

## Sustainability

*A mutual challenge requiring new strategies*

*- by Mary Vallier-Kaplan*



Sustainability challenges the foundation and the grantee alike. This challenge arises from sustainability's nebulous definition. Additionally, there are unclear expectations between both parties as well as the ill-defined best practices in our field. The good news: we each no longer need to suffer in silent angst. Instead, we can discuss sustainability at the start of a project, replacing the dreaded, negative difference of opinion about "why now?" when the grant ends. There is currently an increase in research, analysis, and dialogue between funders and grantees nationally, statewide and at the individual grantee level. Here at the Endowment for Health, we're attempting with our grantees to unravel this mystery for both parties. This partnership will eventually result in a better understanding of the critically important but elusive task of sustainability. It will ensure that the hard-won progress of our mutual work continues over time – the true definition of sustainability.

Foundations worry about ensuring that their influence on an issue continues, whether they were the catalyst or just one of many investors. We wonder if we can afford to walk away, but we also wonder whether we can afford to or should stay. For grantees, the worry is where the funding will come from next. How do we successfully bring new funders into an ongoing project?

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A critical question at all levels of the discussion is what we are ultimately trying to sustain. Are we trying to sustain a program? Is it about the capacity of organizations and communities? Is it more to do with lessons learned? Relationships? All of the above or nothing at all? To date, the Endowment has tried to implement a concept of "multiple levels" of sustainability, believing that together, both the program and the capacity of nonprofits impact our shared mission to improve the health of the people of New Hampshire. Grantees typically want to sustain the program side of the equation. The Endowment typically wants to sustain long-term health-improvement outcomes and systemic change of the health care infrastructure. Most of all we want to learn together how to best do this work in New Hampshire and then incorporate it into our future work. Over the course of six years, the Endowment has narrowed its desired outcomes or theory of change to primarily three: knowledge, leadership and working together. Clarifying these foundation-level expectations continues to be a challenge. Our evaluation structure strives to allow measurement of the multiple levels of impact.

The Endowment recently completed its first sustainability study of its work to date (see below) and will continue this analysis on an ongoing basis. It helps us to better understand desired outcomes as well as the successful sustainability of the projects in which we invest. From this, we can modify our strategies accordingly to further achieve such outcomes for future grants. We also study the best practices of sustainability from other foundations, several of which are referenced below. We include the perspective of both the foundation and the grantees. The Endowment designed many of its program systems using demonstrated best practices of sustainability. These include multi-year grant making, investment in the capacity of nonprofits, availability of planning and technical assistance resources, and a strong evaluation system. We include sustainability outcomes as well as commitment of staff time to assist in leveraging funds and relationships on behalf of grantees. We are also willing to invest in policy change to better access public funding. Along the way, we've learned not to push organizations past their missions (commonly known as mission creep). Organizations are sometimes cursed when a grant is so large that it risks becoming the sole source of funding. At the end of the day, the proverbial advice holds true: It is never too soon to start sustainability planning.

Program Year 2009 will include the implementation of some new Endowment strategies to enhance sustainability. Most likely we and other foundations will invest for even longer periods of time in a single theme and even a single project. At the same time, tapering grant amounts and requiring matching grants may more often be used as a strategy to encourage sustainability planning. Each Endowment proposal currently requires an up-front discussion of sustainability and all Endowment grants require a sustainability outcome in the Workplan. The rigor of implementing both of these requirements may increase. At the same time we will more carefully articulate our expectations and offer more assistance (both EH and technical assistance) to help sustain a project. Community involvement in projects will be expected earlier.

Given the importance of sustained leadership, investment on issues of retention and succession planning will increase. Compatibility of missions will be more closely reviewed during the proposal review. We will more strategically connect evaluation outcomes as a tool to leverage further investment by others in a successful project. It is most likely the Endowment will pilot a New Hampshire funders collaborative relative to a particular theme, issue or health in general. We also will experiment with the development of a "learning community" for our new Children's Mental Health theme. Learning communities are proven strategies to achieve greater sustainability of an initiative. We will continue to collaborate with more national health funders on behalf of New Hampshire's nonprofits similar to our strong relationship with the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation. Finally, we will keep working proactively with the nonprofit community and New Hampshire residents to advocate for improved national, state, regional and local health-related public policy -- especially adequate public funding of health improvement of New Hampshire's residents.

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