

KEEPING THE MOMENTUM GOING: SUSTAINING YOUR DATA WORKGROUP

Data-informed decision-making is a distinctive feature of SAMHSA’s Strategic Prevention Framework (SPF), a five-step planning approach to building the infrastructure necessary to produce sustainable prevention outcomes. To support the integration of data-informed decision-making into their prevention systems, and the use of data to inform and enhance substance misuse prevention practice, state, tribes, territories, and jurisdictions (“states”) rely on **data workgroups**—networks of agencies (e.g., departments of health, offices of public safety, nonprofits, university partners) and individuals dedicated to locating, analyzing, and disseminating substance misuse and related behavioral health data.

Data workgroups perform a specific set of core functions intended to help SAMHSA prevention grantees identify, assess, and prioritize their substance-related prevention need. They identify and collect data, analyze and determine data findings and limitations, create and disseminate data reports, provide training and technical assistance to communities, and monitor existing and emerging priorities. These responsibilities keep them vital and productive in the early years of their existence.

Over time, however, some workgroups struggle to remain productive—and to even stay in existence. They may lose cohesion when a workgroup champion retires, when active members leave, when resources dwindle, or when their mandate becomes less clear. In the face of these likely challenges, it is important to be intentional about how to sustain the workgroup over time.

This tool describes three elements critical to long-term workgroup sustainability: building organizational capacity, maintaining effectiveness, and community support. These elements dovetail with recommendations included in these SPTAC companion resources: [*Actions to Strengthen Your State Epidemiological Workgroup*](#) and [*Recommended Function of Successful Epidemiological Workgroups*](#).

ELEMENT 1: BUILDING ORGANIZATIONAL CAPACITY

Organizational capacity refers to a workgroup's ability to efficiently manage resources, adapt to change, and achieve goals. Building organizational capacity involves enhancing the systems, structures, and relationships that allow it to respond efficiently and effectively to new challenges, expand its capabilities, and sustain high performance.

Infrastructure

Capacity-building strategies can focus on both internal and external structures. **Internal structures** include a workgroup's operating principles, goals and objectives, membership, and subcommittees.

Operating principles govern how the workgroup conducts itself and makes decisions. They ensure that how the workgroup functions is consistent and aligned with its broader organizational values and mission. When institutionalized, operating principles provide a frame of reference when new members join or leadership changes.

Some important principles include the following:

- Development of **bylaws or charters** that clearly define the workgroup's structure, purpose, roles, and responsibilities. These documents should detail how the group operates, including its decision-making, member selection, and conflict resolution processes.
- Establishment and maintenance of **regular working meetings and work plans**.
- Identification of **specific workgroup products**, accompanied by development **schedules and milestones**.

Workgroup goals and objectives are what the workgroup aims to achieve within a defined timeframe. When developing goals and objectives:

- **Consider application.** Goals can be inspirational, but they should also guide practice. Think carefully about what it will take to get where you want to go. Break each goal into manageable objectives and action steps. Then assign responsibilities and deadlines to each action item. Make sure to document these steps clearly and share them with all workgroup members. This will facilitate accountability and help you monitor progress.
- **Be SMART.** This means each objective should be **S**pecific, **M**easurable, **A**chievable, **R**elevant, and **T**ime-bound. Applying these parameters helps to ensure that goals and objectives are clear, quantifiable, realistic, and attainable

within a defined timeframe. This structured approach offers a defined plan and focus for the work, allowing for easier navigation of uncertainties. Attaining achievable and relevant goals enhances the likelihood of the workgroup achieving its intended purpose, thereby boosting workgroup morale and cohesion. Moreover, setting goals that are measurable and time-bound facilitates early issue detection and proactive resolution, making the group more resilient when facing challenges.

Membership describes the workgroup's composition: who belongs, what they contribute (i.e., membership criteria), and what they will be doing (i.e., roles). Membership is typically structured to include a diverse set of skills and perspectives. Having actively engaged members contributes to workgroup health and longevity. Key tasks associated with membership include the following:

- **Regularly assess who's at “the table”.** This will help the workgroup adjust to new developments, such as changes in public health priorities or new funding scenarios and ensure that it remains relevant. New members can bring fresh ideas and diverse expertise. Aim for equitable composition that incorporates a range of perspectives and backgrounds.
- **Actively involve members in discussions and decision-making.** This helps to ensure that everyone's voice is heard, and that their concerns and ideas are reflected in decisions. Having actively engaged members contributes to workgroup health and longevity.
- **Encourage members to take ownership.** Offer them leadership roles and responsibilities and provide them with the supports to be successful. This will not only foster a sense of pride, but also enhance their commitment to the group.

Subcommittees are smaller, specialized teams focused on a particular area (e.g., maternal and child health, school systems, racial equity). Subcommittees allow members to engage more deeply with complex issues, contributing to the broader workgroup goals. They also provide a space for members to showcase their unique area of interest or expertise, and to build connections and share resources within a smaller group.

Collaboration

The long-term success of a data workgroup hinges on the strength of its partnerships and alliances with external partners. These relationships open the door to the critical expertise and resources that workgroups need to thrive. Some strategies for fostering collaboration include the following:

- **Identify leaders and champions within partner organizations who can advocate for and advance the workgroup’s objectives.** These individuals can play a crucial role in promoting broader acceptance and integration of the workgroup’s initiatives within their organizations, thus expanding the workgroup’s influence and effectiveness.
- **Cultivate relationships that provide tangible benefits to all parties involved.** This will help to ensure their ongoing engagement and support. Acknowledging and rewarding partner contributions also strengthens relationships among members and reinforces the positive impact of collaborative efforts.
- **Facilitate regular and structured exchanges of data and information.** Use platforms and tools that support efficient and secure data sharing, such as data access APIs (Application Programming Interfaces) or encryption software. This will help to ensure the reliability of the data exchanges and build trust among partners.
- **Formalize collaborations by establishing data sharing agreements (DSAs) and memorandums of understanding (MOUs).** These help to make the exchange of data and information among key agencies and partners transparent. They also hold partners accountable to one another because they clearly define the rights, responsibilities, and consequences associated with the sharing and use of data. Workgroup members may leave, but these documents ensure that the agency’s relationship and commitment to the group persists. Make sure to review existing DSAs and MOUs over time to ensure that they are up-to-date and meet current data-sharing needs. Modify or renegotiate these documents as necessary to align with new objectives or changes in data governance laws and policies.
- **Establish and maintain regular contact with appropriate state advisory groups and/or key decision-makers.** Update them on progress, highlight common goals, and provide opportunities for input and feedback. These lines of communication will shape the workgroup’s collaborative strategies, making them more relevant and impactful. Alignment with advisory groups and/or key decision-makers also reduces duplication of effort and fosters long-term partnerships.

ELEMENT 2: MAINTAINING EFFECTIVENESS

Effectiveness describes a workgroup’s capacity to meet its goals efficiently and productively. Effective workgroups are more likely to be valued both internally and externally and deemed worthy of being sustained.

One hallmark of effective data workgroups is that they **consult a variety of quality data sources**. Some strategies for identifying appropriate sources include the following:

- **Look at both traditional databases and cutting-edge digital platforms.** Digital platforms typically offer more innovative features that go beyond the usual capabilities of a traditional database, such as enhanced data analyses, real-time processing, and interactive user interfaces.
- **Examine data collected at different levels.** Incorporating a mix of national, state, and local data offers a more complete picture of the issue or topic being reported on. Also, including different levels of data allows for comparison of patterns. Understanding local data patterns in comparison to national and state levels supports the efficient allocation of resources and attention.
- **Consider both quantitative and qualitative data.** Quantitative data provides a picture of the current health indicators within a population, including incidence and prevalence rates. Qualitative data (e.g., from focus groups, key informant interviews) provide contextual information that can help to explain the reasons behind observed patterns and trends. Qualitative data can also help uncover social, cultural, or behavioral factors that influence health outcomes, and reveal emerging issues not currently captured using quantitative data collection methods. Together, these data paint a more complete picture of a community's substance use landscape.
- **Establish a process for discovering and assessing new data sources.** This will help to keep your data pool dynamic and comprehensive. Engaging with academic institutions and other data-centric organizations can help you stay apprised of the latest developments and opportunities in data acquisition.

It is also important to **craft reliable methods for compiling data** to ensure that data are accurate, complete, and complementary. Advanced techniques in data analytics, such as geospatial analysis, predictive modeling, text mining, and visualization, are key to extracting the insights that really matter.

Finally, **monitor the utility of the data products** that the workgroup develops (e.g., epidemiological profiles, data dashboards, topic briefs). These products provide the foundation for data-driven decision making at the community level. When data products are relevant and useful, partners are more likely to remain invested in the workgroup's viability.

One important way to strengthen workgroup products is by inviting partner input; this will also help to strengthen collaborations. Consider these questions:

- How relevant are the data products, given the specific needs and priorities of the community? Do they consider and address existing health disparities and inequities?
- Are there key public health issues or concerns within the community that the products do not address?
- How are community members and organizations invited to provide feedback and contribute to product development?
- How easy is it for community members and organizations to access and use the data products? Do the data products provide clear and actionable information?
- How are community members and organizations using the products to inform their work?
- To what extent do the products empower community members and organizations to improve public health outcomes?

By blending traditional and advanced data sources, and integrating diverse quantitative and qualitative insights, workgroups can enhance their decision-making processes and resource allocation. This strategic approach ensures that workgroup outputs, products, and resources effectively address the community's health needs and priorities.

ELEMENT 3: COMMUNITY SUPPORT

Community support is the active involvement and backing of relevant parties, such as residents, organizations, or local leaders. It provides the necessary foundation for engagement, collaboration, and collective responsibility. Audiences who understand what a workgroup does, and who reap the benefits of its products, are more likely to advocate for their long-term sustainability.

One way to build community support is to develop a clear plan for disseminating data products. This helps to ensure that products reach their intended audiences. When developing a dissemination plan, it is important to:

- **Maintain an up-to-date contact list** of community-based organizations, service providers, and state, county, and city representatives who would benefit from the data products. This will make it easier to both collect and disseminate products.

- **Use multiple dissemination channels** (e.g., webpage, email newsletters, workgroup meetings, social media). Encourage partner agencies to use their connections to distribute products.
- **Consider your audience and tailor products accordingly.** For example, data summaries for community members will differ significantly from summaries for data scientists. For community members, use plain language and avoid technical terms, and provide the context needed to engage with the content in a meaningful way.
- **Consider culture.** Make sure all materials reflect the culture, preferred language, and background of the intended audience. For example, in tribal communities, symbols have significant meaning, as do colors. Using the appropriate terms and phrases helps to ensure that materials are welcomed and used.
- **Solicit end user feedback to strengthen products and dissemination strategies.** Implement regular feedback mechanisms like surveys or forums to gather input from end users and use this input to the design and content of future products.

Sustainability planning is an ongoing and iterative process that should begin from the data workgroup's inception. Consider creating a written sustainability plan that addresses the elements detailed above, and that can serve as a resource when unanticipated changes occur.



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