

## Supporting Grant Recipients Through Continuous Quality Improvement (CQI) Efforts: Lessons from the Sexual Risk Avoidance Education (SRAE) CQI Pilot

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Within the past decade, federal policymaking related to adolescent pregnancy prevention has included an additional focus on optimal health outcomes and sexual risk avoidance. In support of this focus, Congress authorized the general departmental-funded Sexual Risk Avoidance Education (SRAE) program in 2016 and the Title V State and Competitive SRAE programs in 2018. These three SRAE programs expand the federal emphasis on risk avoidance, and emphasize the social, psychological, and biological factors that can eliminate risk and encourage healthy behaviors. In fiscal year 2020, across the three federally funded programs, 109 SRAE grant recipients were working with 363 sub-recipient providers to offer 710 programs with a goal of serving more than 675,000 youth.<sup>1</sup>

To support learning about and building evidence for strong program implementation, the SRAE National Evaluation (SRAENE) supports grant recipients in three distinct research and evaluation areas. One is data and evaluation support, which helps grant recipients build their capacity to use

data and research to improve their programs and support grant recipients in conducting their own evaluations. The other activities include a national descriptive study, which describes the implementation of programs funded by SRAE grants, and a program components impact study, a rigorous effort aiming to improve components of programs.

As part of SRAENE's data and evaluation support, the SRAENE technical assistance team provides webinars, resources, and other supports to grant recipients to engage in continuous quality improvement (CQI) to strengthen programs. CQI is a systematic process for identifying and learning about challenges and then developing, testing, and implementing solutions. Practitioners regularly face implementation challenges, such as difficulty with recruitment or retention. The CQI approach is a step-by-step process for addressing these challenges, helping programs develop targeted solutions and be more intentional about implementing them well. This brief shares lessons learned from a CQI-capacity-building pilot conducted in the Spring 2021 (see Box 1).

### Box 1. The SRAE CQI Pilot: Informing capacity-building supports for grant recipients

**What was the pilot:** In Spring 2021, eight SRAE grant recipients received individual and group CQI technical assistance as part of a pilot to inform capacity-building supports to the broader SRAE field.

**Purpose of the pilot:** The primary goal of the pilot was to inform refinements to the SRAE CQI template, a newly developed tool adapted from a similar template used by Healthy Marriage and Responsible Fatherhood grant recipients. The template is meant to support SRAE grant recipients to engage in self-directed and systematic improvement efforts. The SRAE CQI pilot offered an opportunity to gather feedback from grant recipients on whether the template felt clear, easy to use, and practical.

**Background:** To identify participants for the pilot, the SRAENE team solicited self nominations in December 2020, asking grant recipients to select a challenge they wanted to address that stemmed from the pandemic. The SRAENE team received 12 nominations and identified 8 grantee teams to participate in the four-month pilot. Three teams focused on engaging youth in virtual classes; five teams worked on the challenge of recruiting youth, parents, and partners to bring in a variety of perspectives related to challenges, most teams involved program leadership and frontline staff.

**Insights:** Based on the feedback from grant recipients during the pilot, the team shortened the initial eight-page CQI template to two pages and reorganized the companion guide into separate modules focused on discrete topics.

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## Takeaways from the SRAE CQI pilot for building capacity

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A primary goal of the pilot was to gather feedback to guide the refinement of a new SRAE CQI template developed to support grant recipients in engaging in program improvement efforts. Grant recipients can find the new [SRAE CQI template](#), adapted with feedback from the pilot, on the SRAENE website.

The pilot also provided a mutually beneficial opportunity to offer participating teams support in using a CQI approach to address a key implementation challenge, while informing recommendations for engaging in CQI to share more broadly to SRAE grant recipients. Our team noted the following key takeaways for engaging in CQI:

**Strive to adhere to core CQI principles, not a specific process.** Some of the grant recipients in the pilot already had some steps of a CQI process in place, which led to questions about whether they needed to replace their existing activities to adhere to the steps outlined in the CQI template. This emphasized the need to be clear about how the template can support, but not necessarily replace, existing processes. The process presented in the CQI template is not the only one. Engaging in CQI is about adhering to a set of principles (Box 2), regardless of how a team puts them into use on the ground.

**Look for opportunities to strengthen work already underway.** Most grant recipients participating in the pilot had at least some existing process to build on. For example, collecting feedback surveys and using the results to inform programming, a common practice for grant recipients, is part of engaging in CQI. In our pilot activities, we learned many teams did not recognize these practices were CQI. Our goal was to help them recognize which CQI practices they already use and then determine what they could strengthen. For instance, one program already had a strong practice of gathering feedback from youth after most sessions and using it immediately to refine lessons. Our recommendation to strengthen

### Box 2: Core CQI principles

- **Learn first, then solve.** Taking time to learn about a challenge before jumping into solution development will help grantee teams to develop more targeted improvement strategies. Without taking this step, teams run the risk of solving the wrong problem.
- **Start small.** Rather than launching a new strategy program-wide from the start, grantees should consider trying it out on a small scale first (for example, in one group or for a short period). The goal is to prototype a strategy and work out kinks before scaling up. Starting small allows teams to understand the strategy's promise before investing a lot of time and resources in it.
- **Embrace failure.** Developing innovative solutions to complex problems requires an openness to failure. A safe space for trying new things is an important condition for CQI, because it will encourage staff at all levels to suggest ideas for improvement. Starting small helps reduce the risk of failure and upholds that safe space.
- **Pay attention to implementation, not just outcomes.** Teams often focus solely on results—did this strategy help us achieve what we wanted? But this is akin to assessing a new recipe without knowing what ingredients were used. It's important for teams to pay attention to and collect feedback about how an improvement strategy was implemented so they can pinpoint what needs to be tweaked to achieve desired results. Documenting implementation will also support teams in scaling a strategy to other sites or staff, as they will have a detailed account of what works.
- **Be data driven.** Data aren't just about numbers. It involves any information gathered or looked at in a systematic way. It could include conducting a feedback survey or focus group with participants, using a template to review and pull themes from meeting minutes (for example, challenges, successes, and opportunities), or tracking the number of recruitment activities conducted, among other approaches. The key is to create a plan for data collection first (for example, using a survey, interview protocol, or template) and then carry it out.
- **Promote ongoing learning.** The goal of CQI isn't for teams to review data at one or two points during the year and reflect on opportunities to improve; rather, upon identifying a challenge, teams should strive to learn about it and try something. CQI should be ongoing, low stakes, and iterative.

this program's feedback loops was to take time to pause and reflect periodically on what it learned about program delivery and ensure lessons are documented and shared broadly. It's important for

teams not just to collect data and make refinements as they go but also to institutionalize learnings. We also encouraged the program to start tracking engagement metrics to assess whether the changes they were making were contributing to improvements. Our [SRAE CQI self-assessment tool](#) helps teams identify which of their existing practices align with a CQI approach. The tool also highlights areas where programs can strengthen their existing practices and provides resources to support this improvement.

**TIP:** It's important for teams to collect data and make refinements as they go and to institutionalize learning by periodically reflecting on and documenting what is learned from CQI efforts.

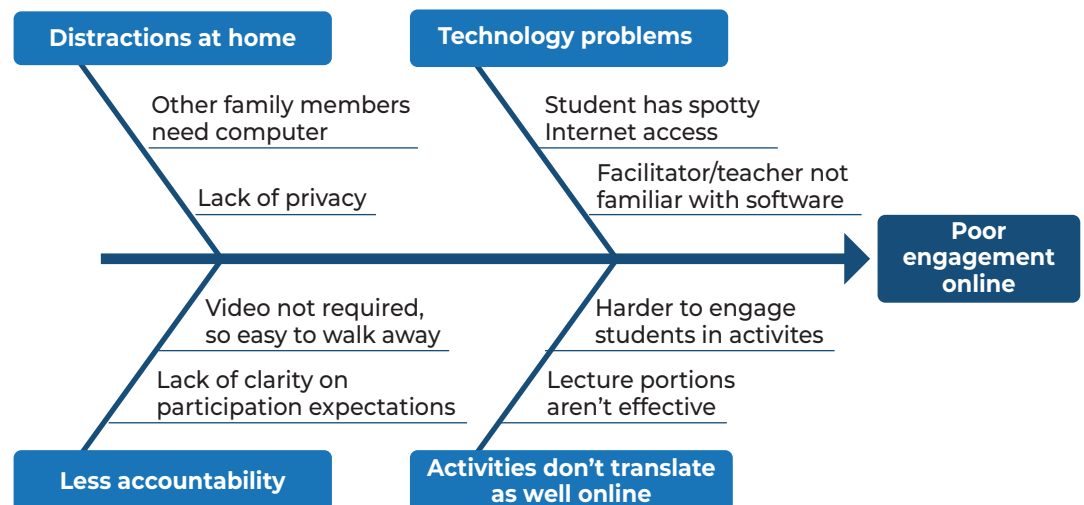
**Build CQI processes incrementally and over time.** Engaging in CQI doesn't have to be all or nothing. Our [SRAE CQI template](#) provides a five-step process, starting with learning about a challenge, then developing a strategy, road testing, assessing results, and planning next steps. Grant recipients that are just beginning to build CQI capacity can start by adopting only parts of the cycle. Grant recipients in the pilot that were new to CQI shared they found the template helpful but

somewhat overwhelming. Our recommendation to them was to find incremental ways to strengthen their approach over time by incorporating practices they found valuable and feasible to implement and helped their team adhere to the CQI principles. For example, several teams in the pilot appreciated the fishbone diagram (Figure 1) as a tool to break down challenges and planned to use it going forward to further learn about those challenges.

**Designate a CQI team to keep improvement work on track.** Several grant recipients formed CQI teams for the first time during the pilot or used the experience to expand or formalize their teams. For example, one grantee had CQI team meetings prior to the pilot but, as a result of participation in the pilot, started using a more formal agenda to support conversations about progress and next steps. Another grantee with a pre-existing team said the pilot helped the grantee consider whether it needed to include additional voices, including frontline providers and program alumni. One state grantee participated in the pilot with three of its sub-recipients. In this case, the sub-recipients each brought separate challenges and teams but would gather for coaching calls. Using this unique structure, the grantee fostered a learning community across sub-recipient teams with the primary grantee functioning as the overarching lead.

**Figure 1. Sample fishbone diagram focusing on virtual engagement challenges**

The fishbone is a tool for synthesizing what teams know or learn about their high-level challenges, listing root causes or drivers of the challenges along the “bones” of the fish. Teams can then select one or two root causes and develop targeted improvement strategies to address them. The tool helps teams engage in root cause analysis, which is a simple but important step grant recipients could incorporate to strengthen CQI practices.



CQI teams should meet at least monthly, which keeps the work active by prompting discussions about improvement and encouraging accountability for tasks. Strong teams should include staff beyond leadership and evaluation staff, including frontline staff and potentially partners, former participants, or other community members. Grant recipients can explore this resource, [Stakeholder Involvement in Interpreting Data and Decision-Making](#), to assess who is represented on their team. If voices are missing, are they able to join the team? If not, how can the team commit to capturing their perspectives? Having an inclusive team brings more perspectives into the work and helps teams to build a culture of improvement as the work is shared with a broader group. For more information on CQI teams, see module 2 of the improvement guide.

**TIP:** CQI teams should meet at least monthly and include staff beyond leadership and evaluation staff, including frontline staff and potentially partners, former participants, or other community members.

## How grant recipients can use the tools to support improvement efforts

Based on learning from the SRAENE CQI pilot, we offer two recommendations for SRAE grant recipients interested in building improvement systems and expanding their CQI activities:

1. To build CQI capacity, grant recipients should consider starting with the CQI self-assessment tool to understand what they have in place, and explore modules in the improvement guide to identify additional practices to implement.
2. To address a specific challenge through CQI, grant recipients can use the CQI template and improvement modules as a guide. The template covers all steps in the process, including learning about the challenge, developing targeted strategies, and road testing. Organizations may choose to work through the template from start to finish or focus on specific sections to supplement existing CQI processes the team uses.

This brief is a product of the SRAE National Evaluation (SRAENE). SRAENE has three distinct activities. One is the **National Descriptive Study**, which describes the implementation of programs funded by SRAE grants. This brief draws upon data collected in summer 2020 as part of this effort. The second activity is the **Program Components Impact Study**. We will use a systematic and rigorous approach to test and improve the components of programs. The third is **Data and Evaluation Support**. We help grantees build their capacity to use data and research to improve their programs and support grantees conducting their own evaluations.

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