Community Assessment

Carol Smathers, Field Specialist, Youth Nutrition and Wellness, Family and Consumer Sciences, Ohio State University Extension, and Jennifer Lobb, Graduate Research Associate, Ohio State University Extension

Community assessment is the process of identifying the strengths, assets, needs and challenges of a specified community. Assets refer to the skills, talents and abilities of individuals as well as the resources that local institutions contribute to the community. Local institutions may include political, religious, educational, recreational and youth organizations; community, civic and service groups; local businesses; nonprofit organizations and volunteer groups.

A community assessment involves (1) an evaluation of the current situation in a community, (2) a judgment of what the preferred or desired situation in that community would be, and (3) a comparison of the actual and desired situation for the purpose of prioritizing concerns. A community assessment is usually performed early in the development of a coalition to better understand the community and decide how the coalition might best address its concerns (Butterfoss, 2007).

Community assessment is sometimes referred to as needs assessment, but there is an important distinction between the two. In a needs assessment, the focus is limited to discrepancies between what is and what should be in a given community. This type of assessment forces a community to focus on its deficiencies and ignore what it is doing well (Kretzmann and McKnight, 1993). In contrast, a community assessment seeks to empower community members by allowing them to take ownership in affecting the health of their community instead of providing them with a prescription of what their community needs.

Key Principles of Community Assessment

- Residents are the best experts on the community in which they live.
- All residents have skills, abilities and talents that they can contribute to the community.
- A strong community is built upon the talents and resources of its members.

The Purpose of a Community Assessment

A community assessment can be useful in mobilizing a community to action as it identifies and matches the skills of community members with the resources of organizations. A community assessment can also be used to do the following:

- Create a coalition action plan
- Establish objectives for a program or intervention
- Select the strategies to use in a program or intervention
- Establish a baseline for evaluating progress in the community
- Identify new ideas, strategies, partners and resources that can be used in working toward a common goal

Conducting a Community Assessment

The process of conducting a community assessment can be divided into three phases: pre-assessment, assessment and post-assessment. Questions to consider during the pre-assessment phase include the following:

- What is going to be assessed?
- What is already known?
- What data will need to be collected?
- How and by whom will data be collected?
- How and by whom will data be analyzed?

A community assessment begins with the community. During the pre-assessment phase, the coalition can also identify community partners, ask them to self-assess their resources and ask them to identify the health issues that they believe are most important to address (Butterfoss, 2007).

Once these questions have been answered, the coalition can proceed through the following steps to conduct their assessment. Technical assistance with the following steps is often available from local Extension offices, local health departments and other local non-profit organizations.

1. Determine the purpose and scope of the assessment.
   a. Decide whether the assessment will focus on a specific population within the community versus the community at large.
   b. Decide which health topics to prioritize, limiting the scope of the assessment to what can reasonably be accomplished.
2. Define the goals and objectives of the assessment.
3. Select data collection methods to use.
   a. Find out whether the desired information exists or if a new data collection effort is needed.
   b. Common methods for new data collection include surveys, interviews, focus groups and observation.
4. Select or design the necessary instruments and procedures for data collection.
   a. Look for valid and reliable instruments that have been tested in similar communities with similar populations. It is much easier and less costly to adapt an existing instrument than to create one from scratch.
5. Pilot test the instruments and procedures.
6. Prepare a timeline and budget.
7. Collect the data.
8. Analyze the data.
9. Prepare and disseminate a report of the findings.
10. Evaluate the assessment’s merit and worth.
    a. Consider what worked well, what problems were encountered and what could have been done better.

**Tips for Effectively Reporting a Community Assessment**

- Prepare multiple reports using a variety of media.
- Include an executive summary.
- Keep a logical sequence in mind, using language that is easily understandable.
- Highlight the information that community members perceive as most important.
- Explain why the needs assessment was completed, what is now known that was not known before and how the new information will help address discrepancies in the community.
- Acknowledge limitations and alternative explanations for the findings.
- Keep the information relevant, practical, credible and understandable.

**References**


**Additional Resources**

The Asset-Based Community Development Institute. "Downloadable Resources." Publications on community assessment and community mobilization. abcdinstitute.org/publications/downloadable

Coalitions Work. "Tools and Resources." Resources for a variety of coalition processes and coalition evaluation. coalitionswork.com/resources/tools

University of Kansas. "Community Tool Box." Toolkits on a variety of topics related to partnership building and community change. ctb.ku.edu/en/table-of-contents


Iowa State University, North Central Regional Center for Rural Development. Vision to Action: Take Charge Too. Publication about community assessment, vision development, action planning and evaluation. soc.iastate.edu/extension/ncrcrd/ncrcrd-rrd182-print.pdf