

Broadband Development

Topic Selection Background Information

March 2024

Program Overview	The Office of Broadband Development within the Department of Employment and Economic Development (DEED) administers federal and state grants that promote adequate internet access for all Minnesotans. The 2016 Legislature set a statutory goal that, by 2026, all Minnesota homes and businesses should have access to a broadband provider offering adequate upload and download speeds.
Original Evaluation Questions	To what extent has the funding to develop broadband infrastructure been awarded competitively and through a transparent process? What has been the overall process for developing broadband across the state, and has it utilized the most current technology?
Revised Questions	To what extent has state funding to develop broadband infrastructure been awarded competitively and through a transparent process? What processes has DEED’s Office of Broadband Development used to develop broadband across the state? What strategies has DEED’s Office of Broadband Development used to work toward statutory broadband goals?
State Resources <i>Medium</i>	The 2023 Legislature appropriated \$75 million for Fiscal Year 2024 and \$50 million for Fiscal Year 2025 for two grant programs that help provide broadband services to unserved and underserved communities.
State Control <i>High</i>	The Minnesota Legislature established and controls state-funded broadband infrastructure grant programs.
Impact <i>Medium-High</i>	About 90 percent of Minnesotans already have access to adequate broadband speeds. However, Minnesotans who lack broadband access may have difficulty obtaining important online services in fields such as health care or social services. Gaps in broadband access can limit economic opportunities in unserved or underserved communities.
Timeliness <i>High</i>	The issue of broadband access has arguably become even more pressing since the COVID-19 pandemic. In addition to its 2026 goal, the Legislature set statutory goals that Minnesota would be a leader in broadband speeds and access by 2022; however, the state did not meet these goals. In 2023, the federal government awarded Minnesota over \$650 million for broadband infrastructure projects.
Feasibility <i>High</i>	OLA could evaluate the Office of Broadband Development’s management of its grant programs and statewide broadband access projects using standard evaluation techniques.
Balance <i>Medium</i>	OLA has not previously conducted an evaluation on the Office of Broadband Development. However, OLA has evaluated different DEED functions in recent years.
Discussion <i>Timely opportunity</i>	Minnesota did not meet its 2022 broadband goals, and it is unclear whether the state is on track to meet its goals for 2026. This may be a good time for OLA to assess the state’s efforts.

Community Benefit Expenditures at Nonprofit Hospitals

Topic Selection Background Information

March 2024

Program Overview	Nonprofit hospitals must provide “community benefits” in exchange for federal tax-exempt status. Community benefits include free or reduced-cost patient care services that are intended to promote community health. Minnesota statutes also allow tax exemptions on many purchases for nonprofit hospitals that operate for charitable purposes.
Original Evaluation Questions	What tax exemptions exist for nonprofit hospitals in Minnesota? How much do these exemptions cost the state? How does the amount of community benefit spending compare to the tax exemptions given to tax-exempt hospitals? To what extent are community benefit expenditures reflective of actual costs accrued by reporting organizations? To what extent is there an association between reported community benefit expenditures and health outcomes? What percentage of community benefit spending is dedicated to charity care? What changes could be made to community benefit and other tax-exempt reporting to better address community health needs?
Revised Questions	How does the amount of community benefit spending compare to the tax exemptions given to tax-exempt hospitals? What percentage of community benefit spending is dedicated to charity care? What changes could be made to community benefit and other tax-exempt reporting to better address community health needs?
State Resources <i>High</i>	According to the Minnesota Department of Health’s (MDH’s) most recent relevant report, published in 2007, nonprofit hospitals received \$225.9 million in state and local tax-exemptions.
State Control <i>Medium</i>	Federal law establishes the “community benefit standard” to determine if a hospital operates for charitable purposes and is eligible to receive federal tax exemption. Hospitals must report spending on community benefits to the federal government annually. State law also requires annual reports and provides more detailed requirements.
Impact <i>High</i>	Community benefits can improve access to care and enhance community health. In a 2021 survey, about 20 percent of Minnesotans said they went without care due to the cost of health care, and about 4 percent of Minnesotans are uninsured. In 2021, Minnesota nonprofit hospitals reported almost \$1.4 billion in community benefit expenditures.
Timeliness <i>Medium</i>	While OLA could provide updated information about community benefit expenditures in Minnesota, there is a not a compelling reason to do so this year.
Feasibility <i>Low</i>	As proposed, the scope of this evaluation is not feasible. OLA could likely make only limited progress on answering a select number of questions prior to the next legislative session.
Balance <i>High</i>	OLA has not previously evaluated or audited nonprofit hospital community benefit expenditures.
Discussion <i>Better suited for other entities</i>	The proposed evaluation questions are more consistent with academic research than a program evaluation. OLA could answer certain questions posed, but MDH published a report in 2007 addressing similar questions; therefore, MDH may be better positioned to conduct this research.

Department of Corrections

Complaint and Investigation Process

Topic Selection Background Information

March 2024

Program Overview	The Department of Corrections (DOC) designates different entities to investigate complaints about misconduct of personnel, based on the severity of the allegations. The Office of Special Investigations (OSI) handles allegations of serious misconduct by department staff. Review committees at the facility and agency level conduct investigations into less serious allegations of employee misconduct.
Original Evaluation Questions	To what extent does DOC adequately investigate complaints and allegations from DOC staff and inmates about the management of DOC facilities? To what extent do DOC's Office of Professional Accountability and Office of Special Investigations fulfill their policy mandates? To what extent do they follow appropriate policies and procedures?
Revised Questions	To what extent does DOC adequately investigate complaints and allegations from staff and inmates about DOC personnel? To what extent does DOC follow appropriate policies and procedures in their investigations?
State Resources <i>Low</i>	In Fiscal Year 2023, DOC spent about \$7.5 million on all OSI activities, only a portion of which are focused on investigating allegations of misconduct. The Office of Professional Accountability, which preceded the facility and agency review committees, spent just under \$900,000 in Fiscal Year 2023.
State Control <i>High</i>	Statutes give DOC supervision authority over all state facilities with respect to their management, condition, and treatment of incarcerated individuals. DOC is also responsible for ensuring a safe workplace for its employees.
Impact <i>Medium-High</i>	As of 2023, DOC employed more than 4,200 staff and managed 11 facilities with over 8,000 incarcerated individuals. Incarcerated individuals are a vulnerable population, dependent on correctional officers for their safety.
Timeliness <i>Low</i>	DOC began using review committees to investigate less serious misconduct allegations in 2023. Prior to that, the Office of Professional Accountability, established in 2020, had investigated these types of allegations. These recent changes may negatively impact our ability to accurately evaluate current practices.
Feasibility <i>Medium-Low</i>	OLA could conduct this evaluation using traditional research methods, although OLA may need to focus on certain types of complaints, such as those that allege more or less serious misconduct. In addition, data on allegations and investigations may be limited.
Balance <i>Medium</i>	OLA's 2020 report, <i>Safety in State Correctional Facilities</i> , touched on information relevant to this topic and reviewed the work of OSI.
Discussion <i>Important, potential timing issues</i>	Proper investigation of misconduct complaints is an important topic worthy of attention. However, given the recent establishment of review committees and OLA's 2020 report, the timing of this project is not optimal.

Department of Employment and Economic Development Grants Management

Topic Selection Background Information

March 2024

Program Overview	The Department of Employment and Economic Development (DEED) administers dozens of grant programs focused on business growth, workforce development, international trade, and community development.
Original Evaluation Questions	How well has DEED managed state-funded grants? To what extent has DEED complied with requirements related to state-funded grants? To what extent has DEED documented that grant-funded services have been provided?
Revised Questions	
State Resources <i>High</i>	In Fiscal Year 2023, DEED received more than \$130 million in state funding to administer dozens of grant programs.
State Control <i>Medium-High</i>	State law typically establishes state-funded grants' purposes, and state agencies, including DEED, must follow state policies when administering their grant programs. However, some of the grants DEED administers are all or partially funded by the federal government, and must therefore be administered in compliance with federal requirements.
Impact <i>Medium</i>	Tens of thousands of Minnesotans receive services from DEED's workforce or business development grants, or live in communities that receive infrastructure improvements funded through DEED's grant programs.
Timeliness <i>Medium</i>	Grant oversight and administration are often of interest to legislators and the public, but there does not appear to be a pressing reason to review DEED's grants management at this time.
Feasibility <i>Medium-Low</i>	DEED manages many grant programs. OLA could evaluate DEED's management of a select number of these grant programs using standard evaluation techniques, but it would not be feasible to evaluate DEED's management of all grant programs.
Balance <i>Low</i>	Last year, OLA issued two program evaluations that reviewed agency grants management: <i>Oversight of State-Funded Grants to Nonprofit Organizations</i> , and <i>State Programs That Support Minnesotans on the Basis of Racial, Ethnic, or American Indian Identity</i> , the latter looked specifically at aspects of DEED's grants management. Another related evaluation, <i>Grant Award Processes</i> , will be released in spring 2024.
Discussion <i>Too broad</i>	This evaluation could provide in-depth information on DEED's grants management for a select number of grant programs. OLA would need guidance from legislators to determine which specific grant programs to evaluate.

Department of Natural Resources Land Acquisition

Topic Selection Background Information

March 2024

<p>Program Overview</p>	<p>The Department of Natural Resources (DNR) purchases land and conservation easements to protect, conserve, improve, consolidate, and expand recreational and natural resource opportunities throughout the state. DNR’s Lands and Minerals Division coordinates the acquisition process in cooperation with various other DNR divisions (such as Fish and Wildlife, Parks and Trails, Forestry, and Ecological and Water Resources).</p>
<p>Original Evaluation Questions</p>	<p>To what extent has DNR followed legal requirements and applicable procedures when acquiring land? To what extent has DNR conducted proper appraisals for land? To what extent has DNR accurately reported on state-owned lands under its jurisdiction? How well has DNR managed state-owned lands?</p>
<p>Revised Questions</p>	<p>How well has DNR managed the acquisition of state-owned lands? To what extent has DNR followed legal requirements and applicable procedures? How accurately has DNR reported on land acquisitions?</p>
<p>State Resources <i>Unclear</i></p>	<p>The 2023 Legislature appropriated more than \$150 million combined from the Outdoor Heritage Fund, the Parks and Trails Fund, and the Environment and Natural Resources Trust Fund to DNR in Fiscal Year 2024 for land acquisition projects, improvement, and management. It is unclear what portion of this sum was dedicated to land acquisition.</p>
<p>State Control <i>Medium-High</i></p>	<p>The Minnesota Legislature established the Land Acquisition Account in 1984 for the acquisition of natural resources lands and interests in land. State law requires DNR to consult with Minnesota tribal governments on matters that have tribal implications.</p>
<p>Impact <i>Medium</i></p>	<p>DNR acquires land to provide recreational and natural resources opportunities at a variety of locations such as state parks and wildlife management areas. While DNR’s land acquisitions benefit the public, they generally do not have a critical impact on the everyday lives of Minnesotans.</p>
<p>Timeliness <i>Medium</i></p>	<p>This topic does not seem urgent given that DNR’s statewide land portfolio has changed by less than one-tenth of a percent over the past five years.</p>
<p>Feasibility <i>Medium-High</i></p>	<p>OLA could complete this evaluation using traditional evaluation methods if it narrows the scope to focus on land acquisition. It is not feasible to review the entirety of DNR’s land management activities.</p>
<p>Balance <i>Medium-High</i></p>	<p>OLA is currently conducting a special review of DNR’s oversight of wildlife management areas. Prior to this special review, OLA last conducted an evaluation of DNR in 2016.</p>
<p>Discussion <i>Potentially valuable</i></p>	<p>DNR’s land portfolio has remained virtually unchanged over the past five years, but it is still important that DNR manage land acquisitions effectively. This evaluation would give OLA an opportunity to follow up on certain recommendations from its 2010 report.</p>

Guardianship of Adults

Topic Selection Background Information

March 2024

Program Overview	Guardians are appointed by courts to make personal decisions—such as those related to medical care, living arrangements, and education—for adults who lack the capacity to make or communicate decisions about their needs. Individuals subject to guardianship may also have a conservator, who is appointed to make financial, rather than personal, decisions for individuals. Guardians must submit reports at least annually on individuals’ well-being to the courts. Interested persons with complaints about guardians may submit those complaints to the Judicial Branch for review.
Original Evaluation Questions	To what extent do appropriate minimum qualifications, screening procedures, resources, communicated standards of care, and training requirements exist for guardians? To what extent are the procedures for processing and responding to complaints about guardians transparent, comprehensive, and consistently applied? To what extent are guardian activities subject to effective and appropriate oversight on behalf of the adult under guardianship?
Revised Questions	
State Resources <i>Unclear</i>	The Judicial Branch provides online training and a manual for guardians and conducts complaint investigations about guardians. Courts are responsible for appointing guardians and receiving guardian reports, among other duties. It is unclear how much of the Judicial Branch’s funding is dedicated to these activities.
State Control <i>High</i>	State law governs guardianship. Minnesota statutes establish procedures for appointing guardians, the rights of persons subject to guardianship, and the responsibilities of guardians.
Impact <i>Medium-High</i>	The Judicial Branch recorded about 2,800 guardianship/conservatorship cases in Fiscal Year 2023. Because guardians make decisions integral to the lives of persons under guardianship, they have a profound impact on those persons’ day-to-day experiences.
Timeliness <i>Medium-High</i>	The Legislature made several changes to state guardianship laws in 2020. Additionally, the complaint process was established at the beginning of Fiscal Year 2023. While these changes are still fairly new, it may be a good time to look at their initial impact.
Feasibility <i>Medium</i>	OLA could complete this evaluation using standard evaluation techniques, but we would likely need to focus some research activities on a sample of courts.
Balance <i>High</i>	OLA has never evaluated adult guardianship.
Discussion <i>Good topic</i>	Minnesota’s laws on guardianship for adults have existed for decades without a formal review by OLA. It may be a good time to evaluate the state’s approach to guardianship for some of its most vulnerable members.

Minnesota Agricultural Water Quality Certification Program

Topic Selection Background Information

March 2024

Program Overview	Agricultural runoff can harm lakes, rivers, streams, and groundwater. The Minnesota Agricultural Water Quality Certification Program (WQCP) is a voluntary program that provides incentives to agricultural landowners to implement conservation practices that protect water quality. The Minnesota Department of Agriculture (MDA) partners with other agencies and local governments to certify program participants and support their implementation of techniques tailored to address their farms' unique water-quality risks.
Original Evaluation Questions	How well has MDA managed WQCP? How long does certification take? To what extent has MDA measured water quality improvements as a result of the program? To what extent has water quality improved? To what extent has MDA established and achieved sustainability and environmental outcomes for WQCP?
Revised Questions	
State Resources <i>Low</i>	Since its inception, WQCP's annual appropriation (from the state's Clean Water Fund) has increased from \$1.5 million for Fiscal Year 2014 to \$3.5 million for Fiscal Years 2024. MDA directs most of this funding to local government partners that provide technical support to agricultural landowners who are certified or seeking certification. Minnesota has also secured a \$9 million federal match through Fiscal Year 2025, all of which supports landowners seeking certification.
State Control <i>High</i>	WQCP is established in state law, and MDA developed the process for assessing an agricultural producer's water quality risks. MDA also approves the local government partners and other individuals who work directly with landowners seeking certification.
Impact <i>Medium</i>	Agricultural runoff can threaten water quality throughout the state. However, as of late 2022, fewer than 1,300 of Minnesota's 67,000 farms were certified through WQCP.
Timeliness <i>Medium</i>	While Minnesota's water quality is of perennial interest to legislators and the public, there is no urgent reason to evaluate WQCP this year.
Feasibility <i>High</i>	OLA could evaluate WQCP using standard evaluation techniques, including data analysis, document reviews, interviews, and surveys.
Balance <i>Medium-High</i>	OLA has never evaluated WQCP. OLA's most recent evaluation related to MDA or water quality was <i>Pesticide Regulation</i> , released in 2020.
Discussion <i>Feasible and potentially useful</i>	Since MDA began administering WQCP in 2014, enrollment and interest has continued to expand. MDA reports that the program has been successful in terms of water quality outcomes and the financial health of the participants. An OLA evaluation could help determine the value of the program and provide suggestions for the future.

Minnesota Department of Health: Human Resources

Topic Selection Background Information

March 2024

Program Overview	The Minnesota Department of Health (MDH) Human Resources Management Division manages employee relations, administers benefits and payroll, and provides other services to MDH employees. MDH employees with complaints about personnel issues may report them internally, including to human resources staff, their supervisors, or agency leadership.
Original Evaluation Questions	To what extent are MDH processes for investigating and addressing personnel issues fair and comprehensive? How well does MDH Human Resources protect employees from retaliation for submitting human resources-related complaints and notifying supervisors of noncompliance with MDH policy and state law?
Revised Questions	
State Resources <i>Low</i>	The Human Resources Management Division is part of MDH’s Health Operations Bureau, which had expenditures of about \$59 million in Fiscal Year 2023. The amount MDH spent on human resources is unclear, but it is likely a small fraction of the bureau’s total budget.
State Control <i>High</i>	MDH must comply with administrative, human resources, and personnel requirements for state agencies established by law and state policy. For example, MDH must comply with state laws that protect whistleblowers.
Impact <i>Low</i>	MDH’s Human Resources Management Division provides human resource services to about 1,600 MDH employees located across the state.
Timeliness <i>Medium</i>	There is no compelling reason to review or not to review MDH’s Human Resources Management Division at this time.
Feasibility <i>High</i>	OLA could complete this evaluation using standard evaluation methods, such as surveys, document reviews, and interviews.
Balance <i>Medium-High</i>	OLA has not directly evaluated MDH’s Human Resources Management Division. OLA last evaluated a division within MDH in our 2018 report, <i>Office of Health Facility Complaints</i> .
Discussion <i>Feasible, not urgent</i>	This evaluation could provide useful information about MDH’s Human Resources and the experiences of MDH employees. However, there does not seem to be a pressing need for this information at this time. To the extent that employees have specific concerns or complaints about MDH Human Resources, they can report them directly to OLA or Minnesota Management and Budget for review.

Minnesota State Colleges and Universities Faculty Pay Processing

Topic Selection Background Information

March 2024

Program Overview	Minnesota State Colleges and Universities (Minnesota State) is a system of 33 universities, technical colleges and community colleges located on 54 campuses across the state. As of 2023, the system employed roughly 14,000 faculty and staff. Each semester, individual campuses submit approved faculty course assignments to the central system office, which processes faculty payroll and benefits.
Original Evaluation Questions	What policies and procedures does Minnesota State have in place to ensure the timely approval of courses and corresponding faculty assignments and payroll? To what extent has it adhered to these policies and procedures? To what extent has Minnesota State taken appropriate steps to ensure accuracy in its payroll system?
Revised Questions	
State Resources <i>High</i>	A large portion of Minnesota State’s revenues come from state appropriations. In Fiscal Year 2023, appropriations accounted for about \$807.5 million, or 39 percent, of the system’s \$2.1 billion in total revenues. That year, faculty and staff salaries and benefits made up the majority of the system’s spending, at 64 percent, or nearly \$1.3 billion.
State Control <i>High</i>	Minnesota State is governed by a board of trustees, whose members are appointed by the governor. The board, in turn, appoints a chancellor to execute its powers. Under state law, the board’s duties include streamlining services offered through its central system office to provide efficient and effective services to the individual institutions.
Impact <i>Medium</i>	As of 2023, Minnesota State employed roughly 14,000 faculty and staff. Payroll delays and errors can have a significant impact on employees and their families.
Timeliness <i>Medium-High</i>	Concerns have been raised recently about coordination issues between the central system office and individual campuses, resulting in errors related to payroll and benefit eligibility.
Feasibility <i>High</i>	OLA could conduct this review using standard research methods, either as a program evaluation or a financial audit, or a combination of the two.
Balance <i>High</i>	OLA has not conducted a program evaluation of Minnesota State since its 2010 report, <i>MnSCU System Office</i> , or a financial audit since its 2016 report, <i>Employee Separation Payments</i> .
Discussion <i>Potentially better for financial audit</i>	OLA is well positioned to provide an independent perspective on coordination issues that may exist between the central system office and individual campuses. However, given the heavy focus on pay-related concerns, this topic may be better considered for a financial audit.

Oversight of Minnesota Veterans Homes

Topic Selection Background Information

March 2024

Program Overview	The Minnesota Department of Veterans Affairs (MDVA) administers Minnesota Veterans Homes. These homes provide residential care for veterans or qualifying spouses who require either skilled nursing care or “domiciliary care” (independent living with other types of support, such as mental health services). In early 2024, MDVA opened three new homes, bringing the total to eight Minnesota Veterans Homes around the state.
Original Evaluation Questions	How well does MDVA oversee Veterans Homes? To what extent have residents in Minnesota Veterans Homes received proper and necessary care? To what extent have MDVA leaders ensured a safe and healthy workplace for Veterans Homes administrators and staff?
Revised Questions	
State Resources <i>Medium</i>	The Legislature has recently increased its appropriations to Minnesota Veterans Homes, from \$57 million for Fiscal Year 2020 to nearly \$100 million for Fiscal Year 2025.
State Control <i>Medium-High</i>	Many of the regulations governing Minnesota Veterans Homes—including admission criteria, quality assurance, and residents’ rights, among other things—are established in state law. Veterans homes are also subject to federal requirements for nursing homes.
Impact <i>Medium-High</i>	Several hundred of the state’s nearly 300,000 veterans reside in Minnesota Veterans Homes. While the number of veterans served by the homes is small, the homes have a deep impact on the health and wellness of their residents.
Timeliness <i>High</i>	Members of the public have raised concerns about the Minnesota Veterans Homes. Some of these complaints led to a legislatively established work group focused on domiciliary care. The work group released a report in January 2024, which answered some of the questions posed above; this could allow OLA to focus on skilled nursing services. Given that MDVA has received a funding increase and has just opened three new homes, it could be a good time to evaluate Minnesota Veterans Homes.
Feasibility <i>Medium-High</i>	OLA could complete this evaluation using traditional evaluation methods. To evaluate quality of care, OLA may also need to work with the Minnesota Department of Health to access data on that department’s inspections of veterans homes.
Balance <i>High</i>	OLA has never evaluated the administration of Minnesota Veterans Homes. It has been several years since OLA conducted a financial audit of MDVA or any of the homes.
Discussion <i>Important topic</i>	Minnesota Veterans Homes provide important services and care to veterans living in Minnesota, and the recent expansion will bring those services to more parts of the state. It could be a good time for OLA to review how effectively MDVA administers Minnesota Veterans Homes.