Sustainability Fundamentals: An Introduction

Sustainability is a frequently used term that people intuitively understand yet have difficulty defining. For the purpose of this resource we will define sustainability as the process of creating an organizational strategy and infrastructure to ensure viable collaborative responses to the health implications of sexual violence. Understanding what goes into that process of creating strategy and infrastructure can be challenging, even to seasoned program managers and other veteran professionals in the anti-sexual violence field.

To help you get started on (or stay on) your path to sustainability, here are some concepts to consider:

Invest in People First, Things Later

Technology is valuable and can complement a quality program, but if the infrastructure is not sound or if there are problems maintaining competent staff and committed leadership, all of the high-tech, expensive equipment in the world cannot make up for these deficits.

To build a strong infrastructure of committed staff, Sexual Assault Nurse Examiner (SANE) programs might consider reprioritizing funds to provide on-call pay, stipends for taking the most shifts in a month, reimbursement to maintain clinical skills, and opportunities for professional enrichment, such as conference registrations or continuing education offerings. A people-first approach may mean reexamining priorities: is a higher priced piece of equipment, such as a colposcope, at the top of the list? Instead, could you consider a less expensive, high quality digital camera and target more fundraising efforts to better compensate staff?   As managers, the choices we make, whether we model the traits we hope to see in our staff, and where we place our priorities impact our capacity to build and maintain a strong team.

<< **Look for this icon** and you'll find more about this and other management ideas in the section on *Managing people*.

Know your Budget and Sources of Funding

Through the **SANE Sustainability Project**, we learned that many SANE program managers have little understanding of their programs' budgets. Of course, all programs work within a budget that includes revenue and expenses. Despite this, some reported they had no operating budget because they did not have financial resources independent of the emergency departments or community organizations where they were housed. Others believed they had no budget, even as independent programs, because they didn't have operating expenses beyond the money used to pay nurses for individual cases.

It's critically important that program managers be privy to the existing budget. If you're not participating in the budget process at your organization, it's difficult to advocate for additional resources for your program. Keep in mind that in-kind contributions, volunteer hours and reimbursement dollars received for exams are all part of the program budget. Consider how you might build or enhance your own financial literacy so that you can have a seat at the table when funding discussions occur.

<< Look for this icon and you'll find the basics for budgeting, billing and other financial issues in the section on *Funding*.

Reframe Traditional Notions about Education

One of the most frequently mentioned issues when discussing the challenges of sustaining SANE programs is obtaining education for nurses, particularly as it relates to completing clinical requirements for new SANEs or maintaining competency for existing SANEs. Today, SANEs have more training options in a broader number of formats than ever before. Online education, in the form of webinars and webcasts can be excellent ways to access current information. Hospital and university simulation labs can provide clinicians with the opportunity to learn and fine-tune clinical skills, particularly useful for low-volume SANE programs. We should also consider less formal methods of education, such as journal clubs (which can easily be implemented as a part of staff meetings) and Twitter chats that expose clinicians to a wide range of ideas, create an opportunity for analysis of emerging research, and allow for resource sharing.

<< Look for this icon and you'll find more ideas for maintaining currency and competency in your team under *Staffing and Leadership*.

Mentor Future Leaders

Every program manager should consider who is available to assume leadership during staffing transitions. Succession planning is a critical aspect of program success, yet little attention has been paid to how forensic nursing management can support and encourage the next generation of leaders. Having a plan in place to develop leadership within a SANE program can help maintain a continuation of services with the departure of a coordinator, even if retirement isn't on the immediate horizon. Read more about succession planning under *Staffing and Leadership*.

Since program coordinators are often nurses with great passion for the work, it is crucial to balance their perspective with the business knowledge and leadership skills needed for success. Nursing school curricula do not educate clinicians on how to run a nursing service, such as a SANE program. By providing ongoing, on-the-job business training for SANEs, programs can mitigate this knowledge deficit and begin to build an ensemble of staff ready to assume fiscal responsibilities.

<< Look for this icon to read more about cultivating leadership in the *Staffing and Leadership* section.

Create Strategic Alliances to Alleviate Resource Shortfalls

One of the defining attributes of SANE practice is collaboration with law enforcement, advocacy agencies, prosecutors, and other community stakeholders. Collaboration is necessary for creating and maintaining a victim-centered approach; it's also necessary for sustainable programming. SANE programs cannot survive in a vacuum. We need to have healthy relationships with our community partners for everything from programmatic feedback to funding. Moreover, we also need to seek out collaboration with other SANE programs. While institutional competition may limit the extent to which formal alliances can be formed between SANE programs, there are multiple innovative opportunities for forging new working relationships that can enhance SANEs' infrastructures.

<< Look for this icon to read more about inter- and intra-disciplinary collaboration in the *Collaboration* section.

Identify What Success Looks Like and How It Can Be Achieved

SANE programs cannot define their success solely in criminal justice terms. Not only is it an inaccurate reflection of how well patient care is provided, it also places an emphasis on a system that not all patients will access. Identifying success in healthcare terms is necessary, examining both patient and programming outcomes. Doing this allows us to determine how well we are providing our services, and what our impact is on the larger community. Creating processes to continually strive for service improvement is part of creating sustainable programming.

<< Look for this icon to find more about quality improvement, program assessment and program evaluation under *Assessment and Evaluation*.

Are you interested in research? Seminal literature on the topic of SANE sustainability can be found on the NSVRC website **http://www.nsvrc.org/projects/SANE/seminal-literature**.

This app is geared toward SANE program managers with all levels of experience. You are encouraged to explore the wide range of information, tools and resources contained within each icon. In addition to the ones mentioned above, you will also find information that will assist in expanded practice situations, whether that means pediatric sexual assault medical-forensic care, or moving beyond the sexual assault patient population to include intimate partner violence, elder abuse and other types of interpersonal violence. And for those of you building new programs, or resurrecting programs that had been dormant for a time, please be sure to explore the information about building a sustainable program from the ground up.

About the author

Dr. Jenifer Markowitz is a forensic nursing consultant, writer, curriculum developer, and educator. She received her clinical doctorate in nursing from the University of Colorado Health Sciences Center, and is board certified as a Women's Health Nurse Practitioner and Sexual Assault Nurse Examiner – Adolescent/Adult. She spends a great deal of time on airplanes, on military instillations, online, and in court (in no particular order). You can find her at her website, Forensic Healthcare Online (**www.forensichealth.com**) or on Twitter: **@ForensicHealth**.

About this publication

This publication is part of the *SANE Sustainability Education Project*. For more information about this project, visit **http://www.nsvrc.org/projects/sane-sustainability**