

Chapter XLII

A Needs Assessment: Critical in Planning and Community Development

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ABSTRACT

The appropriate allocation of valuable human and financial resources requires a decision-making process based upon the most accurate information available. A community diagnostic assessment provides the framework to determine the important issues, propose potential solutions, and empower the community's constituents. In this chapter, several theoretical models which can guide the assessment process are delineated along with six methods of needs assessment (key informant, public issues forum, service utilization, public records - social indicators, and field survey). For each method of assessment, its applicability, strengths and limitations are examined. The use of telecommunication technologies and Internet resources are incorporated throughout the chapter.

INTRODUCTION

Whether it is an individual purchasing a vehicle, or a county health department considering the implementation of a diabetes management program, or administrators of a high school discerning the reasons for the increasing drop-out rate of their

students – the common thread weaving through these diverse situations is a process of decision-making requiring the most accurate information possible. A powerful mechanism that is available to gather a broad range of valid information is the needs assessment (Altschuld & Witkin, 1999). Hence, needs assessment methodologies have

a variety of applications, i.e., market research, environmental deliberation, health and human services delivery, emergency preparedness, etc.

Through the various needs assessment strategies, the following six questions concerning an issue or problem can be addressed: What is it? How often does it occur? How disruptive is it? How long has it lasted? How many people does it affect? Is it perceived as a problem? Thus, a needs assessment examines a problem or concern in terms of its frequency, severity, duration, scope, and perception by the target population.

Conducting a needs assessment, a form of community-based participatory research, performs three vital functions. First, it engages elements of the target population in problem-solving processes, i.e., identifying important issues and best possible solutions. Because the purpose of a needs assessment is to collect valid and reliable data, the process of gathering this information can optimally involve individuals, groups, organizations, agencies and institutions. It can provide the platform whereby, otherwise, isolated community elements can interact to systematically identify priorities, appraise existing resources and uncover the gaps regarding a problem and the methods of its remediation. Secondly, a needs assessment gathers essential information for program planning, development, implementation and evaluation. In addition, these data can provide the foundation for determining policies that are relevant to the target population. Finally, in the process of conducting a needs assessment, community elements can mobilize to sustain the implemented problem-solving efforts over time (Best, Stokols, Green, Leischow, Holmes, & Buchholz, 2003).

Identifying the community constituents and the involvement of its stakeholders are the initial crucial steps for all needs assessment data collection methods. Both are vital to obtaining valid information, to foster successful program development and implementation, and to accurately generalize one's findings (Finifter, Jensen, Wilson, & Koenig, 2005).

Focus of this Chapter

In this chapter, the terms “community” or “target population” refer to those individuals who share a similar history, demographic characteristic, culture, geographic location, political-social system, or interest. Therefore, a target community can represent a municipality, a desert region, a racial-ethnic group, an age category, or parents whose child has cancer. The concept of “stakeholder” represents individuals who are affiliated with that community, i.e., a member, a service provider, an advocate, a teacher, a religious leader, or an elected official. The identification and inclusion of relevant stakeholders provides valuable insights concerning issues needing to be addressed, access to the community as well as interpretation of the findings.

The focus of this chapter will be to describe six methods of needs assessment (key informant, public issues forum, service utilization, public records, and field survey). The use of applicable telecommunication technologies and internet resources will be incorporated throughout the discussion of selected data collection methodologies.

BACKGROUND

Community Diagnostic Models

Intrinsically, the diagnosis of a problem involves a continuous sequential process. This process encompasses: (1) posing questions (does the problem exist), (2) information gathering (providing answers to the questions), (3) planning an intervention or formulating policies, ordinances, or regulations, and again, (4) posing questions (has the problem or concern been remediated, e.g., the direction and degree of change resulting from the intervention) (Finifter, Jensen, Wilson, & Koenig, 2005). or policy).

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