Preparing for a Collaborative Community Assessment

What is community assessment?

Community assessment is a process of gathering, analyzing and reporting information about the needs of your community and the capacities or strengths that are also currently available in your community to meet those needs. A community assessment begins by convening a group of citizens, establishing a vision and prioritizing the issues that require change. This collaborative effort between local citizens provides a foundation for a community assessment that includes professionals who have expertise on issues and others who are likely to be affected by the changes you are planning (such as children and parents.) The vision provides a focus for the community assessment — a clear picture of where you want to be in the future. Prioritized changes are used to select the information you need to gather in order to make decisions that create change.

Why should a community assessment be conducted?

As community-planning groups begin to think about the action steps necessary to create change, members of the group often realize that they do not have sufficient knowledge to make decisions about action plans. Members may be basing their judgments on selected "stories" or anecdotes they have heard from other members and community residents outside the planning group. Sometimes the implications of these anecdotes are contradictory.

Between the vision of the future and development and implementation of a plan to realize the future, community planners may also realize that there is more than one way to accomplish the vision. Indeed, even the vision itself may be perceived as beneficial by some community residents and undesirable by others. Results from a well-designed com-

Why should we conduct a community assessment?

1. **To provide data for decision-making**
2. **To promote awareness and action**
3. **To satisfy a mandate**

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munity assessment that gathers information using sound research methods can be generalized to the entire set of residents in the community. A well-designed community assessment will allow community planners to feel a sense of confidence when they use this information as the basis for decision-making.

Community assessments can also be used to assess and generate awareness of the issues being studied and to promote citizen interest in creating change. Finally, foundations and other funding institutions that provide resources for implementing your action plan will often require a formal assessment of needs and resources.

Characteristics of a successful community assessment:

1. **Understand the current situation first**
2. **Define a vision of the future**
3. **Allow questions to drive the assessment process**
4. **Address issues that stakeholders believe are important**
5. **Communicate information back to stakeholders**

What are the characteristics of successful community assessments?

A successful community assessment provides comprehensive, usable and accurate information for decision-making. Community assessments that result in this information begin with an assessment of the current situation. The current capacities of the community – services and other resources provided by local agencies, institutions and associations, and the skills and abilities of individual children and youth and their families – are identified. Information on needs is collected through data that already exists (secondary data) and through newly collected data, also known as primary data. Finally, the gap between current capacities and needs is identified and ideas on how to eliminate the gap can be generated.

Successful community assessments also begin with a vision of the future and allow questions to drive the information gathering process. With the recent increase in availability of information due to technology changes, planning groups may find a large amount of information, little of which is applicable to the issue being studied. Identifying the questions that will be answered by the community assessment permits group members to be more selective in collecting the data and in judging the usefulness of the data. A preliminary list of questions will also act as a framework for collection of new information through surveys, focus groups or public meetings.

Steps in a community assessment

1. **Do we need to hire a technical consultant?**

Finally, community assessments that result in useful, comprehensive information address issues that stakeholders – people with an interest in the issue such as parents, students, agency personnel, government officials – perceive as important. Moreover, a community assessment that leads to the change desired by your planning group communicates the information gathered back to stakeholders and involves them in the planning process.

What are the steps involved in conducting a community assessment?

Steps in conducting a community assessment vary, depending on the problems your planning group believes community residents are facing. Your planning group may have already begun the work of preparing for a community assessment by including stakeholders, developing a vision for the future of your community, and creating a list of questions that need to be answered by the community assessment.

Should we hire a technical consultant? Designing and conducting an assessment is a highly technical process. Your group may have a resource person who can provide technical advice on design of the study. This technical person should have graduate-level training and experience in statistics and research design.

If your group does not have a member with these skills, consideration should be given to locating and, possibly, hiring someone with these qualities to work with you. While resources to pay a technical consultant are often limited in community groups, other residents with these skills who are not planning group members can sometimes be persuaded to assist you. Technical assistance may also be available through local community colleges, universities and through your state's extension network. Local agencies and organizations also may be interested in providing resources to hire technical consultants and to defray the costs of data collection.

If your group decides to hire a technical consultant, be prepared to answer questions about the history of your planning process, any secondary data that you have already examined (and what you learned from this data), the source

2. What do we know?

3.What do we still need to know?

4. How will we collect the additional information?

of your funding and any time restrictions on data collection and the planning process that will follow. Whether the person guiding your assessment process is or is not a member of your group, request a formal, written plan of work for the assessment. This work plan should include the steps in the process, a description of all parties' responsibilities, the expected outcomes, a timeline and anticipated costs. If your planning group is large (more than 25 people), you may also want to consider creating a subcommittee with responsibility for conducting the community assessment and reporting progress back to the group.

Once you have determined your source for technical assistance, the assessment may follow these steps:

What do we know? Be prepared to explain the information you have already collected and interpret this information.

What do we still need to know? Identify the remaining information needed about the problem. What questions are still partially or totally unanswered?

How will we collect the additional information? Select the method to be used. The technical consultant may suggest additional secondary data or assist you with analysis of secondary data you have already found.

You may decide to collect new or primary data through a telephone or mail survey to a random sample of residents. If correctly conducted, results from these two types of information gathering can be generalized to the entire community that is the subject of your study.

Your group may decide to collect primary data using focus groups, face-to-face interviews, a public forum (such as a town meeting) or through the nominal group process. Using any of these four methods will result in qualitative information that can be useful in planning and decision-making. However, results from these four methods cannot be generalized to all of your community's residents.

Consider using a combination of data collection methods. For example, following a random sample mail questionnaire with focus groups or a public forum may provide supporting data and richer qualitative information to the results of a mailed survey.

5. Who will we ask?

Who will we ask? Identifying the characteristics of the people who will give you the information can be a lengthy process. Ideally, if time and resources were available, data would be collected from everyone (the sampling frame) in the geographic area who has the characteristics in which you are interested. However, collecting information from everyone is rarely possible.

Often a systematic random sample is selected. A sample is a smaller group of people who are asked to participate in the assessment by giving information. A sample is random if everyone in the sampling frame has an equal chance of being selected for the sample. If you are collecting information by using a random sample, the list of everyone with the identified characteristics in the geographic area for your assessment is sometimes difficult to identify and obtain. For a non-random sample such as a focus group, care must be taken in identifying participants who represent important characteristics of the total list of everyone in the population.

Regardless of the sampling procedure, consideration should also be given to issues of consent and confidentiality. Respondents need to know the purpose of your study, how the information they provide will be used, measures taken to protect their identity and that they can choose not to participate without disruption of any services they are now receiving.

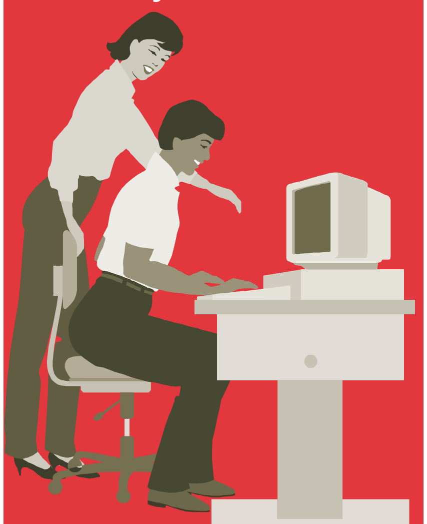
6. What will we ask?

What will we ask? Creating the list of questions – also known as the instrument or protocol for collecting data – is also a technically complex process. The wording of questions influences the answer given, and may also influence the likelihood you will get any answer. Consideration must also be given to the order of the questions, the number of questions and, in a mailed questionnaire, the way the questionnaire is constructed (font size, spacing, highlighting or emphasis.)

7. Who will collect the data?

Who will collect the data? Volunteers from your planning group can distribute questionnaires if there is a sufficient number of volunteers and training in volunteer distribution is available. Conducting telephone interviews, face-to-face interviews, focus groups and other methods listed above requires special training and skills. Your group should consider someone with training and experience in the selected area. Mail surveys may be less time consuming for your group. Your state extension service or the consultant you hire may have resources to assist with stuffing and stamping envelopes.

8. How will we compile and analyze the data?



How will we compile the data? Your group may have a member who is knowledgeable in creating a database with the information you have collected. Frequencies are calculated for responses to questions. Sometimes additional analyses that look at the difference in response between groups of respondents (for example, are respondents with higher education levels more likely to answer a question a certain way) can be conducted by a person with skills in crosstabbing information.

Creating a transcription of responses to open-ended questions (for mail and telephone surveys) and comments collected using other methods such as focus groups, face-to-face interview is also helpful. However, summarizing or analyzing this type of information is a subjective process. A technical consultant can provide a summary or guide you through the steps in creating your own summary.

9. How will we report our findings?

How will we report our findings? Once the data is collected, it is helpful to have the information summarized in a report. Even more helpful is illustrating the results in charts or graphs that simplify the information for a lay audience. Graphing data can be a technical process, depending on the nature of the information. Your technical adviser can assist you in creating graphs or create them for the report.

"A plan well begun is a plan half done."

– anonymous

We are done with the community assessment. Now what?

Completing a community assessment that gives you the information you need, information in which you have a high level of confidence as a basis for decision-making, is just a beginning. Unfortunately, some planning groups see a survey or assessment as the end of their efforts, instead of the means to their vision. Now is the time to celebrate the completion of your community assessment as the successful end of a process that took cooperation and a good deal of hard work.

Your celebration also marks the beginning of the next phase of the change effort. Your planning process must begin again by, literally, beginning again. A facilitator can guide you through a review of your group's vision, formulating a statement of the problems you have identified, generating solutions and a plan of action that uses existing strengths in your community. At this point, it is appropriate to give careful consideration to whether your group's membership is as inclusive as it needs to be, given the course of action you have chosen. When local residents and representatives of agencies, associations and institutions to whom you will look for resources are involved in the planning process, it is more likely they will support your implementation efforts and endorse the results of your efforts in the future.

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