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# Child Safety Forward Learning Brief: Sustainability

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# Evaluation+

There are multiple ways of defining sustainability. People often think about sustainability in terms of continuing programs or services after they are piloted and tested or in terms of transitioning of programs or services from pilot into a host organization. However, there is a third phase of sustainability, which focuses on building up to and sustaining lasting benefits of changes.<sup>1</sup>

Sustainability is important because we know that change takes time. If our attempts at change are regularly interrupted by the flow of resources or even willpower, we end up getting stuck or even worse losing progress and regressing. While initiatives regularly think about program design and implementation, and even early systems change and scaling, it's hard to think beyond the immediate project. In part, this is because evidence of sustainability isn't necessarily visible during a project, but also because signals of sustainability are dynamic and hard to capture in a static and measurable way. Since we operate in a funding structure that has a start and an end and incentivizes meeting milestones as evidence of progress, planning for sustainability is often on the back burner.

This brief learning memo examines how Child Safety Forward was set up to encourage demonstration sites to apply a more comprehensive definition of sustainability during implementation, and it presents our recommendations for how funders and technical assistance teams can support sustainability.

## Background

Child Safety Forward is a national initiative funded by the Department of Justice, Office for Victims of Crime (OVC) to reduce child abuse and neglect fatalities and injuries through a collaborative, community-based approach. Social Current is serving as the national technical assistance (TA) provider to the five demonstration sites in this initiative. The TA team includes expertise in evaluation, data collection and analysis, safety science, development of community collaboratives, communications, fatality review, and engagement of parents and persons with lived experience.

The five demonstration sites are:

- Cook County Health in Illinois
- Indiana Department of Health
- Michigan Department of Health and Human Services
- St. Francis Hospital in Hartford, Connecticut
- Sacramento County, California's Child Abuse Prevention Council

With the support of the technical assistance team, peer learning, and a planning year, Child Safety Forward demonstration sites were asked to develop collaborative strategic plans to address child injuries and fatalities due to maltreatment. During the planning year, in addition to the TA content areas, additional conditions were identified that would support demonstration sites in succeeding and sustaining some aspects of this effort. These conditions included the adoption of a public health approach, examination of equity, capacity building in developmental evaluation, and emphasis on promoting protective factors and systems change.

The planning year was designed so that demonstration sites entered the implementation phase with well-developed strategies to keep children safe in their homes, but also to advance efforts in moving toward a child and family well-being system. Technical assistance during the planning year encouraged demonstration sites to not just think about addressing immediate program or service needs, but to also think about more durable, sustainable changes. Along with implementation plans, sites were also asked to submit sustainability plans to ensure that program and practice changes coming out of Child Safety Forward had life beyond the length of the demonstration cycle.

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<sup>1</sup> K. Hutchinson, *Survive and Thrive: Three Steps to Securing Your Program's Sustainability*. (2016).

## Planning for Sustainability

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*While this memo focuses on evidence of sustainability, it is worth noting that, by the end of the first year of implementation, sites shifted their thinking from how to implement programs for caregivers to address fatalities to how we can build robust systems based on what is being learned with and through community to support stronger collaborations, sustain ongoing communications, challenge traditional power structures, and work in ways that support family and build protective factors. This shift in orientation to child safety is a necessary step on the way to sustaining positive outcomes for children and families.*

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To understand how Child Safety Forward impacted sustainability, it is important to step back and look at where demonstration sites started. For some of the sites, focusing on sustainability early in the work was a difficult task. Sites were encouraged to use existing tools to think about sustainability in a more holistic fashion. There were three tools used to examine plans for sustainability.

- [PSAT \(Program Sustainability and Assessment Tool\)](#) focuses on eight dimensions of sustainability: Strategic planning, funding stability, partnerships, organizational capacities, program evaluation, program adaptation, communications, and environmental support.
- [The Sustainability Circle](#) is built around seven dimensions of sustainability: Leadership competence, effective collaboration, understanding of the community, demonstrating results, strategic funding, staff involvement and integration, community responsiveness.
- [Collaboration Assessment Tool \(CAT\)](#) is a seven-factor assessment to support strong collaboration, a core component of sustainability. It looks at context, membership, process, communication, function, resources, and leadership.

Sites selected different areas of focus for their sustainability plans. While some sites did less sustainability planning than others at the end of the planning year, it was noticeable that when they used the sustainability tools, it enhanced their thinking about what some of the next steps might need to be to ensure that the impact of Child Safety Forward extends beyond the funding cycle. This further helped them think about strategy.

Not surprisingly sites recognized funding first and foremost in plans. However, they acknowledged the need to seek diversified funding from private and public sources where historically they may have relied on government funding. They also acknowledged that receiving funding will not depend solely on whether resources are available, but also whether they can successfully frame their case to get support from grassroots community organizations and private business.

Collaboration also appeared in all sustainability plans because this was a core assumption of the Child Safety Forward project. Collaboration is key to bringing about change in communities and is central to effective service delivery and advancing the public health approach. At the end of the planning year, three of the sites had already explored ways to engage parents and youth in meaningful ways to help shape their implementation, and all sites were collaborating at some level. Other areas where the sites outlined a need for attention were in communications, leadership, community responsiveness, and understanding the community.

## Moving into Sustainability

For the purpose of understanding where potential sustainable change is happening, we can look at some of the outcomes of Child Safety Forward through a transformational change framework that categorizes sustainable changes as: (1) early signals or enabling preconditions specifically related to

program design and implementation, (2) interim signals focused on progress on specific changes that support scale or sustainability, and (3) advanced signals or long-term self-sustaining outcomes.<sup>2</sup> These categories of transformation can be applied to efforts to create systems change and scale efforts, of which we see plenty in Child Safety Forward. For this learning memo, we are focused only on those outcomes that speak to long-term sustainability and were accomplished by March 2023. The Child Safety Forward funding cycle ends Sept. 30, 2023.

Child Safety Forward sites are in their final year and showing evidence of early and interim sustainable change. Given the complexity of the challenge Child Safety Forward seeks to address, we do not yet see evidence of self-sustaining outcomes at most of the sites; these would be things at the macro or population level that show permanent fixes to systems or changes in the number of fatalities or near fatalities.

Figure 1: Evidence of Sustainable Change

Early Signals Preconditions, Programming, and Implementation	Interim Signals Progress External to Specific Programs
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Development and transfer of ownership of programming to partners to promote safety education with caregivers and community (Cook County; Hartford)</li> <li>• Adoption of a new protocol at death scene investigations (Indiana)</li> <li>• Adoption of parent advisory model (Michigan)</li> <li>• Caregivers have collaborative decision making roles (Sacramento)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Policy change to allow for child death review teams to be started by people other than prosecutors (Indiana)</li> <li>• Establishment of grassroots community leadership on safety with supportive funding (Hartford)</li> <li>• Expanded partnerships and relationship with Children Trust Michigan (Michigan)</li> <li>• Established collaborative body with 10 year strategic plan (Sacramento)</li> </ul>

## Needed Supports for Sustainability

Thinking about sustainability is not automatic yet in human services and child welfare. While the field is starting to increasingly engage in practices that promote sustainability, sustainability is linked most often to securing the next round of funding for programs and services. The Child Safety Forward technical assistance team built in conversations to support thinking about sustainability at various stages of the project.

There are ways that technical assistance teams and funders can help support sustainability:

**Think in terms of theory of change not logic models.** Initiatives should be designed with sustainability in mind. It is getting clearer that programs and services alone will not move us to a child and family well-being system where child protection agencies, community partners, neighbors, and families share a responsibility to ensure children thrive. Rather, initiatives need to include core components that support long-term sustainability such as strong relationships, balance of power, multisector partnerships, data-driven strategy, sustained communications, and intentional efforts to move systems from the status quo to ones that are more equitable and inclusive of the caregivers and community. Even where short-term or programmatic funding is being offered or requested, funders and technical assistance teams should work with projects to articulate how current resources and strategic investments align with their larger vision and impact. While logic models serve program design and evaluation well, theories of change help collaborations think about their longer-term goals and how they are going to contribute beyond delivering programs and services.

<sup>2</sup> [Signals for transformational change in climate investment funds](#). January, 2020.

***Reframe success and impact.*** Part of the reason sustainability goes unrecognized is because the conditions that need to be built for sustainability are not easily developed or measured. Sectors working in child safety are still incentivized on quantity over quality and measurable outcomes resulting from intervention, as opposed to moving systems towards prevention and support. Reframing success should include recognizing, incentivizing, and acknowledging learning, mindset, power shifts, and relationship outcomes that are harder to measure but critical to impact.

***Align and resource equitably.*** While we are not talking about pay-for-success models, some aspects of the “wrong pocket problem” apply in reaching sustainable change. The entity funded isn’t necessarily where sustainability will reside long-term. Further, there are components of initiatives that are often “un-fundable” or funded in inequitable ways like relationship building, caregiver participation in design making, communications, etc. There are many steps on the pathway to sustainable outcomes that are not program or service related. In providing funding and capacity support for these activities, movement towards sustainable outcomes will be accelerated.

***Network initiatives locally and nationally. Encourage early dissemination of learning.*** Child Safety Forward encouraged connections and engagement with other local and national initiatives that aligned around shared goals and strategies. Demonstration sites that were able to link their Child Safety Forward projects with other efforts experienced enhanced and accelerated learning especially when they were exposed to strategies and expanded technical assistance outside of their communities. Also, demonstration sites were better able to articulate their outcomes and the pathways to those outcomes during more formal presentations and learning opportunities than in one-on-one strategy calls. Movement toward a child and family well-being system benefits from multiple aligned initiatives staying in conversation with each other.