

Developing a Quality Assurance Plan

What Is Quality Assurance (QA)?

Quality assurance is the systematic monitoring and evaluation of programs to ensure that *standards* of quality are being met.¹ QA should be *systematic*—done on a regular basis in a planned way. QA should also be based on *standards of quality*—levels of performance or guidelines that are set either by the program itself or based on external standards. Standards may be set in several ways:

- Laboratory procedures, for example, have standards for storing test kits, running controls, and reading results that are set by accreditation agencies.
- Funding agencies may set standards for their grantees such as using evidence-based interventions, or requiring the use of outside evaluators.
- Many of the standards in your day-to-day work will be criteria that you define as “doing good work”. For example, one of your organization-developed standards might be that all new staff receive an orientation to your organization, programs, and policies and procedures.

Benefits of Quality Assurance

- Improved program delivery
- Greater client satisfaction
- Lower program costs
- Greater intra-agency communication
- Defined quality standards
- Staff buy-in
- Increased confidence in your program among current and potential future funders

Quality Monitoring, Assessment, and Improvement

The QA cycle^{2,3} is made up of four components—Standards (as discussed above) are at the center of: Monitoring, Assessment, and Improvement. *Quality monitoring* is the planned, systematic, and ongoing collection of information.⁴ *Quality assessment* involves making a judgment⁵—how does actual performance compare to the standards set forth in your plan? *Quality improvement* focuses on making specific aspects of the program better.⁶

The Quality Assurance Cycle



Who Develops the QA Plan?

Ideally, the development of the QA plan is a group effort. While a designated person—whoever oversees QA activities in your organization—may lead the effort, it is important to have participation from program and human resources staff, as well as management and administration.

A development team might include the executive director, human resources director, and directors and program staff from the counseling and testing, case management, and interventions departments. Additionally, you may wish to provide an opportunity for all staff to review a draft of the plan and provide feedback in writing, at a face-to-face meeting—or both.

Elements of a Quality Assurance Plan

As you develop your written QA plan, you'll want to include the following things:

Introduction to Your Plan

Provide information about the purpose of the QA plan and the role of QA within your organization

Staffing

Describe how you will ensure that your staff has the appropriate knowledge, skills, and background to do their jobs effectively.

Possible Standards: self-developed, legal requirements (required licensure).

- How will you ensure that staff members have the appropriate **experience and qualifications**, including work experience, experience with “target” groups, education, and/or licensure?
- How will you **recruit** staff?
- How will you provide ongoing **staff training** on new policies/procedures and other important topics?
- What types of **professional development** opportunities are available?
- How are ongoing **supervision** and **assessment** provided? (Including clinical supervision if appropriate.)

Interventions

Describe how your organization selects, adapts, and implements your programs and interventions.

Possible Standards: funder, self-developed.

- How are interventions selected to ensure that they're **appropriate for your target audience(s)**?
- How do you conduct **needs assessment** and **pilot testing**?
- What is your process for **adapting** interventions?
- How do you ensure that you are implementing your interventions with **fidelity**— making sure that you are staying true to the core elements of the intervention?

Client Interactions

Describe how you ensure quality, safety, and professionalism of your interactions with clients.

Possible Standards: self-developed, legal requirements (informed consent, mandated reporting).

- How do you assess **client satisfaction**?
- What procedures are in place for **emergencies**, such as suicidality, alcohol or substance use on site, or mandatory reporting if working with minors?
- What is your process for obtaining **informed consent**?
- What is your process for providing **referrals** and **linkages to other services**, such as HIV treatment, social and emotional support, support for intimate partner violence, and alcohol and other drug treatment?
- What are your policies and procedures related to **ethics** of client relationships? For example, what explicit policies do you have in place about social and sexual relationships between clients and staff?

Data

Describe how your organization handles, reports, and uses its data. You will likely need to set some of your own standards related to data.

Possible Standards: self-developed, funders (reporting), legal requirements (confidentiality).

- What is your **confidentiality** policy related to clients information?
- How do you ensure **security** of hard copy and electronic files containing client information?
- What type of **quality assurance** checks do you do with your data entry?
- How, how often, and to whom do you **report data**? Examples may include reporting of de-identified HIV-antibody counseling and testing data, and reporting to the department of health, CDC, and other funders?
- How do you use **chart reviews** (if you do)? What information do you gather, for what purpose, and how often?

Elements of a QA Plan

- Introduction
- Staffing
- Interventions
- Client Interactions
- Data
- Clinical Services
- Work plan

Elements of a Quality Assurance Plan (continued)

Clinical Services

Organizations that provide clinical services should include clinical considerations in their QA plan.

Possible Standards: This is an area in which most standards are already set by accrediting agencies.

- What standards do you maintain for **test kit storage**, shelf-life and temperature?
- What steps do you take to maintain **universal precautions** during specimen collection and other clinical services?
- What are your procedures for **confirmatory testing**?
- How do you store and dispose of **hazardous waste**, including sharps?

Work plan

The work plan portion of the QA plan lists the person or persons responsible for each element of the plan and a timeline. (See the Quality Assurance Plan Outline for a detailed example.)

Activity	Person(s) Responsible	Timeframe
Staffing		
<i>Example:</i> Conduct thorough one-on-one training with new hires on organizational history, vision, and mission; all items in policies and procedures manual; and office procedures (e.g., copier codes, mailroom, card keys).	HR Manager	Ongoing when new staff are hired
Interventions		
<i>Example:</i> Observe each intervention using a checklist of core elements and other assessment items.	Prevention Manager	Quarterly
Client Interactions		
<i>Example:</i> Review Policy Manual section on urgent/emergency situations, such as suicidality, alcohol or substance use on site, and update as necessary.	Case Manager	Annually

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- Introduction
- Staffing
- Interventions
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- Work plan

Additional Resources

Here are some additional resources you may find helpful as you develop your organization's QA plan:

- You can find a QA plan outline, including a work plan template, at <http://www.apiahf.org/resources/webinar-developing-quality-assurance-plan>.
- Capacity for Health offers individualized capacity-building assistance. For more information, contact Sonya Dublin, Capacity for Health, at 415-568-3335, sdublin@apiahf.org.

¹ Adapted from Merriam-Webster Online. Accessed May 5, 2011 from <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/quality%20assurance>.

² National Training Center, Division of Cancer Prevention and Control, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2001). *FOCUS on Quality Participant's Manual*. Atlanta: CDC.

³ Walton, M (1986). *The Deming Management Method*. New York, Putnam Publishing.

⁴ Graham NO, ed. (1995). *Quality in Health Care: Theory, Application, and Evolution*. Gaithersburg, MD: Aspen Publishers, Inc.

⁵ Adapted from Graham, NO. See 3 above.

⁶ Schroeder P, ed. (1994). *Improving Quality and Performance*. St. Louis: Mosby Year Book.