

## Understanding Community Needs

### Description:

This tool provides guidelines and a checklist that outlines the process of conducting a community needs assessment.

### How it can be used:

When addressing health issues in your community, you need to understand the needs of individuals and families as well as the resources available in your community to address those needs.

These guidelines and checklist will help to identify the steps involved in completing a community needs assessment including the types of information that will be collected. When you have an understanding of your community needs, you are better able to prioritize and develop relevant health programming and services.

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### Why you need to conduct a community needs assessment

- Gain a deeper understanding of your community – your community needs and assets, culture and social structure, relationships, history, strengths, and conflicts.
- Understand your community's assets - how they can be used to help address community needs.
- Make decisions about priorities for program or system improvement – understanding needs and assets empowers the community to address its issues and overcome challenges.

### Characteristics of a successful community assessment:

1. It helps community leaders understand the current situation
2. It defines a vision of the future
3. It allows for questions that will drive the assessment process
4. It addresses issues that stakeholders believe are important
5. It communicates information back to stakeholders

### Who should be involved in developing a plan for assessing local needs and resources?

The assessment process is most beneficial when there is full participation from community stakeholders. Review the following checklist and identify the relevant participants in your community. Consider whether there is anyone from your community who should be involved.

Participant/Function	Potential participants
Those directly affected by the issue – patients, clients, their families, etc.	
Health providers – staff, outreach workers, home care workers, CHR, etc.	
Elders and community influencers	
Community leadership – Chief, Health/Social/Education Councillors, etc.	
Board of Directors – of your health centre or your health committee.	
Government partners – Regional Health Authority, Prov./Fed., etc.	

## Plan and conduct the assessment

1. Determine why the community needs assessment is being conducted. The reasons for an assessment will affect from whom and how you gather information, what is assessed, and what you do with the information received. It is important to start planning with a clear understanding of what you are setting out to do so that your plan matches your goals. Will your plan:
  - a. address the needs of a particular group?
  - b. launch a health campaign or combat a particular disease or condition?
  - c. inform the activities of a group?
  - d. guide policy creation through the provision of credible recommendations?
2. Recruit a planning/advisory group.
  - a. Determine whether you need one or two groups. Is the advisory group going to be the coordinating group?
  - b. Who should be on the planning group?
  - c. Would any particular training or orientation be required?
3. Design an evaluation process for the needs assessment
  - a. Provide an opportunity to evaluate the needs assessment process to inform future work.
  - b. Ensure the evaluation is participatory and inclusive, like the needs assessment process.
4. Identify the objectives of the community needs assessment (name and frame the goal).
  - a. Develop a process for achieving the goal.
  - b. Identify the questions and how they should be asked.
5. Determine which data is already available.
  - a. Community health information
  - b. Health centre data
  - c. Program data (e.g., home care)
  - d. Provincial data
  - e. Not-for-profit organizations
  - f. Research institutions (e.g., universities)
6. Determine the information you still need to collect.
  - a. This will guide the development of the questions.
  - b. Include community-level indicators.
  - c. Do you require special permissions?
  - d. What level of personal data are you collecting?
7. Decide how you will collect your data.
  - a. Listening sessions, dialogue circles, focus groups
  - b. Public forums
  - c. Key informant interviews
  - d. Direct/participant observation
  - e. Surveys
8. Decide who will be on the participant list.
  - a. Consider this carefully, to ensure a broad range of input and perspectives.
  - b. Include all points of view, not only those that support your intended direction.

9. Identify who will collect the data.
  - a. Will you use participatory researchers or community members working in collaboration with professionals?
  - b. If you use people from outside the community, is any cultural training required?
  - c. A mix of different approaches can be considered.
  
10. Contact the participants.
  - a. How will you contact them?
  - b. What materials need to be prepared?
  - c. Is there a script or background document?
  - d. Prepare a 'Release form' (for personal information).
  
11. Collate and analyze the data.
  - a. Identify main themes.
  - b. Compare feedback with indicators.
  
12. Report on the findings of the analysis.
  - a. To whom will this be presented? (e.g., leadership, stakeholders, community)?
  - b. How and when will you present the results?
  
13. Incorporate the results of the process into your planning processes.