

STEP 1: DEVELOP A COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIP

Before conducting a community assessment, it is important to identify the key individual and organizational stakeholders, and what skills and community resources they bring to the assessment.

⇒ Step 1 has four activities, which are reflected in the *Step 1 Planning Worksheet: Community Partnership Organizational Chart* (following page 4-9):

- 1.1 Identify Stakeholders
- 1.2 Form a Community Partnership
- 1.3 Assess the Individual and Organizational Capacity of the Partnership
- 1.4 Identify Benefits and Risks

1.1 Identify Stakeholders

The first step in a community assessment process is to identify a core group of individuals and organizations with a vested interest in the assessment and what will be done with the results. We'll call these persons **stakeholders**.

Identifying stakeholders in your community may seem easy, especially if this community assessment has been set in motion by previous collaboration or grant-writing efforts. However, you might be surprised at just how many community-based organizations, health agencies, and neighborhood and civic associations exist in your community that will want to participate in the process. Take some time to think about which of them might be interested in advising or participating in a community public health assessment, and then ask each potential stakeholder you identify to recommend others they think might be interested.

If you are conducting this assessment through an already established group, start there. Each member of that group will be a stakeholder, and should be able to help you identify additional community assessment stakeholders. This activity is an important one even if you feel your group already contains key community stakeholders, because you may find through this process that one important person or agency was left out of the original planning.

Here are some good questions to ask yourself when attempting to identify assessment stakeholders:

1. What is a community? What defines your community?

2. What major social institutions exist in your community (education, health, recreation, business, media, civic, government, others)? Which impact health? Which have an interest in health?
 3. What clubs, associations, organizations, voluntary groups, support groups and faith-based institutions exist in your community? Which are related to health?
 4. Who are respected leaders in your community? Who do community members go to for guidance? Who do they use for support?
 5. Who influences decisions in your community? These could include elected or appointed officials, boards or councils, administrators, or other key decision-makers.
 6. Thinking about the community assessment, which of the individuals or organizations would have the most expertise to help conduct a community assessment?
 7. Which of them must be involved in order to conduct a community assessment?
 8. Which ones would most use the results of the community assessment?
 9. Which of these has a positive image and respected reputation in the community?
- ⇒ Look at the individuals and organizations mentioned in questions 6 through 9 above. They are your stakeholders. You will need to be sure that persons who are representing organizations have the power to act on behalf of that organization.

Keep in mind that ideally your stakeholders should be composed of an equal number and mix of professionals, social service staff members, community residents, respected leaders, and other key decision-makers. This gives the assessment an array of expertise, experience, perspectives and values. A few may be from outside the community, such as academics or research professionals, but choose outsiders carefully.

1.2 Form a Community Partnership

A **community partnership** is a collaboration that represents the most intense way for individuals to work together, while still retaining the separate identity of the participating entities. Once you have identified your stakeholders, you need to discuss with them the possibility of collaborating in the community public health assessment and becoming a **community partner**. You should consider ahead of time what levels of collaboration you are prepared to offer and accept from these stakeholders. Some may want to only be updated with progress, some may wish to provide occasional consultation or feedback, and others may wish to be included in all aspects of the work involved.

When inviting stakeholders to participate in your community partnership, you should consider the benefits of engaging stakeholders:

- They can pool their resources and skills.
- A diverse group can expand the reach and acceptability of the assessment.
- Their input assures that the assessment meets community needs.
- They can ensure that results and reports are distributed widely.

If you are conducting a community assessment with an already established group, then you need to start with this step. Your group should decide which stakeholders identified in the above activity should be asked to join the group in this assessment effort, and then determine how they will be involved.

Inviting stakeholders to become involved in a community partnership can be a potentially tricky and political process, depending on how the individuals and organizations have worked together in the past. Therefore, it is important to keep in mind the history and context of your community experience when inviting stakeholders into your partnership. It may be easier for you in the long run to invite *all* interested stakeholders from the outset, and maintain an open invitation for participation in the process.

Inviting all stakeholders may help you in several ways:

- Controversial relationships and issues can be addressed openly and early.
- Opposing views are understood and addressed more easily.
- The perspectives and values of everyone are considered.
- Stakeholders make contributions to and have ownership of the plan.
- You probably need all the major players in your community to conduct a needs assessment.

Once formed, the community partnership is responsible for articulating assessment goals and objectives, planning and coordinating activities, on-going evaluation of the assessment process, and using the results. It is essential that all partnership members have an active role in the group—including opportunities for gaining new skills, and an equal voice in any group consensus-building or problem-solving processes.

The community partnership is also responsible for determining the most appropriate and relevant community assessment methods. The methods used largely depend on what is appropriate for the community, and can be realistically achieved given the resources, skills and the capacity of the stakeholders. Finally, the community

partnership also works on planning and implementing next steps after the assessment—such as raising community awareness of the public health issues discovered in the assessment, mobilizing the larger community around one of these issues, getting involved in local policy decision-making processes, or seeking funding.

As you bring together this community partnership to work together throughout the community assessment process, it is important to keep in mind characteristics of a successful collaboration:

- Shared goals and interests
- Inclusive governance
- Shared responsibility and input
- Shared ownership and commitment
- Trust
- Balance of power and influence
- On-going management and support
- Clear roles and responsibilities
- Ground rules for maintaining a safe atmosphere
- Active participation

Another major component of successful collaboration is **leadership and facilitation**. Throughout this curriculum, we make suggestions for steps to take with the partnership and questions that can be asked in order to stimulate discussion at each of these steps. However, before embarking on this process you may want to take some time to think about who in your partnership would make the best leader and discussion facilitator—whether it should be you, some other partner, or some more neutral stakeholder. It is important for the success of the partnership efforts that the person who takes on this role is comfortable with his/her leadership, communications and facilitation skills. It is also important that this person is the most appropriate person for the job, given group dynamics and history. The potential partnership leader and facilitator can assess his/her own leadership values, beliefs, knowledge and skills with this on-line self-assessment tool —

<http://www.connectccp.org/resources/22assessment.pdf>

It is also important to note here that most groups experience some level of conflict and disagreement. A good leader and facilitator employs strategies to **resolve conflict and build consensus**. Although this is a complicated issue that is outside of the scope of this curriculum, there are many good references on this subject that are included in *Appendix E: Resources*.

1.3 Assess the Individual and Organizational Capacity of the Partnership

Although interest and commitment from your partners may be high, it is actually the amount of resources, time and capacity of each member or organization that can be dedicated to this effort that should determine the magnitude and scope of work. So before defining your goals and objectives, you need to look critically at individual and organizational capacity.

It is essential that you go through this organizational capacity activity whether you are working with a long-standing or recently created partnership. Even within groups that have worked together for a long period of time, organizational capacity is seldom assessed or communicated to members. Often assumptions are made in this area about participating individuals or organizations that may be incorrect, so articulating group capacity is critical to the planning process.

In order to appraise individual and organizational capacity, you need to answer the following about each partner:

1. ***Mission*** - What is their organizational mission? This is a specific statement that captures an organization's purpose, clientele orientation, and philosophy.
2. ***Clientele*** - What community or population(s) do they serve?
3. ***Funding*** – Does their current funding situation allow for them to be involved and at what level? Can they dedicate any funding or other resources to this effort? Are there any conflicts of interest?
4. ***Staffing*** – Do they have staff who can dedicate some of their time to the assessment? If so, what skills do they possess that could be useful to the assessment?
5. ***Organizational support*** - What role can their current work play in the assessment process? What kind of organizational support can they dedicate to the assessment? Can they dedicate office space?
6. ***Research*** - Do they have any data research capacities (data collection, data management, data analysis, report writing, other)?
7. ***Technology*** – Do they have computer or other technology that could be useful to the assessment? Can they dedicate any of this technology or the use of it?
8. ***Media*** – Can they offer access to the media for assessment efforts? These could mean contacts within radio, television or newspaper media outlets, or any other ability to get press coverage.
9. ***Allies*** – Do they have a community advisory board or highly involved clientele? Can these allies lend any support or strength to the partnership or assessment process?

10. **Interests** – What is their particular interest in the community assessment? What would they like to see happen as a result of participating in this process?
11. **Involvement** – How would they like to be involved in this effort? What level and type of involvement can they commit?

Once you have all this information about the partners, compile it into the *Step 1 Planning Worksheet: Community Partnership Organizational Chart*, and share it with the rest of the group. This appraisal step is important for several reasons:

- It allows the group to see the amount of available resources, skills, and knowledge that each member brings to the community assessment effort. Based on this, the group can determine which person or organization can take responsibility to carry out each planned activity of the assessment – “by whom.” It can also help determine what might be a reasonable amount of time to expect each activity to be completed – “by when.”
 - It helps to identify any gaps or limitations in the group and strategize ways to overcome or resolve these. For instance, this process might identify other contributing members or organizations that add to the group’s collective resources and skills.
 - The time, available resources, and level of knowledge of the group also determines the type of assessment methods that will be used. Each assessment method differs in the amount of time needed to collect data, the number of people who should be involved, the necessary funding, and the required technical knowledge. The most commonly used methods, how they differ, and their advantages and disadvantages are discussed later in this section.
 - It allows the partnership to see the potential reach of the assessment results.
- ⇒ The community partnership capacity outlined here represents the *assets* with which you need to work in order to best accomplish the community assessment.

1.4 Identify Benefits and Risks

Every undertaking has risks and benefits associated with it. If these are identified and discussed up front, the benefits of the community assessment are maximized and the risks are minimized. The first time you bring the group together, take a few minutes to identify the potential risks and benefits of a public health community assessment to the following entities:

- Community partners
- Community residents
- Community leaders and advocates
- Public health professionals and agencies
- Health service providers

- Elected and appointed officials

The process of identifying and discussing risks and benefits helps the community partners to air any concerns they might have about this assessment, about working together as a group, or about how the end results will be used.

Examples of Benefits:

- There will be a greater understanding of public health strengths and needs in the community.
- Community leaders and advocates will have the data they need to more effectively advocate for health programs, services, policies and resources in the community.
- Public health agencies will have the information they need to more strategically and effectively design and implement public health programs and services for community members.

Examples of Risks:

- Health service providers may not share valuable data and information about the health of the community if they are not included as members of the partnership or otherwise participate in the planning and execution of the community assessment.
- Elected and appointed officials may not be supportive of community assessment efforts and findings if they feel it will shed a bad light on them.
- Community members may become hostile toward the partnership organizations if they feel assessment results were not used to benefit them.