Doing a Community Needs Assessment

When was the last time your organization conducted a community health needs assessment? Many organizations only conduct needs assessments when required by a funder or other group involved in a project. Resources, particularly money and staff time, may be scarce. A needs assessment may not seem like a high priority when faced with so many other organizational and client demands.

Although community advocates and outreach workers may feel that they have a strong understanding of the barriers to care, community health needs can change over time. New emerging population groups present additional cultural and linguistic competency challenges and opportunities to the organizations that serve them. Changes in living and working patterns of the community can also present new challenges and new opportunities.

A needs assessment is a tool to help you determine the true needs of the community that you serve. These needs are identified by community members themselves. Finding out the specific needs of your community – not just those of patients but also the needs of community members who do not seek services at your center – can help maximize the results of your outreach efforts.

Many organizations conduct needs assessments because they are required to do so by their funders as part of a grant application or renewal. However, there are many other reasons for doing a community needs assessment. Needs assessments can:

- help to establish program priorities, objectives, and goals
- help prioritize which education and outreach services to conduct with a priority population
- improve a health center’s quality of care
- help improve other community service providers’ understanding of health and social service needs, thus working to improve overall community awareness of and services for a priority population
- help securing additional program funding

In planning for a needs assessment, you must determine from the outset how you plan to apply the information you collect. It is important to know exactly what your purpose is in conducting the needs assessment. This will help you develop your specific goals and stay focused on what you want to achieve.

**Define the boundaries of your needs assessment effort.** Be sure to determine exactly whom you want to assess and what you want to assess. For example, do you want to focus on low-income families? Homeless population? A specific ethnic group? Migrant farmworkers? Also be specific about the geographic area you intend to cover and the topics you want to address. It is important to consider language(s) and/or dialects spoken in the community and the best time to assess; both during the year and time of day.

**Use both internal and external resources.** Before collecting any information yourself, determine what information already exists about the community or group you plan to assess. Agencies such as the U.S. Census Bureau, U.S. Department of Labor, state or local health departments, Head Start, local school districts, and community health centers can be invaluable sources of information.

**Determine how many staff members and how much staff time can be used.** You may be able to recruit assistance for certain parts of the needs assessment from organizations such as local churches, hospitals, social service agencies, university students, or community service organizations.

**Decide how you will gather information.** Surveys (mail, telephone, in-person), focus groups, key informant interviews, and secondary data sources are some possibilities. What you choose will depend on the expertise available among staff, volunteers, or collaborators as well as the extent to which each method is appropriate for your priority population. For example, if few individuals in your priority population have internet, an internet survey would not be a useful way to gather information.

**Cultural competency is critical.** If the individuals who are collecting information from the community do not have an adequate understanding of, or respect for, the respondents’ cultural characteristics, there will be little chance of developing enough trust to collect meaningful information. Successful needs assessments also often make use of an existing tool. If an appropriate survey already exists, use or adapt it for your specific purpose.

**Partnering with local agencies or institutions can also be a key to success.** You may benefit from expertise that does not exist among your own staff; data analysis, for example. In addition, sharing information among local agencies, and even at the regional, state, and national levels, can be very useful for a number of stakeholders. Finally, consider establishing an advisory group...
for your needs assessment. The advisory group should be made up of a representative sample of people from the community you are assessing. These community advisors can guide you in your assessment effort. Moreover, inviting community member participation can help build capacity in that community.

**Use the data you collect.** Share the results with stakeholders in the community, including the priority population. When sharing information, make sure what you share is appropriate. For example, if you collected information on worker health and safety, you would probably not want to share specific names and addresses of those who participated in the assessment with employer contacts and representatives. After sharing relevant and appropriate information, develop a plan of action to address the gaps in services and needs you have identified.

In conclusion, a needs assessment is a critical component in delivering effective health services and health education at any organization. A needs assessment requires collecting information from a variety of sources in order to understand the quality of health, health care needs, as well as the type of health education needed in a particular community or group. A needs assessment should respond to the needs of the population studied as well as the needs of the institution(s) conducting assessment.

For more information on needs assessment, please visit our website at [www.outreach-partners.org](http://www.outreach-partners.org). Health Outreach Partners can also help you and your organization conduct a community needs assessment. Please contact us for more information. Finally, you may find these online resources helpful:

U.S. Census Bureau:
[www.census.gov](http://www.census.gov)

U.S. Department of Labor:
[www.dol.gov](http://www.dol.gov)

Office of Head Start:
[www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/ohs/](http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/ohs/)