Since 2006, Social Entrepreneurs Inc. (SEI) has facilitated sustainability planning with funded partners and Initiatives from a number of counties in California. This includes working with seven different county Initiatives in Santa Barbara, Kings and Inyo Counties and assisting over 35 public and private agencies in Monterey, San Bernardino and Stanislaus Counties. Participants represented a variety of agencies in the areas of Family Resource Centers and School Readiness, Early Care and Education Infrastructure, Early Childhood Oral Health, Early Childhood Mental Health and Special Needs, and Home Visitation of Newborns. In order to maximize the potential for sustaining efforts for many years to come, many funders are sponsoring sustainability planning to create long-term sustainability plans for areas in which they invest. This document provides an overview of the sustainability planning process and the rationale for investing in long-term sustainability planning.

There are many reasons why it is valuable to develop a comprehensive approach for sustaining programs that serve the most vulnerable individuals, children and families in a community. Just a few of the benefits that can be realized from sustainability planning are:

- **Stronger partnerships**. Sustainability planning strengthens partnerships by creating greater clarity about the long-term results sought by the organization and how the unique strengths of each agency can best be applied toward achieving those long-term results.

- **Better long-term impact from activities**. A good sustainability plan allows activities like resource development and public relations to be carried out in a way that not only meets short-term needs but also positions the initiative for long-term success.

- **Diversification of funding**. A sustainability plan is crucial to identifying and cultivating the best opportunities for new funding as the current recession continues to reduce the funds available to nonprofits. Diversification of funding is essential.

- **Greater certainty of serving target markets of this generation and beyond**. A sustainability plan is a blueprint that shows how the organization will be able to serve its target market and achieve its mission as a private nonprofit for many years without solely relying on a few limited funding sources.

Research by The Finance Project, Center for Civic Partnerships, Annie E. Casey Foundation, The California Wellness Foundation and others has clearly shown that long-term sustainability of community initiatives depends on much more than just ongoing funding. Sustainability requires a strong vision for the future, focus on health and wellness results for people rather than specific programs or agencies, broad-based community support, effective leadership and key champions in the community, the ability to adapt to changing conditions, a strategic long-range approach to financing, and strong internal systems within the participating agencies.

In order to address all of these elements in a meaningful way, sustainability planning can take place at an organizational or initiative level. Regardless of the participants, a commitment of time and an
An open-minded approach is needed to ensure that the sustainability planning focuses not on protecting a particular program or strategy, but on sustaining results desired by and for the target population. Using a research-based approach, a step-by-step process can be used to develop the sustainability plan, consisting of five phases:

1. **Assess Current Situation and Assets.** The first phase is used to organize the planning team, take an inventory of past work and other assets already present within the collaborative related to sustainability, and determine how to adapt the rest of the planning process in order to fully leverage those assets.

2. **Set Sustainability Vision and Goals.** This phase addresses the most fundamental questions about sustainability. Exactly what is it we are trying to sustain? To achieve what end results? At what level of activity? For how long? Using what strategies? Affected by what issues and trends? The phase creates a very precise shared understanding of what “sustainability” means for each initiative.

3. **Plan for Capacity and Community Support.** In this phase, strategies are developed to address four critical elements of sustainability: Broad Based Community Support, Key Champions, Ability to Adapt to Changing Conditions and Strong Internal Systems. A related issue addressed here is how to build and sustain strong strategic partnerships so that a solid collaborative is maintained to continue driving the initiative over time. Resources and capacity building needed to carry out the strategies are also identified.

4. **Create a Strategic Financing Plan.** Finances can be addressed at this point because the results of the preceding phases create a clear picture of the resources that are needed to ensure sustainability and why those resources are needed. Financial planning will involve developing strategies to control costs and coordinate resources as well as strategies to diversify and strengthen revenue streams, leading to a long-term (typically ten-year) forecast of revenues and expenses that shows the effect of the fiscal strategies. Any additional capacity building needed in order for the initiative to implement its fiscal strategies will also be identified.

5. **Finish the Sustainability Plan and Develop an Implementation Plan.** The sustainability plan should be developed incrementally – in each of the preceding phases, sections of the sustainability plan can be written, reviewed by the planning team for each initiative, and approved before moving to the next phase. Thus, when this final phase is reached the sustainability plan will have been completely written and can go through a last review by the planning team before it is adopted. A detailed one-year implementation plan should then be developed that shows specifically who will do what, by when, during the next twelve months in order to make progress toward the goals and strategies of the long-term sustainability plan.

The sustainability planning process can take as short as four months or as long as one year depending on the number of participants and scope of the desired results. Allowing time to reflect, review and discuss each of the elements is critical for the success of the project and the development of a useful, valid sustainability plan.
The term “sustainability” is defined as the continuation of community health or quality of life benefits over time. Sustainability is a holistic concept – the ability to create lasting improvements in health and well-being for an extended period of time despite ongoing changes in funding sources, program models, service providers, community demographics and other factors.

A critical point to note about this definition is that sustainability is not about indefinitely perpetuating current programs and services at current funding and staffing levels. As communities change over time, the demand for services may grow or shrink. New, more effective approaches to providing services may be discovered and implemented. Changes are also certain to occur in sources of funding, public policies, and other forces that affect the organization. Long-term sustainability is about ensuring that the positive results that the organization achieves for children and families are continued for years to come despite all of the changes that are occurring in the environment in which the organization is operating.

**ESSENTIAL ELEMENTS OF SUSTAINABILITY ADDRESSED IN THE SUSTAINABILITY PLANS**

1. **VISION**: Clarity exists about what is being sustained, for how long, and at what level of activity, with all partners in the initiative embracing the vision.

2. **RESULTS ORIENTATION**: The focus is on sustaining health and well-being benefits for people being served and not specific programs, organizations, and systems.

3. **STRATEGIC FINANCING ORIENTATION**: Short- and long-term approaches to tapping diverse sources of revenue and efficiently managing resources have been developed.

4. **BROAD BASED COMMUNITY SUPPORT**: Community members show solid support through volunteerism, donations, advocacy and other forms of involvement.

5. **KEY CHAMPIONS**: Visible champions exist in the form of business, political, media and/or other community leaders.

6. **ABILITY TO ADAPT TO CHANGING CONDITIONS**: Flexibility exists to change strategies, services, systems etc. over time without losing sight of the end results sought.

7. **STRONG INTERNAL SYSTEMS**: Strong internal/organizational functions (governance, finance, human resources, evaluation, etc.) are developed and remain in place.

8. **SUSTAINABILITY PLAN**: A written plan exists that guides actions to promote long-term sustainability.