

## Introduction to Sustainability Planning

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Louise: Let's begin with a fundamental definition of sustainability. The Cambridge Dictionary defines sustainability as "the ability to continue over time."

In the context of Head Start programs, sustainability goes beyond just survival; it means thriving despite significant changes and challenges. Why is sustainability crucial for Head Start and Early Head Start programs? It ensures the growth and well-being of the children and families who rely on its services, regardless of their circumstances.

How can we ensure ongoing funding, and more importantly, the continuity of our work with children and families? To achieve sustainability, Head Start programs must be prepared to address a range of challenges, such as demographic shifts, natural disasters, or changes in funding. Head Start leadership should anticipate the future, respond to unexpected challenges, prepare for both known and unknown obstacles.

Sustainability is crucial for the well-being of children and families who depend on Head Start programs and services. It also holds significance for funders, including the Office of Head Start, your organization, and your community. Let's examine the two types of sustainability planning.

**Proactive Sustainability Planning.** Proactive Sustainability Planning involves integrating sustainability into your five-year Head Start planning cycle. This means using the self-assessment and community assessment processes to gather data, assess potential demographic changes, foresee challenges to ongoing funding, and identify other threats and opportunities.

Using data from these assessments, the planning process involves establishing goals to overcome challenges and strengthen capacity. This is done by devising and implementing strategies, measuring progress, making course corrections as needed, and planning for future opportunities.

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For example: Recognizing the time-limited nature of American Rescue Plan funds from the pandemic at the outset enabled Head Start agencies to prepare for a scenario where those funds would cease to be available. Incorporating this approach into the ongoing annual or five-year planning cycle exemplifies proactive planning.

**Urgent Sustainability Planning.** Many Head Start programs rely on non-federal support, such as private grants, supply donations, and state and local grants. When this support unexpectedly ends, Urgent Sustainability Planning becomes crucial. This planning involves developing strategies to secure new funds, reprioritize program services, engage new partners, and explore other solutions.

Events like the COVID-19 pandemic highlight the need for Urgent Sustainability Planning. Programs must assess the impact on funding, in-kind support, volunteer or board involvement, and enrollment. Urgent Sustainability Planning sets the stage for effective communication of program needs, engagement with funders, and community mobilization.

Head Start programs have faced natural disasters such as hurricanes, tornadoes, earthquakes, and wildfires, leading to facility damage or prolonged power outages. Urgent Sustainability Planning during such crises could involve mobilizing community and volunteer support, fundraising, and securing in-kind contributions to assist families and minimize program losses.

While Urgent Sustainability Planning often focuses on addressing problems, it is equally important when an unexpected opportunity arises. For instance, when new funding becomes available, Urgent Sustainability Planning ensures that the funds address crucial program needs without generating future challenges. For example, using a sudden but short-term funding increase to raise salaries could lead to long-term issues if the program can't sustain those higher salaries in the future.

Incorporating sustainability planning processes, both proactive and urgent, into a program's ongoing operations allows the program to respond to circumstances, whether foreseen or unexpected.

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