

The Role of Technical Assistance: The Right TA at the Right Time

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The Georgia Health Policy Center provides technical assistance (TA) to the Health Resources and Services Administration's (HRSA) Rural Health Network Development (RHND) grant program.

TA consists of on-site consultation and other advice on programmatic and organizational issues. This analysis explores the effectiveness of the technical assistance in enhancing the sustainability of RHNs and defines areas for future research assessing rural community health systems.

Study Design

All grantees awarded between 2000 and 2004 were included. (n = 65)

Triennial reports detailing technical assistance provided and progress of RHN were analyzed.

Grantees were analyzed in three groups: grantees who received no technical assistance in their first year, those who received a site visit in the first year of their program and those who received only remote technical assistance in the first year of their grant.

Data was coded, and codes were validated by a second researcher for a randomly selected sample of reports. Quantitative analysis of qualitative data was conducted using Atlas.ti software, attempting to assess frequency of codes and code overlaps.

Technical Assistance Needs of Rural Health Networks Peer-to-peer Mentoring Documenting Specific Value Sustainability Strategies Later Earlier Needs Clarification/ Assessment Leadership Early Development Sustainability Planning

Results Obtained

Consistent themes were leadership issues (staff and board development) and financial sustainability issues.

RHN's receiving technical assistance in first year were clearly more assertive and effective in addressing financially sustainability.

RHN's comments on technical assistance suggest that the site visit is most useful in the first year.

RHN's in later years tend to have clearer ideas of needs and thus seek peer mentors; value of early TA seems to be helping young RHN's clarify needs.

Implications for Research

Quantitative analysis demonstrating...

- a) the link between TA and sustainability and
- b) the link between RHNs and increased rural access to services.

Qualitative and quantitative analysis of factors contributing to success.

Future research should include rigorous evaluation of the effectiveness of rural health networks

Implications for Policy and Practice

Assertive technical assistance, preferably in the first year of a grant, significantly improves an RHNs chance of survival.

More detailed and more standardized data collection will assist technical assistance providers in targeting the RHN with the appropriate technical resource.

Projects funded by the U.S. Health Resources and Services Administration contributed to this research.



