



Beyond Implementation: Planning for Sustainability

A Brief From Your RETAIN Technical Assistance Provider

Introduction

Sustainability is the continuation of core program components and activities beyond the initial funding period.^{1,2,3} It is more than just continued funding. Sustainability requires adapting to changing conditions by planning for capacity building, new partnerships, stakeholder outreach, and preparing for the future.⁴

This brief provides an overview of the importance of program adaptability and offers strategies supporting key aspects of program sustainability. The brief also provides examples of sustainability frameworks to help guide and measure sustainability efforts. Finally, it offers a collection of resources organized by topic ([Appendix A](#), p. 9).

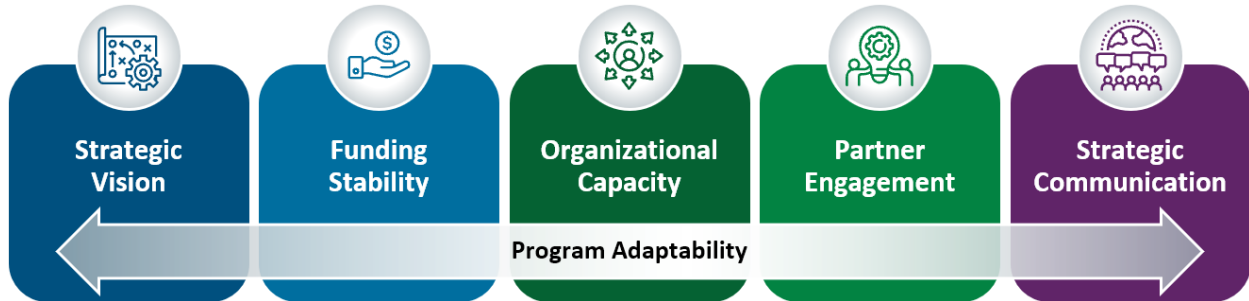
About RETAIN

The states of Kansas, Kentucky, Minnesota, Ohio, and Vermont are participating in the Retaining Employment and Talent After Injury/Illness Network (RETAIN). RETAIN is sponsored by the U.S. Department of Labor in collaboration with the Social Security Administration. RETAIN states are building connections and improving coordination among employers, health care providers, and other key parties to help workers with a new injury or illness stay in the workforce.

Program Adaptability

Adaptability is a crucial component of sustainability as it allows for the most effective parts of your program to continue during changing conditions.^{5,6} In terms of sustainability, adaptability is the degree to which an intervention can be changed to fit local conditions, changing circumstances, or evolving needs.^{7,8} These conditions may include changes in funding, the labor market, or other environmental factors. When thinking about adaptability, it is important to consider what influences your program's capacity. Doing so will help you determine what components of your program you want to sustain and what components can be sustained. Once you have determined what components can or need to be adapted, it is important to consider a sustainability framework to help guide and evaluate your efforts. Below are strategies and key questions to consider in five areas that may influence your RETAIN program's

capacity for sustainability: (1) strategic planning, (2) funding stability, (3) organizational capacity, (4) ongoing partner engagement, (5) and strategic communication.



Strategic Planning for Sustainability

A sustainability lens can be applied to regular, ongoing strategic planning efforts throughout the life cycle of a program. In strategic planning for sustainability, it is important to evaluate what is most important to continue and what may need to be modified or removed from your RETAIN program.

The process of strategic planning establishes a clear, shared vision and a common understanding of what sustainability success will look like across program partners. A shared vision and a collaborative action plan can strengthen partner alignment and the implementation of sustainability activities.⁹ A sustainability implementation plan can clearly outline and track strategies in action, identifying key mechanisms to sustain program elements including supporting resources, action steps, clear roles and responsibilities, and key milestones or timelines. Knowing your RETAIN program's strengths, opportunities, and areas of risk can help anticipate where strategy shifts may support sustainability efforts in response to change.

Strategies for advancing program sustainability through strategic planning:

- **Confirm program need and impact opportunity.** Reflect on program background and context and evaluate the original purpose of the program including the stated vision, challenges to be solved, and the intended beneficiaries. Look for areas where the need and opportunity are either expanded or narrowed through the sustained program.
- **Understand key partner goals and priorities.** Analyze the scope of partner missions and supporting strategies to identify program points of intersection and potential resource-sharing opportunities.
- **Establish a clear, shared vision for sustainability.** Program partners and champions need to have a collaborative understanding of what program sustainability success looks like along with the common messaging for those efforts. Identify common goals across key program partners to establish a shared vision for program success.

(See p. 9 of the Sustainability Readiness Toolkit on how to further develop and support strategic planning for sustainability.)



States in the Sustainability Spotlight



Minnesota. Minnesota is developing a program pilot with expanded eligibility criteria that meets a broader vision of providing RETAIN program services to more individuals. Expanding the vision for program impact has opened conversations for new agency partnerships and additional legislative funding opportunities.

Creating Funding Stability

Funding stability refers to consistent and predictable financial support for a specific project or program. In terms of sustainability, funding stability requires the identification of new sources of financial support once the initial funding for a program has ended.¹⁰ However, securing funding once grant funding ends may come with challenges such as managing budget changes and identifying new sources of financial support.^{11,12,13} These challenges are compounded when there is variability in the economic and political climate.

Strategies for creating funding stability to support sustainability:

- **Evaluate which aspects of the program to sustain.** Consider specific innovations, strategies, and approaches that are central to the vision of your RETAIN program. Note the results of these innovations, strategies, and approaches and evidence of success. Identify the resources needed to continue or expand them.
- **Assess the value of program resources.** Program resources may include existing marketing contracts or partnerships, software licenses such as customer relationship management data systems, organizational memberships (such as to Chambers of Commerce or professional associations), and staff equipment. Attention should be paid to responsibility for fulfilling ongoing program resource needs to carry out the goals of the program.
- **Diversify funding sources.** Inventory potential sources of funding for grant sustainability including federal, state, and private sources of funding. Leveraging multiple funding sources of different types can overcome specific funding source limitations or restrictions (e.g., restrictions on use for staff salaries).^{14,15,16,17}
- **Develop a funding plan.** Based on your shared vision for program sustainability, establish a funding plan with short- and long-term funding goals to maintain key program components. Identify opportunities to adapt to workforce trends, new funding opportunities, and unexpected budget shortfalls.¹⁸

(See p. 11 of the Sustainability Readiness Toolkit on how to further develop and support creating funding stability.)



States in the Sustainability Spotlight



Ohio. One of Ohio RETAIN’s approaches to funding stability is becoming involved in political advocacy and lobbying for RETAIN to become a state program with dedicated funding.



Kentucky. RETAIN Kentucky has been working with the Kentucky Office of Vocational Rehabilitation to evaluate how much they will be funding sustainability efforts in three areas: (1) continuation of enrollment; (2) strengthening their inclusive Workforce Summit; and (3) launching their undergraduate Return to Work Certificate.

Maintaining Organizational Capacity

Organizational capacity involves having the support and resources needed to effectively sustain a program’s functioning at the agreed-upon level to maintain the desired benefits.

Organizational capacity can broadly include internal and external champions, funding, staffing, resources, and ongoing support:¹⁹ and engagement from key partners and communities.

Programs that are designed to build capacity must be able to sustain that capacity through shifts in funding and implementation models.²⁰ Strong organizational capacity supports the likelihood of long-term program success as programs seek to scale and sustain their impact.²¹

As goals and strategies are clarified through the strategic vision for program sustainability, organizational capacity may be affected by structural changes after funding ends.

Strategies for maintaining organizational capacity to support sustainability:

- **Anticipate the risks and opportunities that may result from change.** Consider potential change factors that may affect the sustainability of your RETAIN program. These include both risks and opportunities to access new resources or expand the scope of your program’s impact. Sustainability risks may include risks in partner or champion support of the program goals or access to referral sources for meeting enrollment performance outcomes. Changes may also create additional opportunities for a program, such as accessing a new geographic area or demographic population to be served.
- **Conduct a crosswalk between each program activity by functional area.** Stabilize program operations by assessing each program activity according to functional program area and goals. Evaluate staff and partner responsibilities for identifying potential duplication of efforts or gaps that may be created by sustainability transitions.
- **Evaluate organizational capacity needs based on expected changes.** Reflect on the program’s capacity strengths and limitations and the anticipated changes. Identify elements of the program structure to continue, modify, or streamline based on new needs.

- **Align key roles and responsibilities.** Make an inventory of key staff roles, skillsets, assigned duties or job functions, and regular task responsibilities, including key, recurring deliverables. Crosswalk key internal staff operational roles across the program team to identify transition needs or skill gaps. Update staffing plans accordingly.

(See p. 14 of the Sustainability Readiness Toolkit on how to further develop and support maintaining organizational capacity for sustainability.)



States in the Sustainability Spotlight



Kansas. RETAIN Kansas has been working with the medical system and workforce partners across the state to identify elements of the program that could be sensibly sustained without (additional) funding and parts of the program that are “nice to have” but either (1) cannot be sustained or (2) could be sustained in a different way following any needed refinements.

Ongoing Partner Engagement

Involving and engaging key partners consistently and continuously supports the anticipation of and proactive planning around potential sustainability issues.^{22, p.6} Through a network of partners, a program can access additional resources including expertise, services, and champions of a shared goal.²³ Analyzing partnerships and program-level work can help a team identify partners with an interest in sustaining program benefits and a willingness to support planning efforts. Partner relationships and engagement may shift as programs transition into different areas of focus or degrees of implementation. Sustainability planning is an opportunity to reassess and affirm the program’s value to current and potential partners. While strong partner engagement in the sustainability planning process can support the successful completion of objectives and goals as outlined in sustainability plans, a lack of partner engagement or support in planning can result in additional barriers to implementing key sustainability strategies.²⁴

Strategies for engaging partners to advance program sustainability:

- **Match potential partners to program needs.** Use your RETAIN program’s vision and goals to identify specific needs, which may include partner areas of expertise, access to networks or communities, or specific resources. Use the list of needs to identify potential partners that may be able to fill those needs.
- **Analyze your program’s projected benefits and challenges for partners.** Consider strategies to mitigate challenges, enhance ongoing engagement efforts, and expand mutual benefits for both partners and your program.

- **Clarify partner roles and responsibilities.** Consider various types of partners based on the levels of engagement and program support. Use the goals of your program to outline key activities and to establish a lead, accountable, consulted, and informed partner roles and responsibilities, otherwise known as the RACI Matrix. Document your processes for sharing progress updates across partners.

(See p. 17 of the Sustainability Readiness Toolkit on how to further develop and support ongoing partnerships for sustainability.)



States in the Sustainability Spotlight



Vermont. VT RETAIN is planning a summit to engage and obtain buy-in from local governments and partners. They are also connecting with state officials to build awareness of RETAIN and to identify what components of the program can be implemented and where they can be implemented within the state.

Leveraging Strategic Communication to Support Sustainability

Strategic sustainability communication means effectively communicating with stakeholders and the public about the program to help raise awareness and establish buy-in.²⁵ External communication helps the program build visibility while internal communication can help maintain staff support and confidence.²⁶ Regular communication with relevant audiences can help determine what components of the program are most important to sustain.²⁷ In other words, the more the program and its mission are communicated to others, the more likely it is to find support after initial funding ends. Programs that have strong communication with stakeholders are more likely to be sustained.²⁸

Strategies for leveraging strategic communications to support sustainability:

- **Develop a plan for external communications.** Having a communication plan in place that conveys the goals of your program, program successes, and the importance of your program to a wide variety of audiences and partners can build capacity for communication about sustainability.²⁹
- **Develop a plan for internal communications.** Having a plan that indicates who needs to know what among program staff can help you develop strong internal communication processes.³⁰
- **Support strong communication between internal staff and partners.** Document information that will be shared internally with staff and partners regularly. Identify clear messages and any actions needed and develop clear processes for staff ownership of deliverables, frequency, and methods for sharing information.
- **Tailor outreach strategies and messaging to target audiences.** Craft communication strategies with clear messages and goals for tracking effectiveness.³¹

- **Showcase program success in your sustainability messaging.** Use specific examples of your program's success, such as participant or employer profiles, in your sustainability impact campaigns. Highlight key program benefits for target audiences and share data that illustrate the positive impacts and outcomes of the program.^{32,33}

(See p. 19 of the Sustainability Readiness Toolkit on how to further develop and support strategic communication for sustainability.)



States in the Sustainability Spotlight



Ohio. RETAIN Ohio has developed separate communication plans tailored toward different local area business teams across the state. This helps to address specific needs and preferences of employers in different regions and obtain buy-in for RETAIN.

Sustainability Frameworks

Many frameworks exist to support, guide, and measure sustainability efforts. Before considering a framework, however, it is important to first determine what components of the program need to be sustained. Knowing what components need and can be sustained first will help you decide what framework is best for your goals. Below are descriptions and links for several of these frameworks.

Program Sustainability Assessment Tool (PSAT)

The PSAT assesses a program's readiness for sustainability across eight domains: (1) political support, (2) funding stability, (3) partnerships, (4) organizational capacity, (5) program evaluation, (6) program adaptation, (7) communications, and (8) strategic planning.³⁴ The PSAT looks at the factors that affect a program the most to help build capacity for sustainability.³⁵

Resource: <https://sustaintool.org/psat/>

The Dynamic Sustainability Framework

This framework involves continued learning, problem-solving, and ongoing adaptation of interventions with a focus on fit between interventions and multi-level contexts such as the clinical or community setting, county, or state.³⁶ This framework also accounts for how the use of the intervention may change over time due to policies, regulations, or market forces.³⁷

Resource: [The dynamic sustainability framework: Addressing the paradox of sustainment amid ongoing change](#)³⁸

Normalization Process Theory

This framework addresses the interrelationship between the implementation and sustainability of a new intervention.³⁹ This framework can be used to understand how to embed processes into interventions for the purpose of sustainability.⁴⁰

Resource: <https://health-policy-systems.biomedcentral.com/articles/10.1186/s12961-018-0405-y>

The Shediac-Rizkallah and Bone Framework

This framework uses three categories for monitoring sustainability: (1) the preservation and maintenance of benefits achieved through the initial program; (2) the level of integration of the program within an organization; and (3) the measurement of the program's impact on improving community capacity for health.⁴¹

Resource: [Planning for the Sustainability of Community-Based Health Programs: Conceptual Frameworks and Future Directions for Research, Practice and Policy; JSTOR.](#)⁴²

Conclusion

As with initial program design and development, the process of planning for sustainability is iterative. Continuous program improvement supports a stronger and more effective program by evolving through change. Although sustainability efforts are specific to the context of a program or state, considerations across key domains can support strong program sustainability planning and implementation through funding and scope transitions. Planning for sustainability can expand a program's impact through enhanced capacity, expanded partnerships, and diversified funding. An adaptable approach to sustainability will support the effective implementation of sustainability strategies through the natural transitions of a program's life cycle. A sustainability framework can offer a model for a comprehensive approach to maintaining the impact of program innovations.

Appendix A. Sustainability Resource Crosswalk

The below table presents the available research, presentations, and tools on sustainability by topic area. This table can be used to quickly find resources on relevant sustainability topics.

| Research and articles | Adaptability | Stakeholder involvement | Organizational capacity | Strategic communication | Strategic planning | Funding stability | Sustainability framework |
|---|--------------|-------------------------|-------------------------|-------------------------|--------------------|-------------------|--------------------------|
| A Conceptual Model for Building Program Sustainability in Public Health Settings: Learning From the Implementation of the Program Sustainability Action Planning Model and Training Curricula | | ✓ | ✓ | | ✓ | | ✓ |
| The Dynamic Sustainability Framework: Addressing the Paradox of Sustainment Amid Ongoing Change | ✓ | ✓ | | | ✓ | | ✓ |
| Evidence-Based Intervention Sustainability Strategies: A Systematic Review | ✓ | ✓ | | | | ✓ | ✓ |
| Linking Sustainability Research to Intervention Types | | ✓ | ✓ | | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ |
| Planning for the Sustainability of Community-Based Health Programs: Conceptual Frameworks and Future Directions for Research, Practice and Policy | | | ✓ | ✓ | | | ✓ |
| State Apprenticeship Expansion Sustainability Strategies | | ✓ | | | ✓ | ✓ | |

| Research and articles | Adaptability | Stakeholder involvement | Organizational capacity | Strategic communication | Strategic planning | Funding stability | Sustainability framework |
|--|--------------|-------------------------|-------------------------|-------------------------|--------------------|-------------------|--------------------------|
| Sustainable by Design: A Systematic Review of Factors for Health Promotion Program Sustainability | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ |
| The Sustainability of Evidence-Based Interventions and Practices in Public Health and Health Care | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ |
| The Sustainability of New Programs and Innovations: A Review of the Empirical Literature and Recommendations for Future Research | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | | | ✓ | ✓ |
| Is Sustainability Possible? A Review and Commentary on Empirical Studies of Program Sustainability | | ✓ | ✓ | | | ✓ | ✓ |
| Sustainability of Public Health Interventions: Where Are the Gaps? | | | ✓ | | | ✓ | ✓ |
| Sustainability: Adaptation and Future Directions for Sustainability Research | ✓ | | | | | | ✓ |
| Beyond the Dollars: Introducing New Tools for Sustainability in TechHire Programs | | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | | |
| Sustainability: Conceptual Frameworks and Planning for Sustainability | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ |
| Program Sustainability Assessment Tool | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ |

| Research and articles | Adaptability | Stakeholder involvement | Organizational capacity | Strategic communication | Strategic planning | Funding stability | Sustainability framework |
|--|--------------|-------------------------|-------------------------|-------------------------|--------------------|-------------------|--------------------------|
| <u>The Role of Partnerships in Sustainability Planning and Implementation for America’s Promise Grants</u> | | ✓ | | ✓ | ✓ | | |
| <u>State Apprenticeship Expansion (SAE) Sustainability Strategies</u> | | ✓ | | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | |
| <u>Sustainability: Part I</u> | | | ✓ | | ✓ | | ✓ |
| <u>Sustainability: Part II and De-implementation</u> | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | | | | ✓ |

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