# Pathways for Addressing Social Needs: Doing A Community Needs Assessment

Steps to Conducting a Community Needs Assessment to Assist in the Planning of Social Outreach Programs

# Overview

- When an organization is interested in developing a program/project to address a need in the community, the first step is determining what needs are prevalent in the target area it serves.
- A twelve-step planning process is one method for assessing and identifying the needs present within a community.
  - As part of this planning process, a series of questions are included for the group to think about as they complete the assessment.
- Following this process will help to prioritize the needs the organization will focus on and provide a foundation of important information upon which to develop plans to implement a program(s).

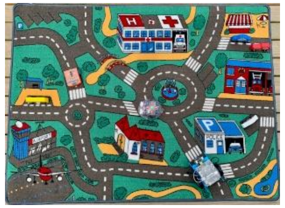
# Step 1: Identify the Community Partners to Include in the CNA Study

- Who are the community partners and stakeholders to include in the needs assessment process?
  - Stakeholders are those who may be affected by or have an effect on an effort and may also include people who have a strong interest in the effort even though they are not directly affected by it. [1]
- Identify the organizations, individuals, governmental representatives, and faith-based groups to invite to participate in the assessment.
- Think about key constituents from the community you want represented at the table.
  - Are you including individuals who are impacted by the unmet social needs in the study process?

# Step 2: Seek Agreement Among the Group on What They are Seeking to Achieve from the CNA

- Identify the specific information the group hopes to get from the needs assessment.
- How does the group plan to use the information collected?
- What is each member of the group willing to contribute to complete the needs assessment?
  - Staff time to assist in completing the study
  - Knowledge about the community and/or experience in doing this type of work
  - Financial support to help fund the needs assessment
  - Space to hold meetings
  - Access to important data about the community
  - Other support

# Step 3: Build Consensus on How to Define the Community



- Determine if there is already agreement among the group on how the community is defined.
- Identify if there are geographic boundaries (natural or man made) that exist which can be used to define the community.
- What geographic area does the faith organization currently serve?
- Agree on what cities or counties make up the area defined as the community.
- Determine what zip codes or census tracts should be included in defining the community.
  - Collecting specific data such as demographics or health status information might be available by specific zip codes or census tracts.
- If the community includes a large geographic area, should it be divided into sub-areas or regions?

# Step 4: Understand What We Want to Know About the Community

- Is the group interested in a particular segment or subgroup of the community?
- Determine how the information collected from the needs assessment will be used by the collaborative partners (e.g. program planning, fundraising, advocacy, etc.).
- Will the information from the assessment be used to leverage funding to support projects and program?
- Discuss with the group if anyone has insight or knowledge about the community in general or a particular segment.
- Seek input from members of the community regarding what information they would find helpful or valuable.

# Step 5: Identify What Information Already Exists About the Community


- Informative and useful secondary data may already exist about the community.
    - In secondary data analysis studies, investigators use data collected by other researchers to address different questions. [2]
    - Identify specific studies that already exist on the community
- When collecting existing data on the community it is important to know how old the information is that is being reviewed
- Do any of the partners who are participating in the needs assessment have access to existing studies or data on the community?
- Sometimes secondary data or existing information available on the community can be costly to acquire.
    - Determine if there is a less costly way to obtain the information because a lot of information is now available online for free or at a low cost.

# Step 6: Identify What Information Will Need to be Collected Through Primary Research

- Primary research is any type of research you collect yourself or commission on your behalf and may include anything from surveys and interviews to observations and ethnographic research (studying participants in their real-life environment).[3]
- In doing primary research it is important to determine the best method for obtaining the information.
- Some important questions to consider when doing primary research on the community include:
    - How long will it take to collect the data?
    - Are we able to reach the group we want to collect information on?
    - What is the cost-benefit to obtain this information?
    - Do we have the expertise within the group to collect the information of interest for the assessment or do we need to bring in someone familiar with conducting studies?

# Step 7: Determine the Best Method to Obtain the Information through Primary Research

- Primary data on the community can be collected through multiple methods.
- In collecting data, it is important to identify what information is needed, how much time is available to collect the data, the cost to do the data collection, what type of response rate you hope to obtain, and the best approach to reach the target group.
- Data collection methods to consider include:
  - In-person interviews
  - Phone/online (e.g. via online conferencing software) interviews
  - Focus groups (bringing a group of individuals together and asking them a series of questions)
  - Mailed surveys to individuals’ homes, work, or to their email addresses
  - Online surveys
  - Conducting real time feedback sessions at community events, faith group meetings, or other group settings

# Step 8: Identify the Existing Resources and Assets in the Community

- Develop a capacity/resource inventory of the community.
- Identify what key resources and assets already exist in the community.
- Key questions to ask in doing an asset inventory of the community include:
  - What resources have been overlooked in the community?
  - How do we access the resources and assets available in the community, especially those that are under utilized?
  - What is the best way to communicate that these resources are available in the community?
- Conducting an asset inventory of the community as part of the needs assessment process helps to build capacity and direct existing resources to identified needs.
  - Rather than focusing on deficits or gaps, this strengths-based methodology helps identify and map the resources, relationships, and capacities that already exist—offering a more empowering path to community change.[4]

# Step 9: Identify the Top Need/Issues

- Once the primary and secondary information collected during the assessment has been reviewed, identify the top unmet needs facing the community.
- Divide the needs by categories (e.g. social, health, economic, etc.).
- Focus the organization's skills, knowledge, and expertise on the needs that align best with where it can make the greatest impact.
- Seek input from the community regarding the needs identified through the assessment process.
  - Is the population to be served in agreement that these are the needs to be focused on?
- Communicate the findings to all key stakeholders.

# Step 10: Prioritize the Needs/Issues


- Review each need identified and prioritize the list.
  - Based on the organization's skills, resources, and expertise will help determine which need(s) it should focus on.
  - Are there needs related to each other whereby addressing one issue will have an impact on another area?
  - Identify those needs that can be addressed quickly and those that will take more time, resources, and effort.
  - When a community assessment has uncovered a number of issues – perhaps issues in different areas, such as health, economics, and racial attitudes – developing a set of criteria for deciding how important each one is to address is crucial to effective action.[5]
- Select the need/issue from the prioritized list to be focused on by the organization and communicate to the team and how the decision was made.

# Step 11: Implementing a Program/Project

- Once the prioritized need has been selected, determine the next steps to address the issue.
  - Create a concept with the team for what the program/project will look like.
  - Identify goals and specific objectives (**S**pecific, **M**easurable, **A**chievable, **R**elevant, and **T**ime bound) needed to operationalize the program.
  - Develop a realistic estimate of the resources (e.g. equipment, space, materials, supplies, staff, etc.) that will be needed to implement the program.
  - Create a timeline to identify all the key components necessary to develop the program/project.
  - Be clear on each partners' roles and responsibilities in the project.
- Maintain communication with the collaborative partners and the community on the program's progress in addressing the need/issue.

# Step 12: Monitoring/Evaluation

- Monitor and evaluate the success of the program/project in addressing the priority need against the goals and measurable objectives.
  - Establish clear action steps/tactics to monitor timelines, resources, persons served, and overall effectiveness of the project.
  - Evaluation is defined as an ongoing process of systematic assessment of your program to provide information needed for making decisions.[6]
  - Determine the progress made in meeting the community need/issue the program is trying to address.
- Establish the metrics and data collection methods at the start of the program that will help to measure its success.
- If the program is not meeting its goals/objectives or desired metrics, then adjust them accordingly.
  - Brainstorm with the program partners and community to identify specific actions to be taken to get back on track.

# Conclusion

- Working through the process to identify the key needs in a community is an important first step before launching a program or project.
- Following a structured process to identify needs in the community will help to focus on the key needs and make decisions based on good information.
- In addition to looking at what needs exist in the community, it is important to also considering the existing assets and resources that are available.
- Doing a thorough needs assessment will help with program design and implementation and will build the foundation for creating a collaborative network.
- It is important to establish criteria to prioritize the needs that will help guide planning for developing programs/projects.
- Ongoing monitoring and evaluation is important to stay focused on addressing the identified community need.
- Online resources are provided for further guidance and assistance in doing a community needs assessment.

# Online Resources on Community Needs Assessments

- Strategic Growth Council
  - The Community Needs Assessment Toolkit
    https://sgc.ca.gov/wp-content/uploads/20221017-Community_Needs_Assessment_Toolkit.docx
- American Academy of Pediatrics
  - Evaluating Community-Based Programs
    https://hsc.unm.edu/community/toolkit/docs6/evaluatingpart2.pdf
- Good Grants
  - How to Create a Community Needs Assessment
    https://goodgrants.com/resources/articles/how-to-create-a-community-needs-assessment/

# Reference Notes

[1] Phil Rabinowitz, *Community Tool Box*, Chapter 7, Section 8, “Identifying and Analyzing Stakeholders and Their Interest” (Kansas: University of Kansas, 2024), https://ctb.ku.edu/en/table-of-contents/participation/encouraging-involvement/identify-stakeholders/main (accessed September 16, 2024).

[2] Rita J. Wickham, “Secondary Analysis Research,” *Journal of Advanced Practice Oncology*, 2019 March 1; 10(4), p. 395. doi: 10.6004/jadpro.2019.10.4.7

[3] Qualtrics, *Primary Research: Everything You Need to Know*, 2024, https://www.qualtrics.com/experience-management/research/primary-research/ (accessed November 20, 2024).

[4] Alex Derr, *What is Community Asset Mapping? A Strength-Based Approach to Community Development, 2025*, https://visiblenetworklabs.com/2025/04/09/what-is-community-asset-mapping/ (accessed January 4, 2026).

[5] Phil Rabinowitz, *Community Toolbox, Chapter 3, Section 28,* “Developing and Using Criteria and Processes to Set Priorities” (Kansas: University of Kansas, 2024), https://ctb.ku.edu/en/table-of-contents/assessment/assessing-community-needs-and-resources/ (accessed January 10, 2026).

[6] American Academy of Pediatrics, *Evaluating Your Community-Based Programs*, (Maternal and Child Health Bureau, 2008), p. 6. https://hsc.unm.edu/community/toolkit/docs6/evaluatingpart2.pdf (accessed January 14, 2026).