ASSESSING CAPACITY FOR SUSTAINABILITY in Local Health Departments

Sustainability has been defined as the **existence of structures and processes** that allow a program to leverage resources to effectively implement and maintain evidence-based public health. It is important in local health departments (LHDs) to retain the benefits of effective programs. The **Sustainability Framework**, which includes 8 domains, is a useful tool for assessing public health program capacity for sustainability among LHDs.

This qualitative study aimed to explore what factors contribute to the sustained use of evidence-based programs and policies in high-capacity and low-capacity LHDs.

- 35 interviews with LHD directors and management team
- 6 geographically dispersed LHDs, 3 of low and 3 of high capacity

It was expected that high-capacity LHDs were more likely to have leadership and organizational culture and climates that were supportive of evidence-based practices.

**LHD capacity was based on:**
- Administrative evidence-based process scores
- National Public Health Performance Standards Scores

**FINDINGS**

**Leadership support** is important because leaders have the ability to affect the adoption of EBDM in their LHDs directly through **resource allocation** (human & material), and indirectly through **encouragement, support, and mentorship**.

**Strong leadership support**
- Adequate staff & training
- Evaluation integrated into program implementation
- Ability to evaluate and adapt programs
- Consistent and supportive top-down communication
- Greater effort to integrate EBDM into strategic plans

**Low-capacity**
- Unsupportive elected officials
- Staff recruitment and retention difficult
- Limited capacity for measurement
- Innovation not always welcome
- Poor communication about importance of EBDM
- Financial constraints as limiting

Evidence-based decision making (EBDM) is a process that involves making decisions on the basis of the best available evidence, applying program planning and quality improvement frameworks, engaging the community in assessment and decision-making, and conducting sound evaluation.

**High-capacity**
- Strong leadership support
- Limited Funding
- Importance of partnerships
- Knowledge of EBDM
- Greater effort to integrate EBDM into strategic plans

**Low-capacity**
- Unsupportive elected officials
- Staff recruitment and retention difficult
- Limited capacity for measurement
- Innovation not always welcome
- Poor communication about importance of EBDM
- Financial constraints as limiting

Leadership support is important because leaders have the ability to affect the adoption of EBDM in their LHDs directly through resource allocation (human & material), and indirectly through encouragement, support, and mentorship.

**Strengthening communication and program evaluation** within a LHD would help to build an internal agency culture that research suggests would be more resilient to external conflicts, like funding instability or complicated political environments.