

# Assessing Community Needs and Resources

## In Context

**BHO Component 3.1 - Community Responsiveness** looks at the mechanisms by which an organization is connected to its community and working to effect meaningful change, including through partnerships, and community involvement and input. This includes the mechanisms the organization employs to make it aware of community changes and issues.

**BHO Component 1.3 - Leadership and Planning** addresses the key issues tied to setting an overall direction for the organization and ensuring that it is realized. This component of BHO includes planning, monitoring performance, continual improvement and leadership.

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## Part of the BHO Roadmap to a Healthier Organization

The Roadmap is a series of short primers that use key components of the Building Healthier Organizations (BHO) accreditation program as guideposts to point organizations to some of the key considerations and existing resources that might help them get off on the right foot at an early stage. The aim is to support new and developing community health centres to strengthen their capacities in fundamental areas of organizational health.

# Assessing Community Needs and Resources

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## Key Concepts

- Community needs assessment
  - Priority populations
  - Community resources
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## About Assessing Community Needs and Resources

To respond to community health needs, you must first have a clear understanding of what the needs are, what capacity the community already has for addressing those needs (the community's resources), and what new options or solutions are possible.

A community needs assessment provides comprehensive information about the health needs in a community. It will help you identify community priorities including:

- populations with unmet needs (priority populations)
- health issues and concerns
- gaps in programs and services

Assessing community needs and resources results in decisions based on facts and the input of key stakeholders.

An essential feature of a community needs assessment is obtaining information and views from community members themselves. This involves asking questions of a certain percentage of the community to find out what health concerns are most common and important. The questions also explore the factors which will affect the design of programs and services to effectively address these health concerns.

Community organizations have learned the importance of involving the members of their organization in the planning of programs and of communicating with stakeholders regularly during the planning process. Community involvement during the health needs assessment can create and maintain the support of the key community members which is necessary for successful programs.

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## Key Markers on the Road to a Healthy Organization

At every stage of your organization's development, there will be key milestones that must be achieved – markers along the road to being a healthy organization.

Key markers of health in the area of assessing community needs and resources include:

- You conduct an assessment of your community's needs and resources every three to five years.
- You develop a plan for conducting the assessment that identifies key stakeholders and how they will be involved in the assessment.
- You collect data that already exists regarding your community (e.g., data collected by Statistics Canada, by Public Health).

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## Key Steps and Considerations in Assessing Community Needs and Resources

Comprehensive community needs assessments take time, people and resources. Given the rate of change in communities, it is wise to do an initial comprehensive community health needs assessment followed by an annual scan of community changes and then another full community needs assessment three to five years later.

### Finding Support for a Community Needs Assessment

The Ontario Ministry of Health and Long Term Care will provide funding for an initial community needs assessment for newly funded community health centres and community family teams. Contact your Program Associate to learn about the resources available and any requirements for your community needs assessment.

There may be grant opportunities available for community needs assessments that will be used to inform strategic planning. Consider making a non-recurring fund request to your funders. In addition, funds are sometimes made available for program proposals where demonstrating community need for the program is required. These opportunities are not common; resources are limited and very focused. For example, Early Years funding at community health centres in the early 2000's.

## **Skills Required to Carry Out a Community Needs Assessment**

People with the following skills are required to carry out the community needs assessment:

- leadership abilities
- community development abilities
- strategic planning experience
- understanding of the health care system and population health concepts
- strong organizational and process skills
- analytical skills
- verbal and written communications skills
- computer skills
- research skills.

If your organization has staff with these skills, this manual will be a source of information and tools to assist you with the assessment. If your organization does not have these skills, you may want to consider:

- partnering with another community based organization skilled in community needs assessment (e.g., either sending a staff member to another organization to learn or arranging for a skilled staff member to come to your organization to do the work).
- contracting a consultant or organization to work with your organization to carry out the community needs assessment.

If the decision is to contract with a consultant, it is important to consider finding someone who is experienced in involving community members and training them to conduct the work of the needs assessment. In this way, the process of conducting the community needs assessment will enhance community skills and knowledge. When the study is completed and the consultant leaves, the new skills and knowledge gained will remain in the community to support program planning and future community needs assessments.

## **Steps in Conducting a Community Needs Assessment**

### **I. Form a Steering Committee**

A steering committee can provide useful input and may take on some or all of the following responsibilities:

- determine the needs assessment scope and desired outcomes
- oversee the entire process
- approve consultants, if needed
- approve the data collection methods
- ensure all affected communities are included
- approve the report
- distribute and make presentations on the report to stakeholders

Consider including board, staff, community partners and members in the steering committee.

## **2. Define the Community**

Community can be defined in different ways, for example:

- a geographic community is defined by distinct boundaries and often has a common political, economic and social system
- a community of interest is defined as a group of individuals that share common interests, goals, history, ethnicity or culture
- a priority population can be defined as a group of individuals at greater risk for health issues/ concerns due to lack of access to services for a variety of reasons such as lower socio-economic status, race, language barriers, age, isolation, disabilities and/or health conditions.

You will need to define the community you wish to study before starting the needs assessment. How you define the community will influence every aspect of your needs assessment including the methods of collecting information, the questions asked, resources required and timeframe.

## **3. Identify Objectives**

Typically the objectives of a community needs assessment are to help your organization document and understand the following:

- community demographics for example, number of community members, ages, languages spoken, race, ethnicity
- the health problems that exist including physical, mental, emotional, social and environmental concerns
- the causes of these health problems (the determinants of health)
- which community members have the most urgent needs (priority populations)
- how best to meet the needs of community members
- what resources are available to address these health problems for example, community expertise, community organizations and funding
- which needs your organization can address
- what training is required by health care providers to meet these needs.

## **4. Identify Principles**

You'll need to identify the principles or ethical guidelines for the community needs assessment, for example:

- the procedures used to ensure that people participating in the community needs assessment have been informed about the purpose of the research and are participating willingly
- how you will protect the privacy and confidentiality of any individual's you interview as part the assessment (you may be guided in this by your privacy policies and/or ethical guidelines for gathering/storing/using information or research)
- a requirement that the community benefits in some way from the assessment
- the steps for review and approval of the community needs assessment processes and report

- how information gathered in the assessment will be shared and used.

### **5. Develop a Work Plan**

The community needs assessment steering committee and the people carrying out the community needs assessment, should develop a work plan which includes activities, timeframes, who does what and who is consulted. Development of this work plan will help to ensure a common understanding of the work to be done and expectations for that work. The work plan needs to be flexible so that as you carry out the work changes can be made based on your experience.

### **6. Decide What Information You Need**

The type of information you will want to collect will depend on the community and your objectives. The following information is typically gathered in community needs assessments:

- description of the community and applicable statistics for example demographics, morbidity and mortality statistics, behaviours, socio-economic conditions
- needs identified by community leaders and staff at other community organizations (key informants)
- needs identified by community members
- current action being taken to meet community needs – an inventory of current programs, services and initiatives by other community organizations, associations, groups, networks, alliances
- community use and involvement in these programs, services and initiatives
- local resources that improve the quality of life for example community members with skills and experience, businesses, groups, community supporters
- opportunities for programs, services and initiatives such as funding or grants
- challenges to programs, services and initiatives
- long-term sustainability of programs, services and initiatives.

### **7. Select Data Collection Methods**

#### **Secondary Data**

Begin by identifying and reviewing pre-existing data about the community, health status, where health services are obtained, other related services and gaps in services. Good sources of existing data include:

- Statistics Canada – community profiles
- Local Health Integration Networks
- Government reports and websites
- Municipal planning documents
- Public Health Units
- Universities and Colleges
- United Ways

- School boards
- Other community organizations

A review of secondary sources of information may help you identify gaps in information and topics you want to explore more.

### Interviews with Key Informants

Interviews with key informants will give information helpful in identifying unique characteristics of the community as well as potential health problems. Key informants are carefully selected for their personal experience and knowledge. Who is interviewed will vary depending on the community and the information required. You may want to interview community leaders, staff at community organizations, funders and policy makers.

### Survey of Community Members

A survey involves asking a set of questions of a sample of people in the community. Enough people must be surveyed to allow you to make general statements about the health concerns of community members. People should be selected randomly but with the goal of getting a good cross-section of opinions. You will want to involve a representative sample of your community so the survey results are meaningful and useful.

### Focus Groups

Focus groups bring together eight to 12 people to discuss their opinions about five or six questions. Focus groups are often used to explore topics emerging from a survey in more depth. It is recommended that focus groups have no more than 12 participants to ensure that everyone has a chance of expressing their views. You may wish to make a tape recording of focus group sessions so that you can analyse the themes after the session. Or, someone may attend whose sole purpose is to take notes of the sessions. Holding more than one focus group helps to ensure that ideas are not particular to a single group. Typically focus groups are 1.5 to 2 hours long.

### Community Forums or Public Meetings

Community forums or public meetings are a method of collecting qualitative information from a large number of community members. These meetings are facilitated and tape recorders may be used to capture information. In addition to collecting information, organizations use such meetings to provide information to the community and to positively impact public relations.

Community forums, public meetings and focus groups are helpful when language interpretation and literacy issues are factors to consider.

## **8. Develop or Adapt Data Collection Tools**

Data collection tools ensure that there is consistency in what and how questions are asked so the information can be compiled. The data collection tool will depend on your data collection method (e.g., survey or focus group) and how you plan to analyze the data once collected (manually or by computer). Survey questions or focus group moderators' guides are examples of data collection tools. You may be able to adapt existing data collection tools or may have to develop your own. There are advantages to adapting pre-existing tools which have been pre-tested and are known to obtain the information you need.

## 9. Implement the Assessment

Once decisions about the data collection methods, the data collection tools and the work plan have been made, you are ready to implement your assessment. Carry out the assessment using the work plan as your guide. Periodically assess how implementation is going and make changes to your plan as needed. For example, a longer time frame may be needed or different means of recruiting focus group participants tried. Be sure to review, reflect and remain consistent with the principles that were developed to guide your assessment.

## 10. Analyze the Information Collected

Analyzing the information collected will help you draw conclusions about the needs of your community and what programs and services your organization will offer based on those needs. The analysis may involve counting and calculating rates of responses (quantitative data). It may involve summarizing comments and identifying themes (qualitative data). It is important to reach conclusions that are supported by the data. Have the Steering Committee review and discuss the findings to ensure they understand the information and the potential implications for your organization.

## 11. Prepare the Report

It is important to write a report detailing the information collected and your conclusions. Provide some background information to give the reader of your report a context for your findings. For example:

Describe the community needs assessment process including:

- why the community needs assessment was implemented
- what data collection methods were used
- where the assessment was implemented
- who participated in the needs assessment both who conducted it and who was surveyed or participated in focus groups or meeting
- when the assessment was conducted
- note any limitations to the assessment

Describe your findings using:

- tables and charts for quantitative data
- narratives with themes and patterns for qualitative data

Describe your conclusions about:

- community needs
- existing and needed services
- implications for your organization
- recommendations

Describe next steps.

Be sure to review, reflect and remain consistent with the principles that were developed to guide your assessment.



## 12. Share the Report

Presenting a draft or preliminary report to community members and participants in your community needs assessment is a good opportunity to hear some of their ideas about the results and your recommendations. As a result, when the final report comes out, there may be greater agreement and buy-in for the recommendations.

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### Road Hazards

- ! Ensure that you don't make decisions based only on past knowledge about what is needed and past practice about what works.
- ! Involve in your planning process community members, community partners and other key stakeholders including individuals with divergent points of view to generate ideas and ensure you are headed in the right direction.
- ! Remember to consider programs and services offered by other organizations when assessing potential gaps in service.
- ! Ensure those conducting the assessment have the experience and training needed to do a good job.
- ! Take time to develop principles to guide your assessment and then follow them.
- ! Share the results of your community needs assessment so that others can understand the reasons for your organization's decisions and benefit from the information as well.

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### Links and Resources

#### Community Health Needs Assessment: A Guide for First Nations and Inuit Health Authorities - [Link to PDF](#)

Ministry of Public Works and Government Services Canada, 2000. Cat.no.:H35-4/4-2000E.  
ISBN: 0-662-29377-0.

Health Canada has developed a handbook for conducting needs assessments. While this handbook was specifically developed for First Nations, Inuit and Aboriginal organizations, it is applicable to other settings and organizations as well.

#### Community Needs Assessment - [Web Link](#)

The University of New Hampshire Cooperative Extension Department Charlie French  
Community and Economic Development Specialist

This website includes useful tools for assessing community needs and assets, including mapping assets.

### [Community Health Needs Assessment Guidelines - Link to PDF](#)

The Government of Manitoba, Health Ministry

This document provides guidelines for conducting a community health needs assessment.

### [The Needs Assessment: Tools for Long-Term Planning - Link to PDF](#)

Annie E. Casey Foundation, October 29-31, 1999, Washington, DC

This is a high level overview of the needs assessment process.

### [The Community Tool Box - Web Link](#)

University of Kansas, 2009

Published by the Work Group for Community Health and Development at the University of Kansas the tool box includes a section on assessing community needs and resources.

### [Toronto Health Profiles - Web Link](#)

Toronto Community Health Profiles Partnership

The profiles provide a lot of useful information regarding health issues in the City of Toronto.

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## **See Also**

Strategic Planning

Operational Planning