

Tip Sheet: Working Successfully with the Recipient¹

Introduction

Planning Council Support (PCS) staff, especially the Manager, play a major role in establishing and maintaining a mutually beneficial, respectful relationship between the Ryan White HIV/AIDS Program (RWHAP) Part A grant recipient and the Planning Council/Body (PC/B) – a partnership that helps ensure effective and efficient planning and a system of HIV care that meets the needs of the diverse people living with HIV (PLWH) in the jurisdiction.

The RWHAP *Part A Manual* emphasizes that the Planning Council “works in partnership with the grantee but not under its direction.”² The Tip Sheet is based on this concept.

The relationship with the recipient is different for a RWHAP Part A planning body that is not a planning council. It is an advisory rather than decision-making body, does not have legislatively-defined responsibilities or the same level of autonomy, and may not have dedicated staff. Still, some of the tips deal with clear communications and clarity of roles, and these are relevant to either type of planning entity.

Tips and Best Practices

Here are some tips and best practices for PCS staff to use in building, maintaining, or strengthening a productive relationship between the planning council and recipient. Some are particularly appropriate if you are new to the job; others apply even if you have been on the job for a considerable period.

1. **Assess the current relationship.** Especially if you are new to the job or if the relationship seems to be deteriorating, observe interactions and talk to both PC leadership and recipient staff to understand their perspectives. What is working? What isn't?
2. **Identify any current pressure points.** Often these involve disagreements over funding for PC support, decisions about services or funding, or perceived overstepping of boundaries. Observe interactions at meetings, then have a frank and open discussion with the recipient so you both understand current perspectives. Remember that both entities are striving to create the best possible HIV health care system.
3. **Explore underlying causes of tension and conflict,** and identify the most important in your jurisdiction. This also requires a combination of observation and discussion. Some common factors:

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²Ryan White HIV/AIDS Program, *Part A Manual*, 2013, Section X. Planning Council Operations, Chapter 3. Planning Council Responsibilities, p 104. See <https://hab.hrsa.gov/sites/default/files/hab/Global/happartamanual2013.pdf>.

- Insufficient knowledge about legislative requirements and HRSA/HAB expectations regarding the roles, responsibilities, and authority of the two entities, and the boundaries for each entity
 - Lack of mutual respect
 - Desire to control resources, especially the up to 10% of RWHAP Part A funds allocated for administration
 - Strong differences of opinion about how funds should be used and service provided
 - Personality clashes
 - Past negative experiences, including failure to respect boundaries, that created distrust
4. **If roles are unclear or the relationship is a serious concern, ask for training or other assistance from your Project Officer.** This can be especially helpful when either you or the recipient is new to the job. Often the best approach is a shared training session including PC members and staff along with recipient staff that focuses on clarifying roles, responsibilities, and boundaries – including which tasks are entirely the responsibility of a single entity and which are shared, and their legislative basis. Include the following:
- Direct discussion designed to clarify roles related to pressure points or areas of conflict
 - Agreement on a plan of action to develop new or revised policies and procedures that help ensure that boundaries are respected and make other changes needed to strengthen the collaborative partnership between PC and recipient
5. **Develop and use a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) between the PC and recipient.** Best practice is to:
- Develop an MOU to maximize collaboration and prevent or minimize tension and conflict – don't wait until conflict develops
 - Use the HRSA/HAB model MOU or a recent MOU from another EMA or TGA to be sure you include necessary elements
 - Be sure the MOU is developed and negotiated between the recipient and PC, with PC leadership, and consumer representatives playing an active role and PCS staff actively assisting and supporting the process; the PC as a whole should approve the completed MOU
 - Be sure the MOU is very clear about information and reports to be provided to each party, including content, frequency, and timing – including the various data reports the PC needs for its priority setting and resource allocations decisions each year
 - Ensure that the MOU is signed by both parties (and senior municipal officials where appropriate) and shared with the entire PC and recipient staff
 - Build in regular review and updates
6. **Build on positive factors.** Be sure the recipient and recipient personnel who staff committees receive appropriate thanks and credit for providing sound data and technical advice to the PC. Give public credit at meetings when someone goes beyond requirements. Be responsive to recipient requests from the PC.

7. **Serve as liaison to ensure appropriate communications.** In many RWHAP Part A programs, serving as liaison between the PC and recipient is a specific responsibility of the PCS manager. Get to know the recipient, develop a mutually effective communications style, and minimize surprises on both sides.
8. **Encourage and model respectful interaction.** Encourage PC leaders to do the same. Disagreements are normal and can be positive, so long as they are handled appropriately. Among the factors most damaging to a positive working relationship are negative statements and personal attacks by either party. Among the most helpful factors is courtesy. It is fine to be direct about concerns, but comments should focus on content, not personality, and should be stated clearly but calmly. Providing a clear, factual explanation for funding allocation choices and listening to each other's viewpoints may help to defuse some of the tension around differences of opinion about funding priorities.
9. **Work with the PC and recipient to implement practical ways to address boundary issues.** For example, PCs should not discuss funded providers by name; their discussions should focus on the service category. Agree that if a PC member violates this rule, s/he will be asked to stop. If the PC feels that the recipient is attempting to unduly influence a decision that is the responsibility of the PC, a PC leader should be expected to state the concern politely but directly.
10. **Consistently support the PC's status as a separate planning entity that collaborates with the recipient but is not controlled by it, just as the recipient is not controlled by the PC.** Your first responsibility is to support the PC and help it to meet its legislatively defined responsibilities. Build a positive relationship with the recipient, while protecting the PC's ability to make independent, data-based decisions.

Other Resources

This compendium includes two resources designed to support efforts to build and maintain a positive working relationship between the PC and recipient:

- A model Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) between the PC/B and recipient, in this section
- A training module, "The PC-Recipient Relationship: What the PC, PCS Staff, and Recipient All Need to Know," in the Orientation and Training section of the compendium