

Sector Activities and Lessons Learned Around Initial Implementation of the United States National Physical Activity Plan

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Background: National plans are increasingly common but infrequently evaluated. The 2010 United States National Physical Activity Plan (NPAP) provided strategies to increase population levels of physical activity. This paper describes (i) the initial accomplishments of the NPAP sector teams, and (ii) results from a process evaluation to determine how the sectors operated, their cross-sector collaboration, challenges encountered, and positive experiences. **Methods:** During 2011, a quarterly reporting system was developed to capture sector-level activities. A year-end interview derived more detailed information. Interviews with 12 sector leads were recorded, transcribed verbatim, and analyzed for common themes. **Results:** The 6 sectors worked on goals from the implementation plan that focused broadly on education, promotion, intervention, policy, collaboration, and evaluation. Through year-end interviews, themes were generated around operations, goal setting, and cross-sector collaboration. Challenges to the NPAP work included lack of funding and time, the need for marketing and promotion, and organizational support. Positive experiences included collaboration, efficiency of work, enhanced community dynamic, and accomplishments toward NPAP goals. **Conclusions:** These initial results on the NPAP sector teams can be used as a baseline assessment for future monitoring. The lessons learned may be useful to other practitioners developing evaluations around state- or national-level plans.

Keywords: evaluation, national plan, parks, policy, worksite

Strategic planning is common in public health practice, with its aim of producing decisions and actions that guide what an organization is, what it does, and why it makes certain decisions.¹⁻³ A continuous process, strategic planning identifies intended outcomes and appropriate measures of success. This process has been used in the development of national plans; however, efforts infrequently include adequate evaluation, a cornerstone of public health practice.

In recent years, strategic planning efforts address physical activity. Countries such as Australia, Kuwait, Northern Ireland, Norway, Scotland, Sweden, the United Kingdom, and the United States (US) all created national plans specifically to promote physical activity.⁴⁻⁶ The plans typically included a series of policy and/or practice recommendations intended to increase population-level physical activity, goals for the country's physical activity, details of how the plan was created, and epidemiological evidence to support the recommendations.⁴ In the US, the first national level plan to focus exclusively on physical activity was released in 2010.⁷

Background on Development and Implementation of the US National Physical Activity Plan

Purpose of the Plan

The US National Physical Activity Plan (NPAP) is a document with a comprehensive set of policies, programs, and initiatives that aim to increase physical activity for all people living in the US.

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Timeline

A timeline of key dates surrounding the development, release, and evaluation of the NPAP can be found in Table 1. In 2006, efforts began with a roundtable on the topic at a national meeting. In 2007, the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention provided funding to recruit organizations interested in joining the coalition as organizational partners. As part of this public sector-private organization collaboration, most organizational partners contributed money and in-kind support for the NPAP, including supporting an individual to serve on the NPAP Coordinating Committee.

Lead Organizations

The Coordinating Committee, representing government, nongovernment, private, and nonprofit organizations involved in physical activity and public health, as well as several prominent physical activity and public health experts, was created to help develop, launch, and provide ongoing leadership in executing the NPAP. To do so, the Committee included Subcommittees for evaluating the plan, to increase awareness of the plan, and to update the plan. With time, Coordinating Committee membership has changed, and a list of organizations associated with the Coordinating Committee can be found elsewhere (<http://physicalactivityplan.org/committee.php>).⁸ The Coordinating Committee collaborated openly with approximately 300 additional individuals (http://physicalactivityplan.org/history/working_groups.php) and organizations (http://physicalactivityplan.org/partners_affiliates.php) throughout the process of developing and releasing the NPAP.

Sector Formation

White papers were developed by experts around the following sectors: business and industry;⁹ education;¹⁰ health care;¹¹ parks, recreation, fitness, and sports;¹² public health;¹³ transportation,

Table 1 Timeline of Key Events Related to the National Physical Activity Plan

Date	Event
4/2006	American College of Sports Medicine roundtable on developing a national plan
9/2007	US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention awarded funding to initiate plan
2/2008	First in-person meeting of the National Physical Activity Plan Coordinating Committee
10/2008	US Department of Health and Human Services released the first comprehensive federal Physical Activity Guidelines for Americans ¹⁷
1/2009	Creation of the National Physical Activity Plan website (http://www.physicalactivityplan.org/)
1/2009	National Coalition for Promoting Physical Activity agreed to provide assistance with plan implementation
7/2009	National Physical Activity Plan conference in Washington D.C.
5/2010	Launch of the National Physical Activity Plan
11/2010	Release of the national implementation plan by the National Coalition for Promoting Physical Activity ²¹
2/2011	Start of evaluation of the National Physical Activity Plan

land use, and community design;¹⁴ mass media;¹⁵ and volunteer and nonprofit organization.¹⁶ A national conference was held to review the white papers and to begin developing the content for the NPAP. Approximately 300 individuals attended the conference and participants self-selected into 1 of 8 sector working groups for each of the 8 sectors in the NPAP (http://physicalactivityplan.org/history/working_groups.php). The NPAP Coordinating Committee identified chairs and cochairs for each sector working group.

Release of National Physical Activity Plan

The NPAP followed upon the first-ever comprehensive federal physical activity guidelines,¹⁷ released in 2008, to assist efforts in reaching national health goals, such as Healthy People 2020.¹⁸ The guidelines provided evidence-based recommendations on the types and amounts of physical activity that can yield substantial health benefits; however, those guidelines did not specify the changes that were needed to actualize those recommendations.¹⁹ Therefore, a strategic planning process was used to develop the NPAP, identifying specific policies, practices, and initiatives that theoretically could result in higher population levels of physical activity.¹⁹ The plan includes strategies grounded in scientific and practice-based evidence that target local, state, and national levels and was motivated by the ecologic model of health behavior.²⁰

Plan Implementation: The NPAP, released in May 2010, included 5 overarching strategies and 44 specific strategies with corresponding tactics to address them. The plan grouped the specific strategies into 8 sectors and white papers were developed around each. The sectors (with the corresponding number of strategies) included

1. Public health (n = 5)
2. Education (n = 7)
3. Transportation, land use, and community design (n = 4)
4. Health care (n = 6)
5. Business and industry (n = 5)
6. Parks, recreation, fitness, and sports (n = 6)
7. Volunteer and nonprofit organizations (n = 3)
8. Mass media (n = 8).

Six months after the NPAP launch, a group led by the National Coalition for Promoting Physical Activity (NCPA) released a companion implementation plan called “Make the Move” to guide initial

efforts on NPAP goals.²¹ This document identified measurable outcomes and objectives of the NPAP, presented for each of the 8 sectors identified in the NPAP. The plan was intended to help define priorities and identify measurable outcomes and annual objectives for advancing NPAP strategies. For some, but not all strategies, they included 1-year and 5-year goals, and tactics to achieve them, as well as examples of success stories.

Upon release of the implementation plan,²¹ the NCPA used the sector working group lists from the national conference as the starting point for populating the 6 sector teams they established. As additional individuals expressed interest in joining the implementation effort, they were offered a choice as to which sector team they would like to be a member of, and were subsequently added to that team. Those 6 sectors began meeting regularly around sector goals. Although the (i) mass media and (ii) volunteer and nonprofit organization sectors were identified in the NPAP, neither had defined strategies in the implementation plan and did not form into a sector team. Sectors had the liberty to structure implementation in their own way, as long as it centered on achieving year-one strategies, generally outlined in the implementation plan.²¹

Plan Evaluation

An initial plan to evaluate the NPAP was developed through the Physical Activity Policy Research Network (<http://paprn.wustl.edu/>), working from a detailed logic model. The initial evaluation included a survey of the National Society of Physical Activity Practitioners members,²² a case study of state contacts on how the NPAP was being used and could be improved,²³ a similar case study within the state of Texas, interviews with organizational partners,⁸ and an evaluation of the sector activities and progress toward goals.

Aims of this Paper

This paper describes efforts of the 6 sectors during 2011, based on quarterly reports and in-depth interviews with sector leadership. This evaluation effort (i) provides feedback to leaders of the NPAP thereby enabling them to assess what is working and areas for improvement, (ii) documents baseline process information that can be used to continue monitoring objectives, and (iii) highlights an example of a process evaluation and lessons learned that may be useful to others developing evaluations for national-level plans.

Methods

The University of North Carolina–Chapel Hill Institutional Review Board reviewed and approved these activities as exempt. The evaluation team developed a password-protected Internet-based reporting system, including a quarterly report document, to capture activities occurring in each sector during 2011. The reports were usually filled out by sector leads. “Sector leads” refer to the chairs of a sector and “strategy leads” refer to those appointed to manage a particular strategy within the sector. The quarterly report documented the following for each sector: work being done; progress toward goals; products, programs, practice / policy changes; and media generated each quarter. The report also asked about the following questions for each goal in the implementation plan:²¹ accomplishments toward it, changes in wording, resources or materials generated; media coverage or promotional activities; and any relevant engagement with national, state, or local officials. To supplement information gathered from the quarterly reports, the evaluation team collected and posted on the website notes from sector and strategy meetings. Sector members received a template to record these notes as useful to them, and facilitate articulation of how activities connected to specific goals from the implementation plan.

Qualitative interviews were conducted at the end of the year with sector leads, in which they reflected on the year’s accomplishments and lessons learned. Six interviews were conducted by telephone with the 12 sector leads between December 2011 and January 2012, representing each of the 5 sectors that were operating at year’s end. The sixth sector ceased meeting during 2011 and thus did not participate in year-end interviews. With permission, these interviews were recorded, transcribed verbatim, checked, and analyzed for common themes. Coding of the quotes to themes was conducted by both authors to provide checks for

consistency, with any discrepancies discussed to reach consensus. A final summary was sent to the sector leads that participated in the interviews for review, as well as to members of the Coordinating Committee.

Results

The accomplishments of the 6 sectors are summarized in Table 2, guided mainly by the sector strategies and goals outlined in the implementation plan.²¹ These activities focused broadly on education, promotion, intervention, policy, collaboration, and evaluation. Through the year-end interviews with sector leads, the evaluation team generated themes exemplified by quotes around operations, goal setting, and cross-sector collaboration (Table 3) and around both challenges and positive experiences (Table 4).

Operations

Each sector had 1 to 4 sector leads, and half of the sectors replaced at least 1 of their leads during 2011. Leadership changes often were attributed to time constraints of the departing sector lead. Each sector created its own approach to organizing its group. In discussing their processes for selecting strategy leads, sector leads suggested it was useful to have written expectations of what the position entailed and to seek people who were passionate about the work. Some sectors preferred communicating to strategy leads and members on an as-needed basis, while other sectors opted for scheduled monthly updates. For strategy-level communication, in 4 of the 5 sectors, meetings were held separately for each strategy, and tended to be on an as-needed basis. One sector scheduled an in-person strategy leaders retreat to reflect on the work accomplished and focus on future priorities.

Table 2 Strategies and Example Activities for the 6 NPAP Sectors

Strategies by sector*	Example activities
Business and Industry	
1: Identify best practices and model interventions. Establish the NPAP as a leading “go-to” resource. Evaluate effective physical activity interventions in the workplace.	Collected and evaluated best practices for integrating physical activity into the workplace.
2: Develop a multicomunication and outreach plan designed to engage, inform, and inspire leaders to promote active lifestyles in organizations, industries, and local communities.	Developed a CEO pledge that business leaders could sign to support physical activity. Created marketing and communication strategies around the pledge.
3: Develop legislation and policy agendas that promote employer-sponsored physical activity. Carefully protect individual employees’ and dependents’ rights.	Tracked worksite wellness legislation. Convened leaders together to discuss the use of incentives in worksite wellness programs. Drafted model legislation on worksite wellness programming.
Education	
1 and 2: Develop state and school district policies that require comprehensive physical activity programs and include mechanisms for monitoring implementation.	Drafted model policy.
4: Ensure that early childhood education settings for children 0–5 years promote and facilitate physical activity.	Disseminate the physical activity guidelines from 2 organizations. Present childcare related physical activity model policies to 6 state teams.
5: Promote physical activity before school, afterschool, and during the summer.	Drafted afterschool physical activity and nutrition standards and related legislation. Surveyed 7500 programs about guidelines for after school activity. Helped develop the first National Standards on Nutrition and Physical Activity for Afterschool Programs.

(continued)

Table 2 (continued)

Strategies by sector*	Example activities
Health Care	
1: Make physical activity a “vital sign” for health care providers to assess and discuss with patients/clients.	Outreach to 40 largest US health care provider organizations. “Exercise is Medicine” was distributed to health care providers, supporting physical activity assessment. Engaged 3 producers of electronic medical records in discussions regarding inclusion of physical activity fields. Convened a work group and drafted the Health care Effectiveness Data Information Set (HEDIS) measure.
5: Include physical activity education in the training of all health care professionals.	Surveyed 16 medical organizations to document how they educate members on physical activity interventions with patients. Generated best practices based on the survey results.
6: Advocate at the local, state, and institutional levels for policies and programs that promote physical activity.	Developed a survey to identify individuals to engage the team around physical activity promotion.
Parks, Recreation, Fitness, and Sports	
2: Promote physical activity programs where people work, learn, live, play, and worship. Provide access to safe and affordable physical activity opportunities.	Announcement by the YMCA on incorporating access to physical activity and health food in its early childhood and afterschool programs.
3: Use existing professional, amateur, and college athletics and sports infrastructures to enhance physical activity opportunities in communities.	Developed and piloted a survey to identify programs that promote physical activity within their respective sports. Piloted strategies for a formal campaign launch.
4: Increase funding and resources for high needs areas in parks, recreation, fitness, and sports.	Administered a survey on joint-use agreements to the National Recreation & Park Association. Collaborated with organizations to create and distribute a toolkit on joint use agreements.
5: Improve and monitor physical activity levels. Gauge program effectiveness in parks, recreation, fitness, and sports settings. Base information on geographic population representation, and not merely numbers served.	Created a vision document to inventory programs and standardize metrics.
6: Coordinate advocacy to integrate physical activity opportunities into open spaces and outdoor recreation areas. Maintain and enhance environmental functions and values.	Surveyed Outdoor Alliance for Kids members. Drafted legislation to increase outdoor physical activity opportunities.
Public Health	
1: Develop and maintain an ethnically and culturally diverse public health workforce of both genders with competence and expertise in physical activity and health.	Developed a public marketing campaign to encourage certification of Physical Activity in Public Health Specialists.
2: Create, maintain, and leverage cross-sector partnerships and coalitions that implement effective strategies to promote physical activity.	Held webinars about transportation and health, as well as related grant opportunities.
3: Engage in advocacy and policy development to elevate the priority of physical activity in public health practice, policy, and research.	Advocate for federal legislation to increase physical activity generally and specifically around the Surface Transportation Authorization Act. Promote “Health in All Policies” at the state level to health officials.
4: Disseminate tools and resources to promote physical activity, including resources that address the burden of disease due to inactivity, the implementation of evidence-based interventions, and funding opportunities for physical activity initiatives.	Updated matrix of physical activity resources.
5: Expand the monitoring of policy and environmental determinants of physical activity and the levels of physical activity in communities, and monitor the implementation of public health approaches to promote active lifestyles.	Appointed liaison to the Physical Activity Policy Research Network.
Transportation, Land Use, and Community Design	
2: Improve community-planning processes to integrate and prioritize opportunities to increase bicycling, walking, and other physical activity related outcomes.	Distributed information on a call for proposals on health impact assessments.

* The table highlights a subset of strategies in which activities were completed in 2011. The strategies and corresponding goals are listed by number and can be cross-referenced in the implementation plan.²¹

Table 3 Exemplary Quotes From the In-Depth Interviews on the Themes of Operations, Goal Setting, and Cross-Sector Collaboration

Theme	Exemplary quotes
Operations	
Sector leadership	“I will say personally, that having [more than 2] co-leaders made it even more difficult ... [if] we had to turn something around fairly quickly, and it was like just trying to find time for ... us to chat about what we were going to do with kind of a deadline was very problematic.”
Sector organization	“I chose people to be strategy leaders if I knew they were good at what they did and they cared and they were passionate about the work. So it wasn’t about having somebody be in charge who was politically advantageous. It’s about people that I knew were go-getters that could accomplish some things.”
Sector management	“We had pretty robust calls with people who sort of signed on and now it seems to just really rotate between about 5 people or so.” “I think to have it less as work groups of busy individuals and to tap more and more into the organizational capacity that those individuals represent.”
Planned annual review	“We actually did an in-person strategy leader retreat... We shared about what we were doing, talked about barriers and challenges, and then we also kind of talked about what would we want to accomplish in the next year and ... next few months.”
Goal setting	
Language	“I don’t recall having a very formal discussion about it. It was just that we looked at what our original goals had been and how far we had come and, okay, what are the next steps to keep moving towards those.” “I think that the goals ... could have been more specific, more endable or attainable. I think it’s just a learning process. We didn’t know exactly what we were getting into at the time.”
Procedure	“I think what we do lives within the organizations... we’re not trying to build up a very large volunteer team of individuals to move things forward...[This process] has just evolved over time and is not something that was like, let’s make this a strategic decision to do this versus doing something else.” “At the heart of what we’re doing with the National Plan, and these sector meetings most of the time, it’s not doing something new. It’s almost always collaborating on something that’s already been done. And to a large degree, again, not to be exclusive, but to a large degree, so much of this is simply capturing work that is being done so that we can coordinate and make sure that we’re not potentially leaving gaps or things of that nature with our work. Making sure that things are being accomplished so that they can be for a larger picture, and not in a fragmented way. So much of our work comes with the National Plan and the implementation plan comes down to coordinating and capturing the efforts as opposed to creating new efforts.” “I think one of the models, going back to the groups that I think do a good job ... is being able to work off of those quarterly reports. But then work backwards and establish some communication guidelines and then practices for not only our sector leadership, but then also the individual working groups so that we can get the information back when we need to get it, aggregate it into a common report and then upload it when it’s supposed to be done.”
Cross-sector collaboration	
Need for more collaboration	“I think everybody is being on task and I don’t want to overstate this, but ... it just may be that there would be relevance to other sectors that would make it a more powerful kind of achievement. And that there probably needs for something to be a catalyst, to ensure that that is occurring at least on some regular basis of the compare and contrast how do those sectors align, complement, work with each other.” “What I’d like to see is more integration across sectors from the strategic planning standpoint, at least just on an annual basis where there can be this sort of discussion. What did everybody learn, what are the challenges in other groups, what are some best practices in communication of the information dissemination and reporting, versus each sector having its own style and lifeline. Are there some best practices that can help to alleviate some known challenges that are coming down the road? Whether or not our sector has experienced those yet, it’s likely that we will.” “There is no other formal reach-out that I am aware of between sectors. Now I guess having said that, I think there’s significant opportunities with our sector being primarily a place of where activity may be performed.”
Clarification on how to collaborate across sectors	“As a matter of fact, the dynamic of conversation within any given sector I think is low. So when you apply that to one sector “working with” another sector, what exactly does that look like? What does that mean? Is that creating a new initiative? A new policy level effort? Or is that working to document efforts that are going on that we’re now documenting across sectors?”

Table 4 Exemplary Quotes From the In-Depth Interviews on the Themes of Challenges and Positive Experiences

Challenges	Exemplary quotes	Positive experiences	Exemplary quotes
Lack of funding	<p>“I don’t think we had really found a successful way ... or maybe we’re not having as much success as we could expect with no real resources ... I’m really not sure on that. But that, I think, is one of the lessons learned is in spite of all that, we do still have interest of people to get on board and contribute at a pretty high level.”</p> <p>“I think it’s really important [resources]. I mean you have to operate, and I know they’re kind of struggling a little bit on this operation part, but I have an organization I can’t ... put money into that.”</p> <p>“The whole success of how far we’ve come as a group has been basically because all these organizations are willing to pitch in their own resources, soft resources, time, events, things like that.”</p> <p>“I know from much speaking from my organization we are constantly challenged on where to allocate resources, and people resources is a valuable asset, and we’re a for-profit company and we have other things always going on. And it has been difficult and some of that pressure has been elevated I guess over the last year where at this point, although there’s no intention of us to not support the plan, the depth in which we can continue to support from a resource standpoint, that may change.”</p> <p>“I think really resources would be the main challenge, just trying to find the time. Certainly there are financial challenges as well, although ... I personally feel the time challenge the most.”</p>	Efficiency of work	<p>“I think its allowed organizations to contribute to the level that they want to. And I think that’s always good. Its ... been good to identify those organizations that really do have a deep DNA kind of based commitment to this. And it furthermore has been ... great to appreciate that there sure is a lot of stuff going on in very positive ways that probably aren’t captured in kind of like the four corners of the National Plan workgroups.”</p> <p>“Aside from specific goal attainment and achievement, it’s just a tremendous educational opportunity to hear about things that are happening in different parts of the country that you might not necessarily be aware of. And ... working together and making sure that we’re not recreating the wheel where we don’t have to, trying to make things more efficient.”</p>
Lack of time		Collaboration	<p>“The National Plan has really provided an opportunity for collaboration I feel among a lot of the organizations within our sector, which has been nice, and it’s not to say that it wouldn’t have necessarily happened otherwise, but I think that certainly this has been a wonderful way to facilitate that, and has made it a lot smoother and there’s a nice kind of aura of camaraderie in that we’re all working towards a common goal.”</p>
Need for marketing and promotion	<p>“We have not done a great job as a sector marketing or promoting our sector or the Make the Move report.”</p>	Accomplishments toward goals	<p>“The National Plan has really provided an opportunity for collaboration I feel among a lot of the organizations within our sector ... There’s a nice kind of aura of camaraderie in that we’re all working towards a common goal.”</p> <p>“In the start-up you’ve got a small room of people and you need co-chairs and you need strategy leaders, and people were just kind of stepping up in an effort to get things moving, and fortunately, I think that is one of the success stories is we were able to add some capacity, share the load, and the interest among other organizations.”</p>
Organizational support	<p>“I feel like we kind of are just operating. We are just doing it because we committed to a 5-year plan. It just does not feel like there is a lot of strong support behind it. I hear it talked about by leadership, but who are the committed people behind seeing this through?”</p>	Community dynamic	<p>“I think it’s leveraging, and I think it’s true for everyone, is that we are leveraging each other’s roles, responsibilities to try to really have a common message and a common vision, but also keep it where there’s a policy continuum.”</p> <p>“I think that while there has not been a tremendous amount of internal sector collaboration on the processes of carrying out our duties, I think that there has been an increased familiarity of an increased sense of family among those groups so that as we learn more about what each other is about and as we learn more about how each other works, there is an increased likelihood that we will seek out our brother and sister agencies to work together on some of these things. So it’s almost like reuniting with family. You know that you have a common set of values and perspectives, and while you don’t get together very often as family, you know that each other is there if you need each other. And I think that as we get together more often we will reinforce that familial value.”</p>

For sector leads, activities they organized included: establishing leads for each strategy within the sector, holding regular calls among sector members, regularly reviewing goals, and planning an annual review. One interviewee described the importance of staying organized “from the leadership, communication both up and down, to the individual working groups and then back up to the sector leadership.” This helped maintain momentum and encourage efficient use of time and resources.

Goal Setting

Describing their processes for goal-setting in 2011, sector leads stated they worked on strategies mostly from the implementation plan, without creating new goals. Goals were viewed as continuous and not time-bound by a calendar year, despite being written into the implementation plan as 1- and 5-year goals. One sector lead described a fluid process, stating that it was an informal decision among the sector leads to continue working toward goals from the previous year. Sectors reported different parties responsible for choosing the actionable strategies and goals for the year. In some sectors, only coleads participated in the decision. In one sector, the strategy teams were responsible for revising their own strategies and goals. In other sectors, conversations were held among full sector membership.

The decision around which goals to work on in 2011 also focused on feasibility and whether the goals overlapped with partner goals. Feasibility was defined by one interviewee as the set of activities that could be worked on in a single year, and another defined it as activities from the implementation plan that could fit with the available time and resources. With respect to overlapping goals, several interviewees suggested focusing on work that integrated with in progress or forthcoming activities at partner organizations (that they represented) instead of trying to create a new set of activities.

Sector leads were asked to reflect on lessons learned from goal setting. Responses described issues around language and procedure, including a desire for strategies that were “discrete,” “specific,” and “attainable” and more actionable goals that were not “lofty.” Comments also included the idea that this was a learning process, with one interviewee suggesting a benefit to acknowledging that their work was expected to change over time, while another stated that the sector was planning to reorganize for the coming year. Setting a regular review of strategies and goals, and establishing roles and responsibilities between sector and strategy leads at the outset of the year, were both recommended. One lead stated the importance of making a conscious effort to nurture momentum and another lead noted that the quarterly reporting mechanism was a way to help stay on task with goals and activities.

Cross-Sector Collaboration

During 2011, cross-sector collaboration did not usually occur, although informal collaborations and contacts were made through regular calls and in-person meetings with the NCPA director. Several sectors mentioned approaching a time when collaborations made sense. One person noted that a NPAP divided into sectors had an “artificiality to it” because “life and opportunities and challenges and breakthroughs . . . don’t always happen in that way.” For that person, cross-sector work made sense, echoing an idea expressed that cross-sector collaboration is “an important piece that probably could be leveraged a lot further.” Others voiced questions about what it meant to work across sectors, including the logistics of the activities, who would organize them, and the content of the effort.

Challenges

Challenges included lack of funding and time, a need for marketing and promotion, and limited organizational support. None of the sectors received financial support from the NPAP during 2011; however, sector leads noted in-kind work from individuals and organizations. Lack of funding was described as a greater challenge for some sectors than others. One sector lead voiced that as a sector they could not keep “doing this for free . . . so it is critical that we can go out to funders and make this case.” Another interviewee expressed frustration around an inability to show appreciation to their members due to the lack of funding. Other comments suggested that the funding situation showcased a high level of commitment among participants to continue with the NPAP work despite the circumstances.

Other sector leads identified time as their primary challenge and a few suggested a need for marketing and promotion of the NPAP. One interviewee expressed both concern about not understanding the current direction of the NPAP and a personal need to motivate strategy members around goals and combat “strategy fatigue.” The same person suggested further elucidating “who” the NPAP is, “what” its supporters are trying to do, and identifying opportunities for sector leads to have a better connection to the core Coordinating Committee. A suggestion offered by several sector leads was to improve communication between the Coordinating Committee and the sectors, and one direct recommendation was that sectors be represented on the Coordinating Committee.

Positive Experiences

Leads from each sector voiced that accomplishments made toward stated goals as part of their positive experiences in 2011. For example, one lead stated that “I think we’ve gotten a lot accomplished in a year with no outside resources. I mean this is just, as we talked about, in-kind and time given. . . . I’m always impressed by that.”

Sector leads were asked about any additional positive experiences from the process, apart from those accomplishments. In response, they noted additional benefits in the form of the dynamic within their respective communities and the focus on efficient work. Several interviewees said worthwhile connections created in working on the NPAP translated into their current job. The networking has led to larger discussions within the health promotion community around other issues apart from NPAP goals. Similarly, sector leads described a sense of camaraderie that developed among organizations working together on the NPAP. Related to goal achievement and improved community dynamic, one sector lead also stated that work around the NPAP introduced partners to work elsewhere in the nation that they may not have heard of otherwise and encouraged organizations to work efficiently by not recreating efforts already in place elsewhere. Another lead suggested the process was useful in allowing organizations with a range of capacity to contribute to the effort, in identifying those organizations with a deep commitment to the effort, and in capturing the work being done at all levels.

Discussion

Though national plans exist for a number of health behaviors and diseases, many plans, including those focused on physical activity,⁴ do not include an evaluation component or conduct evaluation following the plan release. During development of the NPAP, there was early commitment to evaluation, in alignment with recommendations from the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

and the World Health Organization that identify evaluation as an essential element of a physical activity plan.²⁴ This paper summarizes evaluation of the NPAP efforts during 2011 at the sector level, including process evaluation, operations, goal setting, cross-sector collaboration, barriers to address moving forward, and positive experiences.

Process Evaluation

An overall benefit of the current process evaluation was in synthesizing activities to date that were not otherwise captured. The quarterly reports provided a forum for sector members to document accomplishments in supporting the ongoing work of individual partner organizations or new efforts generated by the sector. The reports also provided space to record products and media generated, and note any changes in sector goals. Sector leads were relied upon to complete the reports, many of whom were busy volunteers. Therefore, we found that it was important for quarterly reports to be concise, allow multiple users to complete a single report, and flexible so that questions could be added or removed as needed. In the future, it will be important to maintain consistency in the reports within and across sectors, especially during any turnovers in leadership.

The quarterly reports were part of a web-based system the evaluation team developed, along with informal guidance for sector members on how to use the system. The time and resources used to develop, test, and finalize the system were challenges, though likely only initial investments. The website housed quarterly reports and provided space for all sector members to share materials in an effort to enhance communication both within and across sectors. In upcoming years, the website could be more fully used by sector members, and provide a way to summarize work to communicate with the Coordinating Committee.

The evaluation also included year-end interviews, a key component that provided opportunities for reflection among sector leads and deeper discussion around challenges and positive experiences. As some sector leads stated, the process provided an impetus to trigger thought on ways to adjust their work moving forward, and so became part of the actual sector activity. If monitoring continues, each of the evaluation components also provides an ongoing way to conduct surveillance.

While others²⁵ recommended developing a specific plan to evaluate the implementation (process), impact (short-term results), and outcomes (long-term results) of national physical activity policies, the effort described was a formative process evaluation. It was intended to identify whether implementation was happening, what worked well, and what could be improved. With additional resources, future efforts may be more summative in describing other evaluation components. The criteria used to evaluate a national-level plan may differ from that of program evaluation. This is an area for possible future work, both to advance the field in general, and to further evaluate NPAP implementation.

Operations and Goal Setting

The 2010 NPAP designated overarching strategies as well as sector-based strategies and tactics. Work groups created around these sectors focused on goals outlined in the implementation plan.²¹ The sectors had the freedom to organize and operate in the ways that worked best for them; however, the evaluation did not identify which organizational model was most effective. To enhance operations, based on comments from sector leads, it may be useful for sectors

to identify SMART criteria (specific, measurable, achievable, realistic, timely) for future goal setting.²⁶ In particular, strategies that span more than 1 year will become more actionable if they are accompanied by 1-year objectives. SMART goals and objectives can enhance future evaluation efforts and address some of the challenges faced while working on goals.

Cross-sector Collaboration

The evaluation found that cross-sector collaboration did not commonly happen in the first year, although several sector leads remarked that they envisioned overlap with other sectors. Several leads questioned how collaboration of this type would be operationalized in the future. A mechanism to regularly share complementary efforts and lessons learned across sectors could facilitate collaboration. In addition, leadership could encourage sector members to review and update their goals, considering how their goals cross-cut sectors. Shared goals across sectors could help reduce duplicate efforts as work continues on the NPAP.

Barriers

The interviews with sector leads identified several barriers to their work. Not unexpected, the lack of funding was a concern. While time intensive, the sectors could consider tracking donated time and resources from participant organizations. The information may be useful in seeking funding and promoting NPAP accomplishments. Organizational support was also mentioned as a barrier, including a perceived lack of communication between the Coordinating Committee and the sectors, some of which do not have representation on the Committee. The obvious way to improve this would be to ensure that each sector work group included a member from the Coordinating Committee. The management of all sectors could be enhanced through support on organizational tasks.

Positive Experiences

In the year-end interviews, sector leads collectively described pride in progress toward accomplishing sector goals. A frequent theme was that work around the NPAP enhanced communication with others in the field, brought to light work that partners may not have learned of otherwise, and built a camaraderie that has extended to work outside of the NPAP. In short, these positive experiences around relationship building and information sharing can benefit the public health field at large.

Conclusions

The 2010 NPAP identified specific policies, practices, and initiatives to improve population levels of physical activity for all people and is a companion to the US physical activity guidelines.¹⁷ Evaluation is a key component of this process and national plans that prioritize evaluation have the potential for greater effectiveness and sustainability. The NPAP authors envisioned the plan as a living document to be regularly updated. In conjunction with this, the continuing evaluation system needs the same fluidity, to capture activities and outcomes as the plan changes. While early evaluation efforts of the NPAP, as described here, focused on process, eventually the evaluation should move toward evaluating short- and long-term outcomes. Ultimately, effectiveness of the NPAP will be evaluated through its impact on nationwide population levels of physical activity.

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