



## **Designing Effective Action for Change**

How a Theory of Change helps you  
clarify the cause-and-effect  
relationship at the heart of your  
program

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Welcome to the module, “Designing Effective Action for Change.” This module will describe how a Theory of Change helps you clarify the cause-and-effect relationship at the heart of your program.

## Learning Objectives

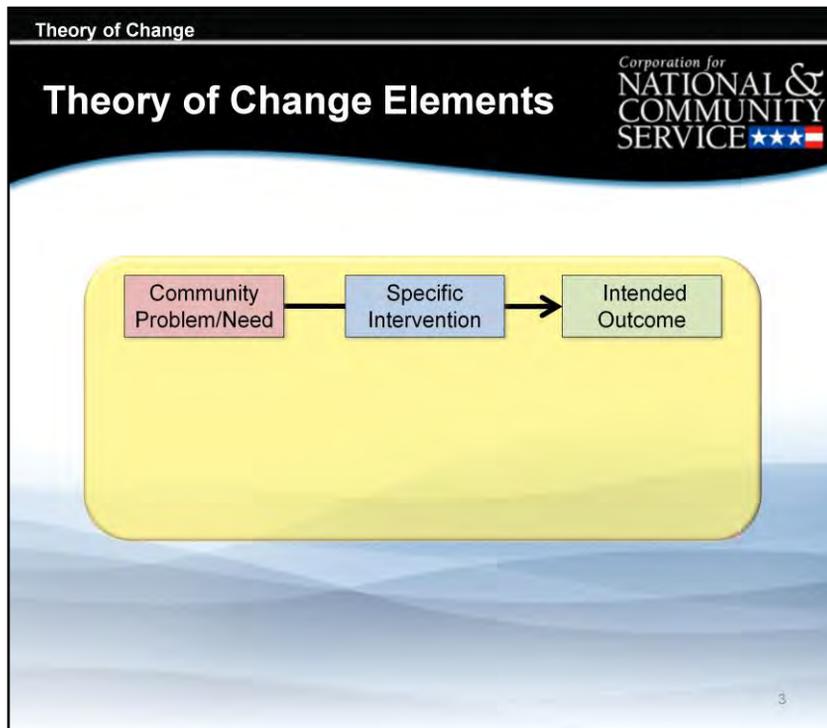
**By the end of the module, you will be able to:**

- Describe the benefits of a Theory of Change
- Define the three elements needed to construct a Theory of Change
- Identify how the Theory of Change informs the program design

This module is designed to give you an overview of Theory of Change.

By the end of the module, you will be able to:

- Describe the benefits of a Theory of Change
- Define the three elements needed to construct a Theory of Change
- Identify how the Theory of Change informs the program design



While the term theory of change may be new to you, the elements are not new to National Service programs. National Service Programs have addressed questions related to these elements in developing and managing strong programs. You might think of this as a set of organizing principles.

A theory of change has three main elements:

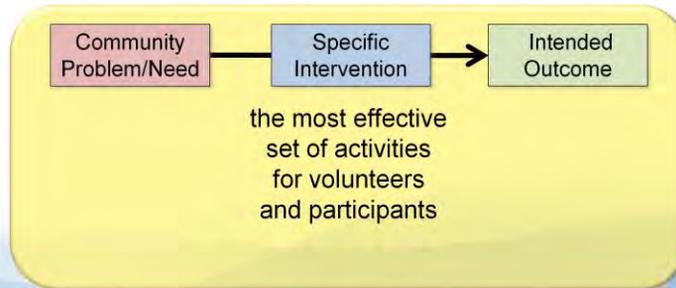
There is the community problem or need to be addressed.

There is the intended outcome – if you deliver the intervention according to plan, it will bring about a measurable positive change in the community in relation to your targeted need.

There is a specific intervention, a set of activities that you have chosen to address the need based on evidence that a similar approach has worked in the past.

As you develop a theory of change for an issue that your program will address, you identify where you are now, as well as the change for which you are programming. You will choose certain activities based upon their link to your desired outcomes.

# Theory of Change Perspective

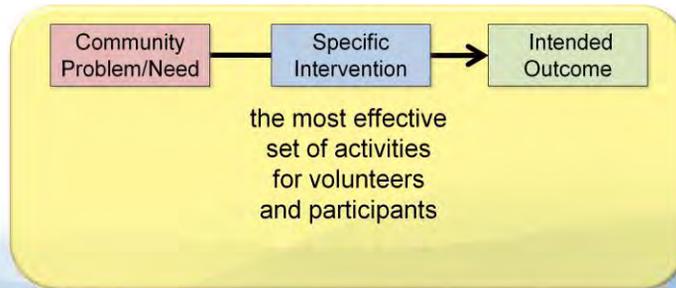


- Looks at cause and effect relationships

*Adapted from [www.theoryofchange.org/about/](http://www.theoryofchange.org/about/)* 4

Developing a theory of change requires you to articulate assumptions underlying your choice of activities by documenting why you think the activities will lead to the intended change.

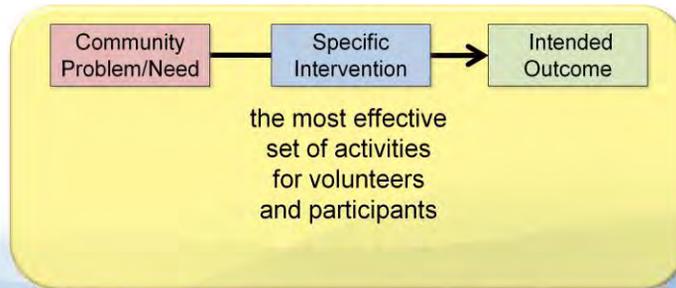
# Theory of Change Perspective



- Identifies specific interventions to achieve the desired result

*Adapted from [www.theoryofchange.org/about/](http://www.theoryofchange.org/about/)* 5

# Theory of Change Perspective

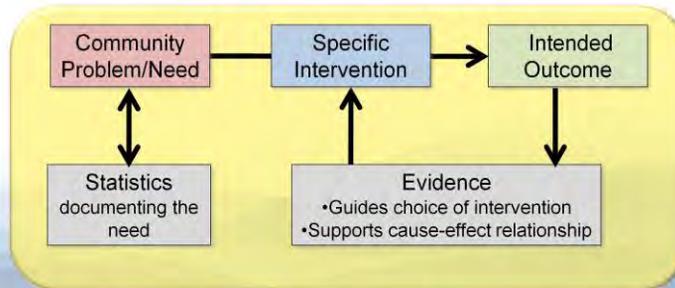


- Shifts thinking from “*what we are doing*” to focus on “*what we want to achieve*”

Adapted from [www.theoryofchange.org/about/](http://www.theoryofchange.org/about/) 6

Clarifying your theory of change is also critical for existing programs as it offers you an opportunity to compare and contrast your program’s approaches and context to similar programs and allows you to consider where to make changes to strengthen your program’s outcomes. Constructing a theory of change also offers you the opportunity to revisit your choice of outcome(s) to insure there is a logical and practical relationship between the service you provide (your intervention) and the change you intend to make.

# Theory of Change Elements



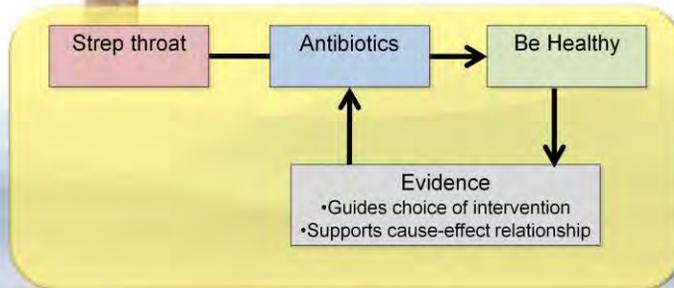
Underlying elements to main elements are:

1. Data that documents the extent and severity of the community problem/need you will address; and
2. Evidence that informs your understanding of why a particular intervention will result in the change identified in the outcome. **[Note: Evidence will be covered in more depth in the next module.]**

## Everyday Life Example



- I have strep throat (problem)
- I will take antibiotics (intervention)
- I will get better (outcome)



Let's walk through an example of what a theory of change looks in everyday life. Science provides us with some of the most familiar examples of how theories of change show us a pathway from problem to solution.

If you have strep throat, then the intended outcome is wellness. Taking antibiotics is a way to get there.

## Everyday Life Example

Evidence:

- Guides choice of intervention
- Supports cause-effect relationship

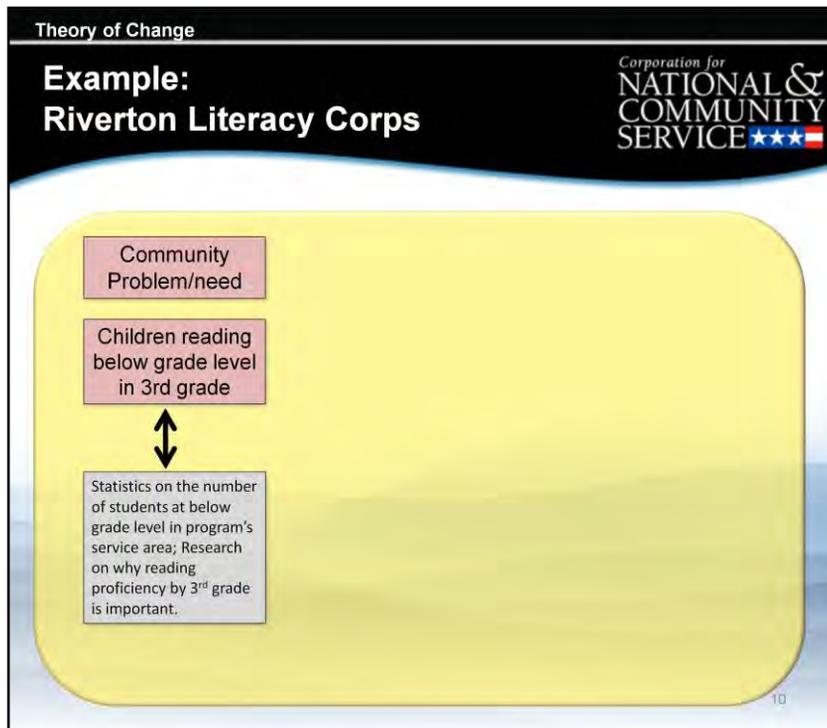
But which antibiotic(s) fight strep the best?  
(Look at evidence to make the choice)

But every antibiotic is not equally effective with strep, so you need to consider the evidence from past studies to determine the best possible intervention or which antibiotics are best to fight strep.

Penicillin has been proven very effective in fighting strep when taken a certain number of times a day for a period of time – making it a good choice.

Tetracycline is also a powerful antibiotic – but it isn't effective for strep throat. It has proven to help with acne. So it would not be a good choice of intervention.

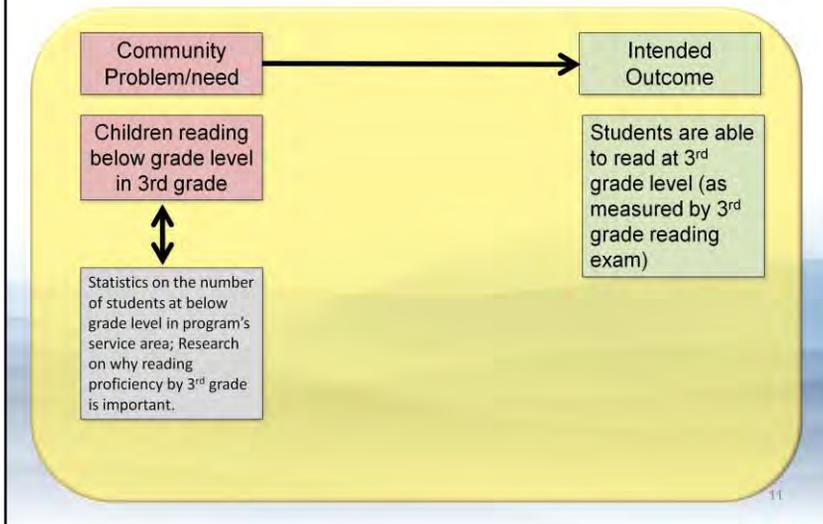
You take 500 mg of penicillin twice a day for 10 days – and you get well.



Now let's look at an example for a national service literacy tutoring program.

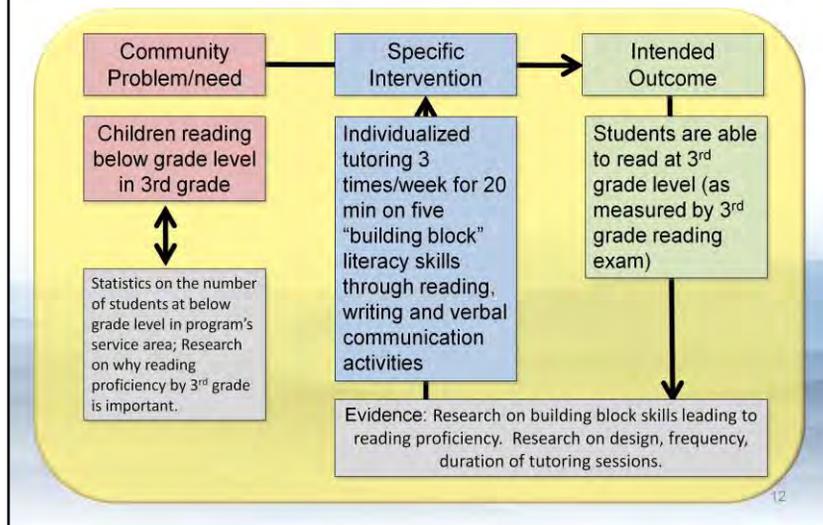
The community problem is that third graders at Riverton Elementary are not reading at grade level as demonstrated by high failure rates on the state reading exam. This is supported by data documenting the failure rates of Riverton students on the state exam and research on the importance of mastering reading by the end of the third grade for future academic success.

## Example: Riverton Literacy Corps



The intended outcome sought by the program is for students to be able to read at third grade level as demonstrated by passing the state reading exam.

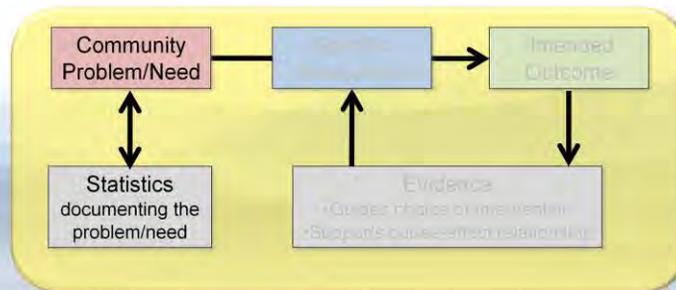
## Example: Riverton Literacy Corps



The intervention will provide individualized tutoring to students identified as "at risk". This tutoring will focus on five "building block" literacy skills through integrated reading, writing and verbal communication activities. Research has shown this curriculum model to be linked to demonstrable improvement in reading skills. The research outlines the specifics of the intervention that yielded the intended outcome.

# Theory of Change Elements

**Community Problem/Need** is the specific issue your project, with its specific intervention (service activity), is designed to address. What is the extent and severity of this need in the community?



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Now let's go into a bit more detail for each element using a different example.

Community problem is the negative condition that exists; community need describes the extent/severity of the problem in your community.

A community has a number of teens that are overweight. You would ask questions such as what is the problem; i.e. what does the research say about the health effects of being overweight? How extensive is the problem in the community; i.e. 5%, 15%, 25% of the teens? And what does this mean to our community? The description of the problem as well as the specific community need is supported by statistics, facts and figures from current and reputable sources.

As you read about and study the problem, you gain an understanding of it which will help lead to your chosen intervention.; i.e., do health classes cover nutrition and fitness? Does the school offer healthy eating options? Does the community offer physical activity programs (team sports) in which teens could become involved? How is the problem described and analyzed in the literature and in conversations? What has been tried, whether or not it has worked? It is useful to know what doesn't work as well as what does.

Theory of Change

# Theory of Change Elements

Corporation for  
**NATIONAL &  
COMMUNITY  
SERVICE** ★★☆☆

**Statistics**  
documenting the  
problem/need



Journal of Health Communication: International Perspectives  
Volume 12, Issue 6, 2007



Evaluating a Minor Storyline on ER About **Teen Obesity**, Hypertension, and 5 A Day

Journal of Nutrition Education and Behavior  
Volume 40, Issue 2, Pages 165-174, May 2008

**Evaluation of a School-based Teen Obesity Prevention Minimal Intervention**

David A. Shook PhD, Cheryl E. Lloyd R. Black PhD, MPH, CHES, Daniel C. Coster PhD

DOI: 10.1080/10810730701508385  
Thomas W. Valente<sup>a</sup>, Sheila Murphy<sup>a</sup>, Grace Huang<sup>a</sup>, Jodi Gusek<sup>a</sup>, Jennie Greene<sup>a</sup> & Vicki Beck<sup>a</sup>  
pages 551-566  
Version of record first published: 29 Aug 2007

The best data:

Come from reputable primary sources, such as government agencies, institutes, foundations, and universities that have conducted their own research. News reports are NOT primary sources. Data from multiple (reputable) sources increases reliability.

Are as current (up to date) as possible.

Are local; national-level and state-level statistics don't tell us about the problem as it affects the community where your intervention will be implemented. If you operate in multiple communities, be sure your data describe these communities. Multi-site programs or programs covering large geographic areas, may rely on county or statewide data. It needs to be clear why you selected particular communities for your intervention. The goal here is to find and use data as close to the source as possible.

## Community Problem/Need

### Data documenting problem/need should answer these questions:

- **SCOPE:** Who and how many are directly affected? How severe is this?
- **SIGNIFICANCE:** What makes this a compelling need? Is it likely to become worse? What will happen if we do nothing?
- **CAUSE(S):** Why does the need exist? How is it perpetuated?

Data describing the community problem/need should address three broad areas.

Scope: The extent of the issue in your local community. What is the severity/intensity of the need for those affected by it? For example, how many individuals or families are directly affected by the need, either in absolute terms or as a percentage of the entire community?

Significance: This is the “so what” question. Why we ought to care about this particular need? This includes data telling us how the need affects the community more generally, and how this is connected to other community issues. Sharing data on trends or the likelihood that the need will worsen also speaks to significance.

Causes: Why the need exists and how it came about, such as historical data showing how the need started and how long it has been around.

Data on the scope and relevance pertain to describing the community need.

Data on the causes of a problem will also inform your choice of intervention or service activity.

## Documenting Community Need

### Healthy Futures Program Example

- **Scope:** National Survey of Children and Health found childhood obesity in State X increased 23% between 2003 and 2007 – the 2<sup>nd</sup> fastest rate of increase in US (2010). CDC data show nearly one-third of children and teens are obese or overweight in Webb County (2009).
- **Significance:**
  - Obese children found to become obese adults
  - Links between childhood obesity and early onset of cardiovascular disease, and Type II diabetes
  - Webb County rising in state and national averages for cardiovascular disease
  - Long term health care costs rising
- **Causes:** Diet, sedentary lifestyle

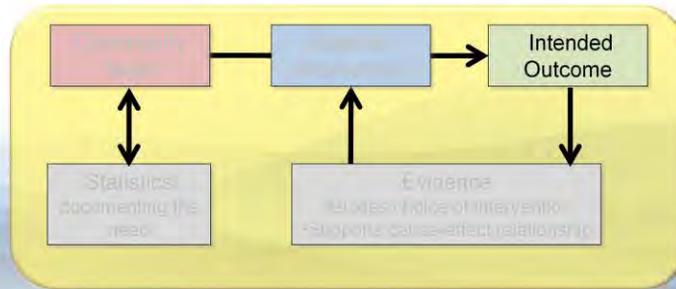


If a health education program is aimed at reducing rates of obesity, then data from reputable sources showing that obesity is a growing problem in the local community should be provided.

These data should inform the reader about the extent to which the community is affected by the problem (scope), why it matters (significance), and why it exists (causes).

# Intended Outcome

**What change are you hoping to make related to the identified need?**



What change do you want your program to make?

Intended Outcome: After you identify the problem/need, the next step is to consider what change you want your program to make. What is your intended outcome, your desired result?

## Identifying the Intended Outcome

### Healthy Futures Program Example

#### Possible outcomes to measure:

- Increased knowledge of what is “healthy food”
- More frequent choice of healthy foods to eat
- More frequent involvement in physical activity or exercise
- Improved physical condition



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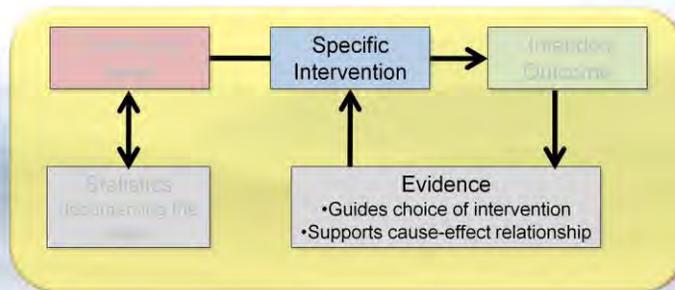
Let's see what an intended outcome might look like for the Healthy Lifestyles program example.

There are several possible intended outcomes to measure:  
Increased knowledge of what is “healthy food”  
More frequent choice of healthy foods to eat  
More frequent involvement in physical activity or exercise  
Improved physical condition

Based on the need, this program selected “Improved physical condition” as its intended outcome.

# Intervention

An **intervention** is the specific set of activities in which participants and volunteers will be engaged. What is the best way to achieve the intended outcome?



Once you know what change you intend to make (your outcome), then you can determine the most effective way to intervene.

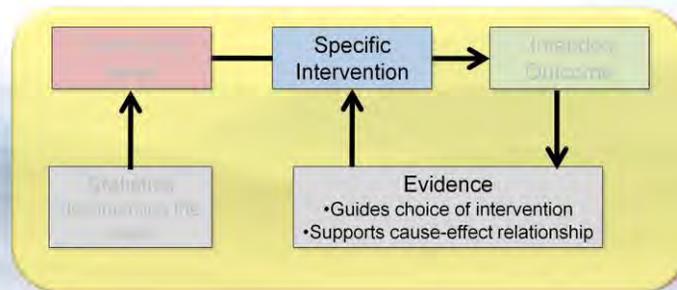
An intervention is the specific set of activities in which your participants and volunteers will be engaged. It is the strategy you employ to bring about the change for those who will benefit from the services.

You are approaching this step with an understanding of the scope, significance and causes of the problem/need and an identified outcome or desired result.

To determine what could be an effective intervention, you will look for evidence from performance measurement, evaluations, or research studies that show your proposed intervention is likely to achieve your intended outcome. What interventions have others tried? Have they proven successful, or have they not led to the expected outcome?

# Intervention

An **intervention** is the specific set of activities in which participants and volunteers will be engaged. What is the best way to achieve the intended outcome?



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Here's an example of how evidence is useful when designing your intervention or modifying an existing intervention to make it more effective.

If evidence from an evaluation shows that *some specific number of* hours of physical activity for teen girls led to improved physical condition and health. Then your intervention should offer a similar number of hours of physical activity if you are seeking to improve physical condition and health in teen girls your program serves.

It is important to note here that physical activity is a broad category of intervention in the same way that antibiotics from our earlier example, are a broad category. Therefore, as you review evidence of what has worked, you also need to pay attention to both the design of the intervention and the dosage received by the teen girls in the program that was studied.

For more detailed information on evidence – what it is, how it helps you select an intervention, where to find it, etc., please see the Evidence Module.

## Intervention

### **Describe the design and dosage of your intervention (service activity):**

- **Design** (who does what with whom?)
- **Dosage**
  - **Frequency** (how many sessions a week?)
  - **Intensity** (length of each session)
  - **Duration** (how many total weeks of sessions?)

As part of your theory of change, you need to describe your intervention or service activities clearly. You need to identify the:

- Design (who does what with whom?)
- Dosage
  - Frequency (for example, how many sessions a week?)
  - Intensity (for example, length of each session)
  - Duration (for example, how many total weeks of sessions?)

## Intervention Example

### Healthy Futures Program Example

- **Design:** national service participants implement the Shape Up curriculum with economically disadvantaged urban girls ages 14-16 to increase physical activity (30 minutes/session) and educate them on healthy eating
- **Frequency:** twice a week afterschool
- **Intensity:** 60 minutes per session
- **Duration:** 12 weeks



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Following our Healthy Futures program example, here is the intervention description for the after-school community-based Shape Up program:

**Design:** the Shape Up curriculum serves small groups of 3-5 economically disadvantaged urban girls ages 14-16 to increase physical activity and educate them on healthy eating

**Frequency:** twice a week

**Intensity:** 60 minutes per session

**Duration:** 12 weeks

## Testing Your Theory of Change

### IS YOUR THEORY OF CHANGE:

**PLAUSIBLE:** Does the logic of the model seem correct: “if we do these things, will we get the results we expect?”

**FEASIBLE:** Are resources sufficient to implement the chosen intervention?

**MEANINGFUL:** Are intended outcomes important? Is the magnitude of expected change worth the effort?

After you have laid out all three elements of your theory of change, you need to ask yourself the following questions.

Is your Theory of Change Plausible: Does the logic of your model seem correct: “if we do these things, we will get the results we expect?”

Is it Feasible: Do you have enough resources to implement the intervention you have chosen?

Is it Meaningful: Are your intended outcomes important? Is the magnitude of change you expect worth the effort?

## Summary of Key Points

- A theory of change identifies cause/effect
- The three elements of a theory of change; community problem/need, intervention, intended outcome are supported by data and evidence
- Data documenting community need should show scope, significance, and causes

To summarize the key points of this module:

Having a well conceived theory of change helps identify the pathway linking your service activities to your intended outcome

The three elements of a theory of change; community problem/need, intervention, intended outcome are supported by data and evidence

Data documenting community need should show scope, significance, and causes

## Additional Resources

**CNCS Priorities and Performance Measures:**  
<http://www.nationalserviceresources.gov/npm/home>

**Program-Specific Notices of Funding Opportunities  
and Application Instructions:**  
<http://www.nationalservice.gov>

This concludes the Theory of Change Module.

For more information on CNCS national performance measures, go to <http://www.nationalserviceresources.gov/npm/home>.

Also see <http://www.nationalservice.gov> for more information on Program-specific notices of funding opportunities and application instructions.