Building a Strong Foundation for Sustainability

Handout 7 - Evaluation of Sustainability Plan and Outcomes

Ensuring that your community health efforts continue to strengthen and remain viable is critical for the sustainability of your initiative. Evaluation plays an important role in supporting the sustainability of community health efforts. Evaluation information can be used to provide accountability to the community, demonstrate the importance of the coalition and/or partnerships to the funder, improve the coalition and/or partner activities, identify the challenges, raise community awareness, and inform policy decisions.

Although evaluation is typically the last step in the sustainability process, it should actually be considered at the beginning of the process. Start with the end in mind and determine what the indicators of your success will look like; track those indicators to ensure success. The evaluation experience is likely to be more positive and its results more useful if you build evaluation in from the start and make it an ongoing activity.

Evaluating Infrastructure Efforts

Evaluation of the operating infrastructure (fiscal agent, administrative, coalition/partnerships, task group operations, collaboration and communication processes) allows you to demonstrate success or progress. It can also help you determine whether your current infrastructure and planning processes will enable your organization to effectively and efficiently achieve its goals. The information you collect allows you to better communicate the value of your initiative to others, which is critical for public relations, staff/personnel/coalition member morale, and useful for attracting and retaining support from current and potential funders.

Infrastructure process data can help you improve implementation over time, increase accountability to funders (now and in the future), engage stakeholders, and promote sustainability. Some example areas to consider for sustainability evaluation include:

- Degree of community representation
- Key stakeholder support of sustainability model or plan
- Satisfaction with the level of management, staff, or leader communication
- Presence, sufficiency, and quality of fiscal agent/coalition staff
- Satisfaction with decision-making processes
- Quality of planning process documents
- Degree to which coalition/partner membership reflects community makeup
- Coalition or task group makeup in contrast to program requirements (having the right people to achieve objectives)
- Quality of leadership of decision-making and task groups
- Level of education and training opportunities
- Satisfaction level of program achievement

- Overall sense of sustainability planning benefits to participants
- Committee or task group functioning
- Satisfaction with role in initiative

Evaluating Initiatives

Studies have shown that partnerships tend to endure longer when there is a consensus on identified outcomes for program strategies and also for the process for measuring them.

As a first step to preparing for the evaluation process, you'll need to choose the best way to gather needed data. Possible methods include conducting interviews, focus groups, surveys, and site visits. Also consider that you may be able to use evaluation data from other sources, such as, national and state surveys, as well as organizational and historical data.

There are plenty of resources for program evaluation on the Internet. CDC offers its framework for evaluating programs here http://www.cdc.gov/eval/framework/. Here are some items to keep in mind.

- Involve evaluators early in sustainability planning discussion so that short and long-term outcomes are clear and that key data sources have been identified or will be developed.

- Develop baseline data that you can use as a benchmark. Consider conducting an environmental scan to develop a clear picture of the initiative's external and internal environment. An environmental scan involves carefully monitoring an organization's internal and external environments to detect early signs of opportunities and threats that may influence the organization's current and future plans. It can, for example, determine the presence or absence of best practices that have been shown to positively affect health in a community.

- Develop a logic model to clarify available resources as well as short and long-term indicators. A logic model will help define the results you want to achieve, identify the strategies and activities that will help you achieve these results, and show how planned strategies will help improve community outcomes.

- Instead of just counting numbers, explain the effort's return on social investment. For example, show how strategies might help save lives or improve health.

- Use short-term results from a smaller-scale demonstration project to demonstrate how a strategy will have long-term benefits.

- Use results of similar activities evaluated in a similar setting or community to make the case for your work and sharpen decisions about which activities to continue.