NACCHO℠
National Association of County & City Health Officials

Financial Strategic Planning Guide

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PUBLIC HEALTH INFRASTRUCTURE & SYSTEMS

ABOUT THIS RESOURCE

This resource is intended for local health department staff with a working knowledge of organizational financial practice who are interested in learning more about financial strategic planning. It includes information about how local health departments approach financial strategic planning, an outline of the core steps, and examples of how local health departments have tailored the process for their own context.

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INTRODUCTION

Local health departments plan their finances strategically to ensure they can respond to future emergencies, withstand changes in the funding environment, and provide a basic set of services to their community. **Financial strategic planning** is the process of assessing the organization's financial health and implementing strategies to ensure it has the resources it needs to achieve its goals. This resource describes considerations for local health departments in financial strategic planning.

Resource Objectives

By using this resource, you will be able to:

- List best practices for financial strategic planning in governmental public health
- Describe why financial strategic planning is unique to local public health as compared to the private sector or other public entities
- Offer considerations for local health departments engaging in financial strategic planning
- Highlight example practices and tools from local public health for financial strategic planning

How this Guide was Developed

This resource builds on learnings from NACCHO's Financial Strategic Planning Case Studies (2025). NACCHO convened a sub-committee from NACCHO's Local Public Health Finance Community of Practice (CoP) between November 2025 and January 2026 to discuss their approaches to financial strategic planning, the role of financial strategic planning in their organization, facilitators of an effective process, challenges and barriers, and desired resources. The findings from those discussions were combined with existing resources on the topic to create this resource.

Thank you to our sub-committee members for their valuable insights:

- **Charlie Bryan**, Business Systems and Finance Manager, Lawrence-Douglas County Public Health, KS
- **Katie McKinney**, MPA, Assistant Director Public Health, Ventura County Public Health, CA
- **Noah Stuby**, Deputy Health Commissioner, Greene County Public Health, OH
- **Chelsea Coffield**, MD, MBA, Senior Public Health Analyst, Harris County Public Health, TX
- **Falguni Patel**, Program Manager, Alameda County Health, CA

FINANCIAL STRATEGIC PLANNING

> ***Your financial strategic plan should boil down to three questions; where have you been? Where are you now? And where do you want to go?***
>
> *– Noah Stuby (Greene County, OH)*

What is Financial Strategic Planning?

Local health departments provide essential services to their communities, guided by a programmatic strategic plan outlining the organization's priorities and strategies to achieve them. The process of **financial strategic planning** involves "projecting revenues, expenses, and key factors that have a financial impact on the organization"[1] to ensure the health department has the resources it needs to achieve those objectives. Financial strategic planning helps the health department prioritize limited resources for the most essential functions.

Benefits of Financial Strategic Planning

There are many benefits to long-term financial planning[1], including that it:

- Provides a long-term view of the organization's financial planning
- Helps the organization diagnose and potentially mitigate potential risks to the financial health of the organization
- Promotes leaders to think more broadly about the health of the organization and its financial future
- Evaluates "long-term compliance with financial policies"
- Provides a framework for decision making
- Supports the organization to communicate about its long-term financial position to stakeholders

The Role of Financial Strategic Planning in the Organization

The local health department's financial strategic plan is the "connective tissue" of the organization, linking the strategic plan, financial policies, capital improvement plans, and budgets. It details the health department's unique set of financial metrics which are used to assess the sustainability of programs and determine whether the organization can achieve its goals.

The metrics within the financial strategic plan are essential for health department leadership to make decisions about programs. Starting, reducing, expanding or sunsetting a program each have an impact on the organization's goals, and financial metrics allow health department leadership to measure and predict the impact of program decisions on their ability to achieve the long-term financial vision. The more decisions about programs can be connected to impacts on the organization, and vice versa, the better. Local health departments shared that they desire each program to have a performance-based budgeting system, and the strategic plan and evaluation framework to tie back to financial metrics.

> ***Every single program and every single aspect of the health department has a performance metric that's financially related in some way or another.***
>
> *– Noah Stuby (Greene County, OH)*

Financial Strategic Planning within Local Governmental Public Health

Financial strategic planning in local public health departments is distinct between communities and other areas of the public sector due to:

- **Reliance on grants:** Health departments are uniquely dependent on grants compared to other public sector agencies. While this allows health departments to seek opportunities to increase revenue, it can also constrain their programs as grants end at various times and have their own unique spending and reporting requirements. Health departments typically piece together multiple funding sources to support a wide variety of priorities, ranging from clinical and environmental services to food inspection, violence prevention, veterinary services, and more.
  - One health department described having 50 grants making up their $40 million budget, and that grants were often patchworked together to support their community health assessment and improvement planning.
  - "A lot of creativity and time has to go into management of the budget because of how it's structured with grants" – *Katie McKinney (Ventura County, CA)*

- **Volatile funding environment:** Public health funding tends to follow a cycle of "boom and bust"[2]. Local health departments must address their many priorities with stagnant or flat funding that does not increase with rising costs and inflation, and with changing unemployment rates.
  - During the COVID-19 pandemic response, many local health departments received millions of dollars in funding and vastly increased their staff. When that funding ran out, health departments had to make decisions about how to retain staff without knowing the full impact of those decisions on their financial future.

- **Unique local health department contexts:** Each local health department navigates its own unique context of what public health funding is available, how it can be used, and who decides. Budgets for local public health may become political, and the health department may depend on decisions of local governing board members.
  - **Limited organizational financial literacy:** Local health department staff have expressed a pervasive lack of understanding among county commissioners, boards of health, and staff about how public health funding is allocated and the need to generate revenue. Public health professionals struggle to reconcile their passion for the work with the reality that programs require funding, often through fees, and that some services will be unsustainable.

- **Lack of standardized financial metrics for local health departments:** Each local health department assesses its financial health differently, pulling from best practices in private, governmental, and non-profit finance. They lack standardized metrics, calculations, or benchmarks to assess their long-term financial viability and identify deficits early, and instead often use their own historical data as a comparison for current performance.

> ***Public health is constantly balancing the need for sound business practices with political realities and public expectations.***
>
> *– Noah Stuby (Greene County, OH)*

Steps of Financial Strategic Planning

Financial strategic planning consists of the following steps:

1 | Preparation

2 | Determine Strategic Priorities

3 | Assess Current Performance

4 | Make Projections

5 | Identify Future Gaps

6 | Create and Implement Strategies

7 | Sustain

Local health departments will vary in how frequently they engage with the different steps, who they involve, and what kinds of decisions they have the authority to make. To determine their unique approach, health departments should consider:

1. **How does their local health department fit into their community's organizational structure?** For example, which larger agency does it exist within?

2. **Who has authority over the health department's budget?** For example, a board of health, board of supervisors, county council, or commissioner.

3. **What is the nature of the funding environment in which the health department operates?** How challenging is it to secure funding that will support the health department's essential services, mandated services, and local priorities?

The sections below describe the purpose of each step, tips for how to implement it, and considerations from local health departments.

STEPS OF FINANCIAL STRATEGIC PLANNING

1. Preparation

Purpose: To establish the foundational components of financial strategic planning, including who is involved in the financial strategic planning process, the documents needed to develop the financial strategic plan, and how leadership support can build financial literacy throughout the organization.

Who is Involved

As mentioned previously, the financial strategic plan aligns the local health department's resources to its priorities and services to ensure they can be delivered. Thus, it is important for all involved in the financial strategic planning process to have experience and understanding in finance.

The financial strategic planning process typically takes place at the highest levels within the agency. This involves executive leadership, division directors, program managers, and boards of health. It also involves the finance teams and grants and billing departments within the local health department. Establishing cross-departmental understanding, and open communication between finance and programs teams is crucial for the financial strategic planning process.

Supporting Documents

To build the financial strategic plan, local health departments must determine what their community's priorities are, and what funding opportunities are available. Below is a list of documents that are used to support this process, and how they can be used.

Community Health Assessment (CHA) or Community Health Improvement Plan (CHIP)	Your CHA/CHIP shows your community's needs and should be used to prioritize what funding you look for.
Local Health Department Annual Reports	Local health departments' annual reports often include financial data, such as total revenue, where revenue was pulled from (i.e., grants, property taxes, etc.), and operating costs. This can be used as a benchmark for financial strategic planning.
Organizational Strategic Plan	Your organization's strategic plan indicates your health department's current position and the directions to achieve your goals. This helps determine what health activities should be funded. – *NACCHO's Strategic Planning Guide*
State Budget Bill	The state budget bill shows what programs are being funded, and what your health department will be able to apply for.
State Health Improvement Plan	Your state's health improvement plan will likely reflect what programs/initiatives it will fund.
Federal Budget Bill	The federal budget bill shows what programs will be funded at the federal level, and what your health department will be able to apply for.

Leadership Support for Financial Strategic Planning

Local health department leaders must create a culture where financial decisions are connected to priorities, sustainability, and community impact rather than treated as separate administrative tasks. Local health department leadership can support financial strategic planning by building financial literacy throughout the organization, investing in staff skills and capacity, and utilizing data to communicate clearly and objectively.

> ***If you're going to create an organization that is highly sustainable, you've got to integrate certain knowledge, skills, and abilities throughout your entire workforce... starting all the way with top governance, and then bringing it all the way down to your leadership and program managers, and making sure everybody on those levels has financial literacy***
>
> *– Noah Stuby (Greene County, OH)*

Financial literacy throughout the organization is crucial. Local health department leaders need to understand the basics of revenues, mandates, reserves, and financial constraints. With this foundation, leaders are better equipped to approve budgets, develop reserve policies, and make decisions that are rooted in fiscal reality. Program managers should be able to integrate financial metrics into program performance and see the connection between spending and outcomes to approve both accountability and planning.

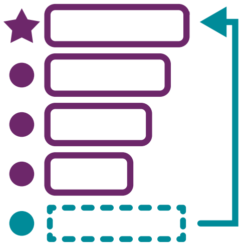
> ***In government finance... commitment for staff development is one demonstration of leadership support***
>
> *– Charlie Bryan (Lawrence-Douglas County, KS)*

Local health department leadership can strengthen financial strategic planning by investing in staff skills and capacity. This includes supporting professional development that helps staff better understand budgeting and resource management. Practical examples include tuition reimbursement, support for certifications or credentials, such as a Certified Public Accountant (see more examples below), and encouraging staff to pursue grants management and financial training.

Finally, local health department leaders should be prepared to use data to communicate clearly and objectively about financial planning. Financial projections, cash reserve rationales, cost analyses, and trend data can help explain current needs and future decisions. Annual reports with clear narratives and simple financial snapshots can make complex information easier to understand. It is also important to tailor messages to the audience. Community members want to know what their investment has achieved, while policymakers want to understand both current results and what continued investment can accomplish.

Resources

- Common certifications for public finance staff highlighted in National Association of State Treasurers Public Finance Workforce Study:
  - ☐ Certified Public Accountant (CPA)
  - ☐ Certified Government Financial Manager (CGFM)
  - ☐ Certified Internal Auditor (CIA)
- For training, see BEAM and the Government Finance Officers Association's educational offerings and training catalog



2. Determine Strategic Priorities

Purpose: To identify the strategic priorities of the organization and what needs to be funded.

When developing the financial strategic plan, a good place to start is reviewing your local health department's overall strategic plan. This helps ensure that funding decisions consider the strategic objectives that your local health department supports or leads throughout your community.

How to Determine Strategic Priorities

Public health programs need to be prioritized using a set of criteria such as public health importance, expected impact, and alignment with community needs. Programs can be weighted and scored to determine funding priorities and ensure that what is financed supports the CHA or CHIP, and overall strategic plan. The criteria for weighing these programs include what programs generate revenue and what programs need to be subsidized.

Examples of Strategic Priorities:

- One health department's long-term goal is to increase revenue, so they are thinking about how they can use fee-based services to do that. They need to establish rules for how fees are charged and how often that is revisited.

- One health department's strategic priorities start with essential services (core mandated services based on health and safety codes) that need to be offered, and then what they would like to be able to offer. Then they review their governor's preliminary report which reveals how much funding the local health department might receive in grants.

3. Assess Current Performance

Purpose: To determine the factors and cadence to assess the organization's financial health.

Financial strategic planning in health departments is not a one-time event, or even on a set schedule. It is both proactive and reactive. Assessing financial health is a continuous process that needs to be able to adapt as claw-backs can occur at any time. Local health departments assess their financial health by looking at several past and present financial metrics to determine how efficiently resources are being utilized.

How to Assess Current Performance

Factors:

Financial health is determined through a mix of organizational financial metrics, programmatic outcomes, and state and federal documents. These factors determine what has been funded in the past, and what can be expected to be funded or need funding in the future. These factors include:

Cash reserves:

Generally, about a year of operating expenses in reserve to stabilize the budget and special operations must have at least 1 quarter of expenses in event of public health emergencies.

Community health improvement plan (CHIP) or community health needs assessment (CHA)

Many health departments align their financial strategic plan with the priorities that their strategic plan/CHA/CHIP highlighted.

> ***The Community Health Needs Assessments (CHA/CHIP) determines what the priorities of the community are and where we want to invest our dollars, so that is our North Star for the duration of those plans.***
>
> *– Katie McKinney (Ventura County, CA)*

Historical data:

Historical financial data is used as a benchmark for future projections. This data can be pulled from annual reports and previous grant cycles.

Local government mandated programs:

Local governments may mandate certain functions of their local health department. As such, local health departments need to ensure that these programs are fully funded and must account for them during the financial strategic planning process.

Programmatic financial metrics:

Programs have financial metrics. There is a need to spend all money for grants but often in a short amount of time. Each program has two ratio analyses to consider.

- Operating ratio: Are you spending more than you have or are taking in?
- Reliance ratio: Proportion of total revenue or expenses, with target ranges

Governor's/state legislature's funding bill:

This legislative document establishes the funding priorities for your state's government. It includes what programs the state is planning to fund, and what opportunities local health departments can apply for.

State mandated programs:

Similar to local governments, state governments may require local health departments to perform certain programs. If the state does not provide funding, local health departments must allocate resources for it in their budgets.

Federal funding bill:

Similar to the state funding bill, it shows the federal government's funding priorities. It includes how much federal agencies will be funding, line items for each branch of these agencies, and what opportunities local health departments can apply for.

4. Make Projections

Purpose: To understand how the organization might perform in the future given various hypothetical scenarios.

A core component of financial strategic planning is estimating how the agency will perform given various scenarios. Health departments use projections to:

- Align resources with strategic goals
- Assess financial sustainability of programs and the organization
- Make decisions about hiring, facilities growth, programs, and services
- Communicate about the financial health of the organization
- Provide evidence for funding and policy requests or decisions

How to Calculate Projections

1. Determine the timeline of and assumptions of the projection

Short and long-term projections serve different purposes. See below for considerations for both, variables to factor in, and examples of how they are applied.

Length	Short-term	Long-term
Time Range	• 1 month – 1 year • *Ex. Twice per fiscal year in the first and fourth quarters*	• 3-5 years • *Ex. Aligned with the health department's strategic plan*
Purpose of a Short vs. Long-term Projection	• To respond to immediate changes in the funding environment (funding claw backs, changes in political priorities, staff turnover, policy changes for cash reserves, or public health emergencies) which may change funding priorities • To determine whether to pursue a new funding opportunity	• To understand what funding opportunities to pursue and staff needed to meet those priorities • To determine the organization's ability to meet priorities of the strategic plan and/or community health improvement plan
Variables	• Micro-economic influences (changes in local, regional, or state funding environment) • Trends in cash flow, cost, revenue, and operating expenses	• Macro-economic influences (federal policy, inflation, unemployment) • Historical data of trends • Overhead cost • Cash reserves
Considerations	• Less likely to go off course • Provides flexibility to meet changing priorities	• Lacks flexibility to meet sudden changes in the funding environment
Example	"Cash targets are set going into the year and evaluated at the end of the year but also done through a monthly evaluation and reported to the Board of Health, county or city leadership or some other higher authority." *– Noah Stuby (Greene County, OH)* "We never see a plan that gets beyond even the second year before it becomes a stretch." *– Charlie Bryan (Lawrence-Douglas County, KS)*	"We use [a projection] that's data-driven, and that shows the outlook of the health department when we're trying to justify either maintaining our current level of property tax dollars...or if we need to justify our request for an increase from the taxpayer." *– Noah Stuby (Greene County, OH)*

2. Define the assumptions:

Determine whether your projection will be calculated more conservatively or if it is intended to reflect an accurate picture of current conditions, and what major revenue and expenditure categories will be included. Document these details so that the projection can be replicated in the future.

3 . Gather information:

Engage key stakeholders (department leads, external partners) who can share information about program changes or efforts underway that will impact budgets, staffing, services, or operations.

4. Analyze historical trends:

Reflect on how programs are performing (making or losing money), the seasonality of programs, demographic trends, or any outliers in the financial ecosystem that will impact your projection.

5. Select and implement forecasting methods:

Methods depend on the extent to which you assume current trends continue or change according to variables (i.e., hypothetical scenarios). Learn more about forecasting methods from the Government Finance Officers Association in "Resources" below.

> ***Tip:*** *Local health departments noted starting your estimations with the largest shares of the budget, such as projected increases in salary and benefits, changes to risk management rates, or pension costs*

6. Analyze:

Make interpretations about what the data says about the organization's ability to achieve strategic priorities, such as from the community health improvement plan (CHIP) or strategic plan.

The resulting picture can be used to communicate about the agency's financial health, make decisions about increasing or decreasing capacity and programs, and advocate for additional resources. In the next section, you will identify gaps in the organization's financial future and plan how to remediate them.

Resources

- Government Finance Officers Association's Financial Forecasting in the Budget Preparation Process
- Focus CPA Group, Inc.'s How to Create Financial Projections: A Step-by-Step Guide

5. Identify Future Gaps

Purpose: Based on the projections, make interpretations about the financial health and future of the agency and its programs.

How to Identify Future Gaps

Use the information gathered in the previous steps to respond to the following questions:

- What is your current trajectory based on past and current performance?
- What strategic priorities will *not* be met based on your projections?
- What risks to not meeting strategic priorities or to financial sustainability need to be mitigated?
- What additional funding is needed to achieve strategic priorities?

Use your responses to these questions to determine what is needed to maintain progress toward strategic priorities and which actions the health department might prioritize to maintain that progress.

> ***Note:*** *Health departments lack widely standardized benchmarks against which they can compare their own projections to interpret how well they are performing. In place of these, health departments often compare their projections to historical trends or past performance to draw conclusions about their performance.*

6. Create and Implement Strategies

Purpose: Identify strategies to address future gaps.

After identifying potential future gaps and risks to advancing the health department's strategic priorities, local health departments develop methods or strategies to achieve their desired financial future. The strategy is "the overall approach the organization chooses to take to address strategic issues"[4].

How to Develop a Strategy

Strategies should be accompanied by clear goals of what will be achieved by implementing the strategy and SMART objectives (specific, measurable, achievable, realistic, and time-bound). To develop your strategy, consider:

> ***Creativity is essential to managing the budget – nothing is straightforward, neatly aligned.***
>
> *– Katie McKinney (Ventura County, CA)*

- What is the future state you hope to achieve?
- What programs, processes, or policies need to change to achieve that future state?
- What specific change(s) is required?
- Who will be involved in implementing this change?
- By what date do you anticipate achieving your desired future state?
- How will you know that you were successful?
- What data should be collected throughout implementation to ensure you are staying on track?

Example Strategies

The strategies that local health departments use to reach their goals will differ widely. A strategy might impact one program or the entire organization:

Target	Intervention Examples
Organization	Exploring **new partnerships** where programs are financially deficient. Ventura County, CA adopted a "joint venture" model to work with partners, wherein both manage funds rather than having a prime/sub relationship.
Departments and Teams	Creating a **centralized grant management team** with a grant tracking system. This team will track when new grant opportunities become available and help with transitions after grants sunset.
Staff members	Supporting staff to build financial sustainability by considering the financial implications of their work, ways to improve sustainability, and opportunities to generate and protect revenue.

Resources:

1. NACCHO's Developing a Local Health Department Strategic Plan: A How-To Guide

7. Sustaining

Purpose: Identify methods of sustaining funding for public health programs.

The last step to financial strategic planning is sustaining. Funding is what keeps the lights on, programs adequately staffed, and ensures that the resources needed to run these programs effectively are available. Sustaining funding requires community buy-in and political will, which are achieved through advocating for public health.

Demonstrating the Value of Public Health

Demonstrating the value of public health is essential for acquiring and sustaining funding. It lets everyone in your community know who you are, what you do, and why you should be supported. There are many methods through which you can promote your work to the public. These include traditional media, such as newsletters, printed materials, radio, and press releases, but also include sharing your success on social media. The medium you use, and the corresponding message depends on your target audience.

> ***One of the most important things for public health professionals to do is advocate for and educate on the importance of early intervention and prevention for the overall health of the community.***
>
> *– Katie McKinney (Ventura County, CA)*

Community Buy-In

Highlighting the success that your programs have had can build support from the community you serve. For local health departments, this means regularly communicating clear, tangible results—such as increased access to services or reduced health risks. Sharing success stories can demonstrate the value of sustained funding and position the health department as a reliable steward of community resources. In addition, strong support from the community can improve political support.

Political Support

Acquiring political support involves displaying the effectiveness of your program(s) and clearly communicating why continued investment is vital to the health of the community. When making the case for political support, emphasize both the measurable return on investment and the human impact of the work: fewer preventable illnesses, stronger community systems, reduced strain on health care and emergency response resources, and improved quality of life for residents.

Cash Reserves

As mentioned in earlier sections, it is crucial for local health departments to have cash reserves in the event of public health emergencies or sudden retractions of funding. These cash reserves ensure that local health department operations can continue for a period of time until new funding sources are found. Ideally, local health departments should keep about a year of operating expenses in reserve in case of emergencies or changes in funding.

> ***...we have things that are statutorily required to be provided, and so those mandated programs are not funded by any funding source... so we have to maintain certain cash balances in order to operate those programs.***
>
> *– Noah Stuby (Greene County, OH)*

CONCLUSION

Financial strategic planning helps local health departments ensure they have the resources needed to improve and protect community health and achieve their strategic priorities. Local health departments operate in a unique funding environment that is constantly changing due to their reliance on grants and "boom and bust" cycles of public health funding. The financial strategic plan acts as the "connective tissue" of the organization and reveals how effectively resources are allocated to strategic priorities.

The process is ongoing, iterative, and both proactive and reactive. Each local health department's approach will be unique based on its unique funding environment, governance structure, funding authority, reliance on grants, local priorities, and staffing. Here are considerations for each step:

- To prepare financial strategic planning, health departments should gather information outlining their unique circumstances and invite stakeholders with expertise on the agency's finance and services to participate.
- Assessing the local health department's current financial health involves taking account of historical trends and assessing the extent to which it is supporting its strategic priorities.
- When making projections, health departments should consider their outlook in both the short-term, in response to immediate funding changes, and the long-term, to factor in macroeconomic variables that might impact their ability to achieve priorities in the next 3-5 years.
- Strategies to improve the financial future may target the whole organization, specific departments, or staff's knowledge and capacity.
- When building strategies, health departments should factor in how they will track progress, ensure they are implementing the strategy as intended, and build a process for course-correcting if their strategy is not returning the intended results.
- Financial sustainability is built through the ability to obtain public and political support for public health, and community investment in the public health department's value. Tools like cash reserves help local health departments plan for uncertain futures.

As one of many planning processes local health department staff engage with, financial strategic planning blends creativity and innovation, expertise from across the organization, and insights from the public and private sectors to create plans for success.

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About NACCHO

The National Association of County and City Health Officials is the voice of more than 3,300 local health departments across the country. These city, county, metropolitan, district, and tribal departments work every day to ensure the safety of the water we drink, the food we eat, and the air we breathe.

For more information:

About NACCHO's programs to build local public health infrastructure, please visit naccho.org or email pi@naccho.org.

www.naccho.org

The mission of the National Association of County and City Health Officials (NACCHO) is to improve the health of communities by strengthening and advocating for local health departments.

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