Project Sustainability Action Plan Guide

Rural Health Network Development Grantee Program

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Rural Health Innovations

NATIONAL RURAL HEALTH RESOURCE CENTER

525 South Lake Avenue, Suite 320
Duluth, Minnesota 55802
(218) 727-9390 | info@ruralcenter.org | www.ruralcenter.org

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Background and Purpose

Background

Rural Health Innovations (RHI), LLC, is a subsidiary of the National Rural Health Resource Center (The Center), a non-profit organization. Together, RHI and The Center are the leading technical assistance (TA) and knowledge center in rural health. In partnership with The Center, RHI enhances the health of rural communities by providing products and services with a focus on innovation and excellence. RHI provides TA to the 2017 cohort of 51 Rural Health Network Development (Network Development) grantees through a contract with the Federal Office of Rural Health Policy (FORHP).

Since the fall of 2012, RHI, working through Health Resources and Services Administration's (HRSA) FORHP contracts, has provided TA to over 250 rural health networks. We have provided direct support to network leaders across the country, held knowledge-sharing summits, delivered capacity-building workshops, developed frameworks for program development, and provided rural health tools and resources.

Purpose

The *Project Sustainability Action Plan Toolkit* provides a framework for rural health networks to actively plan for sustainability as network leaders deploy their networks' business plans and assists grantees in meeting their "Project Sustainability Plan" grant deliverable.

> The toolkit is comprised of a **guide**, **template**, and **sample** and is supported with an educational webinar: *Project Sustainability Action Planning*. The webinar recording and toolkit is posted on RHI's network website.

RHI developed an online *Network Sustainability Toolkit* based on our knowledge and understanding of rural health networks and concepts from the *Baldrige Performance Excellence Framework*, coupled with a systems approach. The toolkit is designed to be used in conjunction with the *Network Sustainability Action Planning Toolkit*.

An important component of the online *Network Sustainability Toolkit* is the

Rural Health Network Sustainability Assessment. This assessment acts as a data gathering tool and is a critical component in the development of your sustainability plan. The assessment was developed through a two-year study by RHI, the National Cooperative of Health Networks (NCHN) and Evalytics, LLC. The study was funded by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS), HRSA, and FORHP. See the *Network Sustainability Study: Final Report 2018* for additional information.

Glossary of Terms

The following terms are used throughout the *Project Sustainability Action Plan Toolkit.* They are based on the National Institute of Standards and Technology, Baldrige Performance Excellence definitions. Reviewing these terms will create a better frame of reference for your sustainability work.

Action plan: Specific actions that your organization takes to reach its short-term and longer-term strategic objectives.

Alignment: A state of consistency among plan, processes, information, resources decisions, workforce capability and capacity, actions, results, and analyses that support key organization-wide goals.

Approach: The methods your organization uses to carry out its processes.

Collaborators: Organizations or individuals who cooperate with your organization to support a particular activity or event, or who cooperate intermittently when their short-term goals are aligned with or are the same.

Customer: An actual or potential user of your organization's services.

Effective: How well a process or a measure addresses its intended purpose.

Goals: Future organizational conditions or performance levels as intended or desired.

Governance: The systems of management and controls exercised in the stewardship of your organization.

High performance: Ever-higher levels of overall organizational and individual performance, including quality, productivity, innovation rate, and cycle time.

How: Systems and processes used to achieve your mission requirements.

Innovation: Making meaningful change to improve services, processes, or organizational effectiveness and create new value for stakeholders.

Integration: The harmonization of plans, processes, information, resources, decisions, workforce capability and capacity, actions, results, and analyses to support key organization-wide goals.

Key: Major or most important; critical to achieving your intended outcome.

Learning: New knowledge or skills acquired through evaluation, study, experience, and innovation.

Measures and indicators: Numerical information that quantifies the input, output, and performance dimensions of processes, programs, projects, services and the overall organization (outcomes).

Mission: Your organization's overall function.

Partners: Key organizations or individuals who are working in concert with your organization to achieve a common goal or improve performance.

Performance: Outputs and their outcomes obtained from services, processes, members, and other customers that permit you to evaluate and compare your organization's results to performance projections, standards, past results, goals, and other organizations' results.

Process: Linked activities with the purpose of producing a service for a customer (user) within or outside your organization.

Results: Outputs and outcomes achieved by your organization.

Stakeholders: All groups that are or might be affected by your organization's actions and success.

Strategic objectives: The aims or responses that your organization articulates to address major changes or improvement, competitiveness or social issues, and service advantages.

Sustainability: The ability to achieve desired outcomes and maintain the ability to do so over time.

Value: The perceived worth of a program, service, process, asset, or function relative to its cost and possible alternatives.

Vision: Your organization's desired future state.

Understanding Sustainability

Sustainability is defined as the ability to achieve desired outcomes and maintain the ability to continue activities over time. [1] Ultimately, program sustainability exists as the goal of FORHP grant funding.

Rural health networks are a critical solution to collaborating across non-integrated health care organizations and community agencies to achieve population health initiatives. This requires networks to lead, facilitate, convene and engage, educate, connect community resources, and make data-driven decisions. Succeeding in these roles requires thriving network organizations that are sustained over time (RHI, October 2017).

Combining findings from the *2018 Network Sustainability Study: Final Report*, and concepts from the *Baldrige Performance Excellence Framework*, seven characteristics of a sustainable network have been identified:

1. **Collaborative Leadership:** Promoting trust, transparency with information, creating opportunities for problem solving and keeping abreast of the larger environment with the organization's future in mind. It also includes a focus on members, partners, and stakeholders relative to the network's drive to meet its mission and attain its vision.
2. **Member-Driven Decisions:** Incorporating network members' needs into decisions for network products and services along with articulating network value as seen specifically through marketing efforts.
3. **Effective Communication:** Intentional communication with members, partners, and stakeholders. Communication is designed as a formal plan that is monitored and valued as part of a strategic planning cycle.
4. **Change-Ready and Adaptable Workforce:** Proactive investment in network staff to support and develop a change-ready culture and workforce that are able to adapt to a changing health care environment.
5. **Continuous Improvement:** Consistent use of process improvement tools and techniques, systematize review of procedures to ensure effective process, and valued network services.

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[1] Scheirer, M. A. (2005). Is sustainability possible? A review and commentary on emperical studies of program sustainability. *American Journal of Evaluation, 26*(3), 320-349.

6. **Ongoing Evaluation and Measurement:** Intentional evaluation of organizational efforts toward both goals and activities. Evaluation is designed as a formal plan that is monitored as part of a strategic planning cycle. There is a specific focus on involving organizational leadership and open communication of results.

7. **Sound Financial Infrastructure:** A focus on financial processes and procedures with the intention to purposefully address financial stability through savings and diverse revenue generation.

The *Project Sustainability Action Plan Toolkit* is based on Baldrige principles of performance improvement. It involves assessing your network on each of the seven characteristics of a sustainable network, then identifying the network's most important opportunities for improvement, and creating a plan to address each opportunity. Below are the three phases for completing a project sustainability action plan.

Sustainability Action Plan Phases

	Phase 1: Build Organizational/Project Profile	Phase 2: Complete Sustainability Assessment	Phase 3: Create Opportunity for Sustainability Action Plans
Who?	Network leadership	Network leadership	Network leadership, staff, and stakeholders
What?	Key information about the systems of your network.	A means to consider your network as a whole and identify opportunities for sustainability.	• Network Sustainability Assessment Results • Selected Opportunities for Sustainability • Opportunities for Sustainability Action Plans and Dashboard
Why?	Prepares you for completing Phase 2, by bringing all of your project's systems into view.	Identifies specific areas your network can focus on and invest in to increase the probability of being sustainable over time.	Outlines how your network will address selected opportunities for improvement and provides insight on improving sustainability over time.
How?	Summarize key network information using the *Project Sustainability Action Plan Template.*	Complete the *Rural Health Network Sustainability Assessment.*	Create action plans that address opportunities for sustainability using the *Project Sustainability Action Planning Template.*

Organizational Profile → Sustainability Assessment → Opportunities for Susatinability Action Plans

Preparation

Gather your project's existing plans. The following documents will be used for reference as you develop your Project Sustainability Action Plan:

- Strategic Plan
- Evaluation Plan
- Marketing Plan
- Business Plan
- Financial Plan (if your network has one separate from your Business Plan)

Phase 1: Organizational/Project Profile

Phase 1 is a starting point for the network leader to understand the systems of their network organization. It sets the context for completing Phase 2 by bringing all your project's systems into view before completing the online *Rural Health Network Sustainability Assessment.* Components of the Organizational/Project Profile include strategic thinking, marketing thinking, operational review and financial outlook.

> Your Project Sustainability Action Plan deliverable should be written specific to your HRSA-funded grant project, not your overall network.

The key to writing the Organizational/Project Profile is to review each component and then summarize the key aspects that describe your network organization and how it operates. See this section from the Project Sustainability Action Plan Template below.

Organizational/Project Profile

Network Name:

Project Name:

Vision: A statement articulating your network's aspirations. It outlines where your network wants to be or wants to achieve while communicating your network's purpose, values, and is future-oriented. *Network vision can be found in both your strategic and business plans.*	**Mission:** A statement articulating your network's purpose for being while communicating what the network does. It is present-oriented and describes how the network will achieve its vision in relation to customer needs. *Network mission can be found in both your strategic and business plans.*

Strategic Thinking

Environmental Analysis: Significant characteristics of your network's internal and external environment. This can be reflected in narrative form, a chart, or a diagram. (Summarize in 100 words or less.) *Environmental analysis can be found in your strategic plan.*		**Project Goals:** *Project goals can be found in your strategic plan.*
Blocks: Top six blocks in health care, your community, and your organization that are hindering your project from moving toward its vision. *Blocks can be found in your strategic plan.*	**Levers**: The top six levers in health care, your community, and your organization that are helping your project move toward its vision. *Levers can be found in your strategic plan.*	**Strategic Objectives:** *Strategic objectives can be found in your strategic plan.*

Marketing Thinking

Members and Customers: A list of members and customers, including organization type and years as members. *Members and customers can be found in your marketing and business plans.*	**Target Markets:** A group of people, or organizations, for which your network designs, implements, and maintains a marketing mix intended to meet the needs of that group. *Target markets can be found in your marketing plan.*
Member Needs: Identified member needs that drive product or service development. (Summarize in 100 words or less.) *Member needs can be found in your marketing plan.*	**Competitors:** Individuals, groups, or technologies that also provide the services offered through your project. *Competitors can be found in your marketing plan.*
Marketing Goals: The future conditions or performance levels intended by carrying out the marketing plan. *Marketing goals can be found in your marketing plan.*	**Products and Services**: Products and services your network offer to satisfy the needs of its members and customers. A product is a tangible item (i.e. telemedicine monitor), and a service is an intangible item (i.e. educational conference). (Summarize as a bulleted list.) *Products and services can be found in your marketing and business plans.*
Key Messages: Statement(s) describing the value members will receive from your product or service. A well-crafted key message spells out how a product or service addresses pains and gains, using language that resonates with people in a particular target market. (Summarize as a bulleted list.) *Key messages can be found in your marketing and business plans.*	

Operational Review

Leadership Skills:

Skills and attributes that contribute to the success of your network's HRSA-funded grant project specifically. The key is to show that you have the people-related resources in place to support project success. (Summarize in 100 words or less or in an organizational chart.)

Leadership skills can be found in your business plan.

Key Initiatives:

Activities that take place in the next six to 18 months that are aligned with your vision. A summary, or high-level description, of your work plan or logic model outlining key activities and initiatives for developing, implementing, supporting, and providing products and services. (Summarize in a bulleted list.)

Key initiatives can be found in your business plan.

Desired Experience and Relationship:

An understanding, or insights, of the target market's desired experience and relationship with your network as they learn about, receive, and use your product or service. (Summarize in 100 words or less.)

Desired experience and relationship can be found in your business plan.

Delivery:

Methods used to deliver your products and services to your target market, including the timing for delivery. (Summarize in 100 words or less.)

Delivery can be found in your business plan.

Key Resources and Infrastructure:

Fundamental resources and infrastructure that support product and service operations. Detail to show your operations are effective, reliable, and stable. (Summarize in a bulleted list.)

Key resources and infrastructure can be found in your business plan.

Key Partners:

Those that contribute to the success of your project operations and how they do so. Key partners may also be network members.

Key partners can be found in your business plan.

Key Measures: An executive level summary of the top three-to-five measurements that help tell the story of progress and impact of your project work. Comparative data or trend information can be included as appropriate.

Key measures can be found in your evaluation plan dashboard.

Financial Outlook			
Summary of Forecasted Annual Net Income: Years 1-3			
Products and Services	**Forecast Net Income** (Revenue and Operational Costs)		
	Year 1	*Year 2*	*Year 3*
Product or Service #1:			
Product or Service #2:			
Product or Service #3:			
Total Forecasted Annual Net Income			

Phase 2: Sustainability Assessment

Now that you have completed Phase 1 and have a holistic view of your project's systems and how the various components work together, it is time for Phase 2. This phase involves completing the online *Rural Health Network Sustainability Assessment*. The purpose of the assessment is to provide a means to consider your network as a whole and identify opportunities for sustainability (OFS). It includes 32 questions within the categories of collaborative leadership, member-driven decisions, effective communication, change-ready and adaptable workforce, continuous improvement, on-going evaluation and measurement, and sound financial infrastructure.

> **Click here to access the**
> **Rural Health Network Sustainability Assessment.**
>
> Unlike writing your Project Sustainability Action Plan, please answer the questions on the sustainability assessment from the perspective of your network as a whole, **NOT** from the project prospective.

Upon completion of the assessment, a summary of your results will be displayed. You will also receive a link via email to revisit your summary results at your leisure. By September 28, 2019 this link, sent via email, will bring you to a detailed report of your assessment results. The detailed results are what will serve as the basis for your Project Sustainability Action Planning in Phase 3.

Phase 3: Opportunity for Sustainability Action Planning

To reveal potential opportunities for sustainability (OFS), identify from your detailed assessment results, the questions you rated as *slightly disagree, disagree, or strongly disagree*. To select the opportunities for sustainability you will include in your phase 3 action planning, you can use the conversation found in [Appendix A](#) with your network staff and board members. This conversation will assist in selecting the **three** OFS that are most critical to the sustainability of your HRSA Network Development project. Once selected, you are ready to begin writing your three opportunity for sustainability action plans.

These action plans are internal documents for network leaders to focus initiatives and invest resources. Network staff will use the action plans to implement identified improvements and board members will use them to better understand the project's opportunities for sustainability and provide input and support on the development of network systems. The Opportunity for Sustainability Action Planning process has three components:

1. **Rural Health Network Sustainability Assessment Results:** Results from the seven Network Characteristics from your detailed assessment results.
2. **Selected Opportunities for Sustainability**: Listing of the three OFS to be addressed and the selection methodology.
3. **Opportunity for Sustainability Action Plans and Dashboard**: Action plans include steps to address challenges, who will implement, timeline, needed resources, monitoring, communication and output.

   The dashboard provides a high-level overview of each OFS action plan. This tool is designed for monitoring progress of your action plans so that you can quickly and easily understand the status of each OFS.

Rural Health Network Sustainability Assessment Results	
Network Characteristics	**Score:** % of Total Possible Points
Collaborative Leadership	
Member-Driven Decisions	
Effective Communication	
Change-Ready and Adaptable Workforce	
Continuous Improvement	
On-Going Evaluation and Measurement	
Sound Financial Infrastructure	
Overall Score	

Selected Opportunities for Sustainability (OFS)		
Selected OFS:	**Sustainable Network Characteristic**	**Network Rating:** Slightly Disagree, Disagree, Strongly Disagree
Opportunity for Sustainability #1	Network Characteristic Category of OFS #1.	Network's response to corresponding assessment question.
Opportunity for Sustainability #2	Network Characteristic Category of OFS #2.	Network's response to corresponding assessment question.
Opportunity for Sustainability #3	Network Characteristic Category of OFS #3.	Network's response to corresponding assessment question.
Opportunity for Sustainability Selection Methodology		
Method used for selecting your top three opportunities for sustainability. (e.g. board discussion, focused conversation, network leadership dialog etc.)		

Opportunity for Sustainability Action Plan #1

Selected Opportunity for Sustainability (OFS):

OFS Characteristic Category:

What will success look like when your action plan is complete?

Action Steps:	Who Will Implement:	Timeline:
1.		
2.		
3.		

Action Steps:		Needed Resources:	
1.			
2.			
3.			

Action Steps:	Monitoring:	Communication:	Output:
1.	•	•	•
2.	•	•	•
3.	•	•	•

NOTE: Create a separate action plan for each opportunity for sustainability.

Dashboard			
Selected OFS:	**Key Actions for Change:** (The three most important action steps for each OFS)	**Timeline:** (Start/end dates)	**Status:** (For future use)
1.	1. 2. 3.	•	•
2.	1. 2. 3.	•	•
3.	1. 2. 3.	•	•

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Appendix A

Conversation for Selecting Top Three Opportunities for Sustainability (OFS):

- **Identify**: Identify the OFS that were rated 'slightly disagree, disagree, or strongly disagree'. Read them aloud and/or post them to a flip chart for consideration.
- **Ask:** From the low-rated OFS:
  - Which low-rated questions are you surprised by?
  - Which low rated questions make sense?
- **Ask:** In considering the low-rated OFS:
  - Which ones are we already been working on?
  - Which ones don't necessarily lend themselves to our network's sustainability?
  - Which ones may be important to consider for our sustained work?
- **Ask:** In considering the low-rated OFS:
  - Left unaddressed, which ones may have long-term impact?
  - Are there any apparent common themes within these OFS?
- **Ask:** Which are the three most important OFS we should address?
  - *Participants identify their top three OFS by placing a mark on the individual OFS.*
- **Select:** Select the top three OFS to develop action plans for, with the intention of improving their individual ratings.