



RURAL HEALTH INITIATIVE

Technical Assistance: Support and Learning in Networks

The Rural Health Initiative (RHI) is about building capacity in communities so that more people collaborate to address barriers to accessing health care. As the initiative progressed, it became clear that the necessary capacity called for the engagement and interaction of many people in each county, a willingness to try new approaches, and an increased ability to reflect and learn from experience. Technical assistance was offered as a way to provide support and learning in networks.

Structure

A Technical Assistance Team (TA Team) was formed that included REACH program officers and consultants. The composition of this TA Team – and the expertise required by the counties – evolved as REACH began to better understand what it took to implement an initiative of this complexity. Currently, the TA Team consists of five consultants with expertise in network development and leadership, coaching and facilitation, theory of change evaluation, rural communities and sustainability. This team had to become familiar with and practice network strategies and evaluation/learning processes in order to share it with others. During 2015, the team met several times a month using videoconferencing, enabling them to work

collaboratively and do the kind of deep learning that face-to-face interaction enables.

Two areas of knowledge became increasingly important for county participants to master and apply. The first was an understanding of network strategies so that participants could strategically reach out to more people in their counties and engage them in collaborative health access projects. The second was an expanded approach to evaluation that enabled participants to understand capacity building through a Theory of Change approach and, at the same time, set up processes for tracking the shift to network behaviors and mindset. TA was mobilized to help county RHI activities operationalize these approaches.

Approaches

In many situations, TA is simply sharing expertise with others. In RHI, new information was shared about the Theory of Change approach and network strategies, and materials were developed such as a description of the responsibilities of core teams and working groups and co-coordinators. On-site meetings and facilitated workshops supported the use of these new approaches and materials. However, RHI is committed to building the sustainability of local initiatives and, as a result, TA has included additional processes to enable

participants to try out what they have learned and, in a coaching situation, reflect on how it has worked.

The TA Team also initiated a Community of Practice where county participants shared their projects so that other communities could adapt those successes. These sessions included time for peer assists, where participants helped one county deal with a challenge it was facing. Core teams also were encouraged to suggest topics for upcoming Community of Practice sessions.

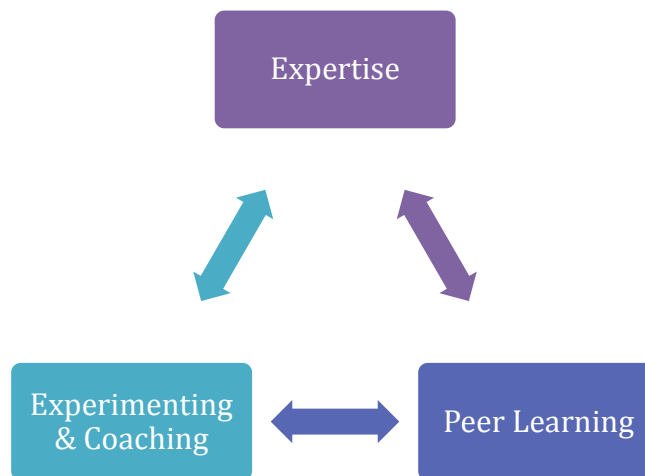


Diagram 1. Supporting RHI Projects

The RHI also has allowed for bidirectional learning. The TA Team has learned much from the county stakeholders and activities about rural realities, generally, and network strategies in rural areas, specifically. Supports have shifted as a result of that learning.

The TA Process in RHI

Typically a set of overlapping practices are used for:

1. Orienting people to what types of TA are available.
2. Mutually identifying and clarifying TA needs.
3. Mutually developing a plan that addresses those needs with a goal and measures for building specific capacity.
4. Delivering the TA and getting feedback/ evaluation on TA process and results.

REACH staff and the TA Team determined that key areas for focus during the first six months of 2015 would include: network building through analysis of network maps, network leadership development, working group formation and operations, Theory of Change development and sustainability. Allen, Cass and Lafayette Counties used their network maps to identify participants for new or existing working groups and, in some cases, to add individuals to their core teams, especially from all areas of their counties and from

under-represented organizations. Cass County used the maps to identify people interested in being part of an oral health working group and a mental health working group. In addition, the TA provider helped the mental health working group establish an Innovation Fund to support self-organized projects.

RHI Networks defined their own priorities for the second half of the year. In July 2015, county core teams undertook a reflection process that enabled them to identify successes and challenges. They then initiated a survey to identify TA needs and develop a TA plan.

County core teams and working groups can access TA at any time. TA needs can arise unexpectedly and the TA team can usually respond quickly to those needs. Areas of expertise are listed below, but counties can request other types of assistance. Once a county has identified a TA need, it can email the appropriate resource listed in Table 1.

Table 1: RHI Technical Assistance Resource Contacts

Technical Consultants	Primary Responsibility
June Holley june@networkweaving.com	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Network strategy and support systems • Community of Practice – network of networks • Technology for communications and engagement • Network maps and assessment
Cheryl Holmes holmes70@ku.edu	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Project coordination and infrastructure • Liaison between various players and connector of the dots
Kristin Johnstad kristin@kristinjohnstad.com	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Training and coaching in network leadership and network building • Reflection using data for learning and improvement
Adena Klem adenamklem@gmail.com	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Evaluation (Design to support assessment and measurement of progress) • Tracking and reflection • Theory of Change

Additional Resources

Holley, June (2012). *Network Weaver Handbook: A guide to transformational networks*. Athens, OH: Network Weaver Publishing.

Sandy Schuman, ed. (2006) *Creating a Culture of Collaboration*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass

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Visit us at www.reachhealth.org or contact:

William Moore, Ph.D., Vice President of Programs and Evaluation, REACH Healthcare Foundation

Phone: (913) 432-4196 **Email:** bill@reachhealth.org **Twitter:** @wmoore_KHealth