

A Partnership to Enhance the Use of Evidence in Government Decision Making: The NC Office of Strategic Partnerships and the NC Department of Adult Correction

By Tim Griffith & Olu Rouse¹

The NC Office of Strategic Partnerships ([OSP](#)) and the North Carolina Department of Adult Correction ([NCDAC](#)) are partnering on an initiative to help NCDAC develop evidence to inform its policy, programmatic, and operational decisions. This article describes the process and lessons learned from NCDAC and OSP to develop the NCDAC Priority Questions Research Agenda (PQRA) between March 2023 and May 2024. This interagency partnership is one example of the growing culture of evidence-based decision making in North Carolina state government. The end of the article includes a list of agency partners and deliverables to date and anticipated. This article contains the following sections:

- **Initiating the Partnership**
- **Developing NCDAC's Priority Questions Research Agenda**
- **NCDAC and OSP Launch Research to Answer Priority Questions**
- **Replicating the Government-Research Partnership Process**
- **Long-Term Impact for NCDAC and North Carolina**
- **Resources and Links**

Initiating the Partnership

The mission of NCDAC is for all Divisions of the Department to protect the public by collaboratively focusing on rehabilitation, protection, innovation, accountability, and professionalism. NCDAC is the second largest North Carolina state government agency with almost 19,000 positions and an annual budget of approximately \$2 billion. NCDAC is responsible for approximately 31,000 people who are incarcerated in state prisons and more than 75,000 who are on supervised probation, parole, or post-release supervision.

The North Carolina General Assembly established NCDAC as a new Cabinet agency in 2021. The agency began operations on January 1, 2023.

A priority for NCDAC in its first year was to develop an agency-wide strategic plan. This was important to developing NCDAC's agency identity and organizational culture in its rehabilitation, reentry, and public safety missions.

One **key goal** for NCDAC's 2023-2025 strategic plan was to set and define key areas in which the agency will generate research and use evidence to inform agency decisions.



We sought OSP's support early during our department's formation because we were still building out our internal research capability and didn't yet have the structure in place to manage development of our Priority Questions Research Agenda. OSP's expertise in this area provided a timely opportunity to initiate the process without waiting for our Innovation Section, who ultimately will manage this process, to be established."

- Mike Daniska, Chief of Staff, NCDAC

Just after the NC Office of State Budget and Management [issued guidance](#) in January 2023 for all North Carolina state government agencies to include “Priority Questions” in their 2023-2025 strategic plans, NCDAC was starting to develop its first strategic plan.

The OSP-NCDAC partnership stemmed from discussions between the two about research support that NCDAC needed to help meet its goals in its first years. In March 2023, OSP and NCDAC formalized a partnership.

What are Priority Questions?



Priority Questions are questions, that when answered, position an agency for optimal performance and outcomes. The answers can directly inform strategic operational and policy decisions by agency leadership and staff.



“NCDAC was in the process of hiring and onboarding staff in its first months of operation as a stand-alone Cabinet-agency with several positions in the sections of Strategic Management and Innovation not yet created or filled. OSP provided, and continues to provide, research capacity to NCDAC through the dedicated time of its Evidence Advisor and other OSP staff.”

- Mike Daniska, Chief of Staff, NCDAC

Since then, OSP has provided, and continues to provide, research capacity to NCDAC - through dedicated time and expertise of its Evidence Advisor, Director, Doctoral Associate, and others - to identify agency Priority Questions and develop a NCDAC PQRA Action Plan to answer those questions.

Developing NCDAC’s Priority Questions Research Agenda

By March 2023, NCDAC had identified five key agency strategic goals that would provide the framework for its [2023-2025 strategic plan](#).

- **Goal 1:** Support Our Employees
- **Goal 2:** Safely Manage and Support Offenders from Custody through Reentry
- **Goal 3:** Strengthen Safety and Security at All NCDAC Locations
- **Goal 4:** Operate Effectively and Efficiently
- **Goal 5:** Increase Transparency of NCDAC’s Missions and Operations

OSP and NCDAC convened a core team of staff from each organization that worked together to identify key internal and external stakeholders to meet with and discuss their perspectives and input for research priorities for NCDAC. From NCDAC, this included Chief of Staff Mike Daniska, then Deputy Secretary for Strategy, Innovation, and Analysis Pamela Walker, and Strategic Planning Coordinator Christopher Rich. For OSP, this included Evidence Advisors Tim Griffith and Kaitlin Anderson, Doctoral Associate Ruth Wygle, Director Jenni Owen, Undergraduate Interns Lori Ko and Efiotu Jagun, and Graduate Intern Caleb Shuda. These individuals provided support for the collection and analysis of information from internal and external stakeholder listening sessions as well as strategic guidance and support to the overall partnership between OSP and NCDAC.

OSP used NCDAC’s five strategic goals as a framework for listening sessions, interviews, and online surveys conducted with NCDAC agency staff to identify Priority Questions most important to the agency. **OSP held seven listening sessions across NCDAC’s major business units, which are:**

- | | |
|--------------------------------------|---|
| 1. Institutions (Prisons) | 5. Comprehensive Health Services |
| 2. Community Supervision | 6. Administration |
| 3. Rehabilitation and Reentry | 7. Operations |
| 4. Educational Services | |



These listening sessions and interviews consisted primarily of division directors and managers. OSP also worked closely with NCDAC’s All In Committee, a staff led peer group, to solicit input from a broad range of staff at all levels of the agency through a survey and nine one-on-one interviews.

In its listening sessions, interviews, and survey with NCDAC staff, OSP asked individuals about their daily work activities, operations, and programs run by the agency. The OSP team asked NCDAC staff to identify areas where they had questions about whether something in their job was working well (or not) and how did they know if it was working. OSP asked NCDAC staff about times when they made decisions and felt like they didn’t have all the information they wanted, and to identify the information they wish they had known when making a program, policy, or operational decision.

OSP and NCDAC used the responses to these questions to identify potential Priority Questions and how the answers to those questions could help the agency achieve its strategic goals.

Following the interviews, in May and June 2023, OSP staff synthesized the input from listening sessions, interviews, and survey, which led to identifying 40 potential Priority Questions, 10 of which NCDAC decided to include in its 2023-2025 agency strategic plan. The 10 selected Priority Questions were those that aligned best to NCDAC's strategic goals that were likely to produce the most impactful and useful information for agency staff.

In addition to obtaining internal agency staff input on NCDAC’s Priority Questions, NCDAC and OSP determined that getting feedback from external stakeholders was key to ensuring the Priority Questions were relevant to the broad array of entities the agency works with and partners around rehabilitation, reentry, and public safety.

In August 2023, NCDAC and OSP invited representatives of three groups in state government (the Task Force for Racial Equity in Criminal Justice ([TREC](#)), the State Reentry Council Collaborative ([SRCC](#)), and the Sentencing and Policy Advisory Commission ([SPAC](#))) to participate in virtual listening sessions to obtain feedback on the 10 Priority Questions included in NCDAC’s Strategic Plan. NCDAC and OSP identified these groups for feedback on the agency’s Priority Questions because they are established groups representing cross-sections of the partners the agency works with on criminal justice, rehabilitation, reentry, and public safety issues. OSP also conducted a survey of members of each group to collect feedback from those who were unable to attend a listening session or who preferred to share feedback anonymously.

NCDAC and OSP then revised and ranked the 10 Priority Questions based on input and recommendations from external stakeholders and agency leadership. The final 10 Priority Questions identified by NCDAC served as the basis for the NCDAC PQRA Action Plan that NCDAC published in January 2024.

The [NCDAC PQRA Action Plan](#) lays out NCDAC's Priority Questions organized by Strategic Goal, with details for each Priority Question, including the background and motivation for the Priority Question, a brief description of proposed evidence building activities and timing, and anticipated challenges for answering the Priority Question.



Embarking on the PQRA process has been a really eye-opening experience. Working with the OSP staff and hearing from a wide variety of our staff about the questions they want answers to, and they feel will help them do their jobs better, has been incredibly informative. The benefits of this process to NCDAC and ultimately the general public are unlimited.”

- Pamela Walker, Deputy Secretary (former), Strategy, Innovation, and Analysis, NCDAC

NCDAC and OSP Launch Research to Answer Priority Questions

Starting in September 2023 while OSP and NCDAC were finalizing the PQRA Action Plan, NCDAC and OSP worked together to implement research projects to answer the agency's Priority Questions. The projects focused on evaluating the effectiveness of its rehabilitation and reentry programming, and an assessment of recent programs and initiatives to improve NCDAC employee wellness and engagement.

OSP and NCDAC followed OSP's standard process for identifying external research support for state agency research needs. In November 2023, NCDAC posted three of the agency's Priority Questions as project opportunities on OSP's [North Carolina Project Portal](#). The Project Portal features opportunities for partnering with state agencies on their research needs and information about how to express interest in pursuing those opportunities.

In January and February 2024, NCDAC and OSP hosted two research partner interest meetings to discuss the project opportunities with 54 interested researchers from 26 different colleges, universities, and state agencies across North Carolina. Following the meetings, NCDAC invited researchers to submit project descriptions for consideration. The project descriptions included information about proposed scope, budget, data needs, and more.

[Rehabilitation and Reentry Project](#)

For the rehabilitation and reentry Priority Question, NCDAC is partnering with the NC Department of Commerce Labor & Economic Analysis Division (LEAD) and the NC Sentencing and Policy Advisory Commission (SPAC) to evaluate the effectiveness of specific rehabilitation and reentry programs and services. NCDAC anticipates being able to use the results from analyses from LEAD and SPAC to inform its rehabilitation and reentry services and adjust those services to better meet the needs of individuals they serve.

Employee Wellness & Employee Engagement Projects

For the employee wellness and engagement Priority Questions, NCDAC is partnering with the Health Interventions in the Legal System Lab (HILS Lab) at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill School of Social Work to conduct a needs assessment for the NCDAC Support, Hope, Inclusion, Empowerment, Loyalty, and Dedication (SHIELD) Program and a review of the methodology and data collection activities NCDAC uses to measure employee engagement. NCDAC expects preliminary results from this project in early 2025. OSP also established memorandums of agreement between UNC-Chapel Hill and NCDAC to expedite the contracting processes to start on this project more quickly than the typical state procurement process.



The OSP research partnership process was invaluable, not only for sparking innovative ideas, but also as a foundational step in forging enduring partnerships with the research community.”

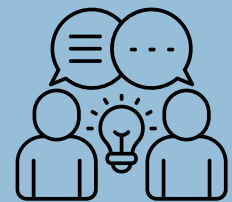
- Zachariah McLawhorn, Director of Innovation, NCDAC

Replicating the Government-Research Partnership Process

The work and products from the partnership between NCDAC and OSP to develop the NCDAC PQRA Action Plan can serve as a guide for other agencies in North Carolina (and other states and federal agencies) who wish to identify key agency research priorities to build a culture of evidence-based decision making. **Key lessons learned and challenges include:**

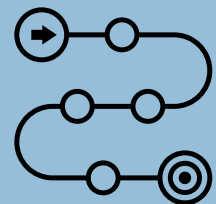
1

Develop a thoughtful and systematic process to engage internal agency staff to identify Priority Questions: OSP and NCDAC developed a comprehensive project plan at the beginning of the partnership to identify agency Priority Questions that would drive decision making in the agency. The systematic nature in seeking feedback from different “levels” of the agency through the listening sessions, interviews, and online surveys ensured that the Priority Questions that ultimately ended up in the PQRA Action Plan were relevant to the agency’s strategic priorities.



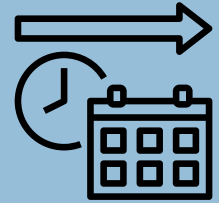
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Ground agency Priority Questions in practical, real-world use cases to minimize research jargon and discuss how the information will be used: OSP and NCDAC used the agency’s five strategic goals as the frame of reference when asking questions of staff about division-specific knowledge gaps and data needs. OSP asked NCDAC staff questions about specific programs and areas where better information was needed to ensure the Priority Questions and the evidence building activities described in the PQRA Action Plan would provide actionable and useful information to improve agency operations.



3

Start working on answering agency Priority Questions before publishing formal “research agenda”: While OSP and NCDAC engaged in a systematic and deliberate process to identify agency Priority Questions, one lesson learned is that work on Priority Questions can start as soon as there is a clear consensus from all stakeholders about the need for better evidence and data. This spurred NCDAC and OSP to work together to get the three previously discussed research project opportunities on the NC Project Portal in November 2023, two months prior to finishing the PQRA Action Plan. Getting started can show the agency staff who provided input on how their feedback is resulting in more data and evidence to address their information needs.



4

Communicate regularly with staff on the progress the agency has made in answering the Priority Questions: It is important for the leaders of these types of engagements to share the final set of research priorities for the agency with the internal and external stakeholders who provided input on the priorities. Moreover, it is important to share the deliverables and results from research and evaluation activities as they become available with the stakeholders so they can use the information for their own policy and programmatic decisions.



Long-Term Impact for NCDAC and North Carolina

The evidence building activities NCDAC and OSP have underway and planned are and will continue to lead to more informed decision making from the agency about practices, programs, and policies. The partnership is helping to build a culture of evidence within NCDAC and is strengthening the agency’s internal capacity to generate and use evidence.



While findings from our priority research activities will fuel innovations and enhancements in key programs and department operations, the biggest impact we expect to see is a strengthening of our collective culture of using evidence-based practices and research insights.”

- Zachariah McLawhorn, Director of Innovation. NCDAC

Government agencies, researchers, and philanthropic partners interested in supporting and responding to agencies’ research questions can learn more about OSP’s partnerships process by exploring the many resources on the [OSP website](#) or contacting OSP at partnerships@osbm.nc.gov.

Resources and Links

NCDAC PQRA Development Timeline

(note while activities are presented in chronological order, many activities occurred concurrently)

March 2023	Formalized partnership between OSP and NCDAC to identify research priorities for agency.
April-June 2023	Engaged NCDAC staff to identify agency Priority Questions through listening sessions, interviews, and online surveys.
July 2023	Produced NCDAC Priority Questions Interim Report identifying 10 Priority Questions for NCDAC Strategic Plan.
August 2023	Engaged SRCC, TREC, and SPAC to solicit feedback on NCDAC Priority Questions.
September-October 2023	Updated NCDAC Priority Questions based on SRCC, TREC, and SPAC feedback.
November 2023	Posted three NCDAC research opportunities to the NC Project Portal related to rehabilitation and reentry, employee wellness, and employee engagement.
January 2024	Published NCDAC PQRA Action Plan; Held NCDAC rehabilitation and reentry researcher interest meeting.
February 2024	Held employee wellness and employee engagement researcher interest meeting.
March - April 2024	NCDAC selects NC Department of Commerce LEAD and NC SPAC as research partners for rehabilitation and reentry Priority Question. NCDAC selects Health Interventions in the Legal System Lab (HILS Lab) at the UNC-Chapel Hill School of Social Work for employee wellness and engagement Priority Questions.
May - June 2024	NCDAC and LEAD kickoff impact evaluation of rehabilitation and reentry programs operated by NCDAC. NCDAC and HILS Lab kick off SHIELD Needs Assessment.

Deliverables

Completed

1. [NCDAC PQRA Action Plan \(January 2024\)](#).
2. Research Project Opportunities posted to the NC Project Portal
 - How effective are NCDAC rehabilitation, programming, and reentry practices at reducing recidivism and improving post-release outcomes? ([Link](#))
 - What are NCDAC staff needs related to peer and behavioral/mental health supports? How can the SHIELD program provide these supports to improve employee mental health? ([Link](#))
 - What steps can NCDAC take to improve the methodology and data collection activities it uses to measure employee engagement, morale, job stress, and other factors related to staff decisions to stay with or leave the agency? ([Link](#))

Upcoming

1. Completed quasi-experimental impact evaluation of NCDAC reentry and rehabilitation programs (expected mid-2024)
2. Review of NCDAC employee engagement methodology (expected August 2024)
3. Completed SHIELD Needs Assessment (expected late 2024)

NCDAC Divisions Engaged in PQRA Development

Many divisions of NCDAC participated in and contributed to the OSP government research partnership process to develop the PQRA. These divisions are listed below:

1. Institutions (Prisons)
2. Community Supervision
3. Rehabilitation and Reentry
4. Educational Services
5. Comprehensive Health Services
6. Administration

External Stakeholder Groups Engaged in PQRA Development

The three entities below all participated in the OSP government research partnership process to develop the PQRA.

1. Task Force for Racial Equity in Criminal Justice ([TREC](#))
2. State Reentry Council Collaborative ([SRCC](#))
3. Sentencing and Policy Advisory Commission ([SPAC](#))

NC Office of Strategic Partnership Relevant Resources

The NC Office of Strategic Partnerships develops, launches, and enhances partnerships between state government and North Carolina's research and philanthropic sectors. Numerous OSP resources are available on [OSP's website](#). A few relevant resources are listed below:

1. [Guide to Identifying Potential Partners for Government-Research Partnerships](#)
2. [Monthly Connect Series](#)
 - [Members of the North Carolina Cabinet and Council of State Reflect Back and Look Forward](#)
 - [Interagency Partnerships to Address Complex Challenges](#)
3. [About Evidence](#)

Acknowledgements

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The North Carolina Office of Strategic Partnerships (OSP) develops, launches, and enhances partnerships between state government and North Carolina's research and philanthropic sectors.

OSP works with state government and non-governmental partners on priority issues, develops and convenes networks of public sector and research experts, and provides learning and engagement opportunities. These efforts help to deepen connections between North Carolina state government and external research experts and to increase state government's internal capacity to generate and use evidence to improve policy and programmatic functions.



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