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## Building a Sustainable Public Health PBRN: Tips for Securing Ongoing Research Funding

Public Health Practice-Based Research Networks

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## **BUILDING A SUSTAINABLE PUBLIC HEALTH PBRN: TIPS FOR SECURING ONGOING RESEARCH FUNDING**

**D***iversify your network's research funding base.* The Public Health PBRN Program funding made available by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation provides start-up resources and initial research support for networks, but networks will require larger and more sustainable sources of funding for public health research as they progress. The most ample sources can be found in federal funding agencies that operate competitive extramural research programs, include CDC, NIH, AHRQ, HRSA, USDA, and NSF. Public health research funding is also available from state and foundation sources, and even corporate sources (e.g. Pfizer's Public Health Research Fellowship Program). For sustainability, networks should look to diversify their sources of funding for research projects and avoid reliance on a single source for very long. The research and demonstration opportunities created by the federal Affordable Care Act, and the growing emphasis on translational and community-based research at NIH, provide particularly compelling funding opportunities for public health PBRNs.

**E***stablish a scholarly publication record in the peer-reviewed literature.* To be competitive for investigator-initiated research funding from federal and non-federal sources, your research team will need a peer-reviewed publication record related to priority areas of the funders. Make sure to publish results from your network's initial small-scale research project, your Quick Strike research projects, and your larger-scale Research Implementation Award. Articulate the major research areas that your research team wants to become "known for" and begin to "stake out" this territory by publishing *review articles* and *preliminary studies*. If you develop new measurement instruments, data collection processes, analytic methodologies, or even conceptual frameworks for PBRN research publish those too! Use these early publications to demonstrate that your PBRN and its research team understands the problem to be addressed, what's known and not yet known about this problem, and the most productive directions for future research. Importantly, be sure that your team can articulate how the PBRN model and practice-driven research approaches are uniquely positioned to address the unanswered questions. These publications will help you populate the "Preliminary Studies" section of your next research grant application.

**B***uild a funding record of progressively larger extramural research grants.* To be competitive for extramural research funding, your research team will need to demonstrate a track record of research funding on topics related to priority areas of the funders. Consider how preliminary results from your PBRN's smaller-scale research projects can be leveraged in support of larger, follow-on studies. What new questions are raised? What methods and measures have proven to be feasible, valid, reliable? What promising practices have been identified for more in-depth testing and evaluation? It is extremely rare for researchers of any stripe to move right into a large-scale, investigator-initiated R01 grant. Take advantage of pilot study funding opportunities and transition funding grants like R03s, R21s, and foundation grants to build the case that larger-scale studies are needed.

**B***uild a pipeline of multiple research collaborators at multiple stages of development.* To maximize opportunities for funding, PBRNs should seek to build research teams comprised of multiple researchers and practitioners who are capable of developing and leading research projects. PBRNs should seek to avoid dependence on a single investigator or a very small number of researchers to provide expertise with research design, analysis, and scientific grantsmanship. A mix of junior and more senior research partners is ideal, along

with the involvement of graduate students poised to become the next generation of practice-based scholars. Senior researchers are better positioned to help the network compete for large-scale, longer-term studies but these investigators may have more tightly-formed, heavily specified research aims and interests that have less overlap with the interests of other network members. Junior researchers and graduate students may be more open to exploring the research interests of others via smaller-scale funding opportunities.

**I***dentify research opportunities in the evaluation components of practice and service grants.* Many federal and state grants to public health agencies are designed to support program and service delivery rather than research, and some explicitly exclude the funding of research. However, many of these grants encourage evaluation and analytic activities that can provide the foundation for practice-based research activities through PBRNs. Other grants support information system development and surveillance activities that – if cleverly designed – can be made to support public health practice as well as public health research activities. Work with your state and local public health agencies to secure roles for PBRNs in providing coordinated, multi-site evaluation, analytic, and QI activities that produce data and findings that can be accumulated and compared across sites to support practice-based research. In some policy and practice environments, research is considered dispensable so you may want to avoid describing these activities as such and instead reference concepts such as “process/outcome analysis,” “quality improvement process,” “performance monitoring and feedback,” or “accountability metrics.”

**S***eek power in numbers.* To increase your network’s competitiveness for large-scale research funding, partner with other networks to develop multi-site, multi-network research projects. This allows your study to have a larger and more diverse set of practice settings for study, potentially enhancing the statistical power and external validity/generalizability of your results. This strategy also allows you to pool and share research expertise and other resources (e.g. data collection instruments, research staff).

**P***artner with other research and practice centers.* Partnering with other centers and institutes that have a shared mission for translational research and public health research can open up new funding opportunities for your network and allow you to tap into new areas of expertise and new ideas for research and practice. Some kindred institutions that may be available in your state or region include: CDC-funded Prevention Research Centers, CDC-funded Preparedness Research Centers (PERRCs), AHRQ-funded Primary Care PBRNs, NIH-funded Clinical and Translational Science Award (CTSA) centers, NIH-funded health disparity research centers (also known as EXPORT centers), and HRSA-funded Rural Health Research Centers, among others.

**M***aintain laser focus on engaging and supporting practice partners.* Research fatigue can easily accumulate in public health professionals who do PBRN work alongside their day-and-night jobs in public health practice. Practice partners need to realize tangible benefits from their investments of time and resources in PBRNs, including not only intellectual stimulation and a share of the funding but also valuable evidence and information that can be used to improve operations, attract and retain talented staff, obtain expert consultation and technical assistance, and protect and increase investments in public health practice. Every project you organize through a PBRN should have a clear view of the products and outcomes that will be of value to collaborators in public health practice settings.

The Public Health PBRN Coordinating Center is located at the University of Kentucky.  
For more information visit [www.publichealthsystems.org/pbrn](http://www.publichealthsystems.org/pbrn) or email [publichealthpbrn@uky.edu](mailto:publichealthpbrn@uky.edu)