Quality Improvement Fund-Maternal Health
Sustainability Planning Guide – August 2024

HRSA Health Resources & Services Administration

Overview

This Sustainability Planning Guide is designed to support health centers in developing programs that continue to thrive beyond the grant period. It provides strategic insights and practical tools to ensure the longevity and effectiveness of your innovations in maternal health and other service areas. Health centers can use this guide to create clear sustainability plans, identify key resources, and adapt successful strategies across various service areas.

Using the Sustainability Planning Guide

This guide highlights the key factors, or drivers, of the long-term success and viability of your organization's maternal health innovations.

The guide has two sections:

- Part 1: Sustainability Drivers: Learn what makes a program sustainable.
- Part 2: Planning for Sustainability: Apply your knowledge from Part 1 to develop your unique Sustainability Action Plan.

Keep your action plan as a living document, updating it regularly with your team in response to evolving health center priorities and resources. Revisit the exercises as needed to ensure they remain relevant and effective.
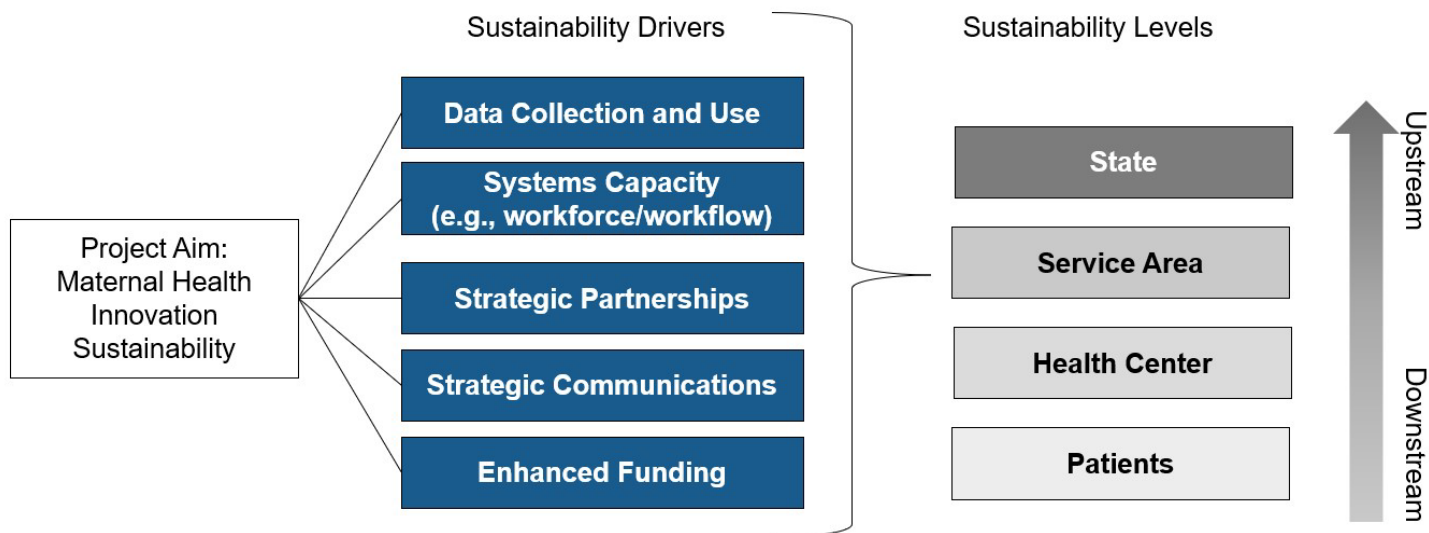
Part 1: Sustainability Drivers

Sustaining effective programs over time involves a complex interplay of various drivers to achieve your innovation's aims. [i] [ii] [iii] While funding is critical, long-term sustainability also requires investing in other drivers, such as workforce development and efficient organization, to serve the greatest number of people. Take action at different levels, from working directly with patients to collaborating on state-level initiatives. Focus on sustaining your program at the health center level as part of your daily work, while recognizing that navigating future policy changes at the state and local government levels is a longer-term process. Study the "Sustainability Driver Diagram" (Exhibit 1) and the sections below to understand these concepts in more detail. Consider where your health center is on its journey to sustain your innovations and identify additional steps you might take.

Note:

In this Planning Guide, we assume your aim is to sustain your organization's maternal health innovations. Drivers are those factors that contribute to achieving that aim.

Exhibit 1: Sustainability Driver Diagram

Sustainability Drivers

Sustainability Levels

Project Aim: Maternal Health Innovation Sustainability

- Data Collection and Use
- Systems Capacity (e.g., workforce/workflow)
- Strategic Partnerships
- Strategic Communications
- Enhanced Funding

- State
- Service Area
- Health Center
- Patients

Upstream

Downstream

Sustainability Driver: Data Collection and Use

To sustain your innovations, continuously collect and analyze relevant data to understand the long-term effects. Gather data on diverse demographics to focus on specific groups of interest and evaluate their outcomes. When partnering with other providers in your service area, ensure that your data systems can communicate with each other and work together seamlessly. This is essential for analyzing patient outcomes and effectively coordinating patient care. Tracking improvements in health outcomes demonstrates the value of your innovations, helps secure funding, and supports advocacy for health policy changes.

Sustainability Level	Examples of Key Activities
	Data Collection and Use
State	• Data inform policy decisions. • Data increase public awareness of problems and effective solutions. • Data demonstrate collective impact.
Service Area	• Data platforms are interoperable with those of partners within a defined area. • Equitable data agreements exist between partners. • Data are used to identify community strengths and needs. • Partners have shared measures of success and effectively track progress using those same measures.
Health Center	• Data are used to inform program implementation and resource planning. • Outcome data are shared with stakeholders and interested parties.
Patients	• Data are stratified (by different demographics, e.g., gender) to ensure comprehensive analysis. • Use plain language in all patient-facing materials for data collection and sharing. • Health services you provide are coded to support payment.

Health Center Spotlight

The University of Illinois Health's Mile Square Health Center (Chicago, IL) aims to improve access to behavioral health services for pregnant and postpartum patients. To measure progress, the health center tracks all behavioral health services their patients receive, including screenings, follow-up plans for those with high screening scores, and completed therapy sessions. Using these data, the health center monitors and improves clinical workflows, ensuring patients can access the full continuum of behavioral health services they need.

Sustainability Driver: Systems Capacity

Systems Capacity refers to the capabilities, knowledge, resources, staffing, and infrastructure that enable organizations to operate effectively. This includes operational IT systems, engaged and effective leadership, efficient workflows and processes, and a skilled workforce. The specific needs for systems capacity will vary based on your innovation. Develop and nurture these assets to sustain innovations, regardless of the funding source.[iv] For example, establishing a meaningful community health worker (CHW) program requires the ability to: recruit and engage staff that reflect the community; establish and maintain referral systems for community resources; and monitor engagement between CHWs and patients through health record systems. Investing in these areas ensures that your organization can continue to support and sustain innovations over time.

Sustainability Level	Examples of Key Activities
	Systems Capacity
State	• Share the causes of maternal health disparities and how systems can address them.
Service Area	• Workflows include the ability to refer patients to relevant partners and to track the results. • Partner workforce is engaged and knowledgeable. • Community is able to address the maternal population's needs.
Health Center	• Program and/or clinic workflows are defined and efficient. • Leadership is engaged. • Workforce is capable of implementation. • Workforce reflects the diversity of the community served. • Technology and medical record systems support clinic operations.
Patients	• Patients are part of advisory or other decision-making organizations or groups. • Patients provide routine, systematic feedback.

Health Center Spotlight

[TrueCare](#) (San Marcos, CA) aims to increase access to maternal health services through a new doula program, providing comprehensive one-on-one support during all stages of pregnancy, delivery and the postpartum period. To integrate doula services into existing workflows, TrueCare's IT department embedded doula encounter templates into their electronic medical record. These templates create a comprehensive patient record, support collaboration between the doula team and clinical staff, and streamline billing and coding efforts for these services, both now and in the future.

Sustainability Driver: Strategic Partnerships

Strategic partnerships offer valuable connections to resources, expertise, and essential services that your health center may not provide, helping you mobilize support for your program and its objectives. These partners can include local business leaders, public colleges and universities, media representatives, and other organizations. The most valuable strategic partnerships often involve advisory boards, patient and family advocates, and community members.[v]

Sustainability Level	Examples of Key Activities
	Strategic Partnerships
State	• Policymakers support policy change based on lessons learned from the program. • Build ongoing relationships with state Medicaid programs through collaboration, communication, data sharing, review of state policy, and capacity building for sustainable health initiatives.
Service Area	• Collaborate with primary care associations and health centers to align program goals and create coordinated service areas statewide. • Involve community members as advisors to shape program planning and implementation through sustained participation and shared vision. • Advisory board clearly outlines the roles and responsibilities of partners and maintains ongoing collaboration through regular meetings and effective communication.
Health Center	• Health center leaders champion program goals and activities. • Partners enable successful referrals through connection to community resources.
Patients	• Patients engage in quality improvement efforts. • Patients champion and promote participation in programs and services through active support and positive referrals.

Tools & Resources to Support Strategic Partnerships

- [Consumer Engagement Assessment Tool](#) helps health centers evaluate their own efforts to invite, facilitate, and support consumer input and leadership in the governance of their organizations.
- [Developing Effective Coalitions: An Eight Step Guide](#) is a framework for engaging individuals, organizations and governmental partners in addressing community concerns. It offers concrete steps toward building effective partnerships, and provides tips for making collaborations and partnerships work.
- [Guidance for Health Care Entities Partnering with Community-Based Organizations](#) provides recommendations for, and examples of, health policy and payment mechanisms used to address health-related social needs, with a focus on collaboration between community-based organizations (CBOs) and health care entities involved in designing and delivering alternative payment models.
- [Healthcare Guide to Contracting with CBOs](#) describes essential elements of contracting between health care and community partners and features leading practices from the field. It was developed with extensive input from CBOs, health plans, and health systems.

Health Center Spotlight

[Bay Area Community Health](#) (Fremont, CA) developed a strategic partnership with the Santa Clara County and Alameda County Women, Infant, and Child Programs to address health-related social needs. By providing on-site assistance, this collaboration helps alleviate food insecurity and transportation barriers while improving patients' nutrition during their prenatal and postpartum phases. This strategic partnership demonstrates how working with state government agencies can enhance existing programs and services, benefiting both patients and health centers.

Sustainability Driver: Strategic Communications

Strategic communications showcase impact, increase visibility, and gain stakeholder support. [vi] Clearly presenting the value and benefits of an innovation boosts staff engagement, enthusiasm, and commitment. Similarly, effective promotion attracts new patients and partners, driving revenue growth. Ensure communications are culturally appropriate and easy to understand, avoiding overly technical language.

Sustainability Level	Examples of Key Activities
	Strategic Communications
State	- Program benefits are communicated to stakeholders by tailoring messages to their priorities, ensuring the right message reaches the right audience. - Interested parties have a sustained voice in state-level conversations. - Initiatives explicitly address the root causes of maternal health disparities.
Service Area	- Communications strategies educate the public on maternal health disparities, experiences, and outcomes. - Interested parties are aware and supportive of program activities and goals.
Health Center	- Staff can explain the value of your program and its benefits to interested parties. - Messaging is audience-specific and includes relevant data.
Patients	- Involve patients in creating the communications strategy to ensure content is patient-friendly and relevant. - Use plain, accessible, culturally sensitive materials; update regularly based on feedback.

Health Center Spotlight

CommuniCare (San Antonio, TX) is implementing a QIF-MH-funded innovation that focuses on providing culturally congruent care for all patients, particularly those who speak Pashto. Recognizing the scarcity of Pashto-speaking healthcare providers in their service area, CommuniCare hired Pashto speakers to offer care and translation services. They also created prenatal booklets, pamphlets, and videos in Pashto, incorporating diverse cultural norms. For example, CommuniCare's dietician group developed a culturally appropriate visual aid that provides nutritional guidance for pregnant patients during Ramadan, recommending foods rich in protein that are slowly absorbed when breaking the fast. These strategic communication materials have been essential in improving access to health care services for this community, creating a safe and familiar environment.

Sustainability Driver: Enhanced Funding

Funding is essential for sustaining high-quality services and maintaining a skilled workforce. Establish stable and diversified funding through multiple sources to protect your organization during uncontrollable or unforeseen fluctuations.[vii] Enhance funding by coordinating or combining multiple funding streams, such as Medicaid and other payors, and partnering with academic institutions and community-based organizations (CBOs). Understand the specific strategies and opportunities available to health centers in your state, as Medicaid programs differ in covered services and reimbursement rates. Health centers play a vital role in providing essential services to medically vulnerable communities. Establish collaborative relationships with your state Medicaid program, managed care entities, and primary care associations. These partnerships can help you navigate funding intricacies and ensure the sustainability of services for your community.

Sustainability Level	Examples of Key Activities
	Enhanced Funding
State	- Medicaid transformation and/or state waivers are explored and developed to fund needed services. - New value-based alternative payment models are considered to enhance maternal health. - Managed Care Organizations share financial risk and return on investment for the cost of this work. - State Primary Care Association advances policy priorities.
Service Area	- You coordinate with other community services to create service networks and share financial resources. - Community members are involved in decisions about how funds are used.

Sustainability Level	Examples of Key Activities		
	Enhanced Funding		
Health Center	• Program services are funded through a variety of sources. • Business plan describes the cost, revenue, and financial targets. • Existing coverage, services, and flexibilities in Medicaid are leveraged to support program services.		
Patients	• Patients understand sliding fee discount schedules. • Referrals are made to free or affordable community resources. • Enrollment services for Medicaid and other coverage programs are available.		

Tools & Resources to Support Enhanced Funding

Managed Care

- HRSA's Form 3: Income Analysis (hrsa.gov) includes detailed instructions on entering patient revenue by program income (e.g., medical insurance, billable visits) and other income (other federal, state, or local income), with alternative instructions for capitated managed care.
- Addressing Social Determinants of Health via Medicaid Managed Care Contracts and Section 1115 Demonstrations describes Medicaid managed care contracts and requests for proposals for 40 states, along with 25 approved section 1115 demonstrations.

Return on Investment

- Return on Investment (ROI) Calculator for Healthcare Partnerships to Address Social Needs tool helps health care organizations plan for the sustainable delivery of social services.
- Beyond ROI: Understanding Value on Investment in Social-Needs Partnerships explores Value on Investment as both a measure and a strategy to better understand the full impact of an upstream investment focused on addressing social needs.

Provider Costs

- Value in Staffing ROI Calculator helps health centers determine the "hidden" costs associated with an unfilled physician post at the health center.
- Financial Assessment Calculator for Provider Turnover helps health centers determine the actual costs of physician and non-physician provider turnover.

Medicaid Policies and Advocacy

- Medicaid State Overviews provide resources that highlight the key characteristics of states' Medicaid program and Children's Health Insurance Program and report data to increase public transparency about the programs' administration and outcomes.
- Improving Maternal Health Outcomes in Medicaid through FQHCs and Managed Care outlines the roles of FQHCs and MCOs in providing maternal health care and policy opportunities to improve maternal and infant health outcomes.
- Financing Strategies to Address the Social Determinants of Health in Medicaid discusses the three primary mechanisms that state Medicaid programs can use to deliver and finance interventions to address the social determinants of health.

Part 2: Planning for Sustainability

You have reviewed the drivers of sustainability and key activities associated with each. This section of the guide helps you achieve your sustainability goals through a continuous quality improvement approach. As you plan for sustainability, keep in mind two key strategies:

- **Start early.** Integrate sustainability into the initial vetting of potential innovations.
- **Start small.** Follow these steps to prioritize and focus your efforts in a meaningful and achievable way.

Use the five steps below to help you and your team plan for sustainability by discussing and prioritizing the key elements of each sustainability driver (described in [Part 1](#)) for your innovation. The goal is to identify one sustainability driver to focus on and develop an action plan.

- **Step 1:** Assess the strengths and risks of each driver.
- **Step 2:** Prioritize drivers by feasibility and importance.
- **Step 3:** Select your sustainability driver of focus.
- **Step 4:** Build your Sustainability Action Plan.
- **Step 5:** Implement and update your Sustainability Action Plan.

Step 1: Assess Strengths and Risks for Each Driver

Use the table below to document your health center's strengths and risks in sustaining your innovation for each driver. Refer to [Part 1](#) for the various components of each driver, if needed.

Sustainability Driver	Strengths	Risks
Data Use & Collection		
Systems Capacity		
Strategic Partnerships		
Strategic Communications		
Enhanced Funding		

Step 2: Prioritize the Drivers by Feasibility and Importance

Using the context generated in Step 1, fill out the template below to categorize the importance and feasibility of each sustainability driver for your innovation. For example, based on your notes, you may consider "Data Collection and Use" to be "Very Feasible to Address" but "Less Important" to the overarching goals of your innovation. Alternatively, you may identify "Enhanced Funding" as "Very Important" but "Less Feasible to Address." Use the questions below to accurately assess and prioritize each sustainability driver to focus your efforts effectively.

Questions to determine the level of importance:

- Is this driver a priority for your health center leadership? (If yes, list as "Very Important.")
- Could the risks associated with this driver ultimately cause the innovation to fail? (If no, list as "Less Important.")

Questions to determine feasibility:

- Do we have the capability to influence the necessary changes? (If yes, list as "Very Feasible.")
- Are there policies already in place (e.g., Medicaid reimbursement) that support the sustainability of this innovation? (If no, list as "Less Feasible.")

Exhibit 2. Priority Matrix[viii]

	Very Important	**Less Important**
Very Feasible to Address		
Less Feasible to Address		

Step 3: Select your Sustainability Driver of Focus

Based on your analysis, choose one sustainability driver to begin your action planning. It often makes sense to select a driver that is both "Very Important" and "Very Feasible to Address." However, collectively decide with your team which driver to focus on, considering the context described in Steps 1-3.

Sustainability Driver of Focus	*(Example: Systems Capacity)*

Step 4: Build Your Sustainability Action Plan

In this step, develop the three main components of your Sustainability Action Plan: Sustainability Goal(s), Measures of Success, and Change Ideas.[ix] Use the following prompts and examples to complete your action plan for the Sustainability Driver you selected in Step 3.

What are you trying to accomplish? Based on your innovation and the chosen sustainability driver, clearly define your objectives. Set a SMART-IE goal (**S**trategic. **M**easurable. **A**mbitious. **R**ealistic. **T**ime-bound. **I**nclusive. **E**quitable.) for your sustainability effort. Consider both short-term and long-term goals and prioritize them based on impact, feasibility, and alignment with your organization's capacity.

Sustainability Goal(s)	Write a SMART-IE goal statement. (Example: Establish a large enough patient load engaged in billable doula encounters to generate the revenue needed to hire and sustain a full-time doula on staff by the end of the grant period.)

How will you know that a change is an improvement? Set measures of success.

Measures of Success	Identify potential measures of success. (Example: Revenue from doula services meets or exceeds the cost of a full-time doula on staff.)

What change can we make to lead to an improvement? Describe the key Change Ideas or activities that you would like to test to move toward your sustainability goal.

Change Ideas	Brainstorm Change Ideas. (Example: Engage in community outreach to raise awareness about the health center's maternal health programs and covered doula services.)

Step 5: Implement and Update Your Sustainability Plan

Now that you have identified Change Ideas, implement these ideas to see if they are successful (i.e., tests of change). The Plan-Do-Study-Act (PDSA) Cycle is a framework designed to test and implement changes, guiding small-scale improvements. Use the table below to help your team plan and document your progress for these tests of change. Remember, a test of change refers to a small-scale Change Idea that will determine whether it leads to an improvement. For this PDSA cycle, focus on one of the Change Ideas you developed in Step 4.

Plan	• What Change Idea will be your first test of change? • What action steps do you need to take to test this idea? • What data do you need to collect? • Who will be involved in this test? List all parties by name and what they are responsible for. • When will you conduct this test of change? • Where will this test of change occur? • What is the predicted outcome from this test? How will you know if you are successful?	**Notes:**
Do	• What is the outcome of the implementation of the test of change? • What were the key observations you made during the test? • What data was gathered during the test? • What were the obstacles that were faced throughout the test?	**Notes:**
Study	• What did you learn throughout the implementation of the test of change? • How did the results compare to your predictions? • Were there any unintended outcomes because of the implementation? • What were your successes? • What were your failures?	**Notes:**
Act	• What adjustments, if any, need to be made to your next test? • What aspects of the test, if any, do you need to abandon? • Is the test of change ready for implementation on a larger scale? If yes, what is your implementation and sustainability plan? • If the test is not ready for implementation, how will you change your approach in the next PDSA cycle? • Are there any ways you can scale up your test of change in the next PDSA cycle?	**Notes:**

Wrap up!

With these steps, you selected one Sustainability Driver to focus on, developed one Sustainability Goal, and implemented one Change Idea. Recognizing that your health center's innovations may be complex, continue using this planning guide to achieve additional Sustainability Goals as needed.

The five steps you followed to achieve your sustainability goal provide various continuous quality improvement methodologies and tools. To continue your quality improvement journey, explore the tools and resources below.

Tools & Resources to Support Quality Improvement (QI) & Sustainability Planning

QI Tools

- QI Project Management is a tool that describes strategies to effectively manage quality improvement projects, and specific ideas to try within each strategy. It offers a workspace to note next steps to implement the strategy.
- QI Essentials Toolkit offers 10 essential QI tools to help with improvement projects, continuous improvement, and quality management.
- Improvement Area: Maternal and Infant Health provides tools and resources to support improvements in maternal and infant health.

Sustainability Planning

- Sustainability Planning Worksheet provides prompting questions for five key areas to consider when planning for the long-term sustainability of your improvement effort.
- Sustainability Planning Guide for Healthy Communities uses evidence-based strategies and real-life examples to provide a process for developing a sustainability plan.

References

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