



Beyond the Finish Line: Tips for Sustaining Your Project

February 2021

Sustainability is a vital aspect of adolescent pregnancy prevention (APP) projects. It is important to consider sustainability throughout all stages of project development and implementation, including during evaluation and continuous quality improvement work. This tip sheet provides information on the elements of sustainability as well as concrete strategies to consider for continuing the impact of APP projects.

WHAT IS SUSTAINABILITY?

The literature on sustainability is expansive and offers definitions as diverse as the array of APP projects and their various implementing structures. Some definitions of sustainability include the following:

- the capacity of an organization to achieve long-term success and stability and to serve its clients and consumers without the threat of losing financial support or quality of services (MayaTech Corp., 2018);
- effectively leveraging partnerships and resources to continue programs, services, and/or strategic activities that result in improvements in the outcome of interest (Office of Adolescent Health, 2014); and
- the ability to maintain core elements of a program (e.g., to remain recognizable or deliver at a sufficient level of fidelity or intensity to yield the desired health outcomes) and adequate capacity for the continuation of these elements after the initial implementation support had been withdrawn (Stirman, 2012).

Numerous publications offer extensive guidance related to project sustainability. Most address two key principles: (1) know what it is you want or need to sustain (i.e., the goal of the sustainability effort), and (2) know what is needed to accomplish that sustainability (i.e., the sustainability plan). Sustainability goals for FYSB APP grantees vary depending on timeline, context, and support. Some grantees focus on institutionalizing APP projects within schools and community-based organizations, such that external partners were trained to deliver the program in the future, and others focus on continuing to implement APP projects within their current structure with grantee staff delivering the programming.

Factors necessary for sustainability according to FYSB APP grantees attending a training on sustainability include the following:

- political support (e.g., Tribal council, school board, governor);
- an established training infrastructure with trained effective facilitators;
- diversified funding;
- community involvement and support;
- youth involvement; and
- program fidelity and outcome evaluation.

A CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK OF SUSTAINABILITY

As FYSB APP grantees have expressed, sustainability extends well beyond financial support for a project and includes a mixture of internal and external factors. Schell et al. (2013) conducted an extensive literature review, convened an expert panel, and used concept mapping to identify eight key domains of sustainability for public health programs. In general, these domains are applicable across multiple program types. Sustainability planning should be part of the implementation process from the beginning. Thus, many of the following strategies and tips for sustainability also apply to effective program planning and implementation.

A SUSTAINABILITY FRAMEWORK

Domain and Definition	Strategies and Tactics
Strategic Planning: Using a process or processes to guide the direction, goals, and strategies of the project or program	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Integrate sustainability planning into the overall strategic planning efforts of the organization. • Develop a written sustainability plan as early as possible in the life of the project that determines which aspects of the project are essential to sustain. Example templates and plans include the <i>Sustainability Action Plan Template 1 and Template 2</i> found at https://www.sustaintool.org/plan-for-sustainability/#develop-an-action-plan and A <i>Sustainability Planning Guide for Healthy Communities</i> found at http://www.cdc.gov/healthycommunitiesprogram/pdf/sustainability_guide.pdf. • Involve key stakeholders, including current funders, in sustainability planning. • Use the sustainability plan continually and revise as needed. • Ensure that the plan aligns with other planning tools (e.g., evaluation plans).
Funding Stability: Establishing a consistent financial base for the program	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Consider future funding needs long before existing funds diminish and be aware of the specific costs of delivering the APP project. • Seek to diversify the financial portfolio as much as possible and give special consideration to different funding sources for varying types of project activities. • Be creative in accessing and using in-kind resources (e.g., space, training, marketing, supplies). • Forge strategic and mutually beneficial partnerships to leverage resources. • Explore funding opportunities that address the risk and protective factors associated with APP. • Remember that federal grant funds cannot be used to supplant or replace current public or private funding. Time spent seeking funding for an APP project must be covered under a different funding source.

<p>Environmental Support: A supportive internal and external climate for the program</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Continue to involve local leaders from businesses, government, faith-based organizations, nonprofits, and others throughout the life of the APP project. • Include the youth and families you serve in project planning. • Educate others about policies that support the APP project’s vision.
<p>Partnerships: A connection between the program and community stakeholders</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Conduct a partner and stakeholder analysis to determine where there might be gaps in current partnerships. • Form partnerships with organizations that serve the same population, be clear on new roles and responsibilities, and establish or revise memoranda of understanding, if appropriate. • Identify the goal of each partnership and how it will be beneficial to advance your programmatic and sustainability efforts. • Research the backgrounds of potential champions to determine the best fit for the APP project with the intent of finding a common purpose. • Develop an outreach plan to recruit key champions and maintain existing relationships. • Dedicate time to maintaining and nurturing partnerships.
<p>Organizational Capacity: The resources to efficiently and effectively manage the program and implement it with high quality</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Conduct an assessment that determines organizational strengths and weaknesses for sustaining efforts. Consider using a resource such as the <i>Program Sustainability Assessment Tool</i> found at https://sustaintool.org or the <i>Sustainability Formative Self-Assessment Tool</i> found at https://www.ruralhealthinfo.org/sustainability/pdf/sustainability-self-assessment-tool.pdf • Foster leadership and support at all levels of the APP project (management, staff, and board or advisors). • Continually invest in professional development to hone skills and stay abreast of best practices. • Continue to refine and use original planning documents (e.g., strategic plans, logic models). • Establish internal capacity to implement activities that once required external support, such as forming a cadre of curriculum trainers. • Train new staff to ensure that there is a steady pool of individuals who can assume the various roles on the project.
<p>Evaluation: Collecting and monitoring process and outcome evaluation data to inform planning and document results</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use easy-to-understand indicators to assess progress toward meeting project goals. This should be based on the program’s logic model. • Establish sustainable data collection methods and systems to continually track the progress and needs of your target population. • Establish regular meetings to review evaluation data and develop a plan for making necessary program changes (see tip sheet on Continuous Quality Improvement).
<p>Program Adaptation: The ability to adapt the program to ensure ongoing effectiveness</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Stay attuned to changing economic, social, educational, political, and demographic conditions at the local, state, and national levels. • Identify someone on staff who is responsible for staying up to date on the evidence and research that informs your program implementation. • Establish a system to collect feedback regularly from the target population to ensure that the program is fitting their needs or how it could be improved.

<p>Communications: Strategically disseminating information about the program to stakeholders and the general public</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Disseminate results in engaging ways to share project success, elicit support, and ensure that the benefits of the project are readily perceived. • Develop and implement a communications and marketing plan with messages tailored for different audiences to communicate the vision clearly and widely in the community. • Develop the leadership skills of key stakeholders so they can educate others about the project. • Build positive relationships with local media. • Consider developing an engaging and memorable 30-second pitch to easily share.
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Tools and Resources to Assess and Support Sustainability

- Program Assessment Sustainability Tool: <https://www.sustaintool.org/>
 - The Center for Public Health Systems Science at the Brown School of Social Work at Washington University has developed an assessment tool based on these domains. Organizations can access the tool and assess their current strengths and gaps related to sustainability.
- The Community Tool Box: <https://ctb.ku.edu/en/table-of-contents>
 - This resource, developed by the Center for Community Health and Development at the University of Kansas, provides a wide range of tools and resources to support community building. Chapters 42–46 focus on financial resources and sustainability.
- A Sustainability Planning Guide for Health Communities: https://www.cdc.gov/nccdphp/dch/programs/healthycommunitiesprogram/pdf/sustainability_guide.pdf
 - The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention provide a detailed guide to support the development of a sustainability plan.
- Bringing the Future into Focus: A Step-by-Step Sustainability Planning Workbook: <https://www.ruralhealthinfo.org/sustainability/pdf/bringing-the-future-into-focus-sustainability-planning-workbook.pdf>
 - The Georgia Health Policy Center developed this workbook to help organizations develop a sustainability plan.
- Sustainability Planning Tools: <https://www.hhs.gov/ash/oah/resources-and-training/tpp-and-paf-resources/community-mobilization-and-sustainability/index.html>
 - The Office of Adolescent Health has developed a suite of planning tools for sustainability, including an assessment and planning template.
- The Road to Sustainability, Sustainability Workbook: <http://www.afterschoolalliance.org/documents/Toolbox/RoadtoSustainability.pdf>
 - The National Center for Community Education and the Afterschool Alliance developed this toolkit to help community education programs develop a sustainability plan.

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This tip sheet was developed by ETR Associates (#HHSP233200951WC Task 25) and updated by RTI International (#HHSP233201500039I Task 4) with the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration on Children, Youth and Families, Family and Youth Services Bureau.

Suggested Citation: Suellentrop, K. & Wallace, I. (2021, February). *Beyond the Finish Line: Tips for Sustaining Your Project*. Washington, DC: Administration on Children, Youth and Families, Family and Youth Services Bureau.