



U.S. Department of Health and Human Services
Administration for Children and Families
Office of Family Assistance



NRFC Brief for Practitioners Program Sustainability: Tips from the Field

Program sustainability refers to the ability to maintain an initiative and all of its benefits over time.ⁱ This NRFC brief provides an overview of eight domains of program sustainability, along with tips from seasoned practitioners and helpful resources with more information on ways to maintain the benefits of successful initiatives for fathers and their families.

The brief draws primarily on information presented in the NRFC webinar [Keeping the Doors Open: Sustainability Tips for Fatherhood Programs](#) (September 2017), which featured presentations by Michelle Foster, Greater Kanawha Valley Foundation, Charleston, WV; Andrew Freeberg, the FATHER Project, Goodwill-Easter Seals Minnesota, Minneapolis, MN; and Kathy Lambert, Connections to Success, St. Charles, MO.

Although the range and impact of responsible fatherhood programs in the U.S. has grown significantly over the last 30 years, program sustainability remains one of the biggest challenges for the field.ⁱⁱ Common sustainability challenges include:

- Difficulty planning far enough ahead to secure necessary financial resources.
- Lack of well-documented successes to share with the community and funders.
- Finite funding streams.
- Competition with organizations doing similar work.ⁱⁱⁱ

These challenges are compounded if programs do not recognize the increased emphasis that many funders now place on evaluation and evidence-based approaches.

"[Fatherhood programs] with the most longevity have had the benefit of dynamic and involved leadership, support from the local funding community, an effective program model, and an ability to form and maintain strong community partnerships."

NRFC Responsible Fatherhood Toolkit

"Organizations that collect and use high-quality data from program evaluation and gather stakeholder input for planning and strategy implementation efforts are significantly more sustainable than those that do not."

Steve McLaughlin
Data Driven Nonprofits

Take Time to Be a Dad Today

Toll-free: 877-4DAD411 (877-432-3411) | Fax: 703-934-3740 | Help@FatherhoodGov.Info | www.fatherhood.gov

facebook.com/fatherhoodgov

[@fatherhoodgov](https://twitter.com/fatherhoodgov)

Eight Domains of Program Sustainability^{iv}

This overview draws on information developed by the Center for Public Health Systems Science and featured during the NRFCC's September 2017 webinar.

- 1. Strategic Planning** is necessary to guide program direction, goals, and strategies; hold program efforts together; and ensure that an initiative is well-aligned with external and internal organizational environments.
"A 3-year strategic plan is ideal ... it's really a process of reflecting on where you are, considering where you want to go, and then coming up with some specific targets for your program and your organization."
(Michelle Foster)
- 2. Organizational Capacity** to effectively manage a program is essential for continued program success.
"We use the [Core Capacity Assessment Tool](#) to assess strengths, identify areas in need of improvement, create a capacity building plan, and implement priority steps to improve organizational effectiveness."
(Kathy Lambert)
- 3. Partnerships** can help connect a program and its participants with necessary resources and expertise.
"We have an extensive array of community, business, and corporate partners who provide parenting, education, and job training services; assist with job development; and support ongoing fund development."
(Andrew Freeberg)
- 4. Program Evaluation** helps programs track outcomes and document results. When the data show demonstrated program impacts, this can help a program build community support and make the case for new or continued funding.
"We follow a 'Culture of Data' whereby data is viewed as an asset, not a requirement; resources are allocated to data collection and analysis; data is available for everyone to use; and data analysis is used to tell a story and produce insights that inform decisions and change within the organization." (Kathy Lambert)
"We have worked with evaluation partners to conduct in-depth cost/benefit analyses. These have shown increases in parenting skills, educational achievement, and job placement; the [Return on Investment](#) study by Wilder Research demonstrated a long-term financial return of \$3.41 for every dollar invested."
(Andrew Freeberg)
- 5. Program Adaptation**, based on data collection and evaluation, is an essential aspect of a successful program. Making necessary corrections can ensure ongoing effectiveness and responsiveness to the needs and goals of program participants and other stakeholders.
"Circumstances change, and sometimes your initiative needs to change as well. The goal is not necessarily to sustain every component over time, but rather to sustain the most effective components and their benefits for your target group." (Michelle Foster)
- 6. Strategic Communications** to share evidence that a program works can build buy-in and support internally with staff and externally with community partners, funders, potential program participants, and the general public.
"We tell our story through videos, social media, community presentations, and annual events where program alumni describe their personal journeys and how the program helped them achieve their goals ... never underestimate the importance of a good quote to demonstrate the importance of engaging fathers so children will thrive." (Andrew Freeberg)
- 7. Environmental Support** from internal and external leaders and decision makers is a major factor in determining ongoing success.
"Decision makers require your attention ... it's important to make time to speak about your initiative with your local leaders, your mayors, your legislators ... explain why it's important, why you need their support as you try to make a difference in the lives of fathers." (Michelle Foster)
- 8. Funding Stability** can be achieved by adhering to each of these domains and ensuring that program adjustments are made in light of changing trends in economic and political cycles.
"We learned the importance of a fundraising board ... be intentional with your board members, ask them to commit to raising a certain amount, ask what they can give personally, and stay engaged with them." (Kathy Lambert)
"Planning for the sustainability of funding should be a strategic process that addresses the long-term needs of your initiative. You should know exactly what it takes to operate your programs." (Michelle Foster)

Additional Tips from Experienced Practitioners^v

- Use a logic model to help develop a service plan. Include information on projected inputs, activities, outputs, and short- and long-term goals.
- Commit to a documentation and evaluation approach to generate robust information about program successes that can be shared with local governments, foundations, and businesses to enhance sustainability.
- Develop multiple funding sources and encourage in-kind support from partners and volunteers.
- Build an effective leadership team, plan for transitions, develop a long-term financial plan, clearly define program goals, and document all work to ensure Continuous Quality Improvement.
- Ensure that the right people (leadership and direct service) are on board to get the job done and the program is well integrated in overall organization operations.
- Clearly articulate the program vision to all staff and external partners.
- Nurture partnerships with diverse community organizations to increase program visibility, build community awareness and support, generate program referrals, and ensure the availability of essential services. In particular, look to gain the buy-in of key decision makers and people who are likely to benefit from the program.
- Form a network of local agencies with similar goals. This can make service provision more cohesive. It also creates opportunities to apply for funding as a network, which not only strengthens funding proposals but also minimizes competition with organizations doing similar work.
- Ensure that “people of influence” know about the program and its impacts. This can be key to maintaining funding, identifying new funding opportunities, and getting policies passed that benefit the target population.
- Identify alternate forms of federal or local funds (e.g., TANF, DOJ, SAMHSA) and encourage partners to contribute with in-kind support such as meeting space, workshop supplies, or food for group sessions.
- Stay abreast of current fatherhood research concerning promising practices and evidence-based strategies and use this information to continuously improve program approaches, align with trends, and identify program components that may need to be adapted or discontinued.
- Reserve part of the program budget (non-federal funds) for development and fundraising, including outreach to government agencies and businesses through research, presentations, and follow-up.
- Hire a grant writer (non-federal funds) to help identify revenue sources and develop applications for local foundations and government grants.
- Involve your board of directors and staff whenever possible. A strong board should be able to help identify local, regional, and national funding opportunities and make fundraising presentations.

“Ultimately, programs succeed because they deliver effective services and adapt to a changing fiscal landscape ...a solid record of success can help a program mature into a long-lasting community institution.”

NRFC Responsible Fatherhood Toolkit

NRFC Resources

- Webinar (2017), [Keeping the Doors Open: Sustainability Tips for Fatherhood Programs](#).
- Program Spotlights (these three programs have sustained fatherhood services for a combined total of 60+ years):
 - [Spotlight on Children’s Institute and Project Fatherhood \(2018\)](#)
 - [Spotlight on Fathers and Families Center \(2018\)](#)
 - [Spotlight on South Carolina Center for Fathers and Families \(2017\)](#)
- [Responsible Fatherhood Toolkit: Tips from the Field](#)
 - [Documentation and Sustainability](#)

Other Helpful Resources

- The [Core Capacity Assessment Tool](#) is a fee-based tool to assess program strengths and areas in need of improvement.
- [Data Driven Nonprofits](#), a book written by Steve McLaughlin (2016), offers tips for using data for organizational decision making.
- The [Foundation Center](#) maintains an online directory of foundations and a network of information centers in public libraries, community foundations, and educational institutions.
- [Grants.gov](#) provides a [Grants Learning Center](#) and a variety of tools to search and track federal grant opportunities.
- The [Grantsmanship Center](#) provides training and resources for grant writers and fundraisers.
- The [National Council of Nonprofits](#) has online resources for charitable nonprofit organizations, including a section with a list of [sustainability resources](#) and [Ten Planning Tips for Leadership Transition](#).
- The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services’ [Office of Adolescent Health](#) has a number of helpful resources drawn from work with their Pregnancy Assistance Fund grantees:
 - [Building Sustainable Programs: The Resource Guide](#) (2014)
 - [Built to Last: Planning Programmatic Sustainability](#) (2014)
 - [Sustaining Programs for Expectant and Parenting Teens: Lessons Learned from Former Pregnancy Assistance Fund Grantees](#) (2017)
- The [Society for Nonprofits](#) offers information and resources to guide fundraising efforts.
- The [Program Sustainability Assessment Tool](#) was developed by the Center for Public Health Systems Science, a public health research center at the George Warren Brown School of Social Work at Washington University in St. Louis.

ⁱ Foster, M. (Presenter). (2017, September 20). Keeping the Doors Open: Sustainability Tips for Fatherhood Programs [Webinar].

ⁱⁱ NRFC Responsible Fatherhood Toolkit: Tips from the Field.

ⁱⁱⁱ Office of Adolescent Health (2014). Built to Last: Planning Program Sustainability.

^{iv} For a more detailed description of each domain, and to assess the sustainability of a specific program, see Center for Public Health Systems Science, George Warren Brown School of Social Work, Program Sustainability Assessment Tool, Washington University, St. Louis, MO.

^v These tips were drawn from the September 2017 webinar, the NRFC’s Responsible Fatherhood Toolkit: Tips from the Field, and conversations with fatherhood practitioners during NRFC program visits and other fatherhood events.