

SUSTAINING EVIDENCE-BASED PRACTICES

EBPs

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY
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With increasingly scarce government resources and fiscal oversight, government funding agencies are more concerned than ever about the sustainability of evidence-based programs once their initial investments end. This briefing examines the sustainability of evidence-based programs, which is an important issue for State Administrative Agencies (SAAs) and their grantees. The briefing describes sustainability and how it relates to evidence-based program implementation, and presents a number of factors and strategies from the research literature for achieving program sustainment.

“Sustainability” is defined as the maintenance, after initial funding is exhausted, of evidencebased program components that have been developed and fully implemented. Beginning with the initiation stage in which a program idea is conceived, programs move through stages of adoption, implementation, and sustainment. Sustainability is an evolving process that begins with the early adoption of a program and continues after implementation.

A program’s likelihood of sustainment can be significantly enhanced through several aspects of implementation: maintaining fidelity to core program components, articulating clear goals and developing a plan to achieve them, and demonstrating program success with measureable results and program evaluation. Implementation research shows that program fidelity to the core components of evidence-based programs is essential for achieving the intended results. Without full implementation, sustainability is more difficult because programs are less likely to demonstrate positive outcomes. Logic models can be effective tools for not only achieving implementation fidelity but also for communicating the value of a program to potential funders and community stakeholders. Similarly, sustainable initiatives can demonstrate program success through measurable results and program evaluation. Measuring progress toward the initiative’s goals allows program leaders to establish accountability to the community and to show potential funders that the program uses limited resources effectively.

Sustainability should be planned for in the early stages of program adoption and considered at each step of implementation. Research finds that grantees with sustained programs tend to plan early in their program life cycle; well before the end of their initial grant funding. Creating and implementing a sustainability plan increases the likelihood of program continuation because it clarifies where to take the initiative in the future, provides benchmarks for determining whether the initiative is successfully reaching its goals, and assists policymakers and others in deciding whether and how to support a specific initiative.

Although seeking new funding is important for program maintenance, research on program sustainability identifies a number of key factors related to the continuation of a program after the initial grant. These

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features of sustained programs relate to the program's characteristics and actions that facilitate sustainability, the program's relationship to its larger organization, and the program's relationship with the community.

A sustainable program is one that adapts and responds to changes in its environment, while at the same time maintaining fidelity to the core components that make it evidence-based. Programs operate in continuously evolving organizational and community contexts. Organizational budgets shrink, leadership changes, staff leave, and organizational priorities shift. Programs that are flexible and responsive to their environments are more likely to be sustained. Responsiveness is enhanced when programs monitor organizational and community environments with strategies like participating in listservs, joining coalitions, and subscribing to relevant publications.

Other significant characteristics of sustainable programs include the presence of competent program leadership and staff involvement. Strong program leaders utilize some of the same skills and strategies that are essential for effective program implementation: setting program goals and objectives, engaging in ongoing program planning, and developing implementation and program evaluation plans. As with implementation, the sustainability research concludes that staff buy-in and commitment can impact whether a program is sustained. When staff become invested in a program they are more likely to pursue program goals and work toward long-term sustainability.

In addition to program characteristics, research suggests that a program's relationship to its host organization influences sustainment. Many of the same organizational characteristics that foster high quality implementation also enable sustainability. A program that is part of an organization with strong internal systems, integrated program activities, and internal program champions is more likely to be sustained over time. Internal systems pertaining to fiscal management, information and technology, and personnel promote effective and efficient operations and use of resources. When these internal organizational systems are well-established, initiatives are better equipped to document their results, demonstrate their soundness to potential funders, and garner support from the community.

Sustainability research also shows that when a program's components are integrated with existing organizational structures and the program has an internal champion, the program is more likely to continue after initial funding is exhausted. Some program integration strategies include funding the program with "hard" money from the organizational budget, inserting program activities into multiple job descriptions, and requiring program use in organizational manuals and policies. Programs should "fit" into an organization's core mission and address an organizational need. Internal program champions in organizational leadership roles are especially useful because they make the program a high priority and integrate core components into the organization's structure.

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Finally, sustainability research indicates that building a broad base of community support can contribute to a program's sustainability by providing financial, social, and political resources. Forming collaborations with other organizations in the community is a useful strategy for maximizing and pooling resources. Social marketing is particularly effective for increasing awareness of a program's benefits and for creating community partnerships. Research shows that having an external program champion in the community is helpful for sustaining programs. External program champions (e.g. government agency staff, church leaders) are willing to generate support to ensure the necessary resources are available for program survival.

Although grantees ultimately bear the burden of continuing their programs when the initial funding ends, grantors can utilize several strategies to facilitate project sustainability in the grant-making process and during the funding period. Grantors can require a sustainability plan in the request for proposal and provide resources on sustainability planning. Organizational capacity can be built with technical assistance and funding for technological infrastructures and staff training on leadership, financial planning, and fundraising. Grantors can facilitate community relationships by organizing events that offer networking opportunities and by sponsoring program awareness campaigns. If grantors and grantees collaborate and engage in multiple sustainment strategies, granting agencies are more likely to see a return on their investments while communities reap the benefits of evidencebased programs.