



A Sustainability Framework* for the National Forum on Youth Violence Prevention

The National Forum on Youth Violence Prevention (the Forum) works to increase awareness, spur action, and build local capacity to more effectively address youth violence. Since its inception in 2010 the Forum’s mission has been to support comprehensive planning and collective action in cities across the country. Communities come together, and with the youths themselves and partners from across sectors—law enforcement, education, public health, juvenile justice, and the faith based—they create a plan that incorporates a spectrum of prevention, intervention, enforcement, and reentry strategies. Leaders use cross-sector data to provide an accurate and inclusive picture of youth violence in the community. They then set goals and measure progress over time.

The Forum is a model collaboration between the federal government and localities. To support local efforts, many federal stakeholders work together to coordinate federal technical assistance, federal resources, and opportunities for learning. Leaders from federal agencies place a strong emphasis on being responsive to locally developed priorities and providing support to address communities’ specific challenges. This is in stark contrast to the typical federal oversight role.

The Forum is not intended to be a short-lived project or program. It is a movement that seeks to change fundamentally the way youth violence is addressed. To create sustained and lasting impact, local leaders will need to embed key strategies of the Forum—multidisciplinary partnerships, coordination of resources, and data sharing—in the day-to-day policies and practices of agencies and organizations at the federal, state and local level. The Forum’s work aims to establish the methods outlined here as the standard approach to collaboration.

Sustainability is critical to the Forum’s long-term success. This Framework is designed to support local leaders by outlining a process for sustaining their work. The Framework begins with a definition of sustainability within the context of the Forum. It then describes the capacities necessary to sustain the momentum and energy in communities to prevent and reduce violence and victimization, and also provides guidance to Forum sites on how to consider and build local capacity. Finally, this document includes advice to public and private funders on how they can best contribute to building the capacities of cities to sustain their efforts, also offering considerations for sustainability at the federal level.

What Is Sustainability?

*“Sustainability is an orientation, not a destination.”
—Steve Zimmerman and Jeanne Bell*

*While this Sustainability Framework has been developed to support cities of the National Forum on Youth Violence Prevention (the Forum), the core concepts included in the framework likely are applicable for a range of comprehensive community initiatives.



In the nonprofit world, the term sustainability can often be considered code for fundraising—that is, to have sustainability means you have sufficient funding to maintain your service or program. This is not surprising, as in the most general sense, sustainability can be defined as “the ability to continue a defined behavior indefinitely.”

However, when sustainability is applied to specific fields of work, the definition is often expanded to include the intended value or impact of the sustained action. It is not solely about continuing an action, but also for what purpose. For example, environmental sustainability is about the ongoing use of resources that meet the needs of the present *without compromising the future*. Business sustainability can be defined as the consistent management of environmental, social, and financial demands *to ensure responsible, ethical, and ongoing success*.

When sustainability is applied to community-based efforts, the added value is that the sustained behavior ensures the well-being of the community. Viewing sustainability of a program, service, or initiative as solely related to its financial health (as is often the case) is not sufficient. A truly sustainable community effort must also make the impact it intends. Both of these factors, together, allow for the continuity and success of the work.

What, then, is sustainability for the Forum’s efforts? What is to be sustained, and what is the value added? Working with local partners, the Forum has defined sustainability as **the endurance of public and community systems, policies, and practices that prevent youth and gang violence and promote positive youth opportunities in our communities**. Notably, sustainability for the Forum will require both public and private partners—including law enforcement, education, public health, juvenile justice, private philanthropy and faith-based organizations—to change the way they do business *based on the perspectives of those youths and community residents who are affected by or commit violence*. Their involvement will be critical to determining how the community systems, policies, and practices must improve.

Capacities of a Sustainable Collaborative: A Framework for Sustainability

Sustainability is challenging for many leaders of community-based programs and organizations. Sustaining large-scale systems change efforts such as those advanced by the Forum can be even more onerous. Without strong leadership and alignment of vision among the various partners, organizations can easily drift away to concentrate on their own activities and challenges. Scarce resources and constantly changing or heated political environments can exacerbate or derail sustainability work. Accountability for results can also be complicated. Local leaders often grapple not only with how to measure results but also with how to sufficiently acknowledge each organization’s contribution to those results.

Despite these many challenges, creating an effective and sustainable collaborative is achievable. Understanding these challenges well, federal leadership of the Forum sought to learn from research on other successful and sustained collaborations.

The research revealed at least nine common characteristics:

- Strong, visionary leadership
- Trust among partners
- Inclusive stakeholder engagement
- Efficient operating structures
- Accountability for measurable outcomes
- Open communications
- Broad range of funding
- Flexibility to changing environments
- Ongoing internal and external capacity building

Taking into account these lessons—and the experience and expertise of Forum site leaders—the Forum identified a set of eight capacities that help ensure sustainability. For long-term success, site leaders will need the capacities to

- Develop and articulate a **shared vision of success** and the scale and scope of that vision.
- **Clearly define the desired results**, and measure the impact of their efforts.
- **Authentically engage youth** in all aspects of the effort.
- Create a **leadership and governance structure** to support the multidisciplinary partnership.
- Consistently and effectively **engage community stakeholders** in the collaboration.
- Effectively **manage the operations** of a multidisciplinary partnership to achieve shared goals.
- **Secure and leverage a broad range of financial resources** to support the capacities and functions needed to achieve and sustain the vision.
- **Nimble adapt to and strategically influence** the changing context in which they operate.

These capacities help site leaders effectively sustain the complex, multidisciplinary collaboration necessary to prevent youth and gang violence and promote positive youth experiences. However, once built, capacity does not remain indefinitely. Changes in staffing, funding, and infrastructure can alter an individual’s or organization’s capacity overnight; thus attention to creating and supporting sustainability over time must become integral to planning and implementation at both the local and federal levels.

To help guide sustainability efforts moving forward, the Forum developed a tiered structure that defines the developmental path cities generally take as they advance their work and increase their capacity to sustain their efforts. Specifically, this structure and associated capacity-building efforts include the following:

- ***Emerging Forum Cities.*** Cities with a demonstrated interest that have been invited to join the Forum will assess their existing sustainability capacities and develop strategies for expanding or deepening those capacities.
- ***Engaged Forum Cities.*** Cities implementing the Forum approach will be able to demonstrate competence in at least three sustainability capacities. Local leaders will integrate strategies for improvement of sustainability capacities into ongoing planning and implementation processes.
- ***Sustained Forum Cities.*** Sustained cities will have successfully developed at least six sustainability capacities and have documented positive outcomes addressing youth violence (for example, reductions in youth violence or risk factors).

Forum sites will be able to use the Sustainability Self-Assessment Tool to determine their progress in each of the capacities. A site's designation as an Emerging, Engaged, or Sustained Forum Site correlates with its stage of development and will guide technical assistance and support. Sustainability training and tools can be targeted and customized to cities within a particular tier, and peer-to-peer learning can be structured among and between cities at various developmental levels.

Building the Capacity to Sustain

The Forum's sustainability framework was developed with and for Forum sites, so that it can be easily integrated into their everyday planning and strategy. To that end, each sustainability capacity is briefly described over the next several pages along with questions on which site leaders can reflect as they begin to consider their progress and determine areas for improvement. Site examples and lessons learned help illustrate the application of these capacities in real-world settings.

1. Develop and Articulate a Shared Vision of Success, and the Scale and Scope of That Vision

The first step in building a sustainable initiative is developing a shared vision of success. The vision must be created through a collaborative process, with a variety of stakeholders involved. For the Forum it is crucial that residents and youths, who are from the communities most affected by violence and reflect those communities' racial and ethnic makeup, are fully engaged in the visioning process. The vision must be valid in their eyes. Only with their commitment and buy-in can the vision become a reality.

The shared vision should articulate what needs to be sustained to achieve and maintain success. Specifically, the vision should include the scale and scope of the public and community systems—policies and practices that need to exist, in the context of *this* city—to prevent youth

violence and promote positive youth opportunities. Clearly addressing these questions from the outset will help partners thoughtfully and intentionally institutionalize the effort in their community.

The shared vision must align with other existing initiatives in the community, describing how they will build on and collectively work toward the broader common good. Once developed, the vision must be clearly communicated to the broader community, government representatives, and others. However, the vision cannot become stagnant. It must remain a vibrant and relevant tool for engaging and uniting partners. Leadership must remain open to revising how the vision is expressed as new ideas, new partners, and new efforts influence the work, and as the environment changes. Youths and other community residents must continue to be involved in the decision-making when the vision or plan is modified to address new circumstances.

Site leaders should consider the following questions as they reflect on their capacity for developing and articulating a shared vision:

- Do we have a shared vision of success, developed with and supported by stakeholders, including youths and older community residents?
- Have we involved stakeholders in the visioning process who represent the racial and ethnic makeup of the community?
- Have we worked with stakeholders to develop a plan that aligns vision, goals, strategies, and activities with measurable results? Is there a related workplan and timeline?
- Does the plan articulate what public and community systems, policies, and practices must be sustained over time to achieve success?
- Have we aligned and coordinated our vision and goals with other initiatives and efforts in the community?
- Do we have a plan for adapting our vision, goals, and workplan in response to external factors?
- Do we have a plan for communicating our vision to government representatives and the broader community?

SITE EXAMPLE

Boston, Mass., site leaders used the planning process to ensure that the Forum’s efforts aligned, supported, and enhanced good work already under way in their community. First, site leaders tied their vision for youth violence prevention closely to the mayor’s overall vision for a healthy, thriving city. The related plan then outlined how existing and new community-based programs and initiatives supported the vision.

Site leaders note that developing a shared vision created a deep, common understanding that violence prevention is not only a priority for Boston but also doable. “We all came to understand that youth are part of families, and families are part of communities, and that we needed a comprehensive vision and plan that reflected that understanding. We now know what it takes to address youth violence, and that this is how we will work together. We have the same goals, and this helps us maintain our effort no matter who is in charge.”

LESSON LEARNED

It is often challenging to keep stakeholders engaged after the initial visioning and planning process. Several site leaders reported that partners can quickly drift away and retreat back to their own silos when there isn’t a shared vision or the resulting plan seems too large and unwieldy. To keep stakeholders engaged, many site leaders stressed the importance of developing a well-thought-out plan that is clearly tied to the vision. And while the vision should be ambitious, the plan should be specific and doable.

2. Clearly Define the Desired Results, and Measure Impact

To realize success, one must know what constitutes success. Thus it is critical for Forum site leaders to clearly define the results they intend to achieve and how they will measure their impact. This will turn the vision into a reality for everyone involved. Further, when all stakeholders have agreed on the intended results, it creates buy-in and support for the collaboration. Partners understand their role more clearly and what improvements they can expect to see in their community as a result of their involvement. It also demonstrates how everyone’s participation is necessary to achieve the vision.

Starting with the Forum’s logic model (see appendix A), site leaders can work with their evaluation partners to develop a logic model to guide and evaluate local efforts. The logic model should depict the specific systems, policies, and practice improvements that need to occur *in their community* to achieve *their intended results*, with related strategies and interventions aligned accordingly.

Next, an evaluation plan should be incorporated into the overall community plan. In addition to the logic model, the evaluation plan should include

- The process and outcome measures that will be used to track progress toward the intended results
- The data sources for each measure, specifying accountability for data collection and reporting, and noting any data breakdown that will be needed (e.g., disaggregation by geography and ethnicity, race, or gender)
- A description of a self-evaluation process for site leaders and other stakeholders to review data and make course corrections as necessary
- A communications strategy for regularly sharing data with community members, government representatives, and funders

Lastly, it is critical that as site leaders see positive impact and communicate their results broadly, there is acknowledgement of all partners' contributions to the collective success. This will help maintain existing partners and funders and entice new stakeholders who are committed to collective action.

Site leaders should consider the following questions as they reflect on their capacity for measuring impact:

- Do we clearly define the results of the initiative?
- Do we have an evaluation plan that outlines how we will track progress toward our desired results?
- Have we identified an evaluation partner?
- Do we have access to and are we collecting the necessary data?
- Have we developed a system to share and track data across partners?
- Do we use data to set priorities, make decisions, and course corrections, and to continually improve our efforts?
- Are youths and other stakeholders engaged in the evaluation process, from determining results and developing an evaluation plan to interpreting and making decisions based on the data?
- Do we regularly communicate the impact of the effort with stakeholders, government representatives, and the broader community?

SITE EXAMPLE

Minneapolis, Minn., site leaders leverage Results Minneapolis, a citywide performance management and monitoring tool, to institutionalize data collection and sharing. As part of Results Minneapolis, site leaders produce an annual report on youth violence prevention. The report captures the current status and progress made across a wide range of risk and protective factors and is aligned with Minneapolis's plan "Blueprint for Action: Preventing Youth Violence." The Minneapolis Health Department coordinates among the many partners who are implementing parts of the Blueprint, including the Minneapolis Police Department, Minneapolis Public Schools, the Minneapolis Park and Recreation Board, Hennepin County, and community-based youth-serving organizations.

Forum leaders meet quarterly to review data, and more frequently in the fall as they put together the annual Results Minneapolis report. Site leaders report: "We are using data to make decisions and to strategize on moving forward. Importantly, [Results Minneapolis] allows us to

analyze and share data from across sectors and compare those figures [with] youth crime. We then present it to policymakers and the community. It brings everyone together.”

LESSON LEARNED

One of the biggest obstacles many site leaders face is lack of access to data. Too often, they have been unable to access the data necessary to make accurate baseline assessments, and to determine whether they are making the impact they intended. Several site leaders stressed that data must be a priority from day 1. Once performance measures and outcomes are identified, they should be tied to specific, reliable data sources with details on how the data are to be collected, aggregated, formatted, and shared. As one site leader noted: “It’s critical to have a system or process where all this data can be brought together and reviewed, while respecting [the] privacy of individuals. We have to get the data, or how else do we know what we’re doing is working?”

3. Authentically Engage Youth in All Aspects of the Effort

It is essential that Forum site leaders authentically engage youth throughout their effort. Only the young people themselves truly understand the environment in which they are living, the challenges they face, and the opportunities that can help them overcome youth violence and succeed in life. Only with that understanding can the Forum’s effort to prevent youth and gang violence become relevant and forceful in the communities it intends to reach.

While there are many ways to engage youths in an effort, authentically engaging young people means going beyond viewing youths as recipients of services or providers of good anecdotes. Authentic youth engagement forms a partnership among the site’s adults and the young people in which the skills, expertise, and contributions of each person are valued equally. Everyone has opportunities to make decisions, contribute toward the effort, and take on specified roles and tasks. Neither the youths nor the adults are in a superior position or valued above the other; rather they are working together as partners toward a common goal.

To authentically engage youth, Forum site leaders and stakeholders will need to be trained on positive youth development and, specifically, on how to build authentic youth–adult partnerships. Clearly defined roles and responsibilities will need to be created with and for youth leaders and stakeholders. Youth leaders will need adult supporters who are easily accessible and can help them be prepared to fully participate. Similar to how adult colleagues work together, an adult supporter can review an agenda with a young person before a meeting, discuss what to expect, and then debrief with the youth afterward. Youth participation will also need to be supported in tangible ways, such as with stipends and assistance with transportation.

Site leaders should consider the following questions as they reflect on their capacity for authentically engaging youth:

- Have we worked with youth to develop clearly defined roles and responsibilities for our youth leaders?

- Has our site leadership team, including youths, been trained in positive youth development and youth–adult partnership?
- Do we have a process for ongoing recruitment and training of youth leaders within the initiative?
- Do we take into consideration the schedules of the youth leaders when planning meetings and events?
- Do we provide young people with tangible support for their involvement, such as stipends and assistance with transportation?
- Do we ensure that youths are prepared in advance of meetings, are engaged in the discussion and decision-making process during meetings, and are debriefed after meetings?

SITE EXAMPLE

As Chicago, Ill., embarked on a strategic planning process, site leaders developed an intentional process to engage young people. First, leaders committed to ensuring that each of the five strategic planning workgroups had at least one youth representative. However, because meetings were held during the day when it is difficult for other young people to attend, the workgroups also developed a list of questions for which they wanted youth input. Youth-serving organizations involved in the process then held focus groups at times and places convenient for young people. In the end, more than 250 youths helped set priorities and determine strategies for Chicago’s youth violence prevention effort.

One site leader reflected: “Youth provided very meaningful recommendations and also some unique suggestions. For example, they suggested providing small grants for local, youth-led violence prevention projects. This resulted in a Youth Peace Grant Program, which received a great response from across the city. But most importantly, our youth engagement demonstrated to the young people that we were sincere in wanting their input and that gave the final plan credibility.”

LESSON LEARNED

Many sites shared that they have “room for improvement” when it comes to authentically involving youth in the Forum’s effort. The biggest concerns include not engaging the most challenged youth, not consistently engaging youth, and not ensuring youths are full participants in decision-making. To address the challenges, sites develop defined roles for young people by creating a youth advisory committee or designating a youth representative on the leadership team. Site leaders advise becoming very intentional about recruiting, training, and supporting youths who have been most affected by violence, so that they may take on leadership roles. One site leader stressed: “Youth engagement can’t be symbolic. It has to fundamentally shape how we do our work.”

4. Create a Leadership and Governance Structure to Support the Multidisciplinary Partnership

A strong leadership and governance structure is crucial for bringing multidisciplinary partners together to address a complex problem such as youth violence. A governance structure is the vehicle with which partners can effectively collaborate, discuss issues, align strategies with actions, make decisions and course corrections, and celebrate successes.

An effective leadership and governance structure acknowledges that all partners are valued and necessary to reach the collective goal. It clearly defines roles and responsibilities for everyone involved. For Forum sites, traditional city leadership must be at the table and committed to the effort. They have the critical ability to align city strategies, resources, and efforts across the community. But just as essential, Forum site leadership should include people not in elected and traditional positions of power, particularly youths and residents from the communities most affected by violence. Faith- and community-based organizations, media, and business and philanthropic organizations can also play critical roles in leadership. Significantly, the overall leadership should be representative of the various stakeholder groups and reflect the racial and ethnic makeup of the community. This will result in decision-making, strategies, and interventions that are relevant and meaningful for all.

The Forum's effort will, undoubtedly, bring together people who have not worked collaboratively in the past, and in some cases, may not have established trust at the outset. In truly collaborative efforts, responsibility and control must move beyond any one organization or agency. Thus, Forum sites should ensure that time is spent letting people get to know one another and understand each person's perspective and personal commitment to youth violence prevention. On an ongoing basis, efforts need to be devoted to thoughtfully maintaining relationships, while also working to incorporate new partners into the fold.

Site leaders should consider the following questions as they reflect on their capacity for creating a strong leadership and governance structure:

- Do we have clearly defined roles, responsibilities, and expectations within our governance structure?
- Do we have representation from various key stakeholder groups—such as law enforcement, health, youth, community residents, education, and the faith based—at the leadership level?
- Is site leadership representative of the racial and ethnic makeup of the community?
- Do we have an effective decision-making process within the governance structure, and is the leadership able to make decisions on behalf of their organization or constituent group?
- Do we have a process for documenting the collective decisions that have been made?

- Is there trust among the site leadership and their respective organizations?
- Do we have a mutually supportive, clearly defined working relationship between the fiscal sponsor and site leadership?
- Do we regularly assess the influence, capacity, and level of participation of the leadership and make adjustments as necessary?
- Do we have a plan for ongoing recruitment and skill development within various stakeholder groups to ensure representative leadership?
- Is site leadership involved in the sustainability planning and committed to leveraging resources?

SITE EXAMPLE

In San Jose, Calif., site leaders developed clearly defined roles and expectations within the Mayor’s Gang Prevention Task Force (MGPTF). The mayor and chief of police co-chair the task force, which leads their youth violence prevention effort. MGPTF has several subcommittees, including community engagement, interagency collaboration, an MGPTF technical team, and the City–School Collaboration. Each committee develops its own plan, which supports the overarching goal of reducing gang violence and promoting positive opportunities for youth. Staffers from the Mayor’s Office, the San Jose Police Department, and Parks, Recreation, and Neighborhood Services provide support to the subcommittees in executing their respective committee charges.

Site leaders shared that their governance structure allows people from many disciplines, and at various levels from within an organization, to meaningfully engage in the effort. For example, a city council member may serve on the overall task force, and their staff person may sit on a particular committee. Committee leadership and membership are critical positions; they are making decisions and guiding the work. Site leaders explained: “People are at different tables depending on their interest and how their work aligns. Real work is going on at every level; decisions are being made. This keeps people engaged. We couldn’t succeed without multidisciplinary and multilevel leadership.”

LESSON LEARNED

Several site leaders shared that building trust among the leadership was one of the most critical aspects of sustaining their effort. Initially, some faced partners being protective of their work. They recommend taking time to let people get to know one another, even when they have a history of working together. One site leader explained: “Trust is not automatic. We needed time to try each other out and make sure we were each keeping our word. It’s relationships and trust that break down the silos.”

5. Consistently and Effectively Engage Community Stakeholders in the Collaboration

Engaging community stakeholders in Forum work will create the public will and momentum needed to sustain a reduction in youth and gang violence. Constituencies should include stakeholders from education, health, law enforcement, child welfare, juvenile justice, the faith based, and, most important, youths and older residents living in the communities affected by violence. It is also crucial that the racial and ethnic makeup of the stakeholders is aligned with that of the community.

A thoughtful, intentional structure is needed to support and value this broad community engagement. Mechanisms for regular communication with stakeholder groups should be created to allow for shared knowledge and engagement in the work. Stakeholders need clearly defined roles, with multiple avenues to provide input on what they have identified as opportunities, challenges, successes, and needs. Like youth engagement, stakeholder engagement must be authentic. Once asked for feedback, Forum site leaders will need to be open to hearing new perspectives, having tough conversations, sharing with one another honestly and respectfully. After input has been received, leaders should communicate back to stakeholders the resulting decisions, actions, or course corrections.

Notably, not all stakeholders will come to the table with equal ability to participate. Even those in elected and traditional leadership positions may not have operated within a collaborative effort. Thus attention should be paid to building the capacity of stakeholders to fully participate in the collaboration. This will help broaden the field of future leaders and ensure ongoing racial and ethnic diversity within leadership.

Site leaders should consider the following questions as they reflect on their capacity for engaging community stakeholders:

- Do we have a plan for active stakeholder involvement at all levels of the initiative's decision-making and work?
- Do stakeholders reflect of the racial and ethnic makeup of the community?
- Do we regularly scan the community for new partners?
- Do we support ongoing capacity-building to broaden the pool of resident leaders?
- Do we have mechanisms for ongoing input from the various stakeholder groups?
- Do we have mechanisms for regular communication with stakeholders?
- Do we create opportunities to recognize and reward stakeholders?

SITE EXAMPLE NO. 1

In an effort to intentionally diversify and build local capacity, site leaders in Salinas, Calif., started a community leadership academy. Through the City of Salinas Community Safety Division, with support from the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention's

Community and Strategic Planning Project partners, the academy provides participants with leadership and life skills training while connecting them with local community leaders and expanding their network. The academy is free and provides day care and meals during training.

Site leaders shared: “We needed to thoughtfully engage a more diverse group of people. At first we had high-level city leadership to get the effort off the ground. That was necessary, but those folks weren’t very diverse. Now we’re helping to create community-based change agents: people who can do community organizing and have a seat at our leadership table.”

Site Example No. 2

Site leaders in Memphis, Tenn., purposely consider how to frame their work in a way that engages a broad group of community stakeholders. For example, after stakeholders identified truancy as a core issue, Operation: Safe Community (focused on crime reduction) and partner agency PeopleFirst (focused on the cradle-to-career pipeline) brought together a task force that included schools, police, juvenile court, the district attorney’s office, and social services. While analyzing attendance data, they realized that focusing on truancy alone left many feeling that the overarching issue of school achievement was not being fully addressed. However, by expanding the focus to include truancy and attendance, everyone had a stake in improving performance, providing a stronger message for coalescing efforts.

“The key to sustainability is engagement across the entire community,” one site leader explained. “The entire community needs to get behind what we’re doing. Some folks are working specifically on the truancy issue; faith-based partners have come to the table and are looking to be resources for truancy-involved youth. But also, everyone involved can do something to boost attendance: every agency, every parent, and every youth.” This approach is reflected in “RePresent Everyday,” a campaign for school attendance. Partner organization Seeding Success is leading the effort with many public and private organizations participating, including an NBA franchise, the Memphis Grizzlies.

LESSON LEARNED

Many sites have found it challenging to keep a variety of stakeholders engaged. Site leaders suggest having roles for stakeholders throughout the process—from planning, to evaluation, to policy change—and to pay particular attention to those people who have left the table. Reach out and ask why they left. One site leader shared that it is important to allow stakeholders to disagree and tell some hard truths. She shared: “Open conversations led to much greater buy in. It wasn’t sustainable when it was just staff trying to make it all work and then run it by community groups at the end. We had to let people tell us what they really think, and then develop a plan that was responsive to them.”

6. Effectively Manage the Operations of a Multidisciplinary Partnership to Achieve Shared Goals

Forum site leaders need to be able to effectively manage a multidisciplinary effort, and all its moving parts, to achieve the shared mission. Within a partner organization or agency, critical management, communications, and operational functions should exist to execute the community’s vision and plan and maintain alignment among partners.

In collective impact efforts, the organizations serving this role are often called a “backbone” organization and are considered essential to long-term success. Backbone organizations provide the infrastructure to manage the day-to-day activities, supporting the processes and structures necessary for governance, data management, stakeholder and youth engagement, and funder management among other tasks. The backbone organization can also play an important role ensuring that the effort is intentional in how it includes people coming from different racial and ethnic backgrounds and with varying levels of power and influence.

Despite how it sounds, the backbone organization is not the most powerful player within the collaborative effort nor does its staff do it all alone. An effective backbone organization executes the direction of the broader leadership, working behind the scenes to lift up and support all of the partners. In Forum sites, city government and other partners should also dedicate staff time and embed critical functions to support youth violence prevention. The backbone organization works with these partners to ensure the Forum’s work is being coordinated, aligned, and institutionalized across the community.

Site leaders should consider the following questions as they reflect on their capacity for managing the site operations:

- Do we have defined roles and responsibilities for the backbone organization, in relationship with the other participating organizations? Do we have memoranda of understanding or memoranda of agreement in place among partners?
- Do the city government (and county government, if applicable) and other critical partners also have staff time and functions dedicated to youth violence prevention?
- Does the backbone organization have strong management systems and appropriate staffing to manage the initiative?
- Does the backbone organization’s staffing reflect the racial and ethnic makeup of the community?
- Does the backbone organization effectively convene key stakeholders and facilitate cross-systems planning?
- Does the backbone organization effectively identify and coordinate its operations with other partner organizations?
- Does the backbone organization have strong communications processes that keep stakeholders engaged and informed?

SITE EXAMPLE

In Camden, N.J., the Office of the Mayor leads the local Forum effort. The Mayor’s Office provides important leadership and guidance in engaging community members and service

providers in the collaboration. The Center for Family Services (CFS), the Public Safety Department, Camden City Department of Health and Human Services, the Community Planning and Advocacy Council, and the Camden County Metro Police are all partners in executing the Camden City Youth Violence Prevention Plan. The CFS, one of the largest and longest-standing nonprofit social service agencies in Camden, serves as the operational lead. In partnership with the Mayor's Office, CFS staffs and coordinates the plan's implementation including organizing meetings, setting agendas, and communicating among the partners.

Site leaders shared that one of the most critical roles CFS plays is to ensure that the Forum work aligns with other community initiatives. "We look at how to leverage other major designations that come to our city, such as the recent Promise Zone grant, so we can all reach our common goal. CFS is working in the community with families, and also at [the] table for planning, so we can help ensure things are integrated and make sense locally."

LESSON LEARNED

Collective impact initiatives such as the Forum include many partners, programs, and moving parts, with a lot of coordination and communication happening behind the scenes. Multiple site leaders reported that without some person, or people, keeping all the pieces connected, the work quickly becomes disjointed and ineffective. A strong, central coordination role is critical to success. Site leaders noted that people filling this role need to have a unique set of skills, including an understanding of youth violence prevention, policy development, and politics. Applying implementation science is also critical to ensuring that the Forum's strategies are adopted and integrated throughout the community and having their intended impact.

7. Secure and Leverage a Broad Range of Financial Resources to Support the Capacities and Functions Needed to Achieve and Sustain the Vision

Forum site leaders need to be able to secure and leverage a broad range of resources to achieve and sustain their results. These resources include existing, new, and leveraged public and private funding sources as well as in-kind services such as expertise, guidebooks, and training curricula. Forum sites are not working to fund a particular program. They are working to improve community collaboration, data sharing, and coordination of services and resources to reduce youth and gang violence. This means site leaders will need to leverage a range of resources related to everything from new management and data-sharing infrastructure to youth and community engagement activities to direct interventions.

Developing a clear vision, and the scale and scope of that vision, is an important first step to creating a strategic financing plan. Doing so helps site leaders accurately estimate the costs of—and potential assets gained from—supporting those goals and strategies. Next, site leaders will need to conduct an analysis of existing public and private resources devoted to youth violence prevention and positive youth opportunities, looking comprehensively across federal, state, county and local funding sources to identify gaps and potential opportunities. Based on that analysis, site leaders can then consider a variety of financing strategies to support the long-term success of their work, including redirecting existing resources, sharing costs with collaborative partners, developing new funding sources, improving coordination across existing resources, and leveraging technical assistance and knowledge resources.

Developing a strategic financing plan requires the engagement of the breadth of site leadership. Site leaders will need to leverage public and private resources to cover the breadth and depth of the work. Moreover, as with the vision and results, site leaders are responsible for monitoring and revising the financing plan on an ongoing basis.

Site leaders should consider the following questions as they reflect on their capacity to leverage and secure resources:

- Do we have a strategic financing plan that includes accurate projections of costs based on our goals?
- Do we know the level of current public and private investments related to each of our goals and opportunities?
- Have we diversified our funding, including engaging private funders in the effort?
- Do we regularly communicate our progress to current and potential funders?
- Have we developed financing strategies, including identifying opportunities to better align public funding with shared goals and shift funding upstream, among other approaches?
- Do we monitor our strategic financing plan over time?

SITE EXAMPLE

From the outset, Philadelphia, Pa., site leaders took an intentional approach in diversifying funding. They worked with a longstanding philanthropic network that includes private funders, private foundations, and corporations and created an affinity group on youth safety to encompass all aspects of youth violence prevention. The affinity group works to align and coordinate priorities between its members and the city and now creates a conduit among funders interested in youth violence prevention and local organizations doing great work.

More recently, site leaders have taken funders on tours of the Forum's targeted area so they see youth violence prevention work in action. Site leaders shared, "We are building important relationships between funders and local community members, which has expanded our reach and allowed our collective effort to positively [affect] a larger number of community members."

LESSON LEARNED

Many sites leaders shared that they faced challenges when they were too reliant on one funding stream. They recommended concentrating on diversifying funding from the beginning. Site leaders noted that public and private funding are equally important and can play different roles. Dedicated public funding demonstrates that youth violence prevention is a community priority and deserving of public resources. However, given the restrictions on most public funding, and especially federal funds, private funding can provide sites with more flexibility. Private funding

also demonstrates a level of community commitment and can provide continuity when public leadership turns over.

Nimble Adapt to and Strategically Influence the Changing Context in Which They Operate

The path to success is never clear from the outset, and the only guarantee for Forum site leaders is that the economic, political, and policy environments within which they operate will change over time. To achieve goals, site leaders need the capacity to nimbly adapt to and strategically influence the context within which they operate.

To build the capacity to nimbly respond, Forum site leaders can begin with an assessment of their existing environment, including an inventory of their needs, assets, and resources. With stakeholder involvement, including youth and community residents, site leaders can develop a strategic influence agenda that identifies the specific systems, policies, and practices that need to be improved and institutionalized to prevent youth and gang violence. Around such an agenda, stakeholders can begin to coalesce and act.

The leadership and governance structure should also incorporate processes for regular, proactive monitoring of changes within the site's environment. Authentic youth and stakeholder engagement is critical to this effort. Done well, it will help create a culture of continual learning and open communications and feedback loops among partners and stakeholders, all of whom can help identify potential opportunities and challenges.

When opportunities or threats arise, site leaders need processes in place so they can come together to discuss, make decisions, and coordinate responses in a timely manner. Time should also be set aside for stepping back to assess longer-term trends in the community and reassess current viability and effectiveness of the existing collaboration. This will often lead to modifications in the strategic influence agenda and the seeking out of new partners or funders.

Site leaders should consider the following questions as they reflect on their capacity to nimbly adapt to and influence their environment:

- Have we developed strategies for improving and institutionalizing specific systems, policies, and practices that are necessary for preventing youth violence in our community?
- Do we monitor and assess opportunities and threats within political, policy, and economic conditions?
- Do we strategically respond to opportunities and threats?
- Do we regularly conduct environmental scans and adjust strategies in response to changing contexts?

- Do we regularly engage new partners and work with emerging and existing initiatives to ensure alignment and coordination of goals, results, and activities?
- Do we contribute to efforts to improve the policy context at the federal, state, and local levels?

SITE EXAMPLE

In New Orleans, La., partners come together regularly to monitor and assess the environment, and adapt their youth violence prevention strategy accordingly. With support from the office of Mayor Mitch Landrieu, NOLA FOR LIFE partners review what’s working and what’s not working. Quantitative and qualitative data, and community stakeholder input, are used to help guide the decisions. For example, a few years ago community stakeholders noted the lack of trauma-informed services for youth exposed to violence. New Orleans quickly adapted its plan and began piloting the use of trauma-informed approaches in schools. Within a couple years, the approach was poised for expansion to other schools.

Site leaders noted: “It’s hard, but sometimes we have to move things out from under the NOLA FOR LIFE umbrella and move other efforts under it. We’re very intentional about aligning our work with current community needs. Community stakeholder participation is foundational; not only for identifying needs, but then [also] helping us adapt to meet them.”

LESSON LEARNED

Many site leaders commented on how necessary this capacity is for sustainability, and, in fact, the ability to be nimble and strategic is derived from the other capacities. First, sites need a clear vision and plan so that there is a common “touch point” from which to consider new opportunities or challenges. An ongoing self-evaluation process, with young people and community stakeholders involved, provides a venue for constant assessment and monitoring of the environment. An effective leadership and governance structure allows for timely and thoughtful decision-making, while a well-functioning operations system can quickly respond to shifts in plans. And finally, a broad array of funding can allow more flexibility when responding to opportunities and challenges.

The Role of Forum Public and Private Funders in Creating Capacity in Sites

The Forum succeeds when the capacity of cities to sustain their youth violence prevention efforts is strong. However, capacity doesn’t develop out of thin air. Forum federal partner agencies, and other public and private funders, need to intentionally work to build and strengthen the sustainability capacities within Forum sites. This requires a flexible approach, as each site is in a different place, with different strengths, assets, and challenges. Funders should customize their capacity-building supports to meet the needs of each site, based on where they are in the development of these capacities.

Forum site leaders indicate three important ways in which funders can support local sustainability efforts. They include

- Providing training and technical assistance on the sustainability capacities

- Supporting a robust learning community
- Structuring grant-making to promote sustainability and systems change

Providing Training and Technical Assistance on the Sustainability Capacities

Forum site leaders acknowledge having areas of strength and areas of challenge across the eight capacities described in this framework and even within a single capacity. With the capacities clearly defined, funders should use this framework and the accompanying self-assessment tool to tailor the Forum’s training and technical assistance to address specific site needs. The sustainability self-assessment will help site leaders reach consensus on their capacity-building needs and priorities. Targeted resources and trainings can be provided to sites to enhance particular capacities, and coaching can help address site-specific challenges.

While the needs of each site are unique, site leaders identified certain aspects of the sustainability capacities most often as needing to be strengthened, including

- When developing a **shared vision**, the capacity to align the Forum’s effort with other initiatives in the community; in particular, *aligning* various collective impact efforts *with similar goals*.
- When demonstrating **measurable impact**, the capacity for *data collection and analysis*, including developing a baseline, *setting reasonable site-specific results* (short, intermediate, and long term), and *sharing data across disciplines*.
- When **engaging youth**, the capacity to *recruit and keep youths at the table who have been most affected by violence*.
- When developing a **leadership and governance structure**, the capacity to diversify leadership; in particular, *engaging youth in the ongoing decision-making and planning process*.
- When engaging **community stakeholders**, the capacity to *develop and maintain meaningful relationships, partnerships, and collaborations, both formal and informal*.
- When **diversifying funding**, the capacity to *identify and seek* dedicated funding *streams for youth violence prevention and positive youth development at the local, state, and federal levels*.
- When **strategically influencing** the environment, the capacity to *intentionally and thoughtfully* engrain *the Forum’s work in policy* at the community, state, and federal levels.

Supporting a Robust Learning Community

Site leaders shared that participation in a robust learning community greatly enhances their capacity to sustain. They identified peer-to-peer learning as one of the most valuable supports they receive. Site visits and convenings are considered very worthwhile; site leaders often attribute their success to applying what they learned from other communities. As participants in a learning community, site leaders particularly value opportunities

- For cross-site learning, including sharing resources, technical support, and innovative ideas
- To solve problems together and address specific challenges, such as getting private funders involved or sharing data among multiple disciplines
- To engage in an intentional, continual learning process with their funding partners

Given the value site leaders place on shared learning opportunities, public and private funders should consider how to continue to strengthen the Forum’s learning community, including leveraging the learning of more experienced sites and potentially offering additional ways for site leaders to connect outside of large events.

Structuring Grant-Making to Promote Sustainability and Systems Change

It matters how public and private funding streams that support Forum sites are structured. Funding can be a driving force in systems reform, allowing localities to spur improvements, leverage additional funds, and make a lasting impact. But funding can also, at times, inadvertently complicate or confuse local efforts.

Public or private funders should consider the following funding suggestions as they build the capacity of Forum sites to sustain their youth violence prevention efforts:

- ***Provide Flexibility on Planning Requirements.*** Site leaders shared that there is a risk of plan fatigue when a new planning process is required for each new funding stream. Funders should consider how sites could build on existing efforts and planning processes of closely aligned work.
- ***Provide Funding for Staff.*** Site leaders appreciate that funding from the Forum can support the hiring of staff. However, this is not true with many other funding streams. When existing staff get stretched too thin, they are less effective and are unable to focus on big-picture issues such as sustainability. Funders should consider providing support for staff.
- ***Provide flexibility on leadership and governance requirements.*** To be successful, communities need to design their leadership structure in a way that is aligned with existing work and that local leaders believe can be sustained over time. Funders should allow variation by community and not always require a new collaborative or decision-making body be formed.

- ***Provide Flexibility Around the Level of Evidence Necessary to Fund Interventions.*** Site leaders understand and appreciate that a level of evidence is needed to justify funding an intervention. However, site leaders shared that many evidence-based programs are cost-prohibitive and some are just not a good fit for their community. Further, strict requirements for replicating evidence-based programs can stifle a communities’ ability to innovate and adapt to meet their local needs. Funders should consider developing guidance and a deliberate process by which site leaders can thoughtfully select interventions that are appropriate to their community and based on the best available evidence.
- ***Provide Multiyear Funding.*** Site leaders shared that a 1-year funding cycle is challenging. First, it is difficult to show results, particularly on a complex initiative such as the Forum, within 1 year. Moreover, with multiyear funding, site leaders are able to think longer term and more strategically.

Sustainability of the Forum at the Federal Level

The Forum intends to reform systems, changing the way communities work together to prevent youth violence and promote positive youth opportunities. The Forum also aspires to model a new way for the federal government and localities to work together. Like site leaders, federal leaders need to commit to improving their systems, policies, and practices and should reflect on how to build capacity to sustain this effort at the national level. The sustainability framework can also be used as a guide for strengthening federal sustainability efforts. The following questions can help national Forum leaders begin to reflect upon their sustainability capacities:

- ***Shared Vision.*** Do we have clarity on what needs to be sustained at the federal level, such as specific functions within agencies, interagency agreements, and multidisciplinary partnerships?
- ***Clearly Defined Results.*** Do we maximize opportunities to develop shared outcomes frameworks and measurements with other federal initiatives? Do we streamline or develop shared grantee reporting requirements and formats?
- ***Leadership and Governance.*** Do we have a clear understanding among federal partners about decision-making, roles, and responsibilities? Are we clear on roles when funding is flowing through one partner but other agencies are also involved?
- ***Effective Management and Operations.*** Do we effectively institutionalize the core functions of interagency communication, joint planning, and coordinated technical assistance and grant making?
- ***Authentic Youth Engagement.*** Do we have a process for ongoing, meaningful engagement of young people at the federal level?

- ***Community Stakeholder Engagement.*** Do we have a process for ongoing, meaningful engagement of community stakeholders at the federal level?
- ***Financial Resources.*** Do we consider strategies to create greater flexibility in federal funding streams? Do we consider how our various funding streams come together, or are able to be “braided,” locally to address a variety of youth prevention strategies?
- ***Adaptability and Strategic Influence.*** Do we use our learning community to keep lines of communications open, so federal decision-making can respond to local needs?

Conclusion

Sustainability is a challenge for all—and a particular challenge for ambitious, multidisciplinary collaborations like the Forum. This paper is intended to support ongoing conversations within the Forum network to strengthen local capacity to sustain these efforts. By thoughtfully considering the range of capacities needed for long-term success, federal leadership, sites and other public and private partners associated with Forum efforts can prioritize capability-building efforts and target resources to position their work for long-term success.