

# Assessing Community Need

## Going outside the walls of your community

By Lisa Lehman

Aging-services providers are keenly aware of today's increased focus on social accountability. Not-for-profit organizations are under scrutiny not only by government entities, but also by local communities to justify the significant tax break conferred by their not-for-profit status. In addition to documenting community benefits, uncompensated care, volunteer service hours, etc., aging-services providers should take note of what is occurring outside their walls and what needs they might be able to fulfill beyond their existing complement of services but still within their missions.

Community needs assessment is an ideal way to demonstrate social accountability and target essential service needs in your area. According to AAHSA's most recent survey of its members, 92% are providing home and community-based services in one form or another. That level of service requires an awareness of the needs in your community.

Conducting a comprehensive community needs assessment confers many benefits:

1. It demonstrates your organization's community benefit and engagement.
2. It clarifies the strategic direction of the services you provide.
3. It develops and solidifies local-level partnerships and collaboration.
4. It ultimately benefits your most important stakeholders: the individuals you serve.

### ***Don't go it alone!***

Building a community coalition is key to a successful needs assessment. A collaborative approach yields numerous benefits not only for you as a provider but also for the greater community. When providers, service agencies, community leaders and other stakeholders convene on a regular basis to embrace a shared commitment to the well-being of the greater community, this fosters communication and sharing of ideas, and prevents unnecessary duplication of services.

You might say, "But I have competitors in my back yard!" No problem. The point is this: The health, housing and service needs of individuals in your back yard demand the attention of all providers, not just some. Rather than thinking that one competitor might "steal ideas" from the next, think about how you can partner to improve efficiencies. Perhaps you have a specific area of expertise – hospice, for example – while another provider is better equipped to provide transportation services. If there is a need, and competition gets in the way of collectively addressing that need, perhaps the vision has been lost. Many, many competitors have proven that they can sit at the same table and walk away with their individual entities intact and collective endeavors moving forward for the greater good.

### ***What are the nuts and bolts of a needs assessment?***

First, determine whether your objectives revolve solely around the needs of seniors in your market area or whether you are committed to the health and well-being of all individuals living in the greater community you serve. Keep in mind not only those you serve directly but also the employees who work for you every day and the family members who are an important referral base for your organization. Your group's vision and commitment should be the first discussion points.

A community needs assessment can be as simple or sophisticated as you want it to be. The design of any assessment will depend on how many partners are involved and on funding, resources and expertise. The main components of a comprehensive needs assessment follow. One, all or a combination of these can provide valuable information:

- Household surveys
- Focus groups
- Key informant interviews
- Secondary data
- Community forums

**Household surveys:** These might be mail surveys or telephone interviews asking respondents what they see as areas of need in the community. What services are lacking? Do they trust the providers in the area? The results of studies of this nature can contribute to your organization's long-range strategic planning. Community benefit is enhanced when you offer a service that fills a gap or addresses an unmet need.

**Focus groups:** These are a great follow-up to survey research. Focus groups help in understanding the whys and probing deeper into needs identified by household surveys. Such qualitative feedback is rich with information.

**Key information interviews:** Do other providers, referral sources and local government agencies have valuable perspectives to share? Absolutely! One option is to have a focus group just with representatives of this group, or you can develop a separate survey for in-depth interviews with them. Online surveys, written surveys and telephone interviews are all options to consider.

**Secondary data:** Do you know the proportion of seniors living alone in the greater community you serve? How about the percentage of seniors living below the poverty level? Do you know the primary causes of disability and death of seniors in your area? These statistics are readily available. Local and state agencies track many of these statistics and make them publicly available. While sometimes dated, these findings reveal interesting, useful data that should be considered when assessing community needs. As with household surveys, the benefit of much of this data is the availability of state and national benchmarks for comparison purposes. This assists in determining whether an issue is indeed an area of significant need or not.

**Community forums:** These town-hall type meetings can be viewed as large focus groups. The purpose of a community forum is to convene a large group of concerned citizens, area agencies, etc., to share ideas about health, housing and service needs.

Reading this list may make community needs assessment seem daunting, but that's why partnerships are so valuable. Try to approach assessment in stages and prioritize next steps. It is not at all unusual for a needs assessment to span six to 18 months. If resources allow, strong facilitators and research pro-

fessionals can carry the burden of executing much of this. Your group must weigh the pros and cons of outsourcing and determine which aspects might be handled internally.

### ***What do I do with all of this information?***

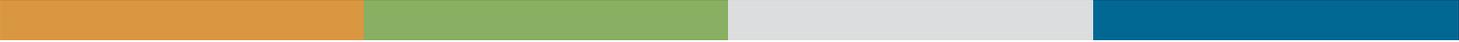
This is the most common question at the conclusion of the research phase of the needs assessment. No doubt, you need to make sense of all of this information and prioritize the issues it raises. You will not be able to address every need that exists. Keep in mind, too, that some research findings might be more applicable to one partner than another. For example, the group may not determine collectively that addressing transportation is a top priority. However, for the organization at the table that provides transportation, this information will help it assess its efforts and determine the best way to meet the community's transportation needs.

Logical steps in moving forward include:

1. Highlight the key findings from each assessment phase.
2. Evaluate themes and areas of overlap.
3. Narrow the list to a reasonable set of issues to address.
4. Once the list has been prioritized, develop a set of action plans to address the issues.
5. Integrate the issues into a community health improvement plan or strategic long-range plan for the greater community.
6. Assess how the findings fit your individual organization's mission and service offerings.
7. Measure progress and outcomes, and reassess as needed.

### ***This is an ongoing process.***

It is important to maintain momentum with your partners. In the midst of the assessment, tasks are many and meetings are frequent. Once a plan has been established and you're in the implementation phase, commitment sometimes wanes and focus is lost. The group should renew its commitment on a regular basis to keep the original purpose and vision fresh in everyone's mind.



You are doing good work. Remember to celebrate your successes and reflect on how far you've come. In the end, you will find that community needs assessment isn't merely a defense of your not-for-profit status. It's simply the right, socially responsible thing to do. The benefits for you, your organization and community will be plentiful.

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