

Needs Assessment

Priorities:

- **Define your target population/community**
- **Identify community needs (concrete and abstract)**
- **Identify existing resources and services in the community**

Define your community/target population

WHAT IS A COMMUNITY?

While we traditionally think of a community as the people in a given geographical location, the word can really refer to any group sharing something in common. This may refer to smaller geographic areas -- a neighborhood, a housing project or development, a rural area -- or to a number of other possible communities within a larger, geographically-defined community. These are often defined by race or ethnicity, professional or economic ties, religion, culture, or shared background or interest:

- The Catholic community (or faith community, a term used to refer to one or more congregations of a specific faith).
- The arts community
- The African American community
- The education community
- The business community
- The homeless community
- The gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered community
- The medical community
- The Haitian community
- The elderly community

It's important to understand the specific community you're concerned with. You have to get to know its people -- their culture, their concerns, and relationships -- and to develop your own relationships with them as well.

- *Physical aspects.* Every community has a physical presence of some sort, even if only one building. Most have a geographic area or areas they are either defined by or attached to. It's important to know the community's size and the look and feel of its buildings, and each of its neighborhoods. Also important are how various areas of the community differ from one another, and whether your impression is one of clean, well-maintained houses and streets, or one of shabbiness, dirt, and neglect.

If the community is one defined by its population, then its physical properties are also defined by the population: where they live, where they gather, the places that are important to them. The characteristics of those places can tell you a great deal about the people who make up the community. Their self-image, many of their attitudes, and their aspirations are often reflected in the places where they choose -- or are forced by circumstance or discrimination -- to live, work, gather, and play.

- *Infrastructure.* Roads, bridges, transportation (local public transportation, airports, train lines), electricity, land line and mobile telephone service, broadband service, and similar "basics" make up the infrastructure of the community, without which it couldn't function.
- *Patterns of settlement, commerce, and industry.* Where are those physical spaces we've been discussing? Communities reveal their character by where and how they create living and working spaces. Where there are true slums -- substandard housing in areas with few or no services that are the only options for low-income people -- the value the larger community places on those residents seems clear. Are heavy industries located next to residential neighborhoods? If so, who lives in those neighborhoods? Are some parts of the community dangerous, either because of high crime and violence or because of unsafe conditions in the built or natural environment?
- *Demographics.* It's vital to understand who makes up the community. These and other statistics make up the demographic profile of the population. When you put them together (e.g., the education level of black women ages 18-24), it gives you a clear picture of who community residents are:
 - Gender
 - Racial and ethnic background
 - Age. Numbers and percentages of the population in various age groups
 - Marital status
 - Family size
 - Education
 - Income
 - Employment - Both the numbers of people employed full and part-time, and the numbers of people in various types of work
 - Location - Knowing which groups live in which neighborhoods or areas can help to recruit participants in a potential effort or to decide where to target activities
 - First language

- *History.* The long-term history of the community can tell you about community traditions, what the community is, or has been, proud of, and what residents would prefer not to talk about. Recent history can afford valuable information about conflicts and factions within the community, important issues, past and current relationships among key people and groups -- many of the factors that can trip up any effort before it starts if you don't know about and address them.
- *Community leaders, formal and informal.* Some community leaders are elected or appointed -- mayors, city councilors, directors of public works. Others are considered leaders because of their activities or their positions in the community -- community activists, corporate CEO's, college presidents, doctors, clergy. Still others are recognized as leaders because, they are trusted for their proven integrity, courage, and/or care for others and the good of the community.
- *Community culture, formal and informal.* This covers the spoken and unspoken rules and traditions by which the community lives. It can include everything from community events and slogans -- the blessing of the fishing fleet, the "Artichoke Capital of the World" -- to norms of

behavior -- turning a blind eye to alcohol abuse or domestic violence -- to patterns of discrimination and exercise of power. Understanding the culture and how it developed can be crucial, especially if that's what you're attempting to change.

- *Existing groups.* Most communities have an array of groups and organizations of different kinds -- service clubs (Lions, Rotary, etc.), faith groups, youth organizations, sports teams and clubs, groups formed around shared interests, the boards of community-wide organizations (the YMCA, the symphony, United Way), as well as groups devoted to self-help, advocacy, and activism. Knowing of the existence and importance of each of these groups can pave the way for alliances or for understanding opposition.
- *Existing institutions.* Every community has institutions that are important to it, and that have more or less credibility with residents. Colleges and universities, libraries, religious institutions, hospitals -- all of these and many others can occupy important places in the community. It's important to know what they are, who represents them, and what influence they wield.
- *Economics.* Who are the major employers in the community? What, if any, business or industry is the community's base? Who, if anyone, exercises economic power? How is wealth distributed? Would you characterize the community as poor, working, class, middle class, or affluent? What are the economic prospects of the population in general and/or the population you're concerned with?
- *Government/Politics.* Understanding the structure of community government is obviously important. Some communities may have strong mayors and weak city councils, others the opposite. Still other communities may have no mayor at all, but only a town manager, or may have a different form of government entirely. Whatever the government structure, where does political power lie? Understanding where the real power is can be the difference between a successful effort and a vain one.
- *Social structure.* Many aspects of social structure are integrated into other areas -- relationships, politics, economics -- but there are also the questions of how people in the community relate to one another on a daily basis, how problems are (or aren't) resolved, who socializes or does business with whom, etc. This area also includes perceptions and symbols of status and respect, and whether status carries entitlement or responsibility (or both).
- *Attitudes and values.* Again, much of this area may be covered by investigation into others, particularly culture. What does the community care about, and what does it ignore? What are residents' assumptions about the proper way to behave, to dress, to do business, to treat others? Is there widely accepted discrimination against one or more groups by the majority or by those in power? What are the norms for interaction among those with different opinions or different backgrounds?

When you want to address health or community issues in your community, you need detailed information about the needs of individuals and the organizations that serve them, as well as the resources that your community has available to address those needs.

Needs

- are the gap between what is and what should be.
- can be felt by an individual, a group, or an entire community.
- can be concrete (i.e. the need for food and water or the need for public transportation in a community where older adults have no means of getting around town).
- can be abstract (i.e. improved community cohesiveness/togetherness or older adults' need to be valued for their knowledge and experience).

Resources, or assets, can include individuals, organizations and institutions, buildings, landscapes, equipment -- **anything that can be used to improve the quality of life.**

Examples: The mother in Chicago who volunteers to organize games and sports for neighborhood children after school, the Kenyan farmers' cooperative that makes it possible for farmers to buy seed and fertilizer cheaply and to send their produce directly to market without a middle man, the library that provides books and Internet access to everyone, the bike and walking path where city residents can exercise -- all represent resources that enhance community life. Every individual is a potential community asset, and everyone has assets that can be used for community building.

WHO SHOULD BE INVOLVED IN ASSESSING LOCAL NEEDS AND RESOURCES?

The assessment process benefits greatly when there's full participation from community stakeholders. Among those who should be involved:

- *Those experiencing needs that should be addressed.* It's both fair and logical to involve those who are most directly affected by adverse conditions. They know best what effects those conditions have on their lives, and including them in the planning process is more likely to produce a plan that actually speaks to their needs.
- *Health and human service providers.* These individuals and organizations, especially those that are community-based, often have both a deep understanding of the community and a strong empathic connection with the populations they serve. They can be helpful both by sharing their knowledge and by recruiting people from marginalized populations to contribute to the assessment.

- *Government officials.* Elected and appointed officials are often those who can help or hinder a community change effort. Engaging them in planning and carrying out an assessment helps to ensure that they will take the effort seriously and work to make it successful.
- *Influential people.* These can include individuals who are identified as leaders because of their positions -- college presidents, directors of hospitals and other major organizations, corporate CEOs -- because of the prestige of their professions -- doctors, professors, judges, clergy -- or because they are known to be people of intelligence, integrity, and good will who care about the community.
- *People whose jobs or lives could be affected by the eventual actions taken as a result of the assessment.* These include teachers, police, emergency room personnel, landlords, and others who might have to react if new community policies or procedures are put in place.
- *Community activists.* People who have been involved in addressing policy or issues that could come up in the course of the assessment have a stake in planning the assessment as well.
- *Businesses, especially those that employ people from populations of concern.* The livelihoods of local business owners could be affected by the results of the assessment, as could the lives of their employees.

Example of identifying needs and assets: If your group has a specific goal, such as reducing teen pregnancy, identifying local needs (better communication between parents and teens, education programs, etc.) and resources (youth outreach programs, peer counselors) related to the issue can help you develop an effective goal.

WHOM SHOULD YOU CONTACT TO GATHER INFORMATION?

Much of your best and most interesting information may come from community members with no particular credentials except that they're part of the community. It's especially important to get the perspective of those who often don't have a voice in community decisions and politics -- low-income people, immigrants, and others who are often kept out of the community discussion. In addition, however, there are some specific people that it might be important to talk to. They're the individuals in key positions, or those who are trusted by a large part of the community or by a particular population. In a typical community, they might include:

- | | |
|--|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Elected officials • Community planners and development officers • Chiefs of police • School superintendents, principals, and teachers • Directors or staff of health and human service organizations | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Health professionals • Clergy • Community activists • Housing advocates • Presidents or chairs of civic or service clubs -- Chamber of Commerce, veterans' organizations, Lions, Rotary, etc. |
|--|---|

- People without titles, but identified by others as "community leaders"

- Owners or CEO's of large businesses (these may be local or may be large corporations with local branches)

HOW DO YOU GO ABOUT UNDERSTANDING AND DESCRIBING THE COMMUNITY?

GENERAL GUIDELINES

To begin, let's look at some basic principles to keep in mind.

- *Be prepared to learn from the community.* Assume that you have a lot to learn, and approach the process with an open mind. Listen to what people have to say. Observe carefully. Take notes -- you can use them later to generate new questions or to help answer old ones.
- *Be aware that people's speech, thoughts, and actions are not always rational.* Their attitudes and behavior are often best understood in the context of their history, social relations, and culture. Race relations in the U.S., for example, can't be understood without knowing some of the historical context -- the history of slavery, Jim Crow laws, and the work of Martin Luther King and the Civil Rights Movement.
- *Don't assume that the information people give you is necessarily accurate.* There are a number of reasons why informants may tell you things that are inaccurate. People's perceptions don't always reflect reality, but are colored instead by what they think or what they think they know. In addition, some may intentionally exaggerate or downplay particular conditions or issues for their own purposes or for what they see as the greater good. (The Chamber of Commerce or local government officials might try to make economic conditions look better than they are in the hopes of attracting new business to the community, for instance.) Others may simply be mistaken about what they tell you -- the geographical boundaries of a particular neighborhood, for example, or the year of an important event. Get information, particularly on issues, conditions, and relationships from many sources if you can. As time goes on, you'll learn who the always-reliable sources are.
- *Beware of activities that may change people's behavior.* It's well known that people (and animals as well) can change their normal behavior as a result of knowing they're being studied. Neighborhood residents may clean up their yards if they're aware that someone is taking the measure of the neighborhood. Community members may try to appear as they wish to be seen, rather than as they really are, if they know you're watching. To the extent that you can, try not to do anything that will change the way people go about their daily business or express themselves. That usually means being as unobtrusive as possible -- not being obvious about taking pictures or making notes, for instance. In some circumstances, it could mean trying to gain trust and insight through participant observation.

Note: Participant observation is a technique that can be used. It entails becoming part of another culture, both to keep people in it from being influenced by your presence and to understand it from the inside. Some researchers believe it addresses the problem of changing the culture by studying it, and others believe that it makes the problem worse.

- *Take advantage of the information and facilities that help shape the world of those who have lived in the community for a long time.* Read the local newspaper (and the alternative paper, too, if there is one), listen to local radio, watch local TV, listen to conversation in cafes and bars, in barbershops and beauty shops. You can learn a great deal about a community by immersing yourself in its internal communication. The Chamber of Commerce will usually have a list of area businesses and organizations, along with their contact people, which should give you both points of contact and a sense of who the people are that you might want to get in touch with. Go to the library -- local librarians are often treasure troves of information, and their professional goal is to spread it around. Check out bulletin boards at supermarkets and laundromats. Even graffiti can be a valuable source of information about community issues.
- *Network, network, network.* Every contact you make in the community has the potential to lead you to more contacts. Whether you're talking to official or unofficial community leaders or to people you just met on the street, always ask who else they would recommend that you talk to and whether you can use their names when you contact those people. Establishing relationships with a variety of community members is probably the most important thing you can do to ensure that you'll be able to get the information you need, and that you'll have support for working in the community when you finish your assessment and begin your effort.

GATHERING INFORMATION

To find out about various aspects of the community, you'll need a number of different methods of gathering information. We've already discussed some of them, and many of the remaining sections of this chapter deal with them, because they're the same methods you'll use in doing a full community assessment. Here, we'll simply list them, with short explanations and links to sections where you can get more information about each.

- *Public records and archives.* These include local, state, and federal government statistics and records, newspaper archives, and the records of other organizations that they're willing to share. Many of the public documents are available at public and/or university libraries and on line at government websites. Most communities have their own websites, which often contain valuable information as well.
- *Individual/group interviews or focus groups.* Interviews can range from casual conversations in a cafe to structured formal interviews in which the interviewer asks the same specific questions of a number of carefully chosen key informants. They can be conducted with individuals or groups, in all kinds of different places and circumstances. They're often the best sources of information,

but they're also time-consuming and involve finding the right people and convincing them to consent to be interviewed, as well as finding (and sometimes training) good interviewers.

Note: Interviews may include enlisting as sources of information others who've spent time learning about the community. University researchers, staff and administrators of health and human service organizations, and activists may all have done considerable work to understand the character and inner workings of the community. Take advantage of their findings if you can. It may save you many hours of effort.

- *Surveys.* There are various types of surveys. They can be written or oral, conducted with a selected small group -- usually a randomized sample that represents a larger population -- or with as many community members as possible. They can be sent through the mail, administered over the phone or in person, or given to specific groups (school classes, faith congregations, the Rotary Club). They're often fairly short, and ask for answers that are either yes-no, or that rate the survey-taker's opinion of a number of possibilities (typically on a scale that represents "agree strongly" to "disagree strongly" or "very favorable" to "very unfavorable.") Surveys can, however, be much more comprehensive, with many questions, and can ask for more complex answers.
- *Direct or participant observation.* Often the best way to find out about the community is simply to observe. You can observe physical features, conditions in various areas, the interactions of people in different neighborhoods and circumstances, the amount of traffic, commercial activity, how people use various facilities and spaces, or the evidence of previous events or decisions. Participant observation means becoming part of the group or scene you're observing, so that you can see it from the inside.

Note: Observation can take many forms. In addition to simply going to a place and taking notes on what you see, you might use other techniques -- Photovoice, video, audio, simple photographs, drawings, etc. Don't limit the ways in which you can record your observations and impressions.

- *Windshield and walking surveys/tours* can be used to assess general community needs – to estimate the poverty level, for example – or to examine more specific facets of the community's physical, social, or economic character. Some possibilities:
 - The age, nature, and condition of the community's available housing
 - Infrastructure needs – roads, bridges, streetlights, etc.
 - The presence or absence of functioning businesses and industrial facilities
 - The location, condition, and use of public spaces
 - The amount of activity on the streets at various times of the day, week, or year
 - The noise level in various parts of the community
 - The amount and movement of traffic at various times of day
 - The location and condition of public buildings – the city or town hall, courthouse, etc.

Existing data sources

U.S. Census -<http://www.census.gov/>

U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention -<http://www.cdc.gov/>

U.S. Department of Health and Human Services - <http://www.hhs.gov/>

County Health Rankings & Roadmaps -<http://www.countyhealthrankings.org/>

Partnership for a Healthy Durham - http://www.healthydurham.org/index.php?page=health_recent

Source: Community Toolbox: <http://ctb.ku.edu/en/table-of-contents/assessment/assessing-community-needs-and-resources/develop-a-plan/main>