Community Needs Assessment Can Increase Participation in Community-Based Organizations

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What is a Community Needs Assessment?

The goal of a needs assessment is to identify the assets of a community and determine potential concerns that it faces. A straightforward way to estimate the needs of a community or neighborhood is to simply ask residents their opinions about the issues and problems they are dealing with.

Why Should You Do a Needs Assessment?

Try out these reasons. Do they make sense for you?

- To learn more about what your group or community needs are. A food survey can supplement your own observations and experiences. It can give you detailed information from a larger and more representative group of people.
- To get an honest and objective description of needs that people might tell you publicly.
- To anticipate and remain responsive to changing demographics, attitudes and needs.
- To become aware of possible needs you never saw as particularly important or never knew existed
- To document your needs, as is required in many applications for funding.
- To get group and community support for the actions you undertake in the near future.
- To get people actually involved in the following action will attract new members.
- To make sure any actions you eventually get involved in are in line with needs expressed by the community.

Why Should You NOT Do a Needs Assessment?

A needs assessment is not necessary before every action, and especially:

- When there is no doubt what the most important needs in the group or community are.
- When it is urgent to act right now, without delay.
- When a recent assessment has already been done, and it is clear the needs have not changed.
- When you feel the community would see an assessment as redundant or wasteful, and it will be harmful to your cause.

How to Carry Out a Needs Assessment

According to Iowa State University Extension, there are Five Needs Assessment Techniques

Existing Data Approach

Already existing statistical data is used to obtain insights about the well-being of people. This approach uses descriptive statistics, such as census data, labor surveys, bank deposit data, sales tax reports, police reports, etc.

Community Attitude Survey Approach

Information is gathered from a representative sample of community residents about issues affecting their well-being. Data is collected by personal interviews, telephone surveys, door-to door surveys or mail surveys. (See article below describing this approach)

Key Informant Approach

The key informant approach identifies community/neighborhood leaders and people who are knowledgeable about the community and can accurately identify priority needs and concerns. Key informants complete a questionnaire or are personally interviewed to obtain their thoughts of community needs. The information is then analyzed and reported to the community through publications or a community meeting.

Community Forum

A public meeting(s) is held during which time the participants discuss what some of the needs facing the community are, what some of the priority needs are and what can be done about these priority needs. All members of the community are encouraged to attend and express their concerns and perceived needs.

Focus Group Interview

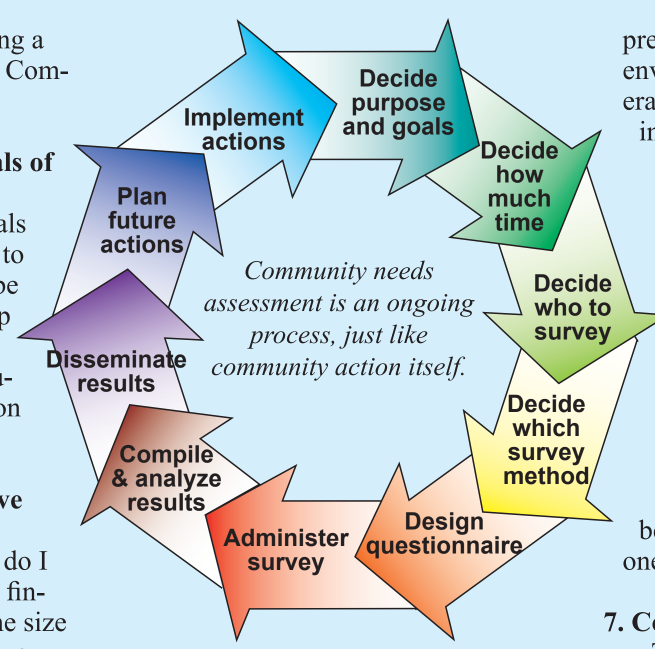
A group of people selected for their particular skills, experiences, views or position are asked a series of questions about a topic or issue to collect their opinions. Group interaction is used to obtain detailed information about a particular issue.

To get more information about each one of these techniques, go to the Iowa State University Extension Web site: http://www.extension.iastate.edu/communities/tools/assess/

Source: A Community Needs Assessment Guide, Center for Urban Research and Learning and the Department of Psychology Loyola University Chicago, 2000; Iowa State University Extension Web site: http://www.extension.iastate.edu/communities/tools/assess/; Community Tool Box Web site: http://ctb.ku.edu/tools/

Steps in the Community Attitude Survey Approach

Here are the steps in conducting a community needs survey using the Community Attitude Survey Approach.



1. Decide on the purpose and goals of the needs assessment survey.

Ask yourself: What are my goals in doing a survey? What do I want to get out of it? How will the results be used? In any case, you need to keep the purpose of the survey in mind throughout the process; it will influence the choice of survey population and the choice of questions.

2. Decide how much time you have to do the survey.

Ask yourself: How much time do I have to do the survey, from start to finish? Your answer will depend on the size of your target group and resources you have.

3. Decide whom you will survey.

The next step is finding out who will fill out the questionnaire. Who will you survey — general public, beneficiaries, people in a specific neighborhood or segment of the community or potential members? Almost all surveys rely on sampling — that is, identifying a section of the population satisfies the characteristics of the target group. Sampling is a big topic, there are many different kinds of sampling. Some Web sites with more detailed information include:

- Sampling terminology — http://trochim.human.cornell.edu/kb/sampterm.htm
- Sample size — http://www.robertniles.com/stats/samples.html
- Sampling from the Centre for Applied Statistics at Lancaster University's Statistics Glossary — http://www.cas.lancs.ac.uk/glossary_v1.1/main.html

Sample Size Calculator — http://www.researchinfo.com/docs/calculators/samplesize.cfm

4. Decide which method you will use to collect your survey data.

Will your survey be written or oral? You need to decide whether it will be done in person, by phone or by mail. There are some advantages and disadvantages for each method. No matter which method you choose, in order to get better return rate, I suggest you provide incentives for completing a survey. You could offer the respondents a chance to win a $20 gift certificate to a local grocery store, restaurant or video store.

5. Design the questionnaire.

There are many forms of questions you can use in the survey. Questions might be:

- Open-ended — They are often "why," "how" or "what" questions. Why it is important to you? What are the best things you like about the neighborhood?
- Closed-ended — Sometimes referred to as forced choice questions. Specific questions that prompt yes or no answers. Do you like the lighting in your street? Yes or No.
- Multiple choice — Allow the respondent to select one answer from possible choices. These type of questions find out more details than closed-ended questions and the results can be compiled more easily than open-ended questions.
- Likert scale — Each respondent is asked to rate items on a response scale from 1-Strongly disagree…. to….5-Strongly Agree. These type of questions are a great tool to measure respondent's attitudes.

Some guidelines for designing your survey questions:

- Place easier questions first.
- Address sensitive issues as discreetly and sensitively as possible.
- Avoid words that provoke bias or emotional responses.
- Use a logical order and place similar questions together.

Remember: The questions you ask depend on the audience you are trying to reach and the information you are trying to obtain!

6. Administer the survey/Decide how you distribute and collect the survey.

Revise the questionnaire several times. When you are satisfied with the questionnaire, administer the survey to your target population. There are several strategies for distributing surveys:

- Direct mail — You need to mail a copy of the survey, cover letter and pre-stamped and pre-addressed return envelope to each participant. For general distribution, publishing a survey in your newsletter or local newspaper might be a good idea.
- Interview and phone surveys — To reach those who have difficulty reading or using printed material is a good way to collect opinions. You still need to print a questionnaire and put together a team of interviewers.
- Drop boxes — It could be a good option to collect information if you have an incomplete mailing list of respondents. However, it is better if it is used along with at least one other method of distribution.

7. Compile and analyze your results.

Tabulate your results. For closed-ended questions, this can be a matter of simple addition. For open-ended questions, you can compile results into the categories. However, analysis can be far more complicated. You will need to look at the overall survey to see how each percentage compares to the others. For example, what questions had the highest proportions of similar responses? The next step is summarizing the data in a one-page report. In the report, look for any patterns — do people in a particular part of the community/neighborhood feel strongly about a particular issue than someone in another areas? Or list "top five" issues and concerns which were identified by respondents.

8. Disseminate the survey results.

When you get the results, decide what to do with them. The results should be made public as soon as possible so community members and local leaders can be aware of a problem or potential problem and start working to solve it.

9. Plan future actions.

Ask and answer the question: What should we do now? A good answer may lead to a good discussion and developing an action plan.

10. Implement your actions.

Implementation of an action plan is the main reason of conducting a needs assessment survey in the first place. This is a big topic and will be discussed in an upcoming NEBLINE.

11. Repeat your assessment.

Community needs change over time. You want to be sure to know if, when, how and why change is needed. Community needs assessment is really an ongoing process just like community action itself.