

FROM CONCEPT TO FUNDED PROGRAM: PRACTICAL STEPS IN PROGRAM DEVELOPMENT

Nonprofit organizations are constantly identifying new community needs and finding new ways to help meet them. Program development success requires knowing how to assess community needs, recognize community strengths or “assets,” and develop programs that build on these strengths to meet needs. It also requires knowing how to describe and present these programs to others within the organization, to the community, and to potential funders so that programs receive the support – including financial support – needed for implementation.

Following are suggested steps for moving from a program concept to a funded program. Even if you don’t follow all these steps in a formal program development process, you can improve program quality and marketability by addressing the key concepts as you develop new programs.

- 1. Community needs assessment:** Assess and review community needs and service gaps – formally and informally – on a regular basis, and also consider crisis needs.
- 2. Community assets assessment:** Recognize and continually update your understanding of community strengths, resources, and other “assets.”
- 3. Concept development:** Brainstorm and assess concepts and approaches for meeting community needs, immediate and long-term, crisis and ongoing.
- 4. Program “content” outline:** Once you identify a promising concept, further develop it into a program outline, with clear goals and measurable objectives, defined components, implementation tasks, rough budget, and staffing requirements.
- 5. Assessment of concept:** Evaluate the proposed program based on formal or informal organizational review questions or criteria, to decide whether to continue developing and marketing it. For example:
 - Does the program fit our mission, vision, and values?
 - Does it fit within stated priorities or our strategic plan?
 - Does the organization have or can it obtain the knowledge and skills needed to implement the program successfully?
 - Can funding be obtained?
 - Is there sufficient management capacity to undertake the program – can it be initiated without jeopardizing other priority activities?
 - Is there Board and key staff support?
 - Will the community support the program?

6. **Potential funder research:** Identify and research possible funding sources, then review the program against the missions, funding priorities, and past grants of several potential donors and determine its probable marketability.
7. **Consultation with donors:** Discuss the program concept with one or two supportive donors, particularly those that might be interested in supporting it – and ask for feedback on the program’s marketability, including any specific concerns that need to be addressed in the proposal.
8. **Marketability analysis:** Develop a marketability analysis and summary for the program, using donor research and feedback; identify the program’s marketability strengths and weaknesses and then decide how to maximize strengths and overcome weaknesses in written and oral presentations. Your summary might include:
 - Expected results in terms of client or community benefits
 - Importance of the populations that will benefit (including any links they may have to the corporations or foundations to be asked for funding)
 - Broader significance for the population served, community, organization
 - Why this program is special or unique
 - Organizational capacity – why your organization can run the program successfully, and why it is the most appropriate organization to undertake this effort
 - Opportunities for visibility for a corporation or foundation that needs such visibility
 - How the program fits into the funding priorities of specific types of foundations or corporations
 - Any potential “downsides” for a funder – e.g., controversy, possibility of failure, competition, high costs per beneficiary, etc. – and how they can be overcome or addressed in marketing
 - How the program can most effectively be describe in a sentence or two, so that its attractiveness to funders is maximized
9. **Proposal preparation:** Prepare one or more proposals – a general program proposal that includes key points to be made in presenting the project to funders, and a targeted proposal or letter of inquiry for each specific potential donor.
10. **Donor meetings:** Meet with potential donors if possible, using your marketability summary to prepare a strong presentation about why they should want to support the program.