use Data Files and Documentation	Extensive	Optimal has prepared Public-Use files from over 50 countries for USAID and Optimal has worked with ED RUD data for over 15 years.
Experience Preparing Agency Reports for the General Public	Extensive	Optimal developed the CMS Medicare Ombudsmen Annual Reports to Congress for eight years, Optimal has produced agency reports that are publicly posted for the SBA for over ten years.

<b>Area of Relevant Experience</b>	<b>Degree</b>	<b>Description of Experience</b>
Experience Disseminating Findings to State Agencies, the General Public, and Other Stakeholders	Extensive	For the CMS Ombudsmen Support contract, Optimal provided expertise for Medicaid programs, multiple hurricane outreach sessions to the States and U.S. Territories.
Experience Designing and Implementing Data Visualizations	Extensive	Optimal excels in designing and implementing live, interactive, accessible and user-friendly data visualizations. Our expert team members conduct training and webinars on these topics.

## Selected Staff Biographies

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**Mark Turner, PhD** is a Principal Research Associate who has led efforts on several FNS projects since 2012 including an Evaluation of the Summer Food Service Program Participant Characteristics and the Child and Adult Care Food Program Assessment of Sponsor Tiering Determination. He also has provided project leadership on over 20 task orders for the USAID's Learning, Evaluation and Analysis Program (LEAP) under the Feed the Future initiative.

**Oswaldo Urdapilleta, PhD** is a Principal Research Associate with over 20 years of leading complex quantitative and qualitative research studies. His work has been for FNS, DHHS, DOL and NIST. For FNS, he conducted the FNS Impact of FNS SNAP Online Applications. **Andrey Vinokurov, PhD** is a Senior Research Associate and has over 20 years of experience including projects with FNS. He also has worked as the co-project director on the SFSP Participant Characteristics and the CACFP Assessment of Sponsor Tiering Determination. He has obtained numerous OMB Clearance Package approvals. He is experienced in conducting program evaluations, including quantitative and qualitative methodological design, assessment development, and statistical analysis. He supports Optimal's SBA projects and State of Maryland work with the HSRC.

**Stephen Bell, PhD**, is an Adjunct Scholar who has worked on numerous FNS projects for over 30 years. These projects include an evaluation of the Food Stamp Employment and Training Program, Data Development Initiatives for Research on Food Assistance and Nutrition Programs, an evaluation of the Electronic Benefits Transfer Summer Food Demonstration Evaluation, and an Analysis of the Impact of the Expiration of Time-Limit Waivers on ABAWD Participation.

**Jacob Klerman, M.A.**, a Principal Research Consultant at Optimal, is an economist and evaluator with 35 years of experience doing policy analysis and experimental and non-experimental impact analysis. Mr. Klerman has deep experience across experimental and nonexperimental methods, including running three of the largest experimental studies ever conducted in the United States: the Summer EBT for Children Evaluation (SEBTC) for USDA/FNS, the Reemployment and Eligibility Assessment (REA) Impact Study for USDOL/CEO, and the Health Professions Opportunity Grant 2.0 Program (HPOG-2.0) for USDHHS/ACF/OPRE. He has authored dozens of journal articles, served as an editor of a major evaluation methods journal (*Evaluation Review*), taught econometrics (winning a teaching award), edited a book, and written more than a hundred contractor monographs.

**Andrea Johnson, Ph.D.** is a Research Associate at Optimal. Dr. Johnson is experienced in psychometrics, multiple linear regression analysis, ANOVA, community-based research, participatory research, and action research. Prior to joining Optimal Solutions, Dr. Johnson taught reading, writing, and social studies for ten years in Houston area public schools and then became an instructional coach for three years. While obtaining her Ph.D., Dr. Johnson taught elementary and secondary literacy in the Teacher Education Program and served as a field

supervisor for student teachers. She currently supports Optimal's National Center for Education Statistics NAEP support and SBA projects.

**Ellen McManus, MPH**, is an Associate at Optimal and currently serves as a Project Manager with Optimal's Center for Workforce Development. Ms. McManus has a strong background in Medicaid-funded disability and family support programming, as well as experience in public health and policy research methods. Prior to joining Optimal, Ms. McManus spent six years working in case management for children and adults with disabilities, during which time she successfully managed a caseload of 60 individuals and supervised a team of 8-10 junior case managers. Through this work, Ms. McManus gained community engagement experience by helping families to access and navigate various medical, educational, vocational, and financial services. She earned her master's in public health with a specialization in Community and Behavioral Health; she has extensive training in community-based participatory research as well as program planning and implementation. Additionally, she has carried out several independent research projects using both qualitative and quantitative data collection and analysis techniques to investigate mental health outcomes among middle and high school students.

**Tracye Turner, BA** is the Communications and Data Analytics Director at Optimal. Ms. Turner has 25 years of Federal contract experience including the implementation of enterprise technologies, security protocols, stakeholder communications and project management. She has served as project director for several health projects in areas such as Medicare Advantage quality improvement, social media and Internet research on drug abuse, mobile app use in Opioid Treatment Programs and Medicare Ombudsman Support. She provides senior review to several CMS, HHS and other agency projects in order to ensure quality control in compliance with Federal guidelines such as agency style and writing guidelines, NIST, HIPAA, Section 508, Plain Language, SDLC, CMS XLC and Agile methods. She currently oversees Optimal's operational departments including software development, information technology and communications. Tracye has developed and/or provides guidance on project templates, protocols, standard operating procedures, internal/external systems, internal resources and infrastructure to support project teams. She formerly managed a \$100 million emerging tech department at Northrop Grumman IT in support of civilian agencies. She frequently serves on technology boards for the University and State of Maryland.

**Michael Chipley, Ph.D.**, is a data and system security consultant with over 35 years of experience in program and project management in the areas of cybersecurity; Critical Infrastructure Protection and Analysis; Building Information Modeling (BIM) Technology; and Emergency Management/Disaster Recovery. He is trained as a SANS Global Industrial Control Systems Professional, a Project Management Professional, and a LEED Accredited Professional. He has a depth and breadth of experience with federal contracts and grants; has managed and directed both small and large and complex IT and OT engineering projects and has advanced skills using project management, MS Office suite, geospatial, building information modeling, emergency management, and financial accounting applications software. He has been an active member as a chair or board member in local professional societies and universities, and teaches seminars and courses on IT and OT, security, and building systems convergence.

**Lisa Lin-Freeman, MS** brings over seventeen years of experience in survey methodology, data collection operations, and federal contract management. She has successfully overseen large-scale, multi-year, multi-site, complex research projects, where she has been responsible for managing project resources and timelines to ensure high-quality deliverables for clients such as the US Department of Labor (DOL) and the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services (CMS). Throughout her career, she has gained wide-ranging expertise in survey design and implementation, including the development of systems for computer-assisted telephone interviews (CATI) and multi-mode surveys, as well as developing study protocols and refining questionnaire specifications. Ms. Lin-Freeman earned a B.A. in Economics from Washington and Lee University and an M.A. in Applied Sociology from the University of Maryland Baltimore County.

**Dan Loew, MS**, is an Associate at Optimal with 15 years of experience mainly in survey operations. Mr. Loew has led data collection efforts for multiple large-scale surveys while at NORC. Mr. Loew served on the Survey of Earned Doctorates (SED) team from 2004-2008 and has experience in statistical weighting, nonresponse bias analysis, hypothesis testing, data table template building and reporting, and data quality assurance. Mr. Loew also has extensive data science knowledge and expertise; he has recently completed intensive data science and machine learning training and obtained data science certifications.



## Selected Past Performance References

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### Policy Research and Analytics

#### **Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP) Assessment of Sponsor Tiering**

**Determination Client:** Food and Nutrition Service, **Description:** The CACFP provides reimbursements for nutritious meals and snacks served in family day care homes, childcare centers, and other participating facilities and programs. Optimal conducted an assessment that provides for 2014 estimates of the number of FDCH misclassified by sponsoring agencies into the wrong tier, and the resulting erroneous payments for meals and snacks reimbursed at the incorrect rate. Optimal collected and analyzed data from State agencies and sponsors. State agencies provided the lists of sponsors and their FDCHs, which was used for the sampling, as well as provided schools' free or reduced-price (F/RP) percentages for the purpose of determining FDCH's eligibility. The Sponsors provided lists of their homes for the sampling, detailed meal counts for each sampled homes, and verification documents for the homes that could not be independently verified by Optimal. The client indicates solid performance but the CPARS has not been completed.

**Website Monitoring of Part D Benefits Client:** Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services **Description:** CMS has broad oversight of Medicare prescription drug plans that contract directly with CMS to provide Part D drug coverage to Medicare beneficiaries. Optimal and CMS developed an interactive, web-based tool to assess the availability of 20 specific elements required by the MMGs. The project management team tracked the progress of the reviewers on each website in real time through an online interactive database that captured and stored assessment data. The database was linked to the dashboard that presented the overall progress of the data collection. This dashboard also calculated and displayed the overall percent agreement among the primary and secondary reviewers, the overall and pair-wise Kappa coefficients, as well as average completion times. These data were presented for each reviewer, assessed plan, and the assessed requirement.

**Moving to Work Demonstration Program Client:** U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development **Description:** As the Technical Assistance and Program Support Contractor, Optimal provided HUD with a variety of services to assist in the execution of the Demonstration. Specifically, Optimal monitored PHAs for compliance with MTW Agreements and HUD rules, conducted annual monitoring site visits, maintained the content on the MTW website, provided as-needed technical assistance to specific PHAs, and assisted HUD in collecting data and evaluations of the Demonstration's outcomes. Optimal also prepared training materials on a variety of topics and organized the content and logistics for the annual MTW conference.



### **USAID Education Strategy Secondary Analysis for Results Tracking (SART) Client:** U.S. Agency for International

**Description:** Optimal collected, analyzed, and reported on the \$85M per year USAID Education Strategy for the USAID SART contract. SART Ed was used by USAID Missions, implementing partners, and education ministries to submit assessment data and supporting documentation based on role-based access based on templates designed by Optimal. Optimal configured

the Revelo™ suite of tools to develop and deploy the SART Ed system, a centralized web-based platform that is used to collect assessment data, programmatic information, and documentation from 50+ countries. Optimal reviewed the data and documentation received for quality and completeness and completed checklists to profile the scope of the reading intervention and the design of the evaluation and create standardized activity and data profiles in non-proprietary PDF format that is section 508 compatible. Optimal then used the ingestion module of the SART Ed system to harmonize and standardize the reading assessment data to a standardized format and is ingested into the SART superset which was then used to create non-proprietary public use data file (PUF) in .CSV format as well as detailed technical documentation that included codebooks and guidelines on how to use the data. Optimal packaged the standardized PUF data and technical documentation as well as the activity and data profiles along with evaluation reports of the activity to create a PUF packet. Optimal then published the PUF packets on the public website of the SART Ed system that allowed users to select and download the packets by selecting attributes from a dynamic list or by exploring an interactive map developed using D3.JS. Optimal not only developed a centralized data platform, but also developed the analytic capacity of the agency to understand and leverage their data to inform the performance of their education strategy.

**Office of the Medicare Ombudsman Support Contract, Client:** Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services **Description:** Optimal was the program support contractor for the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services' (CMS') Office of the Medicare Ombudsman (OMO) for nine years, supporting the OMO's mission of improving Medicare for beneficiaries. In support of the OPS contract, Optimal uses CMS claims data from the Integrated Data Repository (IDR) to analyze Medicare claims patterns to inform CMS on beneficiary's needs, complaints, and feedback to shape current and future Medicare policies. Optimal accesses the data managed by CMS using a SAS Enterprise Business Intelligence (SEBI) tool on a Teradata data repository and conducts rigorous analysis in the SEBI environment and reports findings using dynamic data visualizations. Optimal provided support to the Issues Management task which was heavily engaged with the Stakeholder engagement task where potential issues affecting Medicare beneficiaries are identified through casework, inquiry and complaint data trends, and stakeholder outreach. In order to provide the adequate support, Optimal used the Issues Management Database (IMD) which is a comprehensive repository within CMS' enterprise version of Salesforce.com that tracks issues impacting beneficiaries and the progress toward their resolution. The system includes reports and a dashboard using both Salesforce.com native reporting functionality.



**CMS Learning System Data Management (LSDM), Client:** Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Innovation (CMMI), **Description:** CMMI develops, tests, and implements new health care models that improve health care delivery, provide better health status for Medicare and Medicaid beneficiaries and other individuals, and lower health care costs. Learning system support the successful implementation of innovation model interventions by sharing lessons learned and providing technical assistance. As the LSDM contractor, Optimal has designed and implemented processes

to collect data from learning system contractors. The basis of LSDM reporting framework is a data dictionary that defines cross-model concepts and terminology to standardize variables and metrics across models. Optimal created tools and procedures to enable collection, analysis, and viewing of that data. Model learning system contractors submit data by completing an Excel-based reporting template that is based on the LSDM data dictionary. The reviewed data informs an online dashboard visualizing summary and analytical results which users may splice and filter across a series of variables. Optimal developed an LSDM reporting system, DMARS, using its Revelo™ suite of tools, for monthly data collection regarding the learning events occurring within each model, and to capture the activities occurring at those events as well as the organizations and individuals attending those events. The framework is rooted in a data dictionary that defines cross-model concepts and terminology to standardize variables and metrics across models, and then a procedure for collecting, analyzing, and viewing that data via dynamic dashboards. This DMARS dashboard allows CMMI to get a monthly snapshot of the model learning system events and to view learning system events in the aggregate based on quarterly and annual summaries. The data contained in the database, and presented through the online dashboard, is used by CMMI to fulfill Government Performance and Results Act (GPRA) reporting requirements and is used to correlate learning system engagement with model participant outcomes to assess the extent of the diffusion of the knowledge of and adoption of the new healthcare models. This system is FedRAMP, NIST and Section 508 compliant.

**Learning Evaluation Analysis Project (LEAP), Client:** U.S. Agency for International Development, **Description:** Optimal conducted economic evaluations and provided analysis support services for the overall operational objectives of the USAID Bureau for Economic Growth, Education and Environment. Optimal completed 26 task orders in 22 countries including the West Bank/Gaza, Rwanda, Uganda, Ethiopia, Liberia, Nepal, Macedonia, Guatemala, Honduras, Indonesia, Armenia, Ghana, El Salvador, and the Dominican Republic. For instance, Optimal conducted the Rwanda Nutrition, Behavior Change, and Social Marketing Cost Effectiveness Analysis. The project team analyzed the cost-effectiveness of breastfeeding on both infants and mothers in terms of nutritional status indicators as well as disability-adjusted life years (DALYs) and/ or quality-adjusted life years (QALYs). Indicators of effectiveness included reductions in the diarrhea morbidity and diarrhea mortality rates of infants, reductions in breast cancer rate in women, DALY gain and QALY gain. As part of the study, the team also conducted a beneficiary and sensitivity analysis to identify stakeholders that would benefit most from the program and any that may be at a loss.

## Education Statistics Support Institute Network (ESSIN): Assessment Division Support,



**Client:** National Center for Education Statistics, U.S. Department of Education, **Description:** Optimal designed and implemented a web-based portal, State Assessment Education Policy (SAEP) repository, to catalog state educational assessments and education policies using the NCES Common Education Data Standards (CEDS) as the baseline taxonomy. Data elements cataloged include:

- names/consortia of state assessments used;
- state assessment results (percentages at different achievement levels);
- state assessment participation and exclusion rates as well as sample sizes;
- the mode of state assessments (e.g., computer, paper-based, or hybrid; and whether the mode is subject-based and/or grade-based);
- the content being tested on state assessments (percentage of items devoted to a particular content area); and
- the adoption and/or implementation of particular education policies at the national and state levels.

The SAEP repository is a tailored implementation of the Revelo™ software-as-a-service (SaaS) that builds on the existing Revelo™ codebase and is hosted in NCES’s Amazon Web Services (AWS) FedRAMP environment.



## Non-Experimental Design Studies

### Evaluation of Summer Food Service Program (SFSP) Participant Characteristics **Client:**

Food and Nutrition Service, **Description:** This study is evaluating the current operations of the USDA’s SFSP. The program supports children’s nutrition through reimbursements to participating institutions for meals meeting USDA dietary guidelines<sup>1</sup> to ensure that children who benefit from the NSLP and the SBP do not experience a nutrition gap during the summer. Optimal is conducting a process evaluation using a mixed methods approach consisting of web surveys and telephone calls to collect data on all 53 States participating in SFSP, as well as large, nationally representative samples of sponsors, and sites, augmented by qualitative data collection via one-on-one interviews with parents/caregivers of SFSP participants and non-participants. The data collection also involved States administrative data on characteristics and program outcomes for the sponsors and sites, and FNS administrative data on SFSP, NSLP, and SBP participation over time.

### Implementation of the Credit Enhancement for Charter Schools Facilities **Client:** U.S.

Department of Education **Description:** The U.S. Department of Education (ED) established, in 2001, the Credit Enhancement for Charter School Facilities Program (the Program). The Program makes available grants on a competitive basis to eligible entities—state or local

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<sup>1</sup> Richard B. Russell National School Lunch Act, Sections 9, 13 and 14, as amended, 42 U.S.C. 1758, 1761 and 1762a.

government, private nonprofits, or consortia—which use Program funds for credit enhancements so that lenders will make loans. Optimal conducted an assessment of this project. Please see the final report: <https://www2.ed.gov/rschstat/eval/choice/charter-school-facilities/final-report.pdf>.

**Evaluation of Microloan Program Outcomes Client:** SBA, Office of Program Performance, Analysis, and Evaluation **Description:** Optimal examined the job creation/retention, revenue growth, and business tenure outcomes of Microloan program borrowers. The report investigated how these business outcomes vary by business characteristics (i.e., business type, industry, geographic region, and underrepresented population) and emphasized how the impacts varied when mediated by factors such as assistance type, proficiency level, frequency, duration, and delivery mode. Optimal designed survey instruments stratified statistically representative samples and collected data for the evaluation.

**U.S. Small Business Administration BPA Evaluation Task Order Client:** U.S. Small Business Administration **Description:** SBA has initiated the following task orders:

1. 7(j) and 8(a) Program Evaluations
2. Logic Models for SBA Economic Development Programs
3. All Small Mentor Protégé Projection Evaluation
4. Emerging Leaders (inner city mentorship) Program Evaluation
5. Regional Clusters Evaluation
6. Procurement Scorecard Evaluation
7. HUBZone Economic Impact Evaluation
8. Women-Owned Small Business (WOSB) NAICS Analysis
9. WOSB Logic Model and Measures Development
10. Community Navigators Pilot Program Evaluation
11. Customer Experience Landscape Analysis and Toolkit
12. Community Development Financial Institutions (CDFI) and Minority Depository Institution (MDI) Lender Participation in SBA Capital Programs

## Quasi-Experimental Design Studies

**Consolidating Previous MEP Studies Leveraging Census Data, Client:** NIST, Manufacturing Extension Partnership (MEP). **Prime:** Optimal. **Description:** Optimal has designed and is currently conducting a quasi-experimental study to assess how learning activities and network ties impact small and mid-sized manufacturing establishments' performance. This study uses secondary, survey, administrative datasets, including micro-level Census data, Longitudinal Business Database (LBD). Optimal's researchers link the establishment level data using fuzzy matching techniques and employ difference-in-difference techniques in estimating the impact of learning activities and networks has on business outcomes in comparison to otherwise similar manufacturing establishments that were not part of these same types of learning activities and networks. This analysis is taking place at the Maryland Federal Statistical Research Data Center.

**Assessment of the 602 Non-Profit Disposition Program Client:** U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development **Description:** Optimal prepared three case study reports that describe the operations and socio-economic conditions in each of the sites, as well as a cross-site report

that describes the evaluation strategy and the prospective statistical analysis developed for future evaluations. These reports also discuss near-term progress of the 602 Program in the three sites and provide readers with a general understanding of the operations and potential benefits of the 602 program.

**SBA’s Scale-Up America Program**, Client: Small Business Administration (SBA). Prime: Optimal. Description: Scale-Up American was designed to help small firms with high potential “scale up” and grow their businesses so that they will provide more jobs and have a greater economic impact, both locally and nationally. Optimal wrote the quasi-experimental design study and methodological approach and collected primary data for the Scale-Up America Initiative evaluation. Optimal then transferred the design study and data to the Center for Economic Studies (CES) at the Census Bureau to conduct the study using restricted-use micro-data (i.e., Business Register).

**HUBZone Early Engagement Initiative Evaluation**, Client: SBA. Prime: Optimal. Description. In October 2017, the HUBZone program launched an Early Engagement Initiative. The purpose of the Early Engagement Initiative is to improve the quality of submitted applications, increase the likelihood that firms applying for HUBZone certification are qualified small business concerns, and identify and fast-track substantially “procurement-ready” businesses at the time of application submission. This formative and outcome evaluation will provide the SBA with an understanding of the implementation and effectiveness of the Early Engagement Initiative. This QED uses propensity score matching to determine the initiative’s effectiveness in reaching the intended program outcomes, identify and describe the procurement readiness selection criteria used by SBA partners (PTACs, District Offices, and Resource Partners), and determine how they relate to winning prime federal contracts.

**Evaluation of 8(a) Certified Firms**, Client: SBA, Prime: Optimal. Description: To help provide a level playing field for socially and economically disadvantaged small businesses, the government limits competition for certain contracts to businesses that participate in the 8(a) program. To assess the performance of the 8(a) program, the SBA requested a rigorous program evaluation to understand the market for goods and services demanded by federal agencies and those supplied by 8(a) businesses, as well as to examine the performance of 8(a) businesses in obtaining federal contracts as they progress from the initial development stage to the transitional stage of the program and how they fare once they graduate. Optimal developed a quasi-experimental model by identifying businesses similar to those that joined the 8(a) program using statistical matching and conducted time-to-event or survival analysis to answer selected research questions.

**7(j) Training Program for 8(a) Participants Evaluation Report**, Client: SBA, Prime: Optimal. Description: The 7(j) online training program is a resource provided by the Small Business Administration (SBA) to all 8(a) participants since Fiscal Year (FY) 2013. Through training and education, the program helps 8(a) businesses by enhancing their capacity to obtain federal contracts. Optimal developed a quasi-experimental model using statistical matching to test the first hypothesis and answer the overall research question. The project team filtered the master dataset to keep only small business on their first year of the 8(a) program during FY2014-

FY2017. Then the project team employed a statistical matching technique called Coarsened Exact Matching (CEM) to match 8(a) business that did not take 7(j) training to those that did based on select business characteristics because 8(a) businesses that participate in 7(j) training likely have different business characteristics than the population of 8(a) businesses that did not. Comparing the outcomes of a matched set of businesses improved the validity of the model so that it better isolates the impact of 7(j) training. The project team then estimated the Sample Average Treatment Effect on the Treated (SATT) to assess whether 8(a) businesses with 7(j) training have a higher likelihood of obtaining a federal contract than those that did not.

**Virginia Medicaid’s Children’s Mental Health (CMH) Program.** Client: Virginia Department of Medical Assistance Services (DMAS). Prime: Optimal. Description: Through a demonstration waiver granted to Virginia and nine other states, eligible children in psychiatric residential treatment facilities (PRTFs) could have chosen to transition into community-based care that is funded through Medicaid. To assess the efficacy of community-based care, Optimal conducted a quasi-experimental evaluation by comparing the mental functioning of children receiving community-based care with those in a comparison group remaining in residential care. The goal of the project was to determine whether mental functioning improved, or at least remained the same, when children were moved from residential care to community-based care.

**Healthy Marriage and Responsible Fatherhood Grant: Rigorous Performance Measure and Continuous Quality Improvement Client:** Housing Opportunities Commission of Montgomery County (HOCMC) **Description:** Over the last five years, Optimal has been leading the rigorous program evaluation and Continuous Quality Improvement (CQI) efforts of the HOC’s Fatherhood Initiative funded under the New Pathways for Fathers and Families Grant Program HHS-2015-ACF-OFA-FK-0993. This program in part aims to incentivize father’s engagement in public housing through incentives which include financial ones. In support of the Fatherhood Initiative, Optimal conducted a process evaluation and operationalized performance standards for the program; helped HOC develop data collection instruments; assisted in collecting and harmonizing data from different administrative data stores; and conducted complex statistical analysis to measure the effectiveness of the program as well as cost-benefit analysis to estimate the net social benefit of the program. Optimal’s holistic approach to program evaluation and CQI was instrumental in helping HOC improve program enrollment, increase program completion rates, and recruit target fathers in need of service. Moreover, it allowed Optimal to tell a unified story of the performance of the Fatherhood Initiative by highlighting the role of staff engagement, case management services, incentive structures, completion of workshops, and continued education and vocational training of participants on the short- and longer-term outcomes of the initiative.

## **Experimental Design Studies**

**Evaluation of Charter School Impacts,** Client: National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance (NCEE), Institute of Education Sciences (IES), U.S. Department of Education (ED). Prime: Mathematica Policy Research, Subcontractor: Optimal. Description: Nationally representative evaluation based on an experimental design in which charter school applicants were assigned by lottery to groups that were either admitted or not admitted to the

schools. Optimal led efforts to recruit charter schools to participate in the study, provided technical assistance to the participating charter schools in conducting admission lotteries, and obtain and conducted quality assurance reviews of the school administrative records (enrollment records and standardized test scores).

**Talent Transfer Initiative: Attracting and Retaining High-Performing Teachers in Low-Performing Schools**, Client: National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance (NCEE), Institute of Education Sciences (IES), U.S. Department of Education (ED). Prime: Mathematica Policy Research, Subcontractor: Optimal. Description: Known as the Talent Transfer Initiative (TTI), the intervention identified a district's highest-performing teachers and offered them incentives for moving to and staying in its low-performing schools for at least two years. High-performing teachers were those with the highest value-added scores over three years. Low-performing schools were defined as those with the lowest test scores in the district. The study focused on reading/language arts and math instruction in grades 3 to 8. The intervention was pilot tested in one district, then scaled up to include seven districts for the 2009–2010 school year and three more starting in the 2010–2011 school year. The RCT randomly assigned teachers to either treatment or control groups. Optimal led efforts to recruit school districts to participate in the study and obtain and conducted quality assurance reviews of the school administrative records (enrollment records and standardized test scores).

**Supporting Healthy Marriages (SHM)**. Client: Administration for Child and Families, U.S. Department of Health & Human Services. Prime: MDRC. Subcontractor: Optimal, Abt, Child Trends, Public Strategies. Description: The SHM project was the first large-scale, multisite, multiyear, rigorous test of marriage education programs for low-income married couples. Optimal design and implemented the management information system (MIS) that was used by program sites to facilitate in-take and case management. Optimal configured the MIS to facilitate real-time random assignment of couples to control and treatment groups during the in-take phase.