

THE NEEDS ASSESSMENT:

TOOLS FOR LONG-TERM PLANNING

Needs assessment is the process of obtaining and analyzing information to determine the current status and service needs of a defined population and/or geographic area. Needs assessments can be useful for:¹

- Obtaining information about current conditions in a defined population including problems or service needs and the resources and approaches being used to address them.
- Determining met and unmet service needs among specific target populations and for the overall service area or community.

BENEFITS OF CONDUCTING A NEEDS ASSESSMENT

A needs assessment can be a powerful tool used to assign priority to service needs and develop strategies to address them.

A comprehensive needs assessment provides the following:

- Targets impacted/affected populations identified in the epidemiologic profile
- Describes the health needs of targeted populations
- Furnishes an inventory of existing community resources
- Includes a gap analysis of the met and unmet needs within targeted populations
- Presents results in formats useful for priority setting, program planning, and other planning and decision-making activities (it can include a quality assurance component)

DEFINING MET AND UNMET NEEDS

A *met need* is a service within a specific target population that is currently being addressed through existing resources that are:

- Available to that target population
- Appropriate for that target population
- Accessible to that target population

An *unmet need* is a service within a specific target population that is not currently being addressed through existing services and activities because:

- No services are currently available, or
- Available services are either inappropriate or inaccessible.

STEPS IN DESIGNING THE NEEDS ASSESSMENT

The following are key steps in designing a needs assessment:

1. Determine purpose and objectives of the needs assessment.
2. Identify available resources.
3. Understand and agree upon roles and responsibilities.
4. Determine the research questions to be answered.
5. Develop the methodology for collecting and analyzing data.
6. Establish a realistic timeline and workplan.

KEY QUESTIONS A NEEDS ASSESSMENT ANSWERS FOR EACH TARGET POPULATION

Needs assessment provides critical information about a target population. Specific questions your needs assessment may answer include:

- What are the related risk behaviors, practices, attitudes, or beliefs of the target population?
- To what extent is the target population receiving services?
- What barriers to accessing or using services do members of the target population experience or perceive?

¹ *Assessing the Need for HIV Prevention Services: A Guide for Community Planning Groups*. Academy for Educational Development, Washington, DC: 1999.



- What programs, strategies, or interventions work best with the target population?
- What related resources and services are available, accessible, and appropriate for this population?
- What are the differences among specific subpopulations regarding health needs and access issues?

TYPES OF NEEDS ASSESSMENT DATA

- **Primary data:** original data that you collect and analyze, e.g., data from a youth focus group or results of surveys of women
- **Secondary data:** information that was collected by someone else, but which you can analyze or re-analyze; may be available in “raw” (un-analyzed) or analyzed form, e.g., STD clinic data or census data
- **Qualitative data:** data presented in narrative form that generally cannot be expressed numerically, e.g., information collected from focus groups or key informant interviews
- **Quantitative data:** data presented in numerical terms, e.g., survey data from closed-ended questions or reported AIDS cases from epidemiologic surveys/reports

NEEDS ASSESSMENT METHODOLOGIES

- **Secondary data:** review and re-analysis of secondary (pre-existing) data
- **Focus groups:** qualitative method involving a small group of people whose discussion is carefully planned and led by an experienced moderator
- **In-depth or key informant interviews:** qualitative method of conducting in-depth interviews with a small number of individuals carefully selected for their personal experiences and knowledge
- **Community forums or public meetings:** large-group method of collecting qualitative information from community members that is larger and less formal than a focus group; session is facilitated and tape-recorded
- **Surveys:** quantitative method involving systematic data collection from a sample of individuals selected from a target population; information is used to generate group-level summary statistics; results may be “generalized” to the entire target population

QUESTIONS TO ANSWER WHEN SELECTING A METHODOLOGY(IES)

- What existing (secondary) information is available?
- What new information (primary data) is needed, and from what sources can it be obtained?

- How will the needs assessment process be coordinated and monitored?
- How will quality control be maintained?
- How will data be analyzed?
- When, how, and in what form will results be presented?
- What efforts are needed to promote acceptance of the needs assessment results by the larger community?

GETTING THE WORK DONE: ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES

Health departments, public agencies, or local planning bodies may be able to offer assistance with your needs assessment. Potential areas for collaboration include:

- Identification of target populations
- Preparation of a resource inventory
- Certain aspects of consumer surveys
- Epidemiologic profiles

A needs assessment committee can be an effective way to get the work done. A needs assessment committee may take on the following responsibilities:

- Determines needs assessment scope and desired outcomes
- Approves design and oversees entire process
- Chooses consultants (with organization’s consultation)
- Ensures that all affected and impacted populations are included
- May help with outreach, arrangements, and data collection

A contractor/consultant may have the following responsibilities:

- Coordinate the entire process or perform specific tasks
- Assist with determining the scope of the needs assessment and developing research questions
- Design needs assessment methodology, collect data or train data collectors, analyze data, and present results

THE RESOURCE INVENTORY

The resource inventory and gap analysis are part of a comprehensive needs assessment.

The resource inventory describes existing community capacity for services by identifying and describing current and related resources and activities in the community, regardless of the funding source.

Information needs for each organization or group include:

- Contact information
- Funding amount and sources (private, public, fee-for-service)
- Geographic area(s) served
- Targeted population(s)
- Program focus, i.e., focus and intended program audiences
- Strategies or interventions used
- Service capacity
- Assessment of accessibility and appropriateness for targeted populations

THE GAP ANALYSIS

The gap analysis brings together the following information:

- Data about specific populations identified from epidemiologic profiles and reports
- Findings about met and unmet needs from the needs assessment
- Information about existing prevention services and resources, funding, and populations served from the resource inventory
- Secondary data about availability, accessibility, and appropriateness of existing services for the target population

PRESENTING NEEDS ASSESSMENT RESULTS

There are many ways to present needs assessment findings. The following suggestions may enhance presentation:

- Consider potential uses of the results
- Present gap analysis data by target population
- Organize other needs assessment data by target population and topic, not data source or method
- Choose clear, easy-to-understand formats
- Encourage creative formats designed to support decision-making processes