

# STEP 4: IMPLEMENTATION

## OVERVIEW

In this step, a community's prevention plan is put into action by delivering evidence-based programs and practices as intended. To accomplish this task, planners will need to balance fidelity and adaptation, and establish critical implementation supports. Each of these tasks is addressed in detail below.



## BALANCE FIDELITY AND ADAPTATION

In preparing to implement selected programs and practices, it is important to consider *fidelity* and *adaptation*.

- ♦ **Fidelity:** The degree to which a program or practice is implemented as intended.
- ♦ **Adaptation:** Describes how much, and in which ways, a program or practice is changed to meet local circumstances.

Evidence-based programs and practices are defined as such because they consistently achieve positive outcomes. The greater the fidelity to the original program design, the more likely the program will be to reproduce positive results. While customizing a program to better reflect the attitudes, beliefs, experiences, and values of a focus population can increase its cultural relevance, it is important to keep in mind that such adaptations may compromise program effectiveness.

Remaining faithful to the original design of an evidence-based program or practice, while addressing the unique needs and characteristics of the target audience, requires balancing fidelity and adaptation. When we change a program, we risk compromising outcomes. However, implementing a program that requires some adaptation may be more efficient and cost-effective than designing a program from scratch.

Consider these guidelines when balancing fidelity and adaptation:

- ♦ **Retain core components.** Evidence-based programs are more likely to be effective when their core components are maintained. Core components are those parts of a program or practice that are responsible for producing positive outcomes, and thus most essential and indispensable. Core components are like the key ingredients in a cookie recipe. We might be able to take out the chocolate chips, but if we take out the flour—a core component—the recipe won't work. However, understanding and adhering to the principles underlying each core component may allow for flexibility (see *Adapt with care* on next page).

- ♦ **Build capacity before changing the program.** Rather than change a program to fit local conditions, consider ways to develop resources or to build local readiness so that it can be delivered as it was originally designed.
- ♦ **Add rather than subtract.** Doing so decreases the likelihood of important program elements (i.e., those that are critical to program effectiveness) getting lost.
- ♦ **Adapt with care.** Even when programs and practices are selected with great care, there may be ways to improve their appropriateness for a unique focus population. Cultural adaptation, for example, refers to modifications that are tailored to the beliefs and practices of a particular group and enhance the cultural relevance of an intervention. To make a program or practice more culturally appropriate, consider the language, values, attitudes, beliefs, and experiences of focus population members.
- ♦ **If adapting, get help.** Knowledge experts, such as program developers, can provide information on how a program has been adapted in the past, how well these adaptations have worked, and what core components should be retained to maintain effectiveness. Members of the focus population can also suggest ways to enhance program materials or messaging to better reflect their concerns and experiences.

Keep in mind that adaptations can be **planned** in order to improve a program (e.g., the case with cultural adaptation) or **unplanned**. It's important to be aware of the potential for unplanned changes that may occur during implementation (e.g., missed sessions when schools close unexpectedly due to bad weather) and to address any changes that might compromise program effectiveness (e.g., schedule makeup sessions so students don't miss out on core program content).

## ESTABLISH IMPLEMENTATION SUPPORTS

Many factors combine to influence implementation and support the success of prevention efforts. These include the following:

- ♦ **Favorable prevention history.** An individual (or organization) who has had positive experiences implementing prevention programs or practices in the past is likely to be more willing and able to support the implementation of a new intervention. If an individual (or organization) has had a negative experience implementing a program or practice—or doesn't fully understand its potential—make sure to address their concerns early in the implementation process.
- ♦ **Leadership and administrative support.** Prevention programs and practices assume many forms and are implemented in many different settings. However, in order to be effective, all of them require leadership and support from key stakeholders.
- ♦ **Provider selection.** When selecting the best candidate to deliver a prevention program, consider professional qualifications and experiences, practical skills, as well as fit with the focus population. Ask, "Who is prepared to implement the program effectively? With whom will program participants feel comfortable?" Certain provider characteristics that extend beyond academic qualifications and experience factors are difficult to teach in training sessions, so must become part of the selection criteria.

- ♦ **Provider training and support.** Pre- and in-service trainings can help providers who are responsible for implementing a program to understand how and why it works, practice new skills, and receive constructive feedback. Since most skills are learned on the job, it is also very helpful to connect these providers with a coach who can provide ongoing support. The implementation of evidence-based programs and practices requires behavior change at the provider, supervisory, and administrative support levels. Training and coaching are the principal ways in which behavior change is brought about for selected staff in the beginning stages and throughout the process of implementing evidence-based programs and practices.
- ♦ **A clear action plan.** When developed in collaboration with all key partners, these plans can help to ensure that everyone involved in implementation is on the same page and no key tasks fall through the cracks. A clear action plan includes all implementation tasks, deadlines, and person(s) responsible.
- ♦ **Implementation monitoring.** By closely monitoring and evaluating the delivery of a program or practice, planners can make sure that it is being implemented as intended and can thereby improve it as needed. By assessing program outcomes, planners can determine whether a program or practice is working as intended and is worthy of sustaining over time. Assessments of provider performance and measures of fidelity also provide useful feedback to managers and implementers regarding the progress of implementation efforts and the usefulness of training and coaching. (See *Step 5: Evaluation* to learn more about this topic.)

These implementation supports are interactive and can compensate for one another, so that a weakness in one can be overcome by strengths in others. Organizations are dynamic and there is an ebb and flow to the relative contribution of each support to the overall outcomes. Implementation monitoring can help to reveal where supports may need to be adjusted to improve effectiveness or efficiency.