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Conducting a Community Needs Assessment[1]

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I. Introduction

A community needs assessment is an integral part of the implementation of a community-based leadership program. This *NCLR Leadership Bulletin* examines the relevance and importance of a needs assessment to an organization's leadership program and guides the agency through the phases needed to carry it out. A needs assessment is undertaken to identify and determine the specific needs of a target group or community so that a program can be properly structured to meet those needs. It is important to have an appropriate program design in order for the experience to be meaningful and relevant to the participants. A needs assessment is conducted in order to test conditions before launching new services in an agency, neighborhood, or larger community. Organizations contemplating leadership programs should be sure to focus on the "gaps" in leadership in the community and focus on providing services that can be administered to address related needs.

The first phase of a needs assessment is identifying which needs will be examined and determining the scope of the study. A needs assessment must have a clear and defined purpose. This is a critical component because the purpose statement serves as a guide for the entire process. This stage includes identifying ***who*** will be the population targeted, ***what*** information is needed, and ***why*** this is necessary. Knowing the purpose of the needs assessment, including the target group, and what the information will be used for, in this case, designing a leadership program, is essential in structuring the needs assessment.

The second phase is structuring and implementing the needs assessment. A needs assessment can be conducted by three methods: surveys, focus groups, or community interviews. Each process has different demands and considerations. It is key to understand the differences among the three and adopt the method most suitable for your needs.

Once the information has been gathered, the third phase is analyzing the data. The data must be analyzed in a manner that translates raw information into substantive goals and recommendations. The findings must be relevant to a proposed leadership project(s). This is a time-consuming process and is made easier if the first two phases are implemented carefully.

The fourth and final phase is preparing and disseminating the report. The report should be organized in a logical and easy-to-read format. The documentation must be clear in order to illustrate key findings and conclusions in a concise and understandable manner. It is then disseminated to various members of the community and any other relevant parties, such as the media or potential funders.

II. Identify the Purpose

The first phase of a needs assessment is to specify its purpose and scope and define its relevance to the agency. Defining the purpose in a clear and concise fashion from the onset enhances the needs assessment's capacity to serve as a blueprint for the subsequent project. Furthermore, its relevance and consistency with the agency, and the

[1] This article is based on the following NCLR documents: *Developing a Community Needs Assessment*, 1993, and *Understanding Evaluation Techniques: The Building Blocks of Evaluation*, 1993.

agency's mission, puts the study in perspective and demonstrates the integral role a needs assessment will bring to an organization, community, or neighborhood.

Ways to identify the purpose include asking key questions such as who, what, and why. The ***who*** is the population to be targeted. There may be a gap in programs or services for a particular group of the community. For example, an agency may conclude that there is a lack of service to high school-age students. The needs assessment would thus be conducted among the population of high school-age students and those involved in delivering services to this target group. Next, identify ***what*** the issue that needs to be addressed is. An example of an issue is a recent increase in vandalism or gang violence in the community. Finally, ask ***why*** the information is needed. Is a needs assessment necessary or is the information available elsewhere? Has the increase in vandalism or gang violence made a serious impact on the community? The answer to the "why" provides the purpose of the needs assessment. Answers to these three basic questions will guide the entire needs assessment process beginning with a defined structure and ending with dissemination and follow-through. Failure to supply a reasonable and explicit explanation for each of these questions could result in difficulties during data collection and analysis, or worse, an assessment that fails to help structure your program effectively.

Questions for identifying input for the needs assessment

- ❖ Who lives in the community?
- ❖ What are the socioeconomic characteristics of the residents?
- ❖ What are the sizes and characteristics of the special-needs populations, such as youth, single mothers, homeless, farmworkers, etc.?
- ❖ What critical leadership-related needs are not being met?
- ❖ What is the extent, location, and accessibility of human services within the community?
- ❖ What are the service gaps in the community?
- ❖ What are the perceived major problems within the community and to what extent is there consensus about the relative importance of these problems?
- ❖ What are the resources within and outside the community to address identified needs and attain solutions?
- ❖ To what extent are community members likely to become involved in advocacy or joint actions to make change?

III. Structuring and Implementing the Needs Assessment

A needs assessment can be structured by using the most common methods — survey or questionnaire, focus groups, or community interviews. An organization should consider a careful evaluation of the agency's capacity in order to determine which method(s) will be used to implement the needs assessment. Deciding which method appropriately serves the agency depends on the following factors: the agency's budget, staff capacity, facilities, characteristics of the target population such as literacy level, and the type(s) of projects or services the agency intends to implement. It is not uncommon for a combination of these methods to be used. For example, a mailed questionnaire might be followed up by a telephone or in-person interview.

Once a method has been selected, it is necessary to choose either an individual or a needs assessment team to carry it out. This person or group must have strong research skills, knowledge of the community, a strong commitment, and an ability to carry out an objective analysis. It is very important to gain the trust of the participants. Someone familiar with the community, but not a controversial figure may be more apt to draw open, honest, and straightforward responses. In addition to having a competent and responsible individual or group conduct the needs assessment, an advisory committee comprised of community leaders, elected officials, private sector representatives, and others involved in the community or familiar with the issues being addressed should be formed to review the process and ensure it is well documented and objective.

The Survey

A survey is a set of questions designed to elicit information on a particular issue. The survey, or questionnaire, is distributed to several people and response is usually by mail. There is rarely any personal contact with the respondents. An agency may elect to do an extensive survey if it has sufficient resources and capacity. Because a survey requires careful structuring, a vast amount of time in planning is required. A survey is recommended for audiences with a medium- to high-literacy level and when trying to reach a large number of people.

Designing a successful survey requires selecting questions that meet the research objectives, remain focused on the topic, are understandable by the audience, and are reasonable in length. When drafting a set of questions, pay careful attention to the following five factors: relevance, order, wording, length, and sensitivity. It is best to avoid including questions that do not pertain to the mission of the needs assessment in order to "have that information." Place all similar questions regarding a particular subject in the same section. Do not assume that a group of questions constructed for a specific set of conditions can be used interchangeably for others. Questions should initially be close-ended, needing only a yes or no response, followed by open-ended questions or requests for a narrative response. A change in subject should be indicated to the reader. Questions should remain as neutral and unbiased as possible. Sensitive and controversial questions should be placed near the end, after the participants have become comfortable with the process. A self-administered questionnaire should be self-explanatory; reading instructions should not be necessary because they often will not be interpreted consistently. Before disseminating the survey, test the questions on a few members of the target group to assure understanding and clarity.

The Focus Group

Focus groups and community interviews can be just as effective as surveys, and, depending on the situation, can be more appropriate. These methods of gathering data are good for agencies that are limited by issues such as staff time and budget constraints or are targeting low-literacy populations. One of the advantages of these methods is that participants give more responsive feedback. Although focus group findings are generally not "scientifically valid" they tend to provide more "depth" or "texture" between investigations.

A focus group is a carefully planned discussion among a small group of perhaps 8-12 people led by a trained moderator. Its purpose is to generate reactions and opinions about concepts, approaches, and materials. Participants may be selected according to their common characteristics or a relation to the topic involved. The group should be relatively homogeneous. For example, in a needs assessment targeting youth, include high school students or others in that age group, but exclude teachers and youth service providers from the focus group. An additional focus group may be held to measure the opinions of these other groups.

Before the focus group, conduct interviews with potential participants. Remember to document the gender, age, national origin, and other pertinent information including what language the person feels most comfortable using. Determine if the individual meets the criteria for participants of a particular focus group and if that individual will likely contribute to the group. If the person is to be included in the focus group, invite her/him at the end of the interview.

Once the participants have been selected for the focus group, the implementation process begins. A focus group should be conducted in a convenient and neutral place. The participants should have adequate transportation to and from the site and child care, if necessary. The room and set up should be as comfortable as possible for the participants. The time must be coordinated so that all members can be present.

Keep In Mind...

Following are a few tips that can facilitate the process of conducting a needs assessment:

- **Careful planning is an essential component of the entire process.** Have a flexible schedule for design, implementation, and analysis of the data collection effort. Allow sufficient time for data collection and any unforeseen obstacles.
- **Many participants have already been "surveyed to death" and are hesitant to participate.** Respondents may view the needs assessment as an imposition and feel that the information can be obtained elsewhere. Make sure that other alternatives have been considered and you are convinced that the survey is necessary. In such situations, it is best to clearly explain the purpose of the needs assessment and how their contribution will influence the findings. Justify their participation in a manner that will encourage cooperation.
- **Gather data and background information from sources such as NCLR, the Census Bureau, and community and educational institutions.** Consult previous needs assessments, studies, and surveys conducted on similar subjects.

At the onset of the session, give a brief introduction about the project, and make sure not to reveal too much information which might jeopardize the study's validity. It is a good idea to invite extra individuals to compensate for "no shows." If the session is being observed or recorded, check to see that all participants are comfortable with this situation so as not to inhibit direct and honest responses. A stipend is sometimes offered as compensation to the individuals for their participation. At the end of the focus group, thank the participants for their input. The moderator should promptly write up or summarize the information acquired from the focus group.

Steps to Conducting a Successful Focus Group[2]

1. Define the purpose for conducting a focus group.
2. Choose a moderator experienced in facilitating group discussions who is independent of the project and will not bias the discussion with his/her own views.
3. Develop a set of questions that can be used to guide discussion and will assist in obtaining the necessary information.
4. Designate one or two staff members to be observers and take notes of the discussions. Consider taping the discussion; however, first secure permission from the participants.
5. Before conducting the focus group, select group participants with common characteristics who reflect the target population. If there are several target groups, multiple focus groups should be used so each group is as homogeneous as possible.
6. Be aware of limited language proficiency or literacy among focus group participants.
7. Each group discussion should last no more than one and a half to two hours.
8. The focus group environment should be comfortable, quiet, and allow for good-quality taping. Refreshments should be served.
9. Discussion should cover the pre-determined questions, but also allow for additional issues to be addressed, as long as they are relevant to the topic.
10. Discussion among the moderator, observer(s), and program staff should follow each focus group.
11. A comprehensive report should be prepared once all focus groups have been completed.

[2] NCLR, "Healthy Horizons: A Guide for Developing Health Education and Promotion Programs," 1993, p. 50.

The Community Interview

Community interviews are a less formal version of a focus group, similar in approach, but with relatively open participation. Whereas a focus group involves a small, carefully selected target group, a community interview process involves discussions with a combination of individuals, including community residents, community-based organization representatives, public officials, religious leaders, educators, and community leaders. Due to the greater diversity of participants, the group can be larger than a focus group — 15-30 people. All participants must be given a similar orientation about the project and their role in the outcome. The community interview should have at least two facilitators and the session should be recorded in writing and taped. It is important to remember that because a community interview is informal it should be viewed as providing insight rather than scientifically gathered information.

IV. Data Analysis

Once all data have been gathered, the information must be organized and analyzed. At this stage, all information must be reviewed to identify and fill any gaps in the data. The purpose of data tabulation and analysis is to try to understand attitudes, conditions, and concerns. Based on the information gathered, the analysis will yield relationships, explanations, and correlations. This aspect of the needs assessment may prove to be time-consuming because all of the data must be sorted and arranged in a manner that can be interpreted such that they can inform conclusions and recommendations.

If you are careful in developing questions and the instrument, then analyzing the narrative information obtained can be done by compiling responses, categorizing them, and comparing them. Where close-ended or quantative data are obtained, determine frequencies of various responses to close-ended questions, tabulate and review the answers to specific ques-

METHOD	PROS	CONS
Survey	◆ Produces strong, quantitative data ◆ Reaches a large number of people	◆ Time consuming ◆ Costly
Focus Group	◆ Can record personal and emotional reactions of audience ◆ Low costs	◆ Interviewer bias ◆ Difficult to assemble representative participants ◆ Tabulating data can be difficult
Community Interview	◆ Broad range of opinions ◆ Informal	◆ Interviewer bias ◆ Information provided too general

tions such as age, income, level of education, literacy, and perceived health status. Then tabulate two questions together to draw correlations between data sets such as income and the utilization of services, and make inferences from the correlations and other analyses to draw conclusions for an entire population. Where there are small numbers of respondents — for example, a small focus group — hand tabulations are feasible, and non-numerical responses can be readily ordered.

V. Report Preparation and Dissemination

Once the data analysis is complete, it is time to organize the findings into a user-friendly and clearly written report. It is useful to divide the report into sections. The sections should include the following information:

1. Introduction: This section presents the context of the study and defines the purpose of the needs assessment. It should also contain a community profile describing the geographic area, population, and facilities and services offered. Be sure to provide a synopsis of the community along with its major strengths and weaknesses and present areas of consensus and agreement, in addition to issues and areas of disagreement.
2. Methodology: This section includes background on how the study was carried out including the purpose, major questions asked, an explanation of how the questions were formulated, and any limitations of the study.
3. Summary of Findings: This section includes detailed information on areas of special concern dealing with available resources, needs, and gaps. This section presents the analysis of the data,

Questions to Ask During Data Analysis

- ❖ Do these numbers make sense?
- ❖ If not, what seems wrong or surprising about them?
- ❖ Do data from other studies or communities seem consistent with these figures?
- ❖ If responses to a particular question seem strange, is it possible that some questions might have been misunderstood?
- ❖ Does the analysis seem to go beyond the information available, making inappropriate assumptions?
- ❖ Was the analysis done with the involvement of people from the various populations covered?
- ❖ Are the major questions of the needs assessment being answered?
- ❖ What are the implications of the data? Do they confirm the need for the type(s) of services the agency wants to offer?
- ❖ Does the data provide information which will structure the project?

using tables and charts which help convey the ideas realized.

4. **Conclusions**: This section identifies the implications and importance of the findings. It should be presented as a summary in narrative form.

5. **Recommendations**: This section is perhaps one of the most important because the recommendations will allow you to plan actions to solve the identified problems. When formulating the recommendations, it is necessary to seek input from the advisory board, community groups, and experts on the feasibility and accuracy of the findings.

6. **Executive Summary**: This section recapitulates what the entire report presents. It is written last, but placed in the beginning of the report. The executive summary should be suitable to give out alone without the report.

When the report has been completed, it should be presented to the advisory board for review and feedback. The report is then ready for dissemination. Local press should be contacted as well as other community leaders. The report can also be released to funders and those outside the community. Allow for follow-up to be sure that the needs assessment leads to some positive results for the community and eventually the implementation of a program or another alternative to address the needs.

VII. Conclusion

Organizations which are contemplating a leadership program, but are unsure of the needs of the community or a specific target group, should undertake a needs assessment as a method for defining the needs and structuring a program which will be relevant to its participants. A community needs assessment provides a basis for effective cooperative action by service providers, to better meet service needs, fill in service gaps, and avoid duplication of effort. It provides a sound basis for community advocacy around policies, programs, and funding decisions to more equitably serve the community; the information provided by the assessment helps to develop consensus on priorities for community advocacy, and makes it difficult for government agencies or other groups to deny the fact that community concerns are real and serious. It is also a valuable tool for convincing funders, public and private, of the need for additional resources.

Many human service agencies and advocacy groups find themselves speaking for their neighborhoods, interpreting their needs and concerns to funders and to the larger community. While such actions typically reflect many years of community involvement, they can be strengthened by use of the "hard data" which can be generated by a community needs assessment. A needs assessment can lead an organization to modify its missions or priorities, more effectively structure programs, and to help assure that limited resources are used appropriately. ❋

Join the NCLR Leadership Network

The *Leadership Bulletin* and other resources for leadership development programs serving Hispanics are sent free to members of the NCLR Leadership Network. Membership is free; members provide information on their leadership efforts and agree to share information with NCLR and other network members.

To join the network, or for more information about the Leadership Initiative, contact:

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NCLR Leadership Initiative Subgrantees

NCLR Awards Leadership Grants

The National Council of La Raza (NCLR) has recently awarded subgrants to four organizations to support innovative leadership programs. These programs are designed to increase the number of Hispanic community leaders who possess both the skills and the commitment to improve community resources and opportunities.

NCLR awarded the subgrants as part of its Hispanic Leadership Development Support Initiative, supported by a grant from the W.K. Kellogg Foundation. The latest recipients join seven other NCLR funded leadership programs in developing effective constituencies committed to community empowerment.

The subgrantees include:

Centro Campesino Farmworker Center, Inc.
(Florida City, Florida)

Contact: Marcela Rice ☎ (305) 247-2619

Centro Campesino's leadership program seeks to develop leadership and advocacy skills among local residents through participation in the Homeowner's Association and other community organizations. The participants will meet monthly to gain skills in community organizing and advocacy. Subsequently, they will establish a Board structure and committee system for their neighborhood Homeowner's Association.

El Centro de la Raza
(Seattle, Washington)

Contact: Roy Wilson ☎ (206) 329-9442

El Centro de la Raza adopts a family-oriented approach to its leadership program. The program targets 12 families to integrate individual skill development with more structured community and social involvement. The training curriculum is a step-by-step process through which participants acquire the skills and knowledge required to function as an organizer and build community-based organizations (CBOs). The program works with youth and their parents to assist with various educational and social service needs.

Raising Hispanic Academic Achievement (RHAA), Inc.
(Burtonsville, Maryland)

Contact: Samuel Sánchez ☎ (301) 890-7986

The RHAA Leadership Program is a three-phase project that provides training to high school leaders, college student leaders and to their parents. High school and college students are trained to manage a Saturday School for Hispanic Students program. The program seeks to build the math, science, technological, and managerial skills of the students and create role models for low-income Hispanic students.

San Antonio Hispanic Chamber of Commerce
(San Antonio, Texas)

Contact: Leo Gomez ☎ (210) 225-0462

The San Antonio Hispanic Chamber of Commerce Leadership Program develops the skills of Hispanic business owners, professionals, and students that make them effective participants and leaders of policy-making bodies, and at the same time, provides the community with Hispanic leaders who have a strong perspective of Hispanic issues within corporate and public policy issues. This program promotes participants' interaction with, and exposure to CBOs and other Hispanic-serving institutions. The curriculum includes visits to local CBOs so that participants may observe and get involved with Hispanic-serving CBOs.

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