

What is a functional program?

Simply stated, a functional program is an initial planning document in which the purpose of a construction project, along with key project requirements, is recorded. A well-developed and thought-out functional program is a written record of the results of the functional programming process that carries forward the owner's intentions throughout the life cycle of a project, including serving as a guide to how the completed facility is expected to be used.

As outlined in the Guidelines for Design and Construction of Health Care Facilities (Guidelines), a functional program must be created for new construction, major renovations, and projects that change the functional use of any health care facility space. The size and complexity of the project will determine the level of effort needed to develop the functional program. A functional program is not intended to determine the design itself, but rather is a resource intended to ensure that all the owner's fundamental needs for a facility project are identified so they can be addressed in the facility design and met by the completed project.

The functional program, as delineated in the Guidelines, is to be commissioned by the owner, who will collaborate with the project team (including key stakeholders) to identify the basis for the project parameters. The planning decisions outlined in the functional program will determine which sections of the Guidelines apply to a given health care construction project. Developing the information required in a functional program will help the project team and owner reach consensus on key elements of project scope, and the resulting document will serve as a record and guide to their intent throughout the design and construction process.

How does a functional program work?

Before the functional program is created, the owner's conceptual facility needs are identified, typically, as part of an organization's strategic and facility master planning efforts. Once these needs have been evaluated, organized into specific facility projects, and coordinated with available funding, the functional programming process for a specific project can commence.

During the initial planning phase of a construction project, the health care facility owner (termed the governing body in the Hospital Guidelines) must undertake a high-level, critical thinking process to identify the overall project goals, facility functions, and basic design needs the project is intended to support. The decisions made during this process are recorded in the functional program. This information is then provided to the project architect/engineer and the authority having jurisdiction (AHJ) to assure the basis of the project is understood. Often, members of the project team who represent the owner and the designer work together to develop the functional program, but it is critical that the owner bear the responsibility for this effort.

Although the functional program is completed during the project planning phase, it should be updated, as needed, throughout the design and construction phases. During the design phase, the project team uses and expands the functional program information to develop the details of the project design, allowing them to base it on a full understanding of the owner's project needs.

During the construction phase, the functional program information is used to develop detailed operational plans and is updated to include any additions or changes that occur during this phase of the project.

What's in a functional program?

As usually stated in the FGI Guidelines, Section 1- Functional Program Content, key elements to be included in a functional program are:

Executive Summary

Purpose of the project

Project type and size

- Facility type as defined by the Guidelines
- Square footage and number of stories

Construction type/occupancy and building systems

- For new construction, descriptions of the planned construction type and occupancy
- For renovation, descriptions of the existing and planned construction types and of the existing engineering systems that service the facility

Project components and scope

- Departments affected by the project
- Services required for the completed project to function as intended

Indirect support functions (i.e., increased or decreased demands, workloads, staffing requirements, etc., that will be imposed on support functions related to the construction project)

Operational requirements, such as:

- Projected operational use and demand loading for affected departments/project components
- Operational circulation patterns
- Departmental operational relationships and required adjacencies

In general, the functional program should clarify project terminology, set priorities, and reflect consensus on the project requirements among those who will be affected by the proposed project. The functional program must be fully understood and approved by the project team before it is turned over to the design team to guide design.

The functional program will serve as a statement of the clear intent of the original drafters and provides an important foundation for how the building is intended to function and for planning future alterations to the facility.