Facilitating Alignment and Strategic Thinking (FAST™) is an efficient and effective rapid strategic planning process, designed by Health Resources in Action (HRiA). Unlike a traditional strategic planning process that can take many months and be costly, FAST is a shorter, more cost-effective approach that produces high-quality results and delivers high value and satisfaction for stakeholders. FAST has been used by health care institutions, public health departments, government agencies, and community-based organizations across the country to enhance performance, promote stakeholder engagement, and foster quality improvement. This brief describes the FAST approach and how you can use it to maximize your impact.

Authors: Rose Swensen, MBA; Laurie Stillman, MM; and Steve Ridini EdD
Overview

Strategic planning is an essential, deliberative process that institutions and community organizations frequently undertake to realize their missions, meet requirements or mandates, and achieve measurable change and results. Linking strategic planning and continuous quality improvement is particularly pertinent in the health care and public health sectors, where external pressures demand clear demonstration of ongoing efficiencies and effectiveness.

One challenge facing the health care and public health sectors is that strategic plans often have a short life — about three years — because the health ecosystem is evolving so rapidly. Indeed, IRS regulations governing non-profit hospitals require that their community benefits departments create strategic plans for this timeframe. Likewise, government public health departments must create a community or state health improvement plan — plus an internal strategic plan — at least every five years if they desire national accreditation. A research brief by the National Association of County and City Health Officials (NACCHO) found that many hospitals and public health departments are now collaborating to align population health improvement efforts.

Maximizing Impact

FAST addresses two components that are critical to an effective, collaborative health improvement effort:

A focus on evidence-based, high impact prevention strategies

Based on research, we know that human health is shaped by our experiences in five domains: behavioral choices, social circumstances, environmental conditions, genetic makeup, and medical care. However, morbidity and mortality rates are more dependent on the physical, social, and economic contexts in which people live and work than the medical care they receive.

With this in mind, the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) has devised a framework that suggests how institutions can more effectively target health improvement strategies and resources. The framework (Figure 1) suggests that the bottom three levels of the “Health Impact Pyramid” will yield the largest impact on long-term population health outcomes and costs. Thus, effective planning must focus on strategies that address the community policies, systems, and environments that shape personal health behaviors.

FIGURE 1: CDC Health Impact Pyramid

Largest Impact

- Counseling & Education: Eat healthy, be physically active
- Clinical Interventions: Rx for high blood pressure, high cholesterol, diabetes
- Long-lasting Protective Interventions: Immunizations, brief intervention, cessation treatment, colonoscopy
- Changing the Context to make individuals’ default decisions healthy: Fluoridation, trans fat, smoke-free laws, tobacco tax
- Socioeconomic Factors: Poverty, education, housing, inequality
Likewise, medical care institutions can improve patient outcomes and reduce costs by preventing the need for expensive medical interventions. This can be accomplished by increasing the adoption of evidence-based chronic care and proactive clinical risk factor management.

A multi-disciplinary approach that brings a diverse group of stakeholders to the table

Community health and medical center efforts to reform health care delivery systems for better value care, growth, and sustainability are enhanced when strategic planning processes include cross-departmental employees, multi-sector partners, clients, and funders.

The most effective approaches to improving community health bridge health care, public health, and community building sectors in a unified system of health improvement. Regional collaborations, where diverse sectors work in unison on a shared agenda, coordinated approaches, and common indicators hold the most promise for containing costs and eradicating health inequities.

Many health improvement initiatives are committed to addressing health disparities by focusing efforts in vulnerable/oppressed communities. They recognize that improving the social and economic opportunities within those communities will be as important as the quality and availability of health care services. (See HRIAs Report, Embracing Equity in Community Health Improvement — 2015). Therefore, the key to effective health equity planning is engaging diverse community stakeholders with varied experiences and knowledge in a process that creates shared responsibility and action.

Similarly, public health, health care, and medical academic institutions are recognizing the value of engaging the community building sectors (e.g., housing, community development, transportation, financial/social services, and public safety) in their efforts to improve population health. Engaging collectively to identify areas of shared responsibility and action will yield the greatest impact.

There are a number of organizations that impact the social, economic, and medical determinants of health (See Figure 2 or Stakeholder Engagement Tool). Further, many of these organizations are mandated to engage in health improvement planning.

FIGURE 2: Multisector Organizations Impacting Community Health
### TABLE 1: Multisector Planning Efforts

Table 1 provides a list of health and community building sectors and their planning responsibilities. In the interest of promoting impactful change, it is best if planning efforts are coordinated and aligned.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ENTITY</th>
<th>#s</th>
<th>DESCRIPTION</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Public Health Departments</td>
<td>2,800</td>
<td>State and local government health departments often conduct CHAs and CHIPs as part of their missions. They are required to be updated every five years, if nationally accredited.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tax-Exempt Hospitals</td>
<td>2,900</td>
<td>IRS regulations stipulate that non-profit hospitals conduct CHNAs and Strategic Implementation Plans (SIPs) every three years and post them for public view.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Federally Qualified Community Health Centers (FQHC)</td>
<td>1,000</td>
<td>FQHCs engage in planning for federal Health Resources and Services Administration (HRSA) designation and must address community and patient health. This includes examination of medical, dental, and mental health services, as well as specific health outcomes.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community Action Agencies</td>
<td>1,100</td>
<td>Private and public anti-poverty agencies are required to perform a needs assessment every three years and develop a community strategic plan every five years to be eligible for Community Services Block Grant funds.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community Development Finance Institutions (CDFI)</td>
<td>800</td>
<td>The Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation (FDIC) evaluates certified CDFIs. Regulations allow these financial institutions to develop a three-year strategic plan, with community input and data, as a pathway for their evaluation. It must be available for public comment. Evaluation criteria includes the extent of community development lending.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>United Way Affiliates</td>
<td>1,300</td>
<td>Most United Way affiliates are guided by local community assessment and strategic plans, with focus on areas and giving that address education, income, and health.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public Housing Agencies (PHA)</td>
<td>3,330</td>
<td>PHAs have to develop five-year plans. Larger PHAs have to update them annually. New regulations will likely require the collection of housing and neighborhood data useful for promoting healthier communities, such as on neighborhood segregation, income, and affordable housing.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Area Agencies on Aging (AAA)</td>
<td>665</td>
<td>The Administration on Aging (AoA) awards funds for nutrition and supportive home and community-based services to the 56 State Units on Aging (SUAs), 655 Area Agencies on Aging (AAAs), 244 Tribal organizations, and two Native Hawaiian organizations. Each of these is required to complete a plan every four years, compiling both qualitative (including the voice of older adults) and quantitative data for their target area and developing a plan. These data are useful for understanding the needs of older adults in a community and for promoting healthier communities.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Source:** Health Resources in Action, Inc., 2015, adapted from Kevin Barnett, Public Health Institute
Using FAST™ for Strategic Impact

FAST™ is an intensive and interactive planning process that produces the output of a typical 12- to 18-month planning engagement — in just about eight hours! This can be accomplished during a full day meeting or two half-day sessions.

This rapid strategic planning process has been developed in response to the fast-changing health environment, increasing mandates, and scarce resources. After years of facilitating more traditional strategic planning sessions with multi-sector partnerships, we have found that a short, focused, and richly inclusive process keeps diverse partners — many of whom suffer from “planning fatigue” — more engaged and satisfied.

A more prolonged strategic planning process is valuable under certain circumstances, particularly when time and funding allow for it. However, when rapid output and limited resources are important considerations, FAST is an effective approach that produces high quality results with very few drawbacks. In fact, a rapid strategic planning process can even be better at fostering consensus and ownership while focusing on the adoption of evidence-based, high-impact strategies.

Some benefits and limitations of rapid strategic planning are identified in Table 2.

### FAST™ Principles

- **Inclusion & Engagement**: Include the right people at the planning table; engage both providers and diverse community representatives.
- **Equity**: Equal participation in discussions and decision-making processes.
- **Transparency**: Everyone has access to the same information and data.
- **Expert Facilitation**: A trusted manager of group process, offering planning templates and guidelines.

### TABLE 2: Pros and Cons of Using FAST™

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>WHAT’S GAINED</th>
<th>WHAT’S LOST</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Focuses efforts on desired results</td>
<td>Space and time for prolonged conversations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Saves time and money</td>
<td>Time to build deep relationships</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Provides intensive bonding experience that can be a foundation for deeper relationships</td>
<td>Multiple meetings with changing participants</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Energizes and engages participants from start to finish</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The purpose of the Steering Committee is to guide the planning process, gather and review authentic community or organizational input, and develop a sustainability plan. The Steering Committee typically consists of 15–25 individuals who meet two to three times to:

- provide input and guidance to the overall approach;
- identify/recruit stakeholders for the planning sessions;
- review data;
- provide feedback on documents and reports; and
- act as champions of the process.

The FAST Planning Cycle

The FAST planning cycle comprises four components that lead to an inclusive, comprehensive, and effective product:

- Forming a Steering Committee
- Convening Key Stakeholders
- Developing a Strategic Plan
- Creating a Sustainability and Communications Plan

1 Form a Steering Committee

The purpose of the Steering Committee is to guide the planning process, gather and review authentic community or organizational input, and develop a sustainability plan. The Steering Committee typically consists of 15–25 individuals who meet two to three times to:

- provide input and guidance to the overall approach;
- identify/recruit stakeholders for the planning sessions;
- review data;
- provide feedback on documents and reports; and
- act as champions of the process.

KEY ACTIVITIES

- Review current quantitative and qualitative data
- Identify approach, decision-making process, and outcomes for planning cycle
- Engage facilitator
- Identify and recruit key stakeholders for planning session participation. See Stakeholder Engagement Tool.
- Provide input and feedback on materials and reports
- Create criteria to select priorities and interventions
2 Convene and Conduct Key Stakeholder Planning Sessions

Key stakeholders are brought together in one or two planning sessions to develop the elements of the strategic plan. This group is typically larger than the Steering Committee and includes service providers and community members who will have important roles in adopting and implementing elements of the plan.

The role of the stakeholder planning group during these sessions is to identify shared priorities, goals, strategies, metrics, and partnerships that will be the foundation of the strategic plan developed in Component 3.

KEY ACTIVITIES
✓ Provide feedback on Vision-Mission-Values statements and selection criteria
✓ Review findings from data collection
✓ Select three to five priorities based on established criteria. See Prioritization Tool.
✓ Identify evidence-based and innovative strategies for each priority
✓ Create Action Teams to develop goals, objectives, strategies, and metrics for each priority
✓ Identify critical partners and champions to implement strategies

3 Develop a Strategic Plan

The stakeholder planning sessions provide the data for developing a strategic plan. The Steering Committee formalizes the plan and identifies how progress will be measured and tracked over time. This includes agreeing on implementation strategies, identifying resources and partners, and finalizing key metrics. This plan will be shared with key stakeholders for final input.

KEY ACTIVITIES
✓ Develop and refine strategic plan based on stakeholder and community input
✓ Identify shared metrics for success and benchmarking progress
✓ Develop one-year Action Plan. See Action Plan Template. Create evaluation and monitoring plan linked to efforts and milestones.
Create Sustainability and Communications Plan

Improving the social determinants of health, or implementing new organizational priorities and partnerships, takes time. The broader community needs to buy-in to the process and embrace the strategies identified in the plan in order to leverage resources and have an impact. The Steering Committee needs to consider how this planning process will be communicated and sustained over time.

A commitment to CQI is critical to long-term success. The strategic plan should be tracked and evaluated using the short and long-term metrics to assess whether the results align with expectations. If not, a process for course corrections should be identified and implemented.

KEY ACTIVITIES

✔ Finalize strategic plan with specific timelines, roles, resources, partnerships, and metrics
✔ Address sustainability by identifying backbone/infrastructure needs and resources to oversee successful implementation including staffing, accountability, funding, communications, tracking, and reporting
✔ Create Action Teams to implement strategies
✔ Develop a Communications Plan that capitalizes on key stakeholders to communicate the Action Plan to their constituents to demonstrate unity and collective will. See Communication Planning Tool.

FAST™ in Action: Together We Thrive

Together We Thrive is a robust multisector partnership in Austin/Travis County, TX. HRiA was hired to guide the development of their Community Health Assessment and Community Health Improvement Plan, as well as help to create a Community Action and Sustainability Plan. Using the FAST process, HRiA staff facilitated two intensive half-day planning sessions with over 45 community stakeholders. The product — an ambitious Community Health Improvement Plan — authentically reflected community-informed goals and strategies. According to one partnership member, “The planning sessions were successful because we were prepared! With the help of HRiA, we developed an inclusive and engaging process to create a vision and a comprehensive plan to improve the health of all Travis County residents.” Following these sessions, HRiA continued to support the partnership in their quest to promote strategy and resource alignment by providing technical assistance to ensure the plan’s impact and sustainability over the long term.
Keys to Success

**Equity Focus**
A commitment to valuing everyone equally.

**Multisector Engagement**
Diverse planning group that can bridge health care with public health, social services, funders, and community voices.

**Diverse Leadership**
Leaders at all levels within the institution and the broader community who can make the time and commitment for planning, implementation, and evaluation efforts.

**Engaged Champions**
Individuals who have the ability to convene the right people, and the power to make things happen.

**Expert Conveners and Facilitators**
Competent facilitators who have credibility in working with institutional and community leaders and also have experience in engaging diverse voices and managing group processes.

**Accurate and Timely Data**
Access to researchers, epidemiologists, and community leaders who can collect quantitative and qualitative data, as well as best practices, then translate and communicate findings for community action.

**Iterative and Inclusive Feedback**
A planning process that allows key stakeholders to comment and provide valuable feedback.

**Alignment and Collaboration**
A commitment to working together on high impact strategies and shared metrics for tracking progress.

**Communication and Transparency**
Providing regular updates to stakeholders, including progress and challenges, to foster buy-in and faith in the process.
Conclusion

FAST is a useful data-driven health improvement planning process that promotes community alignment and accountability. FAST saves time and money, and helps energize participants while achieving the same high-quality product as more traditional planning processes. The result of this approach is higher performing organizations with greater levels of systems and resource alignment.

For more information, contact:

Rose Purrelli Swensen
Director, Strategic Planning & Organizational Effectiveness
Health Resources in Action, Inc.
rswensen@hria.org

FAST™ in Action: Moffitt Cancer Center

Moffit Cancer Center in Tampa, Florida engaged HRiA to consult with its Community Benefits Director in the development of its Strategic Implementation Plan. Initially, HRiA worked with a Community Advisory Committee to collect quantitative data and community input through interviews and focus groups with community residents and hospital staff. This data informed the community health needs assessment. HRiA organized the data into key needs and priorities and then assessed and mapped current and anticipated hospital strategies and investments with these priorities. Utilizing the FAST approach, HRiA worked with Center staff to develop a strategic implementation plan with goals, objectives, strategies, and indicators. This plan was approved by the Center’s Board of Directors. A key outcome of this process was the establishment of a formal Community Benefits Department at Moffitt Cancer Center.

FAST was developed by HRiA, a national nonprofit organization in Boston, dedicated to advancing public health and medical research. Additional resources can be found at hria.org.
“The rapid strategic planning process was a great success for us! The process effectively engaged everyone involved in developing a plan over the next few years.”

CARL FULWILER, M.D., PH.D., Director, Center for Mental Health Services Research
University of Massachusetts Medical School, Worcester, MA

“I am amazed at how effective the rapid strategic planning process was in developing our new statewide oral health plan.”

SUSAN FULTON, Chief Financial Officer
Endowment for Health, Concord, NH

“The Cambridge Public Health Department engaged HRiA to guide us through a planning process to identify the city’s health priorities for a five-year period, which led to the development of a citywide Community Health Improvement Plan aligning with other city plans and initiatives. HRiA’s rapid planning method allowed us to generate a comprehensive plan over the course of two planning sessions. These day-long sessions were highly interactive with very positive feedback shared by the multi-sector stakeholders and participants. The HRiA team also worked with health department staff to develop a department strategic plan which reflects the vision, mission, values and “pillars” of our infrastructure that anchor the day-to-day work of our staff and volunteers.”

CLAUDE-AXIL JACOBS, MPH, Chief Public Health Officer
Cambridge Public Health Department, Cambridge, MA
Our Vision:
A world where social conditions and equitable resources foster healthy people in healthy communities.

Our Mission:
To help people live healthier lives and create healthy communities through prevention, health promotion, policy, and research.

Health Resources in Action (HRiA) is a nonprofit public health organization dedicated to promoting individual and community health through prevention, health promotion, policy, and support of medical research. HRiA is the parent organization of the Medical Foundation, which provides medical research grants programs and philanthropic advisory services.