

## UNDERTAKE a Plan

### Plan how to carry out the strategy

- Determine what steps need to be done and who needs to do them
- Recruit others to help with the plan if necessary
- Involve frontline staff
- Consider who else needs to be involved or informed
- Anticipate barriers to implementation and address them proactively

### Plan how to evaluate the strategy

- Develop measures to assess:
  - ◆ How well the strategy was implemented (execution)
  - ◆ How well the strategy accomplished the improvement goal (results)
- Use a combination of several complementary measures
- Be sure that the measures selected correlate well with the desired practice
- Keep measures simple by focusing on what can be counted easily
- Consider collecting data over time and comparing practices before and after implementing the strategy
- Develop a plan for analyzing the data collected
- State up front how much data will be adequate to demonstrate whether the change is working

### Execute the plan

- Spell out each task in detail, assign it to a specific person, and set explicit deadlines
- Appoint a team member to oversee and monitor the execution of the plan
- Also appoint someone to monitor the results in real time
- Make mid-course corrections as needed based on what works and what doesn't

## EVALUATE and Adjust

### Check the execution and the results

- Consider these questions:
    - ◆ Was the strategy executed as planned?
    - ◆ Did the strategy achieve the improvement goal? Did it improve the practice as intended? Did it narrow the ethics quality gap? If not, why not?
    - ◆ Is the strategy having other positive or negative effects?
- Adjust as necessary
- If the strategy worked, determine whether the improvement was sufficient to declare victory
  - If the strategy didn't work, modify it and conduct another test, look at a different strategy, or start over with a new issue

### Evaluate your ISSUES process

- Complete a self-evaluation of each ISSUES cycle
- Compare what you did with the ISSUES approach
- Discuss lessons learned and opportunities for improvement
- Seek input from other participants in the process to determine how it could be improved

## SUSTAIN and Spread

### Sustain the improvement

- If the strategy was successful, integrate the change into standard operating procedures

### Disseminate the improvement

- Implement the change more broadly, if applicable
- Disseminate results to management, those involved in the process, and others who could learn from the process

### Continue monitoring

- Follow up to make sure practices do not revert to the pre-intervention baseline



## Preventive Ethics Addressing Health Care Ethics Quality Gaps on a Systems Level

This card describes the ISSUES approach, a practical, systematic process for identifying and addressing systems-level ethics issues that arise in health care institutions.

This process involves six steps:

- **Identify** an Issue
- **Study** the Issue
- **Select** a Strategy
- **Undertake** a Plan
- **Evaluate** and Adjust
- **Sustain** and Spread

Based on established principles and methods of quality improvement, the ISSUES approach was specifically designed to help preventive ethics teams improve the systems and processes that influence ethical health care practices within a facility.

Although these steps are presented in a linear fashion, it should be recognized that ISSUES is a fluid process and the distinction between steps may blur in the context of a specific ethics issue. At times, it may be necessary to repeat steps in order to achieve a particular improvement goal.

## IDENTIFY an Issue

### Be proactive in identifying ethics issues

- Gather and maintain a list of ethics issues
- Establish regular contact with groups, such as the ethics consultation service, senior management, service and program heads, quality management staff
- Ensure that those who may wish to refer ethics issues are knowledgeable about the preventive ethics team and what it does
- Examine other sources of information, such as accreditation reviews and sentinel event reports

### Characterize each issue

- Does the issue give rise to an ethical concern?
- Does the issue suggest an ethics quality gap?
- When in doubt, consider whether another process in the organization should address the issue
- Keep a log of issues for future consideration

### Clarify each issue by listing the improvement goal

- Specify the improvement goal the team would like to achieve
- Assign a shorthand working title that expresses both the ethics issue and the improvement goal

### Prioritize the issues and select one

- Select an issue in which the improvement effort is likely to have a real impact on the facility's ethical practices
- Consider these questions:
  - ◆ Is the issue a high priority for leadership or other important stakeholders?
  - ◆ Are there data indicating an ethics quality gap?
  - ◆ How significant are the issue and its effects?
  - ◆ Is the issue of manageable size and scope? Can it be broken down into components?
  - ◆ Is it likely that the preventive ethics team will be able to bring about change?

## STUDY the Issue

### Diagram the process behind the relevant practice

- Collect firsthand information from multiple sources
- Include people who are directly involved in the process
- Draw and label a process flow diagram

### Gather specific data about best practices

- Review the available ethics knowledge on the issue, including ethical guidelines, consensus statements, codes of ethics of professional groups, scholarly publications, and online resources
- Review applicable VA policy and law
- Seek examples of model practices in other facilities
- When appropriate, consult subject matter experts
- Use a combination of available knowledge, practical advice, and ethical analysis to develop best practices

### Gather specific data about current practices

- Establish a baseline to compare the results of future improvement efforts against
- Keep data collection efforts simple and targeted
- Practices can often be measured by comparing the number of occurrences of the practice before and after an improvement
- Consider such tools as key informant interviews, focus groups, and existing databases or records
- Consider using already validated instruments rather than designing new surveys
- Consult with local quality management staff

### Refine the improvement goal to reflect the ethics quality gap

- Compare best practices to current practices
- Describe the distance between where you are and where you want to be in quantitative terms, if possible
- Define a time frame for the improvement goal, if possible

## SELECT a Strategy

### Identify the major cause(s) of the ethics quality gap

- Do a root cause analysis
- Involve the people who know or use the process to help identify the causes
- Bear in mind that multiple causes often contribute to the gap
- Use a fishbone or cause-and-effect diagram to diagram the causes

### Brainstorm possible strategies to narrow the gap

- Follow the rules of brainstorming:
  - ◆ Indicate clearly when brainstorming begins and ends
  - ◆ Encourage creativity
  - ◆ Keep comments brief
  - ◆ Don't interrupt or criticize
  - ◆ Record comments in the contributor's own words
- ◆ Engage each member of the group
- ◆ Sort through new ideas, critiquing, refining, and reorganizing them
- ◆ Summarize the ideas in a list of strategies

### Choose one or more strategies to try

- Search for strategies with the highest likelihood of success, the maximum expected net benefit, and the lowest resource requirements
- Recognize that modest strategies are more likely to be successful than grand plans
- Weigh the likely impacts in terms of their magnitude the degree to which they can be sustained over time
- Consider potential negative consequences
- Make sure the strategy is not itself ethically problematic
- Take into account expected monetary costs, person-hours of staff time, and other resource requirements
- Think about ways to conserve resources, e.g., by trying out a strategy on a small scale before implementing it more widely
- Contact individuals outside of the preventive ethics function to obtain additional information or support as necessary