Knowing your community's resources

Why identify local needs and resources? (Introduction)

- Most people know something about general issues of CED, such as the importance of it to sustain rural communities. Programs and agencies may have conducted informational campaigns about specific CED issues and their consequences if something is not done.
- We learn about these issues from commercials, public service announcements (PSAs), newspaper articles, and through other media.
- The information we get through these campaigns, while useful, is not always specific enough for use by a community group trying to solve a problem.
- When you start looking closely at community development issues in your community, you need detailed information about the needs of individuals and the organizations that serve them, as well as the resources that your community has available to solve those needs.
- The best way to get the information you need is by developing and identifying a plan for identifying local needs and resources.

Needs can be defined as:

- The gap between what a situation is and what it should be.
- A need can be felt by an individual, a group, or an entire community.
- It can be as concrete as the need for food and water or as abstract as improved community cohesiveness.
- For example, older adults in a community need help getting around town, but your community has no public transportation. Here the need is more obvious. More abstractly, these same adults may feel a need to be valued for their knowledge and experience.
- Examining needs helps us discover what is lacking, and points us in the direction of future improvement.

Resources, or assets, are:

- Those things that can be used to improve the quality of life.
- They can be anything from people to places to organizations.
- The block mother arranging a soccer game after school, the pastor having a community benefit dinner in the basement of the church, and the athletic club holding a lock-in for teens all represent individuals using the resources they have to improve the community.
- Everyone is an asset, and everyone has assets that can be used for community building.

There are many good reasons to identify needs and resources. These include:

- Understanding the environment in which you will be working. Trying to improve the community without first understanding it is like trying to sell pocket protectors to ballet dancers.
- Knowing how the community feels about an issue and what members think needs to be done about it. Getting the opinions of community members, while at the same time mapping the resources and limitations of the area, gives a holistic view of the issue.
- Making decisions about priorities for program or system improvement. Once you have assessed the community, it is much easier to make improvements that community members will notice and benefit from. A comprehensive identification of needs and resources means that ballet dancers are sold the slippers they need.

Who benefits from identifying local needs and resources?

Many people benefit when you identify local needs and targets. These include:

- *Those experiencing the problem.* Before you start implementing a program of change, it makes sense to assess the needs of the people who will be most affected! Communication with the people who are directly experiencing the problem will enable them to discuss what their needs are with those who have the resources to provide solutions; this will ultimately increase the effectiveness of services provided.
- *Service providers.* When the needs of the community are identified, service providers can be more efficient and effective in addressing community concerns.
- *Community leaders.* Once the needs and resources of the community have been established, they have the knowledge base to make better decisions, explain actions, write grants, or lobby for the organization.
- *You!* Everyone benefits from a community that understands its strengths and limitations. Once its strengths and limitations are widely known, the community can work as a whole to better its well being, utilizing its strengths to build a better future.

When should needs and assets be identified?

Identifying needs and assets can be helpful to your organization at almost any point in your initiative.

- If your group has a specific goal, such as reducing teen pregnancy, identifying local needs (better communication between parents and teens, education programs, etc.) and resources (youth outreach programs, peer counselors) around the goal can help you craft a workable, effective goal.

Identifying resources and needs should be done on an ongoing basis throughout your initiative:

- *Prior to planning the initiative.* This gives coalition members, community leaders, and those being served an idea of how to improve their surroundings.
- *During implementation of an initiative.* It is important to make sure that you are on target not only at the beginning and the end of a project, but also during its implementation. If car companies only did quality checks on the steel before the parts are constructed and the paint job after it rolled off the line, I wouldn't trust the engine. Would you? Identifying needs and assets during the life of the initiative helps get the maximum impact from the resources you have, and to get the most "bang from your buck."
- *On an ongoing basis.* When efforts are being reviewed. After the completion of any project, it is important to celebrate successes and also learn from setbacks to further the development of a community initiative.

There are many ways to identify local needs and resources:

- You can focus on the needs or strengths in your community.
- You can interview key people, hold community meetings or focus groups, or follow one of a number of other methods.
- The most important part of identifying local needs and resources is listening to the insights of group members, community members, leaders, and others while incorporating community data and history into the analysis.
- A document that identifies the local needs and resources of a community should ring with a richness that only a comprehensive, diverse, and large group can give

In following this method, you'll go out to people in your community and ask them what they feel are your community's greatest needs and assets. Sound simple? It is, but as with anything else, first, you need a plan.

Phase *1: Brainstorm!*

Before you poll the community, take some time to think broadly about what you're really after. Determining the focus of your area of interest is a key first step to putting together a useful, usable plan. Ask yourself:

- Which issues, questions, and behaviors are of particular interest to our organization, and why?
- What don't we know about these issues, questions, and behaviors? What questions do we need to have answered?
- What outside resources can we tap into to help us understand the issues?

For example:

- Your organization may be interested in the issue of teen violence in the community. But this is actually a fairly broad topic.
- Do you want to look at the whole, overarching issue, or would you prefer to look at gang violence? Or violence among teenage girls?
- Once you've chosen a specific area to explore, you can narrow it even further -- do you want to identify and tackle the root causes of gang violence? Or produce an educational campaign for youth about the dangers of becoming involved with a gang? Or even offer self-defense classes for groups likely to be targets of gang violence?

Phase 2: Start with what you know.

After choosing an issue to focus on, you may find that you are aware of many possible solutions. For example, if you're working on revitalizing rural community groups. Identifying what you know about an issue also helps highlight what you don't know and what you don't know will form the basis of the questions you will ask when you survey the community members.

Ask yourself:

- What do we already know about the needs and available resources around this topic in our community?
- Have other studies of this topic been done in our community? Can we rely on this other work to give us insight and answers?
- Are there a few selected experts in the community who can answer some of our questions before we finalize our questions? (Their input may narrow the remaining questions you need to ask other community members.)

A final thought on "starting with what you know" -- keep in mind that you (or your sources!) may be wrong. People -- even experts -- you talk to may have strong but irrational opinions about the problems in your community; studies you find may be outdated; and even "conventional wisdom" can be just plain wrong. So, as you begin to finalize the questions you're going to ask the community members, be willing to think critically about what you think you know.

Phase 3: Decide what you still need to know, and finalize the questions you will ask.

This is the time to review the questions you created in brainstorming sessions and in initial inquiries with colleagues. But before going out into the community with the newly formulated questions, run them by your

group one more time to make sure that they will clearly convey your interests. Also, talk to a couple of influential people outside your organization, and refine your questions with the help of their edits. Once this process is complete, your group should have a set of questions to ask designated community members.

Phase 4: Identify your target population.

Who in the community has the information that will help you answer the questions you have formulated? Probably, a wide range of people can help answer the questions; you will want to identify those who will provide the most useful information. For example, if you want to learn why youth in your community join gangs, you'll probably want to plan to target some gang members. However, teachers, parents, police officers, and even teens who don't join gangs may also be excellent resources.

Once you've identified your target audiences, you may wish to revisit the questions you plan to ask and make sure they're appropriate for each group. For example, gang members, parents, and police officers will all have slightly different perspectives on the problem of gang violence, and will likely identify different needs and resources in your community.

Phase 5: Decide what methods you will use to collect information.

The next step is to determine which method you will use to collect information. For example, individual interviews followed by a survey are an excellent combination if your organization has a large enough budget. Calling influential community members is useful if the issue is acute or if you are already knowledgeable in the area.

Regardless of the method you choose, it is important to take into account:

- The amount of time available
- The number of people assisting you
- Available resources
- The size and characteristics of the target population(s)
- Your relationship with the target population(s)

Data collection tools - some commonly used methods include:

Listening Sessions. Listening sessions are public forums you can use to learn about the community's perspectives on local issues and options. They are generally fairly small, with specific questions asked of participants. They can help you get a sense of what community members know and feel about the issue, as well as resources, barriers, and possible solutions.

Public Forums. If listening sessions are a can of Coca-Cola (or Pepsi if you prefer), public forums are soda pop. They tend to be both larger in number of participants and broader in scope than listening sessions. They are gatherings where citizens discuss important issues at a well-publicized location and time. They give people of diverse backgrounds a chance to express their views, and are also a first step toward understanding the community's needs and resources. A good public forum informs the group of where the community is and where the members would like to go.

Needs assessment. A needs assessment is a way of asking members of the community what their most important collective needs are. This type of assessment stems from dissatisfaction with the status quo, or current situation, and is focused on the outcomes rather than the process of improving the dissatisfaction. If the status quo is a looming question mark in the community, a needs assessment can also be used to do a preliminary analysis of the area.

Asset Mapping. Asset mapping focuses on the strengths of the community rather than the areas that need improvement. Focusing on assets gives the power back to the community members that directly experience the problem and already have the resources to change the status quo. If the changes are made by the community and for the community, it builds a sense of cohesiveness and commitment that makes initiatives easier to sustain.

Phase 6: What is missing? What are the limitations of the assessment or study?

Once you've identified your questions, your audience, and your data collection methods, you're almost ready to implement your plan. But first, it's a good idea to review your plan and identify and fix, to the extent possible its limitations. Taking a look at the weaknesses in the method you are using can strengthen the study or prompt supplemental ideas. Evaluate the effort that you have put together, and build from what you find.

Phase 7: Determine whether you have the resources to conduct the study.

Make sure you have the resources to conduct the study. This is something you should have held in the back of your mind throughout the planning phase; now that you're ready to implement your plan, it's time to focus on the cost. It should go without saying that before you begin a full-scale effort, you should be sure your organization can afford it!

But keep in mind that even if you are not able to conduct an assessment right now, you can lay out your ground work with a strong plan. With a plan in place, you have a better chance of obtaining future funding, since you have established contacts out in the field and have brought to the

forefront issues that are important for the community. Developing a plan for identifying needs and assets in the community is also a great way to expand your knowledge of the community and see what others around you have to say, piquing interest for future efforts.

To sum it up

Needs and resources are really two sides of the same coin. Without each other, they don't buy much! In order to get a comprehensive view of your community, it is important to look at what you have and what you need. With these things in mind, you can have a positive impact on the problem you wish to address. Understanding your community in this manner will also help your organization clarify where it would like to go and how it will get there.

Resources

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