



»»»»» Planning for Lasting Impact



Planning for Lasting Impact

KEY POINTS: PLANNING A RESEARCH PROGRAM FOR LASTING IMPACT

- Build a research program design by understanding community needs and challenges, and aligning program goals with local priorities.
- Design programs to be flexible, allowing adjustments based on observation, feedback, and expansion.
- Prioritize inclusion and identify barriers.
- Identify resources, including funding, personnel, and partnerships, to ensure the program can reach its short-term and long-term goals.
- Establish measurable benchmarks to ensure consistent progress and alignment with the program vision.

TOOLS, TEMPLATES, AND RESOURCES

- [Program Planning Worksheet](#)
- [SMART Goals Template](#)
- [Community Pulse Survey](#)
- [SWOT Analysis Template](#)


Building to Last

Public health research programs aim to improve community health and well-being, but their impact should last beyond their initial implementation. Designing for sustainability ensures that the program’s benefits will continue even after program funding or resources are no longer available. To achieve lasting benefit, public health teams must build a program that can adapt to changes, integrate into existing systems, and empower the community to take ownership over time. They must also create partnerships that can carry the program forward as different needs arise or funding fluctuates.

The following steps may assist in building a program to last:

1. Develop an initial vision
2. Brainstorm ideas with partners and ask what kind of program they would like to create
3. Identify steps needed to bring the vision to life
4. Maintain a respectful relationship with the partners in their shared vision and values
5. Continue to review goals and adapt to new opportunities and conditions
6. Share tasks equitably and seek new funding sources and opportunities
7. Make goals reasonable, measurable, and attainable

This section outlines key considerations when designing a program that is effective, flexible, and built to last. Public health teams can create programs that have lasting impacts by focusing on long-term planning, accessibility, and cultural relevance.



Consider using the [Program Planning Worksheet](#) to document and begin organizing program plans.

Establishing Clear Goals

By first defining goals, teams can shape the research program's design to support long-term impact. Knowing what the program aims to achieve can help guide decision-making, including what resources, partnerships, and systems are needed to sustain program impact after initial funding runs out or other challenges occur.

Effective Goal Setting

- **Be specific.** Set goals and deadlines that you can easily measure. For example, "Determine methods to support 100 local families in building healthy habits; Engage 50 children in regular wellness activities by the end of this year and determine the impact on childhood healthy weight by next August."
- **Be realistic.** While it is good to aim for lofty goals, you should also ground the program's goals in its available resources and capacities. Ex. Partner with two local schools and one community center to host wellness activities, based on available staffing and budget.
- **Be precise.** Define short- and long-term milestones with deadlines for achieving goals. This will help maintain motivation and accountability. Use benchmarks at regular intervals (e.g., quarterly) to track progress and assess impact; Ex. Conduct weekly zoom meeting check-ins with parents and guardians. Identify fitness programs or ways to teach youth how to meal prep with a parent.
- **Be collaborative.** When setting goals, work with community members, partner organizations, and funders to determine collective priorities. Ex. Community members could be parents and guardians of children between the ages of 5-12 or grades K-6. Partnering organizations could be the school district or local schools, local funders or food banks. Community centers, etc.



To help develop and refine your research program goals, consider using the [SMART Goals Template](#).



Understanding the Community

To support sustainability of a community-engaged research program, teams must thoroughly understand the environment in which they work. This involves assessing the social, economic, cultural, and political dynamics influencing the program. This context helps ensure that program interventions are relevant, responsive to local needs, and adaptable to any challenges that may occur. People are more likely to participate in research programs that address their needs. Knowledge of the community shows respect for local partners and builds trust, a critical part of long-term program success. Additionally, understanding the community allows research programs to make the most of existing strengths, like local skills and systems, while addressing potential barriers, such as limited funding or systemic inequities.

Community Analysis

Follow these steps to gain an understanding of the community:

- **Find partners.** Identify community leaders, government agencies, or local organizations that may help reach shared research program goals. Determine how existing partnerships can support the program and collaborate with new partners and organizations.
- **Engage partners through active listening.** Create opportunities to listen to community voices. Seek and gather input from community leaders to learn about the community's needs, values, and culture.
- **Consider cultural norms and practices.** Recognize local traditions, values, and customs that may influence research program design and acceptance. These may include language barriers, religious influence, or social roles. Adapt your approach to ensure it is considerate and respectful of the community.
- **Collect data to understand and describe the community.** Programs can learn more about the community by collecting data on age, income, education, and health demographics. Also consider social determinants of health, such as food insecurity, housing, transportation, and other barriers to health and well-being. Conducting surveys, interviews, or focus groups can help you understand community perspectives and needs, and determine what are current challenges to health and well-being in the community that can be measured to assess program impact.



Refer to the [Community Pulse Survey](#) for a way to gather useful data from the community quickly.

REAL-LIFE EXAMPLE

When supporting underserved populations, it is important to understand how the program may affect other populations within the community. For example, a lead partner recalled when an organization outside the area offered food service only to specific groups within their community. This caused a backlash, forcing the organization to stop service entirely. The problem was not *who* the program served but how eligibility was conveyed to the community. This cautionary tale underlines the importance of local community input on program implementation and perceptions. When planning, consider the entire community, even if a goal is to serve a specific subset of the population.

Prioritizing Inclusion

By designing a program to reach and serve everyone, regardless of background or circumstances, we can promote long-term impact, enhance trust, and increase participation and engagement.

Language Barriers and Access to Translation Support

To foster meaningful community partnerships, address language barriers upfront by providing translation and interpreter services for those who are not fluent in English. Interpreter and translation are distinct services that require different skill sets and specialized training. Interpreters work with spoken language, helping with real-time communication, while translators work on written materials. Both roles demand advanced proficiency in two languages and cultural competence to convey complex ideas, including professional terminology, values, and beliefs, accurately.

When planning program partnerships, allocate funds for hiring professional interpreters and translators. Community organizations often have connections to trusted language service providers experienced in supporting collaborative, multilingual environments.

Be aware that bilingual staff within universities or community organizations may not always have the fluency or training needed for the specific communities served. For example, translating word-for-word, without capturing the nuanced meaning, can hinder clear communication. Additionally, bilingual fluency does not automatically imply bicultural understanding, which is crucial for culturally sensitive communication.

Communication considerations for professional presentations and meetings:

- Plan enough time so that presentations and materials can be translated
- Give time for the interpreters to ask questions and prepare for the presentation
- Use plain English and avoid technical jargon, acronyms, and idioms, e.g., where the rubber meets the road
- Do not speak too rapidly
- Spell out the meaning of acronyms, if they are necessary
- Speak using descriptive language, and avoid using long and convoluted sentences
- Permit the interpreter to clarify information
- Take pauses to check in with the interpreter and make sure they are keeping up

Consider the types of interpreting available when planning meetings or events:

- **Consecutive interpreting:** The speaker pauses to allow the interpreter to relay the message in the other language. This method requires no special equipment but doubles the time needed for communication.
- **Simultaneous interpreting:** Using special equipment (microphones, transmitters, receivers, and earphones), interpreting occurs in real time without interrupting the flow of conversation. Participants can engage directly despite language differences. This type of interpreting is challenging for someone without experience. It also requires additional time and planning to check, distribute, and pick up the equipment. It is best to hire a company that has the equipment and expertise to use it.
- **Remote interpreting:** A valuable option for online meetings that adapts interpreting equipment and practices to virtual settings.

While these services are vital tools for language access, creating a truly multilingual and inclusive space involves more than language services. Consider the physical setup of meeting spaces, program design, and other logistical details to ensure all languages and cultures are respected and can coexist equitably.

By thoughtfully addressing language barriers through professional services and inclusive planning, you can enhance participation, foster mutual understanding, and build stronger, more equitable collaborations.

Geographical and Physical Barriers

Making a public health research program physically accessible means everyone, including those with disabilities, limited mobility, or geographic barriers, can fully participate in program activities. Without addressing these barriers, a program may exclude populations and undermine its impact.

To design a physically accessible program:

- Host events at accessible and familiar locations like community centers, public libraries, parks, or recreational facilities
 - Avoid locations that might feel exclusive or intimidating, like hospitals, government buildings, or organizations associated with a particular group
- Consider if public transportation can reach event venues and whether these places have ramps, elevators, or accessible restrooms
- Offer virtual or mobile activities, satellite locations, or in-home visits to better reach remote populations
- Schedule program activities at various times to accommodate work schedules, caregiving responsibilities, or other commitments
- Provide food, childcare, or other supportive accommodations when possible
- Write materials in large-print and use high-contrast color schemes for better readability

Financial Barriers

Financial barriers, such as fees or indirect costs (e.g., transportation), can prevent populations from participating in public health research programs. Considering and finding solutions to these challenges can help increase participation and ensure program sustainability.

Overcome these obstacles by including strategies to:

- Cover costs associated with participation, including transportation, childcare, or any equipment needed for program activities
- Offer the program at no cost
- Compensate all participants appropriately for their time and effort

Cultural Barriers

Awareness and acknowledgment of cultural barriers help program teams to be considerate of differences within the community. Cultural norms or values may influence how community members perceive and engage with health programs. Understanding and respecting these differences is important to building trust and communicating effectively.

Cultural barriers may include:

- Historical distrust
 - Patterns of exclusion and mistreatment are a part of research history. Transparency and open communication help build trust in the program.
- **Cultural competency and sensitivity**
 - Respect and value community members' diversity and cultural differences by including diverse voices and perspectives in program design and implementation.
 - Approach conversations with:
 - Cultural awareness
 - Open-mindedness
 - Respect
 - Adaptability
- **Cultural humility**
 - Be aware of how privilege may impede connection with community members. Acknowledge the program's blind spots and work with the community to reduce these gaps.
 - Consider personal biases and try to be open to learning about other cultures and respecting different beliefs.
- Power imbalances
 - Create welcoming, non-judgmental spaces that allow for all voices to be heard and acknowledged. Shared decision-making helps empower community members to provide information and resources that can help strengthen the program.



Digital Barriers

Programs can overcome digital barriers by taking steps to address gaps in digital literacy. Digital literacy means the ability to use digital tools, technologies, and platforms to find, understand, and share information. In public health research programs, promoting digital literacy or offering alternatives to digital tools helps make sure everyone can participate and access resources.

Some communities may not have reliable internet or access to digital devices, making it hard to engage with the program. Participants might also feel unsure about using advanced digital tools or sharing their data online. These challenges could cause people to feel overwhelmed and stop participating.

Consider how the population served feels about the digital tools they are being asked to use. For example, older adults or people with disabilities might find digital tools harder to use. To ensure an inclusive program:

- Provide workshops and training on how to use digital tools or platforms
- Give clear instructions for any digital requirements
- Offer alternatives, like in-person meetings or paper-based materials
- Explain how participants' data will be used, stored, and kept safe, or discarded
- Work with local organizations to understand the population's digital literacy

By considering a community's digital literacy, a public health research program can be more accessible and welcoming.

REAL-LIFE EXAMPLE

The YMTT program used QR codes on materials to help enroll participants and share information about the program. However, many Spanish-speaking participants were unfamiliar with QR codes or how to use them, including the community health workers (Promotoras) tasked with sharing the information. The local partners trained the health workers how to use QR codes. The health workers were then able to bring this knowledge to the rural communities and farm workers they served. What started as a barrier became a learning opportunity for the health workers and communities. This example highlights the importance of community input on how to implement a program and how training and outreach can promote program success.

Adjusting to Change

Flexibility and adaptability are critical parts of any public health research program. A program that can adjust to changing circumstances, evolving needs, and unexpected challenges (such as health crises or policy changes) is more likely to stay effective and relevant. This section outlines key strategies for designing resilient and responsive programs.

Seeking Feedback

Getting and responding to feedback along the way allows programs to stay aware of participants' experiences and needs, which can help you identify issues early and adjust as needed. A program may collect feedback from surveys, focus groups, suggestion boxes, or interviews. It is important to foster a safe and non-judgmental culture where team members and participants feel comfortable sharing their concerns or ideas.

Adapting to Evolving Needs

Sometimes, research programs may need to grow or shrink in response to community needs and shifting priorities. Plan to respond quickly to changes in demand for the program or available resources. A program can adjust its scale by incorporating parts that can be added or removed without disrupting general operations. Programs can also be adapted by adding goals and including additional measures to assess impact of new priorities. Other helpful strategies include training staff in roles that can cover various needs and planning budgets with funds that could address unexpected growth and shifting priorities.

When an organization is going through changes or facing a big decision, it is a good time to use a SWOT Analysis. This method helps you look at:

- **Strengths** – what your team or project does well
- **Weaknesses** – areas that need more work
- **Opportunities** – chances to grow or improve from outside factors
- **Threats** – problems or risks from outside factors



Use the [SWOT Analysis Template](#) to help assess a situation in times of change.

By looking at these four areas, you can better understand the situation. This makes it easier to make smart choices and deal with the challenges that come with change.

Planning for Emergencies

A program can plan for how it will manage disruptions without compromising its overall goals. This may include identifying potential risks like funding cuts, supply chain issues, or natural disasters and developing strategies for maintaining services during these disruptions. Creating a crisis communications plan can help pre-determine chains of command for how crises will be handled and by whom.

Relying on Partners

Partnerships expand a program's resources and provide a support network during times of change. When experiencing difficulties, community organizations, healthcare providers, academic institutions, and others can help sponsor events, donate resources, or provide other key operations.

Consider the following ways to work with partners in making a program more adaptable and resilient:

- **Preparing for change**
 - Program partners can ensure they have the resources, skills, and leadership needed to adapt to emerging needs.
 - Training staff and community leaders on flexibility, resilience, and continuous learning is key to adaptation.
- **Shifting resources**
 - Shifting resources is necessary as community needs evolve. This may mean adjusting how the program receives funding, changing the budget, or exploring innovative partnerships.
- **Piloting program design**
 - Involve partners in testing health interventions on a small scale and use the insights to refine and adapt the research program including the measures that are collected to assess impact before a wider rollout.
- **Sharing leadership**
 - Giving community members leadership roles in program design, execution, and evaluation helps ensure that the research program can adapt and continue to meet the community's needs.

Budgeting and Financial Planning

Thoughtfully managing resources and investing in the right team ensures a program can withstand challenges, adapt to changing circumstances, and maintain its impact over time. This section explores how to plan for changes in finances and staff to support lasting success.

Consider the following tips:

- **Secure multiple funding sources**
 - Seek funding from various sources like government grants, private donations, corporate sponsorships, partnerships with local businesses and nonprofits, and fundraisers so the research program can adapt if one source is reduced or cut.
- **Plan for emergencies**
 - Put some of the budget into unallocated funds to help address unexpected needs, such as a sudden health crisis, shifts in the community, or policy changes. This safety net will allow the research program to continue running without securing new funding immediately.

- **Include partners in financial decision-making**
 - Involve community members, program partners from across the community in financial decision-making to ensure the research program uses the money to align with the community's evolving needs.
 - Assess how the research program has impacted the community and whether it is reaching its goals. Work with partners to prioritize funding for the most effective activities, ensuring that resources are allocated efficiently and redirected as needed.
 - Allow partners to identify opportunities to reallocate funds to new priorities within the research program or develop additional income-generation strategies.
- **Create dynamic financial plans**
 - Design financial plans that allow the research program to increase or decrease in size and effort depending on the community's health needs or funding availability.
 - Consider testing new initiatives on a smaller scale before committing to a larger size and budget.
- **Think about the future**
 - Consider establishing endowments, developing partnerships with stable funders, or creating income-generating activities (such as offering paid services or products) to help maintain research program continuity, especially during funding uncertainty.
 - Advocate for policy change that aligns with research program goals and help secure more stable and predictable funding sources, such as government or foundation support.

