

## Accountable Care Sustainability Planning: Four things to do *before* the money runs out



If you are managing an accountable care-like organization, chances are that you have been the recipient of some type of delivery system reform funding or other infrastructure building bolus of cash. Chances are also that you've built programs responsibly, but broadly, which begs the question: what is your plan once the money runs out?

### 1. Figure out what must be kept

The first question to ask is: which of these programs are worth sustaining? Given that ACOs are designed to promote improved care and health and reduced costs, this may seem like a strange question. However, now is the time to conduct an honest ROI: What outcomes are you seeing in your population in terms of total cost of care? Can you sustain your programs focused on long-term returns (e.g., smoking cessation).

Do This

➔ **Go beyond standard quality measure reporting and leverage institutional benchmarks to conduct an honest evaluation.**

### 2. Evaluate what you have (and how much it actually costs)

Your sustainability plan will be unique to your program. What do you want your program to look like the first year after current funding runs out? 5 years after that? 10 years after that? How much money will it take to support your vision of the program?

Understand your administrative, financial and clinical costs. Take this opportunity to thoroughly know the value proposition of your services and critically reassess your staffing model. If you don't already know your costs and expected post-grant revenue, prioritize completing a thorough analysis. Understand your vulnerable points, such as programs with a high proportion of non-billable services.

Do This

➔ **If you have not developed a single comprehensive scorecard for the ACO, now is the time.**

### 3. Identify essential components

The first step to securing funding for a program is to identify the leanest version of the current model you're attempting to sustain. In design this is called an MVP: minimum viable product. What is the leanest version of the current model that will still maintain fidelity to the original design and sustain impact on patient outcomes and costs?

Do This

➔ **Get to this model by asking two key questions:**

- 1. Will we sustain the whole program or component parts?** For partial programs, ensure service will not be compromised from losing any essential components.
- 2. Are there any opportunities for a more sustainable staffing model?** Creatively reassess your staffing model. Is everyone operating at top-of-license? Could graduate interns be used for some component part? Can you incorporate more billable staff (e.g., supplement social workers with licensed clinical social workers)?

### 4. Seek sustainable funding

Make sure you are setting yourself up early on to be ready to court potential partners. Share results of your success early on, frequently, and widely. Positive impact to the business and to the population should be celebrated and broadcasted through presentations at conferences, webinars, and other online forums. This commitment to publishing your success will pay dividends during conversations with potential partners and create exposure to partners that might not already be on your radar.

Do This

➔ **Designate an individual or small team to monitor potential funding opportunities, and remember to consider "braided" funding.** It is likely that no one funding source will be sufficient for sustaining services for multiple programs. To investigate funding sources, use your priorities for the program as a guide. Explore various public and private financial sources, look for in-kind resourcing opportunities, research philanthropic sources and private pay.

What should you **avoid if at all possible**? Untapped short-term funding sources (i.e., another grant). If you must, first weigh the administrative cost and then ensure the new grant does not serve as a crutch, weakening sustainability planning.

### Conclusion

Be proactive in approaching your funding source for sustainability planning guidance, a service that might already be available to you. Critically, identify resources to help guide you through the actual steps of sustainability plan development, which will be unique to your organization. As with anything, starting early gives you the advantage, but it is never too late to develop a contingency plan.