



Building Sustainable Programs: The Framework

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INTRODUCTION

Creating adolescent health promotion and disease prevention programs that will have lasting effects requires a deliberate, thoughtful approach to planning, leading, and collaborating. Building an effective, integrated, and sustainable system is an important step towards improving the overall health and well-being of adolescents. As local needs and political and financial climates change, planning for sustainability is critical for ensuring local adolescent health program and services thrive and are sustained over time. Programs and services must meet broad community and individual stakeholder needs in the face of increased competition and changing funding opportunities.

This document provides a framework on sustainability for U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Office of Adolescent Health (OAH) grantees. It is one tool in a series of sustainability resources aimed to support grantees in planning for their long-term success. Since 2011, OAH has provided grantees with access to a number of resources to support their sustainability efforts, including webinars, conference and regional presentations, tip sheets and toolkits. Grantees can find these resources at the OAH [Pregnancy Assistance Fund \(PAF\) Resource and Training Center](#)¹ and [Teen Pregnancy Prevention \(TPP\) Resource Center](#).² The identified key factors for building sustainable programs and services are based upon research and on-the-ground experiences of current OAH grantees and serve as a foundation from which grantees can begin, enhance, or reconstruct their sustainability planning efforts. Additionally, this framework lays the foundation for OAH's Sustainability Resource Guide to be released in March 2014.

The sustainability resources in this series were developed as a direct response to grantee needs as identified from OAH hosted dialogues with PAF and TPP grantees to better understand their current sustainability approaches and needs. These discussions focused on how OAH grantees defined sustainability, challenges and barriers they faced, and resources that would be helpful to grantees. As a result of these conversations, OAH began developing targeted sustainability resources to assist grantees in their planning efforts.

OAH also convenes a grantee sustainability workgroup consisting of seven PAF and TPP grantees. The workgroup represents school-based, community-based, and clinic-based programs from all over the country at various stages of sustainability planning. The workgroup played an instrumental role in the development of this framework and accompanying sustainability resources. Moreover, the grantee workgroup provides valuable insight on sustainability planning at the grantee level, sharing their own experiences, and reviewing OAH materials throughout the development process.

"Sustainability goes beyond financial (consideration)..."

Funding is essential, but all of the building blocks need to stand up tall first."

A 21st Century Community Learning Center afterschool program director from National Center for Community Education. The road to sustainability: Sustainability workbook.

This framework and the accompanying sustainability resources provide useful information about key factors that will help grantees make lasting changes in their communities and position them for the long-term. The framework is not prescriptive, but rather responsive to grantees' needs. Each grantee should create and implement its own unique sustainability strategy and is encouraged to repurpose and adapt the framework and related materials to meet their vision for sustainability, planning needs and the unique needs of their organization, program, and stage of implementation.

This framework provides a perspective on sustainability within the context of adolescent health programming with the expectation that grantees will use this guidance as they frame their own sustainability concept. It contains a discussion of the research and program-based literature used to identify eight key sustainability factors.

Planning for sustainability is not a single event or a linear process. Rather, it is a continuous process where many activities could occur simultaneously. Many of the factors discussed here are complementary and in some instances, sustainability themes or principles may repeat between factors because they are interconnected.

Identifying strategies for continuing to deliver effective programs and services before federal funding cycles draw to a close is often cited as a significant challenge by grantees. Although the date on which federal grant support expires must be considered and planned for, replacing federal funding is only one element of a strong sustainability plan. Sustainability planning should focus broadly on responding to community needs, which may shift or change over time. Effective organizations are able to adapt to these trends and grow with their target audiences. Sustainability planning must be fluid and specifically tailored to local needs and the environment within which each grantee operates. This framework is practical and aims to provide a foundation that grantees can draw from to think critically about sustainability planning. It provides sufficient flexibility to allow grantees to infuse elements of their own local experiences into the planning process, engage local partners, and ultimately guide them in developing their own sustainability strategies. Moreover, the framework not only emphasizes the maintenance of any given program or service, but also the continuation of activities and impacts.

METHODOLOGY FOR IDENTIFYING SUSTAINABILITY RESOURCES

To build this framework, a search was conducted across a broad range of mediums. The search targeted resources that focused on how community health programs defined and achieved sustainability and included a review of articles, reports, toolkits, resource guides, guidelines, and academic research, from peer-reviewed journals to public access articles. Searches were conducted in PubMed, Google Scholar, and

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TABLE 1: KEYWORDS USED FOR CONDUCTING RESOURCE REVIEW

Engine	Terms used
PubMed	Sustainability; sustainable
Google Scholar	Sustainability of community health programs; sustainability of community-wide initiatives
Google	Sustainability of community health programs; sustainability of community-wide initiatives

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Google using a combination of keywords, outlined in Table 1. A breadth of research, resources, and tools were gathered by conducting a citation network analysis, including resources from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Health Resources and Services Administration, Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation and previous OAH sustainability efforts.

Relevant articles, resources, and tools were limited to those written in English. Resources reviewed were not limited to those published in the United States. OAH grantees, staff, and senior leaders also informed the development of this framework and the accompanying sustainability resources.

A CONCEPT OF SUSTAINABILITY

There is no standard approach for defining or conceptualizing sustainability. In some situations, it is simply a continuity of a program or services – the ability to carry on program services through funding and resource shifts or losses.³ In others, it is about institutionalizing services or the continuation of activities and impacts; creating a legacy; including continuing organizational ideals, principles, and beliefs; upholding existing relationships; and/or maintaining consistent outcomes.^{4,5,6}

Achieving sustainable impact requires that grantees develop a planning process that accounts for local needs and seeks to realize their mission. For OAH, the concept of sustainability is linked to its vision and mission to advance best practices that improve the health and well-being of America's adolescents, enabling them to become healthy, productive adults. Acknowledging that there are many definitions of sustainability and that adolescent health programs vary greatly, each grantee must develop its own concept of sustainability. OAH offers the following perspective to assist grantees in determining how to achieve sustainable impact and develop their own sustainability strategies.

Adolescent health programs will be better positioned to achieve sustainable impact when they can "*effectively leverage partnerships and resources to continue programs, services, and/or strategic activities that result in improvements in the health and well-being of adolescents.*"

This concept of sustainability encapsulates OAH's vision, while emphasizing the continuation of the program and/or the grantee's activities and impacts. Grantees should take a full account of the program and processes that affect change at multiple

A perspective on sustainability

Sustainability is effectively leveraging partnerships and resources to continue programs, services, and/or strategic activities that result in improvements in the health and well-being of adolescents.

U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Office of Adolescent Health. (2013)

levels (e.g., individual, community, systems and policy). Ultimately, the goal of using the best science and practices to prevent teen pregnancy or provide expectant and parenting teens, women, fathers, and their families with a seamless network of supportive services should be the common goal and continue in the absence of federal funding. As the literature and evidence for sustainability expands and OAH and its grantees continue to systematically evaluate program impacts, this framework will evolve. Grantees' sustainability processes should occur over time and ensure a balance between program continuation or continuation of its activities and benefits.

The next section outlines eight key factors that influence sustainability: strategic planning, assessing the environment, adaptability, community support, integration, leadership, effective partnerships, and financial diversification.

BUILDING THE FRAMEWORK FOR ACHIEVING SUSTAINABILITY

Planning for sustainability can span a number of strategies from building internal capacity, to securing new funding, to incorporating effective programs, practices or policies into partnering organizations to ensure continuity. Sustainability also involves managing and leveraging resources (financial and otherwise), and focusing broadly on the community needs, which may shift or change over time. Effective organizations and programs adapt to these trends and grow and change with the climate. The following eight key factors can influence whether a service, program or its activities and benefits will be sustained over time:

1. Create an action strategy
2. Assess the environment
3. Be adaptable
4. Secure community support
5. Integrate program services into community infrastructures
6. Build a leadership team
7. Create strategic partnerships
8. Secure diverse financial opportunities

These factors provide a foundation from which grantees can begin to build sustainability plans. Grantees should tailor and incorporate any or all of these factors into their own unique sustainability strategy.

CREATE AN ACTION STRATEGY

Grantees should begin planning for sustainability early in the life of their programs and services. In fact, when possible, grantees should consider their sustainability approach prior to applying for funding. However, sustainability planning at any stage is valuable and will help chart the project's course. Grantees should weave

KEYS TO SUCCESS

Start planning early

Create a shared vision with partners and community leaders

Incorporate sustainability activities into daily program operations

Create a sustainability plan

Incorporate measures of success into your sustainability plan

sustainability planning into their larger program and service work plans. A 2005 study of five community health center demonstration programs examined organizational sustainability over a ten year period. The research suggested that including sustainability planning early in program planning stages helped programs better coordinate sustainability planning into their future efforts.⁷ Noting that sustainability is often the last stage to be discussed in program planning, the researchers warned that this can lead to the implementation of services that do not anticipate the long-term environment in which they operate.⁸

Achieving sustainability requires careful planning and ongoing monitoring of policies, practices, programs, and services to address community needs, even as they evolve over time. To move towards sustainability, it is critical that grantees develop a plan, develop it early, and review it often. By systematically approaching sustainability planning, grantees can be more effective in addressing and forecasting many future program and service needs. This allows grantees to create a shared vision with partners and community leaders and determine what should be sustained and how. Of equal importance is being able to measure one's success. Grantees should identify the most appropriate indicators of success and develop a process for collecting data, measuring their progress, and incorporate changes based on the data.

Grantees should develop a living sustainability plan that is re-visited regularly, identify who is responsible for carrying it out, and specify goals, objectives, action steps, and a timeline. Although the elements of sustainability plans can vary, grantees should anticipate their plan's evolution as their programs and services mature. Leveraging lessons learned, successes, and challenges should lead to the incorporation of new approaches or ideas to sustain a service, program or its activities.

KEYS TO SUCCESS

Embed continuous assessments throughout the life of the program or service

Identify focus areas for conducting an environmental assessment

Use the information gathered

ASSESS THE ENVIRONMENT

Analyzing a school-based prevention program, a 2006 study noted the program had difficulty in its first year moving from implementation to stabilization in five target schools.⁹ Researchers recommended that the project assess community readiness for the program by considering key stakeholder perspectives, which included parents, teachers, and principals. A comprehensive community readiness assessment, the study concluded, would have helped lay the foundation for a viable sustainability plan.¹⁰

In planning for sustainability, it is critical for grantees, whether they are in the planning phase or well into implementation, to perform an assessment of the environment in which they work. Looking at community readiness, local demographics, and existing school or community-based adolescent health services enables grantees to identify their niche within the community and add value to complement efforts provided by others. Assessing the financial environment encourages grantees to analyze their current resources and understand what funding may be available now and in the

KEYS TO SUCCESS

Match services offered to community needs and uphold the fidelity or best practice of the model being implemented

Create opportunities for innovation and utilization of successful practices

KEYS TO SUCCESS

Formulate a communication approach and message

Promote the program and its services

Use program leaders, strategic partners, and community champions to share your message

future. Analyzing the political environment will help them navigate the political atmosphere within their community. Looking internally, assessing their own organizational environment (i.e., leadership, staffing, and infrastructure) may help grantees streamline services and cut costs. Assessment of both the internal and external environment is critical, and can affect the program or service and its ability to attain its sustainability goals and create lasting change.

BE ADAPTABLE

A recent meta-analysis of literature on the sustainability of public health prevention and intervention programs found that a core domain of a public health program's sustainability strategy is the ability to adapt and improve to ensure effectiveness.¹¹ Community needs evolve, and addressing these needs can be challenging. Adding to that challenge are the often unsteady and fragile financial and political landscapes in which programs and services operate. Continually assessing the effectiveness of programs and services becomes a delicate balancing act between adaptation in light of changing needs and fidelity to a proven approach. Being aware of and responsive to environmental changes, grantees can withstand challenges while striving to continuously improve their programs and services to meet local needs.

Grantees should think beyond the status quo, be innovative, and remain open to all possible opportunities and options for implementing programs and delivering services. Being knowledgeable about emerging trends, research, and other approaches can help grantees pioneer new and successful efforts in their communities.

SECURE COMMUNITY SUPPORT

A recent case study assessing outreach strategies of a local teen pregnancy prevention program found that having a deliberate and well-planned communication approach that leverages community assets and partnerships is critical to successful program implementation. The program engaged other community leaders to spearhead efforts around a common cause, using regular meetings as opportunities to communicate the program's successes and enhance its partner network.¹² A recent experience of an OAH grantee also demonstrates the importance of community buy-in. Two school-based programs were recommended for closure because of low enrollment rates and budget cuts despite showing a number of positive impacts on the community, including improved school enrollment, retention, and graduation rates and increased student success.¹³ The programs used their leaders, key partners, students, and faculty to garner support for the programs and share their stories on how the programs impacted their own lives and the lives of the communities they served. Because of the wide range of support, the local school systems voted to keep

KEYS TO SUCCESS

Streamline service delivery, policies, and practices

Integrate programs, services, and practices into the broader community fabric

the programs doors open. Community collaboration was instrumental in the programs' success and the decision to maintain them.

Securing community buy-in and support may take many forms, whether it is creating a coalition of similarly situated service providers or building relationships with relevant stakeholders that are knowledgeable about the program's services or educating key community champions. The community buy-in can provide support through a variety of avenues. It may also include developing and disseminating effective messages, success stories and data within and external of the organization.

INTEGRATE PROGRAMS AND SERVICES INTO LOCAL INFRASTRUCTURES

It is important for grantees to explore opportunities to make their activities, services and programs an integral part of the community and regular activities of an organization to ensure their longevity. In a 2006 study of social service programs, researchers assessed whether programs survived after their start-up grant funding ended.¹⁴ The study found that sustainable programs were those that adopted efficient practices during the grant period.¹⁵ Streamlining management systems, hiring and training additional staff, and developing program materials during the grant period enabled programs to continue services after funding ended without significant financial burden.¹⁶ Grantees should examine the policies, practices, and structures through which programs and services are offered and consider opportunities to embed them within their organization or partnering agencies. This can increase their viability and help them move towards replicating practices, programs, and services that can be easily adopted.¹⁷

The process of integrating efficient and effective policies, practices, and services into the activities of other organizations can facilitate the continuation of grantees' adolescent health services. Capitalizing on the strengths of local partners and their commitment to addressing adolescent health needs, grantees can build capacity to continue their programs, services and activities in the community.

BUILD A TEAM OF LEADERS

A 2008 study of six community-based social programs, researchers found that having dedicated and competent leadership was a differentiating factor between programs that were sustained and those that were not.¹⁸ According to the study, sustained programs had leaders that fought to maintain the program and "exercised considerable initiative, ingenuity, and flexibility to keep the programs going."¹⁹

Leaders are important factors in sustainability, either acting as advocates, resources, or barriers. Grantees should continuously strive to engage and develop their own

KEYS TO SUCCESS

Identify strong internal leaders

Keep organizational leaders engaged and secure their commitment

Identify external community champions

Promote leadership development

organizational leaders while also identifying champions in the community and among partners. Building a leadership team, rather than identifying a single leader, can help bolster successes even during staff turnover. Having a clear vision for that team can also help ensure that it continues to be a source of support for programs and services as the team composition changes over time.

Leadership teams can fulfill many important functions, including playing a major role in engaging key stakeholders and finding additional or alternative funders.²⁰ Internal and external leaders can also develop and communicate the program's mission and goals and chart new paths in the face of shifting community needs.

Grantees should identify and cultivate leaders by creating opportunities for staff to build their own skills and participate in efforts to champion their causes. Grantees should use the knowledge and skills of their current leaders to continually build this cadre of champions. In doing so, they also create opportunities to build relations and create larger networks of supporters.

CREATE STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIPS

A 2008 review of social program sustainability efforts, found that lasting programs entrenched themselves into their local communities working with external agencies and advocating with strategic partners on local issues.²¹ Effective partnerships can help programs and services achieve sustainability.²² By leveraging their partnerships, grantees may be able to increase program and service capacity, become more efficient in their service delivery, and decrease the likelihood of duplicated efforts. Partners can also help grantees learn important lessons about implementation and community readiness and needs, gain more exposure to target audiences, and secure additional resources.

Partnerships should be strategic and built on each partners' commitment to a shared goal or mission. It is important for grantees to identify their needs and opportunities for building lasting and effective partnerships and to establish a clear purpose for collaborative efforts. Doing so will help them secure partners who are committed to sharing the responsibility of sustaining program and service efforts and the benefits they generate.

Ongoing assessment of the strengths and challenges of existing and potential partners will deepen grantee's capacity for building a strong network. As such, grantees should regularly assess the purpose and ensure that every partnership is or will be based on advancing a common goal and long-term sustainability. Engaging a wide range of individuals and organizations will extend the grantee's reach and capacity. Reaching out to nontraditional partners will allow the grantee to draw upon a variety of backgrounds, skill sets, and knowledge bases.²³

KEYS TO SUCCESS

Develop strategic partnerships

Assess existing partnerships continuously

Establish a shared vision and commitment to sustainability

Engage partners to help market program successes

Leverage partner resources

KEYS TO SUCCESS

Review the program budget to identify core activities and services

Identify and seek funding opportunities

Develop a strategy for securing funding

Create a budgetary line item

Build fundraising and grant writing capacity

Strategic partnerships can be forged through a variety of mechanisms and can help grantees maximize existing resources, maintain activities, services or programs beyond Federal grant cycles, and develop and sustain new approaches to address adolescent health concerns.²⁴

SECURE DIVERSE FINANCIAL OPPORTUNITIES

A 2012 study of program longevity factors found that diversity of funding was the most significant financial factor in predicting sustainability.²⁵ An earlier 2002 study also noted that programs must understand the local funding environment to infuse adequate sustainability planning into their organizational strategy.²⁶

Budgetary changes can create sustainability challenges for many grantees. It is important to set funding goals from the program or service onset and recognize the many ways that grantees can achieve sustainability through financial stability. Grantees in the early stages of development have a prime opportunity to build a foundation for sustainability by incorporating sustainability activities and planning into their overall program and service funding schemes.²⁷ They can do this by creating a budgetary line item to address sustainability planning, which immediately elevates the importance of these efforts by continually devoting resources to them.

More seasoned grantees can assess their current budgetary outlays and align these with the essential services and activities required to address local needs. By gaining a better understanding of the bare essentials needed to implement their program or service, grantees can explore funding streams to match these requirements, even considering scaling back programs or services as a way to sustain.

Targeting a variety of diverse funding opportunities can help both new and seasoned grantees adapt to budget cuts and regular fluctuations in funding streams.²⁸ Grantees should determine what streams or financing structures will work best to meet their needs, as well as consider how or whether their external champions and strategic partners can help. They should also seek out opportunities to build capacity around fundraising, which may include training or staff development on grant writing or event planning. Grantees may also explore funding options through:

- In-kind resources;
- Local and community foundations;
- Modified organizational financial structures, such as contracting out services, moving services under the umbrella of a community partner, or moving to a fee-for-service model;
- Existing Federal, State or Local funding through the education system, to the extent program services are offered through the schools;
- Social enterprise business models;
- Impact investments;

- Local partnerships with other organizations or programs; and/or
- Other non-traditional funding sources through Federal or State health entitlements or initiatives, such as Medicaid or managed health care organizations.

CONCLUSION

The framework aims to help adolescent health programs, and specifically OAH grantees, understand that sustainability is influenced by several key factors. Moreover, the framework illustrates that sustainability goes beyond financial security and includes producing benefits within the community and target population that may or may not be dependent on the continuation of a single program or service.

The factors discussed are supported by existing literature and research on the sustainability of social welfare and public health programs as well as on-the-ground experiences of OAH grantees and federal sustainability frameworks, including those from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Health Resources and Services Administration, Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, and the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation. This framework is meant to be a foundation upon which grantees can build their sustainability activities and plans. Combined with OAH's accompanying sustainability resources, including the resource guide, the [PAF Resource and Training Center](#)²⁹ and [TPP Resource Center](#)³⁰, this framework is intended to help grantees effectively leverage their resources to facilitate the continuation of their programs, services and activities that lead to long-lasting improvements in the health and well-being of adolescents.

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