ASSESS NEEDS & RESOURCES

Guidance and tools

One of the first steps in local health improvement is to take stock of your community’s needs, resources, strengths, and assets. You will want to understand what helps as well as what hinders progress toward improving your community’s health.

**Purpose:**

Understand current community strengths, resources, needs and gaps to help you decide where to focus your efforts.

**Who to Involve:**

Multi-sector team of partners (including leaders and stakeholders from business, healthcare, education, government, public health, funders, and community organizations) as well as anyone who cares about or is affected by health issues in your community

**Assess Needs & Resources: Start Guide**

We need to collect data, but we aren’t sure where or how to start.

**Assess Needs & Resources: Act Guide**

We are collecting a variety of data, but we could use some help interpreting what it means and moving forward.
ASSESS NEEDS & RESOURCES: START GUIDE

Review your County Health Rankings snapshot

The County Health Rankings provide a snapshot of a community’s health and a starting point for investigating and discussing ways to improve health. Start by reviewing your county snapshot along with the County Health Rankings Data Drilldown Guide.

To find your county snapshot, go to http://www.countyhealthrankings.org and select your state from the map, then your county (or enter your county name in the Search box). From your snapshot, you’ll be able to review data used to calculate your county’s current Rankings.

The County Health Rankings Data Drilldown Guide will help you interpret the data included in your snapshot and think about additional questions and sources of data.

Suggested tools:
- County Health Rankings Data Drilldown Guide provides suggestions for finding more detailed information about key areas in your community’s rankings.

Define your community

Your community can be defined geographically (e.g., state, county, hospital catchment area) or by a population of interest (e.g., low-income families, elderly). Work with your multi-sector leadership team to define your community in a way that is most relevant and useful for your team. As you think about how to define your community, you might want to consider the following questions:

- Is there a population group more deeply affected by the factors highlighted in your County Health Rankings snapshot?
- Is there a neighborhood or geographic area more directly impacted?
- Can you define the community in a way that invites participation in building solutions from a wide and diverse membership?
- Can the definition also be narrow enough to recognize needs or low ranking factors?

Be cautious not to define your community too narrowly, which may make finding data difficult, or too broadly, which may make effective policies and programs difficult to implement.

Don’t have a multi-sector team? Learn more about how to Work Together.
Suggested tools:
- Understanding and Describing Community (from the Community Tool Box) provides some additional guidance about how community may be defined and the type of information you might pull together to better understand your defined community.

Generate questions about your community.

You likely thought of some questions as you reviewed your county snapshot. Are there others? What do you hope to learn about your community? What questions do you want to answer about your community’s needs and resources?

The County Health Rankings model provides a useful framework for thinking about additional information you might want to gather about your community. What else would you like to know about each of the four health factor areas (health behaviors, clinical care, social and economic factors, and physical environment)?

This is also a good time to go back to the vision and mission your multi-sector team developed as part of Work Together. Use these questions from A Handbook for Participatory Community Assessments (PDF) to guide a discussion to determine what you want to know about your community.

- What does your team want to learn from the community?
- Why is this information important to your team at this time?
- Will this information help move your team closer to its vision, mission or goals?
- Where can you find this information?
- Who knows this information?
- Has the information already been collected?
- By when do you need the information? (1)

Write down and discuss the responses as a team before finalizing your questions.

Mobilizing for Action through Planning and Partnerships (MAPP) is a community-driven strategic planning tool developed by the National Association of County & City Health Officials for improving community health. The Assessment phase of MAPP includes four assessments which seek to answer the following questions:

- What is important to our community?
- How is quality of life perceived in our community?
- What assets do we have that can be used to improve community health?
- What are the components, activities, competencies and capacities of our local public health system?
- How are the essential public health services being provided to our community?
- How healthy are our residents? What does the health status of our community look like?
- What is occurring or might occur that affects the health of our community or the local public health system?
Suggested tools:

- **MAPP Assessment Overview** (from the National Association of County & City Health Officials) provides tips for coordinating assessment efforts. Assessment is the phase of the MAPP process during which participants conduct four interrelated assessments.

- **A Handbook for Participatory Community Assessments** (PDF from the Alameda County Public Health Department) walks through the process the department undertook with two neighborhood groups to conduct participatory community assessments. The handbook includes detailed information about developing partners and preparing for an assessment, pp. 1-27.

*Identify measures and sources of data that will help you answer questions about your community*

Now that you have figured out what you want to know about your community, you can start to identify the specific measures or categories of measures that will answer those questions, as well as existing sources of data for those measures.

For example, one of the questions the *County Health Rankings* seeks to understand is tobacco use within counties. We look at adult smoking as a measure of tobacco use. Data are available at the county level to help us answer that question.

Your community may want to look at additional measures related to tobacco use, such as youth smoking, pregnant women smoking, exposure to second-hand smoke, and community policies to discourage smoking or limit second hand smoke exposure.

The *County Health Rankings Data Drilldown Guide* and Community Tool Box’s *Developing a Plan for Identifying Local Needs & Resources* include common places to find useful data, including:

- Federal government statistics, such as census and public health data. The Data Drilldown Guide provides an overview of and links to several national sources as well as links to state data sources.
- Assessments or studies conducted by local or state government agencies.*
- Assessments or studies conducted by other organizations. Hospitals, human service providers, Chambers of Commerce, and charitable organizations such as United Way may all conduct community assessments for their own purposes, and may be willing – or even eager – to share their results.*
- Studies conducted by researchers connected to local universities.(2)

*WORK TOGETHER NOTE: Are these groups at the table? Have you reached out to them? Would they be willing to share their data?*

Suggested tools:

- **County Health Rankings Data Drilldown Guide** provides suggestions for finding more detailed information about key areas in your community’s rankings.
- **Developing a Plan for Identifying Local Needs & Resources** (from The Community Tool Box) describes what community needs and resources are and why, when and how to identify them.
- **Possible Community Health Indicators** (from the Community Tool Box) includes a variety of indicators (e.g., children in poverty, unemployment rate), what they are an indicator of (e.g., social environment, prosperity), and potential sources of data (e.g., Census, state employment office).
What’s missing? Identify any additional qualitative and quantitative sources of data that will help answer your questions (e.g., focus groups, community surveys)

You may not be able to answer all of your questions with existing data, and your team may need to collect its own data. There are a variety of ways to collect qualitative and quantitative data. Use a combination of methods to give your team the best picture of your community.

Quantitative methods generally result in numbers and answer questions like How many? How much? and How often? Qualitative methods generally result in descriptions or explanations about often-complex issues.(3)

Most of the sections of Assessing Community Needs & Resources, Chapter 3 in the Community Tool Box, are devoted to different methods for collecting information. Each section provides an in-depth description of what the method is and why, when and how you should use it.(4)

As you decide which methods you will use to collect additional data, keep in mind your vision for the community and the main reason for doing an assessment. Limit your data collection to those things that will help the team achieve its vision.

Suggested tools:
- Developing a Plan for Identifying Local Needs & Resources (from the Community Tool Box) describes what community needs and resources are and why, when and how to identify them.
- Assessing Community Needs and Resources (from the Community Tool Box) includes 21 sections mostly dedicated to different methods for collecting information (e.g., Conducting Focus Groups, Conducting Surveys, and Qualitative Methods to Assess Community Issues).

Collect information

You will likely want to identify small groups within your multi-sector team to collect data using your selected methods.

Assessing Community Needs & Resources in the Community Tool Box, includes in-depth descriptions and provides specific tools for a variety of data collection methods.(4) Likewise, Mobilizing for Action through Partnership and Planning (MAPP) include detailed steps for how to complete each of the four assessments.(5)

Suggested tools:
- Assessing Community Needs & Resources (from the Community Tool Box) includes different methods for collecting information. Each section provides an in-depth description of what the method is and why, when and how you should use it.(4)
- A Handbook for Participatory Community Assessments (PDF from the Alameda County Public Health Department) includes detailed information about choosing data collection methods, collecting the data and sharing your results, pp. 29-85.
- Community Commons allows users to create custom maps using data from multiple data sources.
- Community Assessment Tools (PDF from Rotary International) provides detailed descriptions, planning tips and, in some cases, samples for several types of assessment.
- Mobilizing for Action through Planning & Partnerships (MAPP) four assessments:
Community Themes and Strengths Assessment answers the following questions: What is important to our community? How is quality of life perceived in our community? And what assets do we have that can be used to improve community health?

Local Public Health System Assessment answers the following questions: What are the components, activities, competencies and capacities of our local public health system? How are the essential services being provided to our community?

Community Health Status Assessment answers the following questions: How healthy are our residents? What does the health status of our community look like?

Forces of Change Assessment answers the following questions: What is occurring or might occur that affects the health of our community or the local public health system? What specific threats or opportunities are generated by these occurrences?

Specific Assessment Requirements

If members of your multi-sector team are planning to use your assessment effort to meet requirements related to Community Benefits or Public Health Accreditation, you may want to review additional resources. Following are two resources intended specifically for Community Benefits and Public Health Accreditation.

Community Benefits: As a result of passage of the new Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act (PPACA), not for profit hospitals are now required to conduct a community health needs assessment at least once every three years, using public data, engaging community stakeholders, and resulting in an implementation plan that articulates both how current needs will be met and explanations of ongoing gaps.

The National Center for Rural Health Works has developed a template for the process of completing a Community Health Needs Assessment, Assessing and Addressing Community Health Needs, developed by the Catholic Hospital Association, is a comprehensive guide to community health assessments that incorporates requirements from both the PPACA and the Internal Revenue Services.

Public Health Accreditation uses standards and measures developed after a thorough process of study, vetting, and testing. The governmental entity that has the primary statutory or legal responsibility for public health in a Tribe, state, territory, or at the local level is eligible to apply for accreditation. Domain 1 (pp. 10-48) of the Public Health Accreditation Board’s Standards & Measures (PDF) document discusses the accreditation requirements related to assessment.

ASSESS NEEDS & RESOURCES: ACT GUIDE

Review Assess Needs & Resources START activities, tools, and guidance

Has your team:

- Reviewed your County Health Rankings snapshot?
- Defined and generated questions about your community?
- Identified measures and sources of data to help answer your questions?
- Collected information about your community?

If not, you may want to review the START activities, tools, & guidance for Assess Needs & Resources.

Identify community assets and resources

It’s important to assess your community’s strengths and assets as well as your needs. As your work through the Take Action Cycle, you may want to focus your efforts on policies and programs that build on your community’s existing assets and resources. Identifying these elements early will help you later as you Choose Effective Policies & Programs and begin to Act on What’s Important to implement policies and programs.

Suggested tools:

- Community Assets Brainstorm exercise (from Healthy People 2020) is a two-page exercise that gives guidance for a brainstorming exercise to identify your community’s strengths.
- Identifying Community Assets and Resources (from the Community Tool Box) provides some specific techniques not only to help you identify community assets but ideas for how to use them as well.

Bring it all together: Compile and analyze information collected

Your goal here is to bring the data together in a way that lets your stakeholders know what you found and helps them understand the health of your community.

Go back to the questions you generated about your community. How do the data you’ve collected answer those questions? How do the various data collection techniques you used work together to better answer your questions? What story does your data tell about your community?

Suggested tools:

- Assessing Community Needs & Resources (from the Community Tool Box) is largely devoted to different methods for collecting information. Each section provides an in-depth description that includes suggestions for analyzing your information.
Identify any remaining gaps

As you bring the data together, you might find gaps in the data you’ve collected. Do you need to go back to the data source(s) and gather additional information?

At this point, it’s important to consider how much value additional data will add to your process.

- Do you have enough information to answer your most important questions?
- Will gathering additional information help you move toward your overall vision?

Share results with your community

Once you’ve collected and analyzed your data, you will want to share what you’ve learned with your community. You can communicate your results in a variety of ways such as community presentations or forums, publishing and distributing fact sheets, via a web or social media site, and/or through the local media. Sharing your results will raise community awareness, influence public opinion, and mobilize support.

Alameda County’s Handbook for Participatory Community Assessments (PDF) suggests considering four key questions to help you prepare to communicate your results:

1) What data are most important to share?
2) How should numbers be shown?
3) How should the results be presented?
4) How should the results be distributed? (1)

Communicating your assessment results gives community members an opportunity to give feedback—think through ways that you can elicit this feedback. Does the community perceive your data and findings to be valid? If not, you may want to spend some time on additional educational campaign to raise awareness about the problems identified during your assessment. Or you may want to revisit your assessment to be sure that you have adequately considered important aspects of your community.

Suggested tools:

- **A Handbook for Participatory Community Assessments** (PDF from the Alameda County Public Health Department) walks through the process the department went through with two neighborhood groups to conduct participatory community assessments. Pages 80-84 discuss sharing assessment results with your community.
- **Communicating Information About Community Health and Development Issues** (from the Community Tool Box) explains why communicating information about community health is important, how to communicate effectively, and makes suggestions about to whom you should communicate.

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