Sustainability Checklist: Guidance for Federal Grantees

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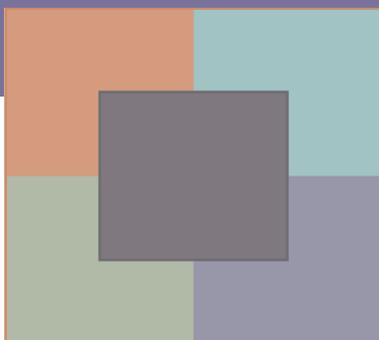Maureen McDonnell, BA
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INTRODUCTION

This checklist has been developed to assist federal grantees with integrating sustainability plans and then performing sustainability actions beginning early in the life cycle of a grant. The guide will briefly cover the concepts of conceptual and practical sustainability, previously introduced in SAMHSA's GAINS Center publications, as well as provide a checklist of activities that should be conducted over the first years of the grant. The goal is to provide guidance to promote grant program sustainability, in whole or part, as early as possible in the funding cycle. Preparing for and developing the mechanisms to support program sustainability from the outset can ensure that the good work of the program and the outcomes it produces continue beyond the end of the grant. Remember, tomorrow is an unforgiving and relentless task master.

KNOW, DO, BE

Sustainability should be integrated into every aspect of program development and implementation from "Day 2." This means that on the very day after a program has launched, the focus must include sustainability. For Day 2 to become a reality, the grant team must first know what is needed for sustainability—what partners, messages, leadership, resources, and infrastructure need to be in place. Next, the grant team should move early on Day 2 to do things that promote sustainability, aligning those partners and resources and determining how to build that infrastructure. Finally, as the program emerges and evolves, the grant team should aim for sustainability, continuously looking for opportunities and partnerships that can support the program into the future.

CONCEPTUAL SUSTAINABILITY

Conceptual sustainability is the perceived value of your program to the individuals, community, institutions, and systems that helped the initiative get started. It is the idea that sparked the effort to life and appealed to the heart. From there, it is about ensuring relevancy over time. If a program becomes irrelevant, its existence is in jeopardy. Ultimately, conceptual sustainability is oriented toward appealing and re-appealing to the hearts of the community, partners, funders, and even the grant team itself. To do so, grantees need to articulate the societal problem the program is designed to address, emphasize its value to specific segments of society, and/or state why this specific solution to the problem deserves attention over others. Does the idea of what the program wants to do or is doing, on its own, merit support in the sea of programs clamoring for support? Does it capture our dreams? Is it exciting? The idea must be alive! It does not need to be revolutionary or innovative, but it must be appealing and attractive.

PRACTICAL SUSTAINABILITY

Practical sustainability is the quantifiable and demonstrable value of the program in terms of its intended impact on the problem it purports to solve. In demonstrating the practical impact of the program, you appeal to the minds of potential partners by showing them that the program effectively, quickly, and efficiently solves the problem. In the era of evidence-based practices, employing data to demonstrate effective outcomes has become increasingly important to both public and private partners. An agency focused on practical sustainability will take steps to ensure it can "walk the walk."

When considering sustainability, both conceptual and practical, it is the combination of a program's efforts toward achieving both over the course of the grant period that indicates the program's overall level of sustainability. Sustainability is not static; it is dynamic—changing for the better or worse over time.

THE FIRST GRANT YEAR — "BUILDING THE PLANE WHILE FLYING IT"

In the first year of the grant, it is critical to start several sustainability activities on Day 2. This is the best path towards becoming sustainable. Never wait for the miracle funding, magic relationship, or ideal situation to arrive. Sustainability comes from a proactive, "early and often" strategic approach. It is imperative that sustainability is a regular agenda item. This includes identifying and working with existing and new partners who can provide support for the program in the ongoing work as well as conceptualizing future viability. A champion or leader who can bring together the necessary external partners and guide the process is also necessary to help to establish the correct group, which may change over time. With a strong team of external partners and a solid advisory committee, it is possible to develop and to carry the message about the program's value.

Know the Environment

Determining the "local global system" is essential. An environmental scan will inform the grant team and partners what the political climate is like, who else is in the space, what conveys value in the project, and how to disseminate information. In year one, grant team and partners should examine the MSR3 (mission, shared resources, risk, and return) for each program partner. While the project can never have too many partners with similar goals, it is crucial that a risk tolerance for collaboration is also established. This will allow for a review of which partners, new or potential, are more valuable than others, or which may become more valuable down the road. After the evaluation of various potential partners, the group can conduct the evaluation of the 4 Cs (coexist, communication, cooperation, and collaboration) to form a cooperative alliance. Once the group is solidified, sustainability has been identified as key, and other grant goals have been discussed, the team can move on to the practical matter of identifying future funding streams to sustain progress after the grant cycle has ended.

Determine the Message

It is important to be able to articulate the value of the project to the broader world. This will allow the message to maintain value to the external audience. This is called a value proposition, and it should be among the earliest developed products of the working group. Repeated use of multi-modal communication tools (i.e., e-mail, social media, paper flyers, meetings, YouTube, etc.) will also assist in distributing the message and ensuring that it is being spread to a wide audience in many ways and so that it "speaks" to various actors. Once the message is confirmed, it can be used to conduct outreach to potential new external partners. Through discussion with partners, you can further understand how and where it is best to carry the message to achieve maximum buy-in.

The environmental scan also guides the identification of the outside audience and development of the main message. The message must be crafted in such a way to convey value, but also maintain the goal of creating and sustaining the application of the design. The strategic message creates a base upon which sustainability can take root and become a main factor in ongoing discussions and planning.

Prepare to Make the Case for Sustainability

In the First Year, it is also necessary to determine actual steps and plans for sustaining funding and how the key elements of the project can be carried on fiscally once the grant period ends. Part of this includes proving the concept through data collection. Identify early which factors the program plans to track and how results will be presented to its audience. By gathering stories, quantitative data, and other aspects that convey positive outcomes, the program becomes more attractive to those who may contribute to

continued funding efforts. Depending on the environment, it may be necessary to prove fiscal savings, improvements to the community, or positive systems change. Being able to show that the project has garnered beneficial results lends justification to the project and to the organization that leads it.

THE MIDDLE GRANT YEAR(S) — "PROCEED WITH ALL HASTE"

In the Middle Year(s) of the grant, projects should be well underway and the grant team should have gathered some experience in overcoming struggles and in accomplishing goals. While implementation forces the triumphs and hurdles to remain main topics of discussion, sustainability efforts must continue at a strong pace. Indeed, sustainability should remain at the forefront of the agenda at all meetings and a constant concern for all partners. The very life of the program depends on it. The Middle Years are also an essential time for growth in the project, building upon the work that was done in the First Year.

Nurturing Partner Relationships

In the First Year, grant partners are identified and gathered. In the Middle Year(s), it is necessary to continue growing connections. Ensuring that the right people and organizations are involved helps expand the base of support. In turn, they may also help to facilitate connections to other partners with similar interests.

As the project and work involved broadens, it is possible to become the idea or thought leaders in the specific grant space. Individuals interested in the program from the outside may seek out information, consultation, or technical assistance. This allows for the development of even more external partnerships and bolsters credibility. These factors will continue to build upon themselves, producing a cumulative effect necessary for sustainability.

Extending Strategic Message Reach

After a year of project implementation, it is beneficial to review the message for the external audience. This value proposition will provide an update for existing partners and entice new partners to become involved. It is also helpful to see where the project was and where it is now, giving the grant team encouragement when a program is successful and a call to action when it is not.

A marketing plan is also favorable at this stage in the grant cycle. By performing repeated multi-modal messaging across different media, audience reach is maximized. This can be useful for external partnership growth as well. As issues evolve and information changes, more interested actors may come to the fore. Ensuring that they are aware of the project's work helps to avoid unnecessary competition and may attract a renewed interest in the issue.

Analyzing Project Results

For the practical side of continued sustainability, few things are more important than recording project results. Quantitative data and proof of concept is vital to maintaining funding. From the conceptual side, it is also important to provide stories, anecdotes, and other qualitative measures that can come from any of the actors in the project. Managing the data collection and sharing early successes make the information and the project in general more relevant to external partners. It is also necessary to ensure that partners remain a good fit for continuation funding, and conducting research on the funders drives sustainability further. Feedback from the consumers in the program also informs its success or failure. From all of the data collection and research conducted, program leaders can make detailed action plans to secure funding

for key project elements after the grant cycle is complete. Project results show what is working, what is not, and what portions of the program are key to sustained funding in the future.

THE FINAL GRANT YEAR — "SPRINT TO THE NEXT YEAR"

While the grant cycle winds down, the grant team must ramp up its sustainability efforts. This includes remaining interested in exploring new ways to spread the message, openness to adjustments to improve outcomes, and securing continued funding. Long-term sustainability is the culmination of years of planning and effort. At the end of the initial funding period, the grant team should fine-tune the plan for sustainability and use it to secure additional resources for continuation.

Advanced Transmission of the Message

In the Final Year of the grant cycle, the message should be well-tested and maintain a broad reach. This does not mean that it cannot be improved or promoted further. The grant team will need to continue to engage in repeated, multi-modal messaging through a wide variety of platforms and to a varied group of partners. During the course of the grant life cycle, the environment, culture, and context may have changed. It is important that the message remains relevant. This is the definition of conceptual sustainability. Authenticity is critical in good communication; the message must convey belief in the mission. In addition, what separates communication from good communication is a crystal clear call to action. Remember to ask for support.

As a cautionary note, it is best not to vary the message greatly. It takes a substantial amount of effort to communicate even a single message. Change your communication at the margins if at all possible. A last-minute full change of message might not be heard.

Improving the Program

Much like the message, the value proposition must continue to be relevant. Partners in the project may have changed, new partners may be on the horizon, and the attitudes of those around the issue can evolve. The value proposition must be able to continue to encompass purposeful meaning. Feedback from the consumers of the program can also be applied to improve outcomes. The grant team should compile the positive reviews, identify common themes, and make changes where necessary.

Upon gathering information on the project, many of the aspects of the program will fall into one of three "what to sustain" categories: high impact areas, areas to improve, and areas to discontinue. This helps to inform which areas are most deserving of continued funding and which are not. This is a difficult activity to undertake and must be done with sensitivity to potential impact on the consumers, grant team, and even partners. Yet, from a mission-oriented posture, it must be done and from a sustainability standpoint, without delay. From here, you can specify which grant activities are delivering the greatest impact and which have not proven to be essential to success. It also provides evidence to funders and partners that the program is adaptable and workable, two important features of a strong strategy.

Spur Action to Secure Funding

At the end of the grant-funding cycle, sustainability is at the "might make or really could break" stage. Successful efforts represent the culmination of all of the previous planning and preparation from earlier project activities. The Final Year of the grant is when the grant team should begin their "no holds barred" strategy to secure future funding for the key project elements once the cycle is completed. This is also

an advantageous time to examine what was learned over the course of the project in order to establish the grant team and partners as thought leaders in the topical arena. Creating events, announcements, and initiatives can attract similar programs, partners, and funders. It also positions the organization as the leader in the larger idea or thought space. Another way to understand this latter concept is by considering the word innovation.

Bringing all of the grant team and partners into the full court press for sustainability and having them work diligently to secure new financial streams is more vital than ever before in the grant cycle. The grant team must convey a sense of urgency to the external partners. The grant team can also assist in identifying and responding to solicitations for funding to sustain the program along with other partners.

Sustainability 2.0 – "Discovering Innovation"

Sustainability 2.0 recognizes a new paradigm that is already here and unfolding rapidly. From the greatest technical problem to the most transformative challenges, somebody out there can do it better, faster, and cheaper. Sustainability 2.0 seeks to harness the next big thing called by another name—innovation, which we have mentioned earlier. Innovation means "to foresee, to stay ahead." If you think about it, innovation when done right is sustainability. Should program leaders yield territory for the sake of the mission to realize innovation? Regardless of the answer to that question, another program already has or is about to.

Sustainability 2.0 has three basic premises. First, the data (successes, failures, and all points in between) collected and the outcomes achieved by grantees are of interest to the public. Grantees do not know the full picture of who the people are, where they are located, or why they would be interested. If they could be reached, however, it is plausible to believe some of them would play a role in sustainability.

Second, thanks to the Internet in general and social media in particular, grantees have easily available methods to get their data in front of not just a large audience but, specifically, the program's "best audience"—those most likely to support the program. Today, there is an unprecedented ability to make connections with others quickly, efficiently, and with minimal resources. However, mere connections are not sufficient. It can become somewhat of a numbers game in that the more connections you have, especially if they are your best audience, the better. Of course, this type of engagement effort is a two-way street.

Lastly, there are ideas, knowledge, skills, and talents that can come from a grantee's best audience that can provide solutions that would otherwise not be found. The idea of sharing program data with the general public and actively seeking to connect and interact with them is unsettling, but a grantee using public dollars must acknowledge a truth about its efforts: the grant may not be sustainable unless outside entities completely unconnected to the grant are invited in as equals. Programs constantly utilize volunteers, consultants, and partners, but it is important to have two-way engagement with the public in the civic arena.

SUSTAINABILITY CHECKLIST – THE FIRST GRANT YEAR "BUILDING THE PLANE WHILE FLYING IT"

Steps P = Practical Sustainability C = Conceptual Sustainability	Rationale	Actions	Status (Not Started, In Progress, or Complete)
P/C – Start Early on "Day 2"	Sustainability is only ever built slowly	Conduct grant team and partners initial training session on sustainability using SAMHSA's GAINS Center Sustainability publications	
P/C – Make sustainability a priority for all grant staff and partners (ongoing)	Sustainability should be part of everybody's responsibility, grant team and partners, and not limited to leadership and boards.	■ Place sustainability as an agenda item for every staff meeting ■ Write sustainability duties into job postings, descriptions, and evaluations ■ Work towards 2–3 shared, achievable goals for grant staff and partners together ■ Develop simple, easy-to-gather metrics ■ Share and discuss results throughout the year ■ Celebrate success	
P/C – Train new grant staff and orient partners (ongoing)	New grant staff and partners must quickly be brought into sustainability efforts.	■ Add sustainability training for new grant staff as part of onboarding procedures ■ For partners, develop simple sustainability orientation to be provided within 60 days of joining the partnership	
P/C – Make other intra-agency units/ divisions aware of grant activities (ongoing)	Sustainability does not belong to any single unit/division within an agency; other units/divisions cannot consider in their decisions what they do not know about.	Conduct 4 minute briefs about the grant, progress and success, at highest organizational level possible. Use the "2+2" presentation method: 2 minutes to present, 2 minutes for Q&A, and then STOP. Do this no more than monthly and no less than quarterly.	
C/P – Conduct an environmental scan	An environmental scan identifies who else is in the "space," such as potential partners and competitors.	■ Identify (potential) partners (agencies and organizations) discovered by 1) mission, 2) core business, and 3) relationship ■ Describe (potential) partners by MSR3 and group based on 4Cs ■ Identify idea champion who can work both internal to the grant team, as well as with the partners – this person is a boundary spanner by definition	

Steps P = Practical Sustainability C = Conceptual Sustainability	Rationale	Actions	Status (Not Started, In Progress, or Complete)
C – Form an externally focused partnership table	Collaboration allows partners to achieve shared goals and outcomes.	Convene a partnership with collaborative and cooperation partners. Consider future inclusion of other levels of partnerships.	
P – Identify and map out potential alternate and future funding streams	It is important to start looking at public and private future sources of funding early in the process.	Identify how similar programs are funded via government, nonprofit, foundations and charitable activity. Create funding map.	
C – Develop a Value Proposition	A Value Proposition states the conceptual value of the program as an appeal to the heart.	Craft no more than a one page statement explaining: Why does the activity matter? What's so important about the work? What is the societal problem being addressed? Why does this merit support over other efforts?	
C/P – Create and use engagement tools (outreach)	Agencies need to be proactive in using various media (multi-modal communication) to communicate their value proposition to external audiences. The communication must also be repeated often across different media.	▪ Create and use flyers, social media, blogs, brochures, websites, or advertisements to promote your value proposition. Note this is for marketing and not operational purposes ▪ Perform multi-modal communication, at least 4x/ month, starting in the 3rd month of the program	
P – Prepare for practical sustainability	Building the infrastructure and creating the framework for data collection is relevant.	▪ Determine steps and plans for funding for the successful elements of the grant ▪ Ensure data collection starts ▪ Gather stories ▪ Identify early, key positive outcomes ▪ Demonstrate positive change for program participants or the community	

SUSTAINABILITY CHECKLIST – THE MIDDLE GRANT YEARS "PROCEED WITH ALL HASTE"

Steps P = Practical Sustainability C = Conceptual Sustainability	Rationale	Actions	Status (Not Started, In Progress, or Complete)
P/C – Conduct sustainability training, and First Grant Year or Middle Grant Years Review	Allows for a single time for the entire grant team and partners to review progress on an annual basis.	▪ Conduct grant team and partners review training session on sustainability using SAMHSA's GAINS Center Sustainability publications ▪ Review progress towards shared goals, including use of metrics developed ▪ Discuss efficacy of strategy ▪ Celebrate success	
P/C – Make sustainability a priority for all grant staff and partners (ongoing)	Sustainability should be part of everybody's responsibility, grant team and partners, and not limited to leadership and boards.	▪ Place sustainability as an agenda item for every staff meeting. ▪ Write sustainability duties into job postings, descriptions, and evaluations ▪ Work towards 2-3 shared, achievable goals for grant staff and partners together ▪ Develop simple, easy to gather metrics ▪ Share and discuss results throughout the year ▪ Celebrate success	
P/C – Train new grant staff and orient partners (ongoing)	New grant staff and partners must quickly be brought into sustainability efforts.	▪ Add sustainability training for new grant staff as part of onboarding procedures ▪ For partners, develop simple sustainability orientation to be provided within 60 days of joining the partnership	
P/C – Make other intra-agency units/ divisions aware of grant activities (ongoing)	Sustainability does not belong to any single unit/division within an agency; Other units/divisions cannot consider in their decisions what they do not know about	Conduct 4 minute briefs about the grant, progress and success at highest organizational level possible. Use the"2+2" presentation method: 2 minutes to present, 2 minutes for Q&A and then STOP. Do this no more than monthly and no less than quarterly.	
P/C – Continue to grow external partners	Relationships ebb and flow, come and go. There are no permanent allies that support you and no permanent agencies that oppose you.	▪ Conduct a brief environmental scan for potential partners only at the beginning of each Middle Year of the grant; pay attention to potential partners throughout the year	

Steps P = Practical Sustainability C = Conceptual Sustainability	Rationale	Actions	Status (Not Started, In Progress, or Complete)
C – Hold strategic positioning activities in your idea space	Being recognized as the idea, thought, or action leader in an area generates interest, excitement, and attention.	Conduct one strategic positioning activity every 4 months. This can include writing a paper, proposing model legislation, presenting at a conference, etc. This is in addition to your repeated multi-modal communication.	
C – Develop a partners' value proposition	A value proposition states the conceptual value of the program as an appeal to the heart. The value proposition for the Middle Years will then also reflect partners.	Craft, if necessary, a revised statement, no more than one page, explaining: Why the activity matters? What is so important about the work? What is the societal problem being addressed? Why does this merit support over other efforts? This revised version will be inclusive of the partners.	
C/P – Perform weekly multi-modal messaging	In the Middle Years, increase the frequency and reach of messaging. Be proactive in using various media (multi-modal communication) to communicate the value proposition to external audiences. The communication must also be repeated often across different media.	▪ Create and use flyers, social media, blogs, brochures, websites, or advertisements to promote your value proposition (note this is for marketing and not operational purposes) ▪ Perform multi-model communication at least 3x/ week starting for a total of 12x/month ▪ Consider new audiences to reach; target certain audiences based on strategy; consider orienting your message to different audiences for each communication (funders, clients, stakeholders)	
P – Using the funding map from the First Year, create a plan and strategy for securing funding for key project elements	Strategy is words and action working towards a goal. The plan lays out specific steps to ensure funding for the elements of the program to be sustained (i.e., those most important grant elements to achieving desired outcomes).	▪ Identify the integral elements of the project and the specific actions to attempt to secure funding	

Steps P = Practical Sustainability C = Conceptual Sustainability	Rationale	Actions	Status (Not Started, In Progress, or Complete)
P – Evaluate ongoing project results	Even before the grant is done, it is important to know what appears to be working, what is not, what might be sustained. Also, it is important to show intermediate success towards goals and outcomes.	▪ Data analysis against outcomes ▪ Feedback from program consumers	
P/C – Share program successes	Staff, stakeholders, and community are part of sustainability. The better informed they are about program success, the more able they are to speak positively about the effort.	Share 1 program success every 2 months. This is in addition to your repeated multi-modal communication.	

SUSTAINABILITY CHECKLIST – THE FINAL GRANT YEAR "SPRINT TO THE NEXT YEAR"

Steps P = Practical Sustainability C = Conceptual Sustainability	Rationale	Actions	Status (Not Started, In Progress, or Complete)
P/C – Conduct sustainability training and Final Year Grant Review	This step allows a single time for the entire grant team and partners to review progress on an annual basis.	■ Conduct grant team and partners review training session on sustainability using SAMHSA's GAINS Center Sustainability publications ■ Review progress towards shared goals, including use of metrics developed ■ Discuss efficacy of strategy ■ Celebrate success ■ Select top sustainability actions to undertake in the Final Year	
P/C – Make sustainability a priority for all grant staff and partners (ongoing)	Sustainability should be part of everybody's responsibility, grant team and partners, and not limited to leadership and boards.	■ Place sustainability as an agenda item for every staff meeting ■ Write sustainability duties into job postings, descriptions, and evaluations ■ Work towards 2–3 shared, achievable goals for grant staff and partners together; develop simple, easy-to-gather metrics ■ Share and discuss results throughout the year ■ Celebrate success	
P/C – Train new grant staff and orient partners (ongoing)	New grant staff and partners must quickly be brought into sustainability efforts.	■ Add sustainability training for new grant staff as part of onboarding procedures ■ For partners, develop simple sustainability orientation to be provided within 60 days of joining the partnership	
P/C – Make other intra-agency units/ divisions aware of grant activities (ongoing)	Sustainability does not belong to any single unit/division within an agency; other units/divisions cannot consider in their decisions what they do not know about	Conduct 4 minute briefs about the grant, progress and success at highest organizational level possible. Use the"2+2" presentation method: 2 minutes to present, 2 minutes for Q&A, and then STOP. Do this no more than monthly and no less than quarterly.	
C – Perform a rapid, updated environmental scan focusing on changes	Over time, the environment will change, and it is important to know and understand the significance of those changes.	■ Describe the agencies and organizations discovered by 1) mission, 2) core business, and 3) relationship; compare them to the First Year environmental scan for changes and quickly conduct outreach as appropriate; complete the updated scan in the 1st month of the Final Year	

Steps P = Practical Sustainability C = Conceptual Sustainability	Rationale	Actions	Status (Not Started, In Progress, or Complete)
C – Review and update as needed, the value proposition	The value proposition has to stay relevant, current, and persuasive. Other events will have occurred since the program start.	Again, explain: Why does the activity matter? What's so important about the work? What is the societal problem being addressed? Why does this merit support over other efforts?	
C/P – Perform multi-modal messaging	Increase the frequency and reach of messaging, including to organizations not previously targeted. Agencies need to be proactive in using various media (multi-modal communication) to communicate their value proposition to external audiences. The communication must be repeated often across different media.	■ Create and use flyers, social media, blogs, brochures, websites or advertisements to promote your value proposition (note this is for marketing and not operational purposes) ■ Perform multi-modal communication at least 5x/week starting for a total of 20x/month ■ Consider new audiences to reach, but not at the expense of strategic audiences ■ Target certain audiences directly related to funding based on strategy	
C – Hold strategic positioning activities in your idea space	Being recognized as the idea, thought, or action leader in an area generates interest, excitement, and attention. In the Final Year you advance and solidify your role in the space, thereby increasing your value.	■ Conduct 1 strategic positioning activity every 3 months (this can include writing a paper, proposing model legislation, presenting at a conference, etc.) in addition to your repeated multi-modal communication ■ Goal in the Final Year is to declare the lead role in your idea space	
P – Evaluate ongoing project results	Even before the grant is done, it is important to know what appears to be working, what is not, what might be sustained. Also, it is important to show intermediate success toward goals and outcomes.	■ Data analysis against outcomes ■ Feedback from program consumers	

Steps P = Practical Sustainability C = Conceptual Sustainability	Rationale	Actions	Status (Not Started, In Progress, or Complete)
P/C – Share program successes	Staff, stakeholders, and community are part of sustainability. The better informed they are about program success, the more able they are to speak positively about the effort.	Share 1 program success every month; this is in addition to your repeated multi-modal communication	
P – Identify what to sustain	This is one of the toughest things to do as it means letting go of certain activities and possibly staff, as well as focusing on areas to increase or improve.	Classify program aspects into 3 areas: high impact, areas to improve, and areas to discontinue	
P/C – Full Court Press	Simply put, the program will end in whole or part if you are not successful at sustainability. This is the final drive if sustainability is not yet guaranteed.	Starting 6 months prior to the end of the grant, put all staff and partners into play closing the deal and locking down all loose ends related to sustainability	

FOR MORE INFORMATION

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