

Network Sustainability Assessment and Five Characteristics of a Sustained Network

Final Report of a Two-Year Study

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Introduction

This final report is written to share the results of the Network Sustainability Assessment Study and consider ways to use the results to improve network organizations and, therefore, the health and wellness of rural communities.

The Rural Health Network Sustainability Assessment Study was a two-year study which began in 2015 and was developed collaboratively by Rural Health Innovations (RHI), the National Cooperative of Health Networks (NCHN), and Evalytics, LLC. It was funded by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS), Health Resources and Services Administration (HRSA), Federal Office of Rural Health Policy (FORHP). The primary purpose of this study was to develop a valid and reliable instrument to assess sustainability of rural health networks. The secondary purpose was to identify conceptual characteristics; indicators that describe a sustained network, to better understand and support rural health network sustainability. The overall goal of the study was to develop a systematic method to increase the impact of rural health networks (RHI, September 2016, September 2017).

Why does it matter if rural health networks are thriving and sustained over time? The answer is that rural health networks are a critical solution to collaborating across non-integrated health care facilities and community agencies to achieve population health initiatives. These initiatives require networks to serve as leaders, facilitate continuous planning, convene and engage stakeholders, provide meaningful education, connect resources within communities, and act on data for making decisions. Succeeding in these important roles requires thriving network organizations that are sustained over time (RHI, October 2017).

Sustainability Definition and Study Approach

The significance and focus of this two-year study is to consider what is meant by “sustainability”. The definition used for the Network Sustainability Assessment Study is the ability to achieve desired outcomes and maintain the ability to continue activities over time (Scheirer, 2005). The Baldrige Performance Excellence and the Business Model Generation Canvas Frameworks were used as effective systems-thinking approaches to provide structure and defined language to the assessment. With those frameworks in mind, concepts regarding strategy, marketing, operations and finances were integrated into the Network Sustainability Assessment.

Characteristics of Sustainability

Statistical analysis of nearly 100 rural health networks of diverse size, structure, and purpose confirmed the validity and reliability of the Network Sustainability Assessment as a tool and identified five characteristics common to sustained networks (RHI, September 2017).

The five characteristics identify conceptual ideas based on the context of the questions along with RHI Network TA team and NCHN leaderships' experience with, and knowledge of, rural health networks. The questions used in the first study were created through a collaborative discussion involving the RHI Network TA team and a NCHN workgroup of rural health network leaders.

- The RHI Network TA Team started with assessment questions based on the seven Baldrige Performance Excellence categories and technical assistance experience with rural health networks.
- The NCHN workgroup developed an assortment of questions while seeking to answer the question, "What are characteristics of a sustained rural health network?"

These questions were then studied using responses from 100 active and viable rural health networks, and two iterations of statistical analysis yielded the final list of assessment questions. The questions themselves were used to name the groupings of questions; creating reference titles. And then a general description was developed for each of the five sustainability characteristics. The order for presenting the sustainability characteristics roughly matches that of the Baldrige Performance Excellence Framework.

Sustainability Characteristics

- **Collaborative Leadership:** Promoting trust, transparency with information, creating opportunities for problem solving, and keeping abreast of the larger environment with the organizations' future in mind. It also includes a focus on members, partners and stakeholders relative to the network's drive to meet its mission and attain its vision.
- **Member-Driven Decisions:** Incorporating network members' needs into decisions for network products and services and articulating network value as seen specifically through marketing efforts.
- **Effective Communication:** Intentional communication with members, partners, and stakeholders. Communication is designed as a formal plan that is monitored and valued as part of a strategic planning cycle.
- **On-going Evaluation and Measurement:** Intentional evaluation of organizational efforts toward both goals and activities. Evaluation is designed as a formal plan that is monitored and valued as part of a strategic planning cycle. There is a specific focus on involving organizational leadership and open communication of results.
- **Sound Financial Infrastructure:** A focus on financial processes and procedures. There is an intention to purposefully address financial stability through savings and diverse revenue generation.

For rural health network leaders, understanding these five characteristics and using the validated Network Sustainability Assessment creates an opportunity to better understand and support the development of sustained rural health networks. The

assessment is a tool to help network leaders identify specific areas of focus or initiatives to pursue that will increase their likelihood of becoming and remaining sustainable networks.

Network Sustainability Assessment

Five Characteristics of Network Sustainability

The following includes the validated assessment questions within the five characteristics of a sustained network (RHI, September 2017).

Collaborative Leadership

- Network leader is aware of regional and national health care trends that could impact network members.
- Network leadership creates opportunities for members to share ideas and problem solve together.
- Network leadership creates opportunity for innovation.
- Network leader promotes transparency by disclosing information about network activities to their members.
- Network forms strategic partnerships or relationships that are aligned with its mission and vision.
- Network leader meets face to face with members to promote trust.

Member-Driven Decisions

- Network's marketing plan is consistent with its mission and vision.
- Network's marketing plan was developed from an assessment of member needs for network services.
- Network continuously reviews its marketing plan to monitor progress toward marketing goals.
- Network has a written marketing plan that incorporates member needs into product and service development.

Effective Communication

- Network's communication plan is consistent with its goals and objectives.
- Network's communication plan informs others about its mission, activities and key metrics.
- Network continuously monitors its communication plan to assess progress towards communication goals.
- Network's Board of Directors reviews the communication plan annually.

On-going Evaluation and Measurement

- Network's evaluation plan is consistent with network goals and objectives.
- Network's evaluation plan includes process measures to determine progress towards projects and activities.
- Network shares its evaluation and measurement results with members and stakeholders on a regular basis.
- Network leaders and Board of Directors are involved in the process and development of evaluation measures.
- Network has an evaluation plan to monitor progress toward goals, objectives and outcomes.
- Network's Board of Directors reviews the evaluation plan and results quarterly.

Sound Financial Infrastructure

- Network has financial systems and practices in place.
- Network leadership reviews financial statements on a regular basis.
- Network maintains adequate cash resources for its operations.
- Network has on staff or on contract a proven financial expert.
- Network has external audits each year or as required by law.

Using the Assessment to Identify Opportunities for Sustainability

The five characteristics of a sustained network represent a systems approach that enables rural health networks to thrive, not just survive. To gain insights on opportunities for sustainability, network leaders can complete the Network Sustainability Assessment annually and, using RHI's *Network Sustainability Action Planning Guide*, prioritize opportunities and develop specific sustainability action plans (RHI, December 2016).

Investing in network improvement, based on the results of the Network Sustainability Assessment, will support the network as a community asset that will continue to provide benefit to its partners into the future.

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