



KEY ELEMENTS OF EMPLOYMENT PROGRAMS: STRATEGIES FROM THE FIELD FOR IDENTIFYING, IMPLEMENTING, AND SUSTAINING CORE COMPONENTS

Searching for and selecting an evidence-based intervention to implement is one important step that employment service providers can take to help improve outcomes for their clients. The Pathways to Work Evidence Clearinghouse, which summarizes evidence on employment interventions, is designed to support that process. After an employment service provider has identified an evidence-based intervention, another important step for them to take is to figure out how to implement that intervention effectively, but often there is limited information available to guide that process. Research studies that document interventions often do not contain enough information for organizations to easily identify the most important ingredients of the intervention, known as the **core components** or the aspects of the intervention that are most likely to drive results. This is particularly the case within the employment and training literature, where few studies use rigorous, quantitative methods to test the impacts of different components of an intervention. In the absence of quantitative data on core components for an intervention, employment service providers can use qualitative strategies to carefully determine how to identify them. This brief fills an important gap for employment services providers by offering strategies for identifying the core components of evidence-based interventions when those core components have not been described in existing program manuals or evaluation materials.

The Pathways to Work Evidence Clearinghouse

provides reliable, accessible information about what works to help job seekers with low incomes succeed in the labor market. Program administrators can use the Pathways Clearinghouse website to find interventions likely to be successful based on the evidence presented: <https://pathwaystowork.acf.hhs.gov>.

There are several reasons why the employment literature does not always provide the quantitative information needed to identify core components. First, evaluations of employment and training programs typically assess an intervention as a *whole*, not the *individual* intervention components. Employment and training interventions often offer bundles of many services, making it hard to disentangle which of those services might be driving change. Second, although common in other fields, employment and training interventions do not typically have curricula or implementation guides and checklists, which typically define the core aspects of the program. Quantitative methods for assessing core components are valuable and continuing to grow, with efforts underway through large-scale effectiveness studies and databases that summarize program elements and intervention impacts.

In the absence of this information, service providers need tools to understand both *what* services and activities comprise the evidence-based intervention, and *how* to effectively implement them. This might include details about delivery mode, frequency, duration, setting, and the data collected to measure outcomes.

This brief begins with an overview of the current literature and efforts to identify core components of evidence-based programs. Next, the brief summarizes lessons from interviews with human services agencies and federal representatives to describe how organizations can identify, document, implement, and monitor the implementation of new interventions. The brief concludes with recommendations and best practices for service providers who are aiming to implement core components with fidelity.

Identifying the core components of programs: Insights from the literature

Core components are elements that define an intervention and are necessary to produce outcomes in a typical service setting (Blase and Fixsen 2013). They are directly related to a program’s theory of change and either have a conceptual basis for improving outcomes or are supported by evidence that they do improve outcomes. There is little rigorous research that identifies the core components of employment and training interventions using experimental methods, though there are efforts underway to clearly describe the components of employment programs as part of current experimental evaluations, such as the Next Generation of Enhanced Employment Strategies (NextGen) Project (see Table 1).

Core components are the active ingredients that lay out exactly what providers need to implement. They can include a service itself as well as features of that service, such as timing and duration. For a more comprehensive analysis of how core components are defined across disciplines and frameworks, see [this 2021 brief](#) published by The Active Implementation Research Network.

Many frameworks from implementation science describe how practitioners who want to implement existing evidence-based interventions can begin to qualitatively identify core components when limited information about them is available. Mowbray, Holter, Teague, and Bybee (2003) indicate that core components of an existing intervention can be identified through expert consensus and consultation, or (if available) using the core components of a similar, well-documented evidence-based intervention as a starting point. In a brief that describes five steps for advancing the use of the core components of effective programs, Ferber, Wiggins, and Sileo (2019) alternatively suggest beginning with theory to identify components that may be instrumental in changing outcomes for program participants. They suggest a process of examining the existing literature on a given intervention, including reviewing available information on the intervention that is present in clearinghouses, and conducting interviews and focus groups with practitioners to determine core components.

Methodology: Expert interviews

To help employment service providers understand where to begin when attempting to qualitatively identify core components for interventions found in the Pathways Clearinghouse, we interviewed a targeted set of respondents that have focused on this issue. We identified three categories of expert informants: (1) federal program staff in other human services fields who have experience using qualitative approaches to identify core components; (2) researchers with expertise identifying core components across a range of human services programs, and within the context of employment programs; and (3) human services agencies that have been through the process of implementing employment programs and reporting on their core components (see Table 1).

“[Service providers] might find a journal article that describes an evidence-based program, but that does not describe the details of what the program actually is or how to implement it.”

— OPA TPP staff

Table 1. Respondents and direct experience identifying core components

| Organization or research project | Experience | Interview focus |
|---|---|--|
| Federal staff with insight from other fields on identifying and managing implementation of core components | | |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Office of Population Affairs (OPA)'s Teen Pregnancy Prevention Program Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation (OPRE)'s Home Visiting Evidence of Effectiveness | Experience with the challenges of identifying core components of a model, understanding how to assess whether a program adheres to its model's core components, and (for OPA only) identifying the kinds of adaptations that are permissible within the context of federal grant funding. | Strategies and tools that have supported or hindered successful implementation; processes these staff have used that could be replicated or adapted for employment programs. |
| Researchers with expertise in identifying core components and supporting their implementation | | |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> National Implementation Research Network (NIRN) Next Generation of Enhanced Employment Strategies (NextGen) Project* | Expertise in implementation science and the successful implementation of evidence-based and evidence-informed interventions. | Accessible and practical processes and tools for determining core components of programs and supporting implementation. |
| Local agencies that deliver employment strategies supported by evidence | | |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Baltimore City Mayor's Office of Employment Development New York City (NYC) Mayor's Office for Economic Opportunity | Familiarity and experience with choosing, developing, and implementing employment programs. | Current strategies for determining core components and implementation fidelity considerations in delivering employment programs. Key programs discussed: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Baltimore Health Corps Young Adult Internship Program in NYC NYC-Jobs Plus |

*The NextGen Project is rigorously evaluating employment interventions for people with low incomes. It is funded by OPRE, within the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services' Administration for Children and Families.

From May to July 2021, we conducted one-hour interviews with key informants from each of these six organizations or projects to learn more about their experiences related to researching or implementing the core components of evidence-based programs. Together, their perspectives provide useful insight about how core components of employment interventions can be qualitatively identified and implemented.

Recommendations for employment service providers who want to replicate programs

A. Identifying and documenting core components

Employment services providers may learn about interventions through many different channels, including their own research, conversations with colleagues in other agencies, or by finding them on evidence review websites like the Pathways Clearinghouse. Our interviews identified three central ideas for employment service providers to consider when they want to implement an evidence-based intervention but find that its core components have not yet been documented.

Scan available research to look for common features of evidence-based interventions focused on achieving similar results. Consulting resources such as the original evaluation reports for an intervention and program websites may be helpful to understand the elements of evidence-based interventions. Employment service providers can also search evidence clearinghouses, such as the Pathways Clearinghouse, to access detailed descriptions of effective interventions that resulted

As used in this brief, an **intervention** is a bundle of services or policies implemented in a given context, such as an employment or training program or service model. A **model** is a standard on which an intervention is based. A **program** is a local implementation of an intervention.

in outcomes like those they are looking to produce.¹ Because this is labor intensive, practitioners may want to use existing research syntheses. For example, a Pathways Clearinghouse publication, [What Works to Improve Employment and Earnings for People with Low Incomes](#), looks across the research on high-quality employment programs to identify the service strategies that are linked to the greatest impacts for participants. In addition, Pathways Clearinghouse [Evidence Snapshots](#) summarize the findings for interventions that use a common service approach.

The Baltimore City Mayor’s Office of Employment Development took the approach of scanning the existing research when developing the Baltimore Health Corps initiative. The team began by examining specific features of several other evidence-based interventions that focus on transitional jobs, including the types of work supports and length of services the interventions offered. Staff formed a workgroup to review and synthesize relevant resources and generate a list of core features used across the evidence-based transitional jobs interventions. Using this list, the workgroup identified the key program features to include in the Health Corps initiative.

Engage other agency staff and partner organizations to draw on their experience implementing program elements and begin to test implementation of those elements. When a program’s core components are unclear, informants recommended that service providers consider talking with their own staff and partner organizations to make educated guesses about best practices for making a vague component concrete and actionable. By convening a team of service provider staff and administrators, as well as community partners, an organization can hear and learn from others’ experiences implementing programs that might not be reflected in published literature with positive evidence findings. For example, NYC’s Mayor’s Office wanted to replicate an employer engagement strategy that had been found promising in an evaluation conducted elsewhere, but little information existed on how the sites in the original evaluation implemented that employer engagement strategy. Despite the lack of a prescriptive guide for implementing the employer engagement strategy, NYC Mayor’s Office asked their sites to “implement a robust employer engagement strategy” across sites in NYC, allowing for sites to suggest ideas. When they began the process of data collection and monitoring, the team found that the employer engagement strategy was being implemented in different ways across NYC, and that some employer engagement strategies were stronger than others. To make the implementation of the employer engagement strategy more consistent across the city, NYC’s team asked the providers to share details on

NIRN has an exploration tool that organizations can use for engaging with partners called [The Hexagon](#). This tool helps capture diverse perspectives on the fit and feasibility of implementing programs across a range of contexts and helps teams consider core components as part of rating the usability of an intervention.

the ways they were operationalizing the strategy to understand specific components that seemed to be effective in engaging employers. They documented the components and provided technical assistance and support to help NYC service providers implement the employer engagement strategy consistently. The process of exploring the components of a program that has not been well described, implementing the components across multiple locations, and identifying factors associated with high-quality implementation is one approach providers can use. Over time, this kind of data provides information on a particular program component and can help service providers decide how to implement the component in the future.

Develop descriptions of each core component of the intervention to establish a shared understanding to guide future implementation. As described earlier, employment and training models often do not have this information documented. When possible, the Pathways Clearinghouse provides preliminary details on intervention implementation, such as descriptions of services, service intensity, and fidelity measures, for interventions that have at least one favorable

¹ **Evidence clearinghouses** assess the quality of research on interventions to then rate the effectiveness of the interventions. These resources include the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services’ [Pathways to Work Evidence Clearinghouse](#), [Home Visiting Evidence of Effectiveness review](#), and [Title IV-E Prevention Services Clearinghouse](#); the U.S. Department of Education’s [What Works Clearinghouse](#); and the U.S. Department of Labor’s [Clearinghouse for Labor Evaluation and Research](#).

outcome. However, there is often limited detail to draw on for employment service providers who are interested in replicating an intervention.

The NextGen Project is making important strides to document the components of employment and training programs. The research team for the NextGen Project, which evaluates promising employment interventions designed to help individuals with low incomes, worked with employment service providers to document the core components of their interventions before launching an evaluation of intervention effectiveness. This process is similar to developing a logic model,² and was conducted with the distinct purpose of informing documentation of the intervention and the interpretation of findings. The NextGen Project research team held a series of meetings with staff from each service provider organization to detail services, identify those services core to their model, and articulate the outcomes they are expected to achieve. The research team and service provider staff collaboratively drafted descriptions of the core components to establish and document a shared understanding of which service elements were core. These shared definitions could then be used to guide implementation and to see if the intervention was being implemented as intended.

In addition to establishing a common understanding of what elements of an intervention are core, documenting an intervention’s core components supports implementation research, replication of the model, and future adaptations.

For resources on how to identify and describe core components of an intervention, NIRN offers information and tools in its [Usable Innovation](#) framework to guide practitioners.

B. Implementing core components: How can organizations successfully implement core components of evidence-based interventions?

Interviewees noted that employment service providers often struggle to systematically implement the core components of evidence-based interventions. We identified the following ideas to support successful implementation. Many of the suggestions described in this section acknowledge that core components may not be clearly articulated already. The steps below are intended to guide employment service providers in those instances.

Take a deliberate, step-by-step approach to plan for a new intervention. Before fully adopting a new intervention, organizations should carefully plan the details of the implementation process, including the core components. NIRN said that organizations often skip activities in the exploration and planning phases and that more time is typically needed to prepare the organization and its staff for implementation. As pointed out on [NIRN’s website](#), successful implementation of an evidence-based intervention can take two to four years, depending on the scale of the intervention, readiness of the organization, or staff capacity. Notably, this time-intensive process can be challenging for an organization, particularly if the work is funded by a time-limited grant. This process also acknowledges that core components largely are not well-defined. NIRN recommended a gradual implementation approach consisting of [four stages](#):

“When you take the stage-based approach, you’re building and planning for sustainability.”

— NIRN staff

- **Exploration.** Preparation activities, such as building a team, identifying the need for change, and assessing readiness for change. The overall goal for this stage is to investigate and ideally choose an intervention whose core components and other elements are well-defined. In most cases, however, the core components may not be well-defined and organizations should build in time to identify core aspects of an intervention before moving to full implementation.
- **Installation.** Planning activities, such as developing training processes, auditing policies and procedures, and allocating resources to support the intervention.

² Logic models are tools that provide a graphic illustration of an intervention that map out the program inputs, a sequence of activities, and intended effects. For examples, see this [ACF logic model template](#) and a [recent guide on creating logic models](#).

- **Initial implementation.** Beginning to put the core components into action with careful monitoring.
- **Full implementation.** Routine use of the intervention, which is well supported and integrated into practice.

Baltimore City Mayor's Office staff, drawing on their experience with the Health Corps initiative, reported that brainstorming with a diverse team and carefully building a team that included a specialist for every part of the project were particularly critical to successful implementation of the initiative's core components.

Consider model fit and consciously adapt as needed before implementation. The OPA TPP Program funds grantees to implement evidence-based teen pregnancy prevention programs. To support that program, OPA's team created processes for assessing adaptations that TPP programs could implement that they have used for more than a decade. The OPA federal staff who oversee the TPP Program discussed that when adapting an intervention before implementation, it is important to understand which components of an intervention are core, and thus less suitable for adaptation. Core components are less suitable for adaptation because doing so can put the program at risk of failing to produce the intended outcomes. The OPA TPP team reviews a variety of adaptation requests from grantees, and major adaptations go through a formal review. The most common adaptation request is to change the duration of an intervention; other common requests involve a change in setting or the population served. OPA asks grantees requesting an adaptation to consult with the developer of the evidence-based intervention, though OPA does not always require grantees to follow the developer's recommendation. Over time, OPA has encouraged grantees to focus on identifying models that fit well with their program from the outset "instead of extensively adapting" another model, although they recognize that programs that operate in unique contexts will almost certainly require a degree of adaptation. To assess the fit for their program, they ask grantees to use [Getting to Outcomes](#), a guide to continuous quality improvement for community service organizations developed by the RAND Corporation and the University of South Carolina. Currently, federal systematic reviews such as HomVEE are considering a process to review adaptations to program models.

Build in implementation supports. NIRN staff described the importance of setting up and maintaining an environment that supports successful implementation of core components. Multiple interviewers identified the following supports as helpful:

- **Create detailed intervention descriptions.** Implementation leaders within an organization should describe the intervention they plan to implement in enough detail so staff know how to incorporate the core components into their daily work. NIRN provides guidance on developing and using [Practice Profiles](#) to support implementing organizations. OPRE's Home Visiting Evidence of Effectiveness (HomVEE) team develops [Implementation Profiles](#) for each early childhood home visiting model that it reviews. The profiles include information about the home visiting model's services and requirements for implementation, such as intended population, desired outcomes, service intensity and length, location, and information about adaptations and enhancements. As discussed in the prior section, while employment and training programs often lack sufficiently detailed intervention descriptions for replicating programs, the NextGen Project is one effort that is developing the kind of robust descriptions that are needed.
- **Secure consistent funding, leadership, and staffing.** Baltimore City Mayor's Office staff explained that adequate funding and staffing are the most important supports for successfully implementing core components. Frequent changes in leadership and staffing can disrupt the implementation of evidence-based interventions, especially if there is not a strong plan for sustainability.
- **Data management capacity.** Interviewees noted that many workforce organizations struggle with outdated data systems that are difficult and costly to adapt to new programs. They discussed ways that employment service providers have begun to expand their data management capacity. Staff at the Baltimore City Mayor's Office learned that having a database through which all partners delivering core component services could enter or view data helped facilitate

coordination and reporting. When multiple agencies are responsible for delivering core services of an intervention, a common database allows all partners, as well as administrators, to monitor which services are being delivered and to whom, ensuring that participants receive all core components of the intervention. The shared database allows implementation partners to directly enter their service data so that reports reflect real-time service data for program management, even if core services were provided by different agencies.

C. Sustainability: How can organizations monitor fidelity?

Although funders might require programs to use evidence-based models, the organization may not always implement the intervention, or its core components, with complete fidelity to the original model. An organization may adapt an intervention to fit a specific context, such as setting or the needs of the population served, thus straying from the components of the model as intended. This is important because when an intervention is implemented differently than intended, we have less confidence that it will produce the intended outcomes. Respondents who have experience implementing employment programs shared strategies that they have used to monitor fidelity to a model and ensure that it can continue to be well-implemented in the future.

Use existing data from performance monitoring and program evaluation

efforts. An organization can repurpose data that it already collects for reporting or program management to assess implementation fidelity. For the Health Corps initiative, the Baltimore City Mayor’s Office and its partners collected and tracked data on participant attendance as part of regular performance monitoring. They analyzed the data about workforce supports, such as career navigation, legal services, mental health services, and digital and financial literacy services, that they had identified as core components. This helped them understand whether program participants were engaged in the workforce supports with the frequency and dosage intended as a way of monitoring fidelity.

Fidelity refers to implementing an intervention as it was intended. NIRN explains that an effective **fidelity assessment** “provides evidence that the program is being used as intended and is resulting in the desired outcomes.”

Use or build a fidelity monitoring tool. In fields other than employment and training, such as education or early childhood home visiting, model developers often provide a fidelity checklist, which identifies the core components of an intervention and describes in detail their features. Given formal fidelity tools may be challenging to use in employment-focused interventions, which tend to be complex and large in scope, organizations funding, overseeing, or administering employment interventions may consider using other tools. For instance, OPA uses grantees’ implementation plans as fidelity monitoring tools throughout the grant period. NIRN offers extensive guidance for organizations that have limited tools or none at all. [NIRN’s online module](#) on fidelity assessment suggests that “in these instances, it is important to develop a fidelity assessment of some kind so that [organizations] can get started and get better at understanding and detecting the core features needed to produce outcomes.” NIRN suggests that a fidelity tool be practical, low cost, and low burden, and that program administrators need to understand its value.

Partner with researchers, model developers, and experts to provide guidance. For its Jobs Plus program, the New York City (NYC) Mayor’s Office for Economic Opportunity contracted with a research organization that had developed the model on which the program was based to conduct a rigorous evaluation and to provide technical assistance to the implementing organizations. The research organization coached sites to implement the Jobs Plus model with fidelity, but, according to an NYC Mayor’s office representative, “it wasn’t about accountability so much as a supportive approach to implementation.” For the NextGen Project, the implementation study for each program participating in the evaluation will involve the research team assessing the site’s fidelity to the core components identified in an earlier phase of the project.

Make intentional adaptations during implementation as needed. Once implementation begins, employment service providers need to be open and responsive to ever-changing circumstances. Several interviews identified a tension between fidelity and adaptation. The NYC Mayor’s Office staff pointed out that they need a level of consistency in core components across implementation locations while still encouraging communities to tailor some program elements to their needs. Most interviews emphasized the role of fidelity monitoring as a way of learning and informing adaptation, rather than as a punitive measure. The HomVEE team recognized that informed adaptation is one way program administrators might adjust interventions to meet the needs of local practitioners and participants. They pointed out that having core components as a starting point from which to adapt is crucial. Most respondents considered adaptations an opportunity to learn and improve implementation moving forward.

Conclusion

Having limited implementation information for an intervention that has been evaluated and deemed evidence-based is a common challenge for employment service providers looking to replicate interventions in their own context. They are often in the difficult position of needing to create and produce their own documentation of program elements to begin to understand the aspects of an intervention that are core. The examples, lessons, and tools presented in this brief from interviews with federal staff, researchers, and employment service providers offer suggestions for qualitatively identifying and implementing core components of evidence-based interventions.

Employment service providers have an important set of considerations to guide the implementation of evidence-based interventions. In the absence of detailed information about the core components, most interviewees acknowledged that the implementer must do the best they can with the information at hand. They suggest drawing as much as they can from existing research or descriptions of the intervention, supplemented with practice wisdom, and systematically documenting and testing what they end up implementing. These steps are crucial to support implementation fidelity, both internally to the organization and for other organizations interested in achieving the same results. While a lack of established, well-defined core components makes replication challenging, this also provides an opportunity for building evidence on the core components of an intervention. For more information about strategies that evaluators are using to identify and document core components, please see materials from OPRE’s 2020 Innovative Methods meeting, [Exploring Core Components Research in Social Service Settings](#).

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