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Using a "Road Test" to Improve Human Services Programs: A Primer

WHAT IS A ROAD TEST?

A road test is an iterative, rapid prototyping process that involves multiple cycles of testing, refining, and strengthening the design and implementation of a new program strategy prior to scaling. It begins by implementing the new approach on a small scale, in a contained practice setting. Often, small numbers of staff and clients participate over a short period of time and provide structured feedback about their experience. This feedback is then used to refine the strategy itself, improve its implementation, and examine the contextual factors that might influence outcomes.

WHY ROAD TEST?

A road test allows programs to try out and refine a new idea or strategy on a small scale before committing to a particular approach or scaling up. It identifies weaknesses in design or implementation that can be corrected and tested again, before expending resources to scale the program change. Without using this intentional and incremental process, the change might ultimately be abandoned due to complications related to implementation or perceived ineffectiveness, resulting in wasted energy and resources. Even evidence-based approaches are at risk of failure if their piloting does not account for local context and incorporate time and space for adjustments to the approach or to the environment.

HOW DOES A ROAD TEST WORK?

Road tests are grounded in the principle of "failing fast." A road test often includes two or more feedback periods, known as learning cycles, in which a carefully selected strategy is used for about four to six weeks and then refined based on feedback from staff and program participants. Feedback can be collected through surveys, interviews, or focus groups and then analyzed for trends in terms of implementation strengths and challenges. This approach is designed to be accessible to programs without dedicated research staff, though outside researchers can be a resource for conducting road tests.

To get started with a road test, check out the complete **practice brief**.

An example of the road test process

Learning Cycle 1	Analyze feedback, synthesize themes, make targeted improvements	Learning Cycle 2	Analyze feedback, synthesize themes, make targeted improvements	Learning Cycle 3	Analyze feedback, synthesize themes, make targeted improvements
5–10 line staff working with 10 participants each to try out a new goal setting process		5–10 line staff working with 10 participants each to try out a new group workshop		5–10 line staff working with 10 participants each to try out a revised version of the new group workshop	
4–6 weeks		4–6 weeks		4–6 weeks	

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