Assessing Community Needs

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A needs assessment can be an invaluable tool when you are developing a new program or expanding a program you already offer. However, the process for conducting a community needs assessment can be complicated. In this brief we walk you through this process, including defining your purpose, selecting an approach, collecting data and then using that data. Special thanks to our guest author, Suzanne Kunkel, director of Scripps Gerontology Center and associate professor in the department of sociology and gerontology at Miami University in Oxford, Ohio. (Portions of this paper have been excerpted from the Handbook for Needs Assessments in Ohio's Aging Network written by Suzanne Kunkel, Jennifer Kinney, Robert Logan, and Ray Matura.

Assessing Community Needs

Community organizations often undertake some kind of needs assessment when they are developing, expanding, refining or improving programs. The phrase "needs assessment" refers to a broad category of activities, all designed to determine the discrepancy between what is and what should be.1The difference between these two depends on many factors, including whose opinion you seek, how you define "what should be" and how you ask the questions. It may be related to which specific services you provide, how readily available those services are, how fully your clients' needs are met, who is served, and what the community (including consumers) expects of your program. The purpose of this brief is to present some of the major decisions, challenges and helpful hints for conducting a community needs assessment.

What Do You Want to Know? Clarifying Your Purpose and Focus

The starting point in any needs assessment is to clarify exactly what you want to know about, and why, because these decisions will affect every other aspect of the process. Usually you will want to have some idea of what your target population looks like—both demographically and in terms of the needs you are seeking to fulfill. But the specifics of what you want to know and how you will use the information are influenced by the context for the assessment.

A few examples:

- If you are seeking to expand the services you currently offer, you will want to know what else your clients might need. If financial pressures mean that you cannot possibly extend your program to offer new services, you probably would not want to send out a survey asking people to tell you what else would help them in their lives. In doing so, you could be setting up unreasonable expectations.

- If you want to broaden the population that you serve (say you want to start providing Medicare education to younger beneficiaries with disabilities in addition to the older people you already serve), you will probably be most interested in how to reach that group effectively. What are the needs and unique characteristics of the expanded target population? What barriers and benefits do they perceive in accessing your program?

Some examples:

Another dimension that can be tapped in an assessment is the extent to which the services you currently offer meet the known needs of your existing clients. For example, you might want to know how much your consumers rely on other sources (such as family and friends) for the hours of services your program currently cannot provide.

There are many other kinds of questions that can be answered through a community needs assessment. To learn what the relevant questions are for your organization, it is a good idea to convene a group of people who can help brainstorm about what exactly you want to know and why. This group should include all major stakeholders since their perspectives are likely to vary—this includes agency staff, consumers and their families, decision makers and other community partners. The greater the stake-holder involvement in the planning stages of this process, the greater their interest will be in your findings.

What Is the Best Way to Find Out What You Want to Know? Qualitative v. Quantitative Approaches

Depending on your questions, you can use either an exploratory, in-depth (qualitative) approach to gathering information, or you might choose a larger-scale survey that aims to get a good representation from your target groups (quantitative approach). These two different approaches fit different situations and answer different kinds of questions. Both qualitative and quantitative methods can be valid, rigorous and useful. But the "right" approach is determined by what you really want to know. In general, qualitative approaches give richly textured information and insights about needs and services. Quantitative approaches are more appropriate when you have a fairly good understanding about a topic and when you want information that you can use confidently when making decisions.

No matter what kind of new information you might want to collect, there are some existing sources of data that can help you in your needs assessment process. Census data, agency records and waiting lists are all examples of existing data that might help you learn more about your target groups.

Some examples:

- When designing a new program or a new component for an existing program, you will probably be most interested in having in-depth, open-ended discussions with small numbers of people to find out about heir everyday lives and what kinds of needs limit their community access, quality of life or independence. Focus groups and in-depth interviewing are two examples of qualitative, exploratory methods that can help you in this situation.

- At other times, you want to know about the ways in which an existing program meets current needs, might meet those needs more effectively or might anticipate the growth of those needs. In this case, a representative survey about the needs of your target population (most likely, current clients) will probably be most useful. However, finding that representative sample is one of the great challenges of needs assessment research (more on that later).

How Do You Ask the Questions? Data Collection Techniques and Instruments

As mentioned above, the nature of the questions you want to answer will determine your general approach to data collection. For both quantitative and qualitative approaches, there are tasks and decisions related to question wording and exact method of collecting data (e.g., focus groups, phone interviews, mailed surveys, etc.). However, because most programs decide at some point to do a large-scale survey of community needs, we will focus on that process.

DATA COLLECTION TECHNIQUES

For large-scale surveys, data collection options include mailed surveys, phone surveys and face-to-face interviews. Each of these approaches has advantages and disadvantages. Face-to-face interview shave very good response rates and are a good way to make sure of honest, direct and clear communication. Interviewers can pick up on all kinds of cues and can probe or follow up to make sure that the participant's views are completely clear. However, in-person interviews are also extremely expensive. Mailed surveys are much less expensive, but there is greater opportunity for misunderstanding and imperfect communication. In general, phone inter-views can be a cost-effective and valid source of information, although they can be problematic for people with hearing impairments. For both phone and in-person interviews well-trained interviewers are essential. Paid professional interviews are an option, but that will increase the cost of your project significantly. Since there is often a limited budget available for the needs assessment process, it usually can be cost-effective—and methodologically sound—to use volunteers. The two most important aspects of working with volunteer interviewers are to recruit selectively and to train thoroughly. Recruit interviewers who are good communicators, reliable and committed to the research process. Ideally, you will want to recruit interviewers who have some level of experience with the process. Some agencies have been able to use staff as well to complete some of the phone interviews. On average, it is helpful to have enough volunteers/staff members so that each person will have no more than 20interviews to complete. Effective interviewer training does three things:

1. It communicates to the staff and volunteers the crucial importance of their contribution to the needs assessment process.
2. It reinforces the skills and characteristics of a successful interviewer.
3. It provides a clear sense of the purpose of the assessment instrument as a whole, as well as each question on the survey, so that interviewers are completely informed and comfortable with the instrument. The interviewer training session is also an ideal time to discuss issues having to do with local context. Your volunteers can help to improve the wording of both the introductory statement and questions based on their knowledge of the people in the community and their preferences, values and attitudes toward participation in a survey.

SURVEY INSTRUMENTS AND INTERVIEW PROTOCOLS

Designing the questionnaire you will use for your needs assessment requires several stages. Starting with the overall questions you most want to know about, you need to write pilot-test and refine specific questions to ask participants. One important issue to consider in writing your questions is whether you want to ask about needs or about services. For example, if you wanted information about transportation needs, you could ask whether people need assistance with transportation, or you could ask whether they need transportation service. While it might seem more-straight forward to ask about need for transportation service, this approach has some disadvantages. Respondents might want to know what kind of transportation ser-vices you are asking about, because they might welcome a taxi service, but not a van service. More importantly, there is not always an exact translation between needs and services. A service is a solution to the problem of a need (discrepancy between what is and what could be). But there is often more than one way (or one service) to meet a need. Services are designed by taking into account not only consumer need, but also negotiations about resource allocations, competing priorities and community needs, as well as other gaps in the service system. In general, it is easier and more realistic for consumers to talk about their needs. Clearly, the specific questions you ask participants will be driven by the focus of your needs assessment. There are a number of existing instruments readily available from the aging network. It can save you time, energy and possibly money to begin with existing surveys and modify them to meet your specifications by adding, revising or deleting questions. Always keep in mind the major purpose of your assessment and the uses you have in mind for your data. Whether you use an existing instrument or design your own, it is essential to pilot-test the survey. Even though the questions seem clear to the team that writes them, it is extremely valuable to have other people who have not been so involved in the process look at the questionnaire, fill it out, and talk with you about how they interpreted the questions. Inevitably you will learn about some way to make the questions and response categories clearer.

Whom Do You Ask? Sampling

Once you have your interviewers trained and your questionnaire refined, it is time to start collecting the data. But where do you find a representative sample? And how can you make sure you talk to enough people to be confident in your findings? These are the major challenges of sampling. One of the greatest challenges in any research project is deciding how to sample. This is one of the areas where the advice of an expert is a worthwhile investment. The first decision you will have to make is between a random, representative sample and a convenience sample. A convenience or availability sample means that you select respondents because they are readily available. For example, going to senior centers, retirement communities, nursing homes or churches is a good way to find older people in your community who might participate in your needs assessment. However, each of these groups is unique in some way (healthy or not; mobile or not; socially active or not; etc.). Therefore a survey based on any combination of these groups will produce biased results. For qualitative, exploratory assessments however, convenience samples are quite appropriate. For survey-based needs assessments, a random sample of the older population is most likely what you will want. A random sample allows you to make general statements about the older people in your community. Even though it is a good idea, drawing a random sample is a challenge. Unfortunately, there is no complete list of all the older people in your area. Some researchers use random digit dialing, in which a randomly generated list of phone numbers is called. However, when you are seeking only older respondents, this approach is not efficient since most households do not include an older per-son. In addition, not all older people have phones. A fairly efficient and effective approach to random sampling is the use of voter registration records. Most county boards of elections can run a list of names and addresses of registered voters above a certain age. Sometimes there is a charge for this service, and often the lists will not be completely accurate. Some registered voters will have moved, and most importantly, not everyone registers to vote. Because of this latter issue, voter registration samples are biased in a particular direction—they tend to under-represent individuals with lower education and fewer economic resources. It is also possible to purchase a list from any one of an umber of market research organizations. These lists can be tailored to the exact specifications of your agency. They tend to be more complete and accurate than voter registration lists, but they are costly and are not guaranteed to be exhaustive. Another approach to sampling that can be used in conjunction with voter registration lists or other purchased lists is to interview a group of people randomly selected from waiting lists collected from agencies in the area. The advantage of this approach is that you will hear from people who require ser-vices and can provide you with information about areas of greatest unmet need. The disadvantage of this approach is that such a sample is not necessarily representative of the older population in general, since these folks already need assistance of some kind. Once you have a sampling list, you must decide upon the appropriate sample size and strategy. How many names will you choose from your list(s), and how will they be chosen? Sample size depends on a number of factors, including the diversity of your population and the kind of analysis you hope to do. The greater the diversity among the older people in your survey, and the more extensive the subgroup analyses (such as comparing men and women or rural and urban groups) you hope to do, the greater the sample size you will need. Because sample size calculation is complicated and because the validity of your results depends on the adequacy of your sample, you may want to get a trained researcher to help you devise your sampling strategy. You may have a researcher on staff. If not, seek the advice of a research consultant (perhaps someone from a local university or research firm) to help with this process.

What Now? From Data to Information

After your interviews have been carefully collected, the data need to be coded and analyzed. This is another point in the process where outside assistance may be valuable. If your agency has good computer capabilities and researchers on staff, you can handle this task internally. If not, you might contact a local university to find a gerontology or research methods class instructor who might help you think through data entry and analysis. It is a good idea to work this out in the very early stages of planning for your needs assessment. Deciding how to analyze, interpret and report your data is related to the purpose of the assessment established at the very beginning of the process. As we discussed earlier, it is essential to always have in mind what, exactly, you want to learn as a result of a community needs assessment and how the data will be useful. At this stage, your initial and sustained clarity of focus will be extremely helpful. Your data should be used to tell a story. What is the story to be told, and who is the audience? These questions will help guide data analysis and reporting, the stage in the needs assessment process when data is trans-formed into information. Several groups of stakeholders will likely be interested in the findings of the needs assessment: pro-gram agency staff, funding agencies, agency boards, decision makers, and consumers and their families. A summary report should be prepared with a general audience in mind. More detailed and technical reports can be made available to agency personnel, funders or researchers who might be interested. A general report can be used as the basis for presentations at public hearings, to administrators and legislators, and for media releases. An example of a general report can be found in the Ohio Needs Assessment Handbook. Obviously, each needs assessment report should be tailored to the specifics of the local area, the stakeholders, and the overall goals and purposes of the assessment.

In Conclusion

A well-designed, carefully planned and executed assessment of community needs can be an invaluable tool for the development, expansion, refinement and improvement of the programs and services that you offer. Some agencies are fortunate to have internal resources for all aspects of a needs assessment. Others will need outside help with some phases of the process. Even when people outside the agency will do some of the work, someone within your agency must “own” the process, its purposes and its outcomes—otherwise it will never happen. The involvement of stakeholders at all stages of the process will help to assure that you stay on the right track and that there will be interest in what you find. Consumers can provide an invaluable perspective during the planning phases, as “participants,” and in telling the story. After all, they are the experts on their own needs. Overall, the success of the needs assessment process is tied to clarity of purpose, commitment to use of the information, good use of resources and beginning with the end in mind.

1Posavac, E. J., Carey, R. G. Program Evaluation: Methods and Case Studies, Fifth Edition, Prentice Hall,1997.

Helpful hints for planning and conducting your needs assessment:

- Begin with the end in mind.
- Clarify the purpose of your needs assessment.
- Consider the context.
- Have a good idea how you will use the data before you collect it.
- Engage all stakeholders.
- Listen to consumers.
- Fit your method to your question.
- Use your resources (i.e., information, people) wisely.

About the Author

Suzanne Kunkel, Ph.D., is director of the Scripps Gerontology Center and associate professor in the department of sociology and gerontology, Miami University, Oxford, Ohio. She has been involved in several large-scale studies projecting the future of long-term care needs for the nation, and for the state of Ohio and its counties. Dr. Kunkel is also interested in consumer-oriented service design and delivery. She is currently principal investigator or co-principal investigator on three consumer-direction projects, including a study of consumer direction in Ohio’s Medicaid waiver program, funded by the Robert Wood

Johnson Foundation. She has authored numerous book chapters, research monographs, and articles, and has recently completed the second edition of a textbook(with Leslie Morgan), ***Aging: The Social Context***.

Other Resources

HANDBOOK FOR NEEDS ASSESSMENTS IN OHIO'S AGING NETWORK
http://www.state.oh.us/age/needsassess.pdf
Available through the Ohio Department of Aging Web site, this handbook offers a practical guide to conducting a useful, affordable needs assessment process. It includes sample interviewer training materials and other resources. A companion piece to this guide is a needs assessment instrument that was developed and successfully used in several needs assessments conducted within the state of Ohio. To access this instrument, visit http://www.state.oh.us/age/NASurveys.pdf.

SMART COMMUNITIES IMPLEMENTATION GUIDE: HOW CALIFORNIA COMMUNITIES CAN THRIVE IN THE DIGITAL AGE
http://www.smartcommunities.org/guide/
A smart community is one in which various organizations (government, business, health-care organizations and more) understand the value of information technology and develop partnerships in order to use technology "to transform their communities in significant and positive ways." This guide to becoming a smart community includes a chapter outlining the purposes of and approaches to con-ducting needs assessments.