Needs and Asset Assessments

By Karin Tice, Ph.D. (In Michigan Nonprofit Association Links Jan/Feb 2009 Vol. 10, No 1.)

What are they? Needs assessments identify the needs for, and gaps in, services for a group of individuals that an organization serves, or is considering serving. They answer the questions like: What are the highest priority needs? Who needs these high priority services and/or programming? How great are the needs? Asset assessments can be separate from or combined with a focus on needs. A focus on assets would document existing resources. Conducting both together allows for gaps to be identified. These studies can be initiated by organizations or by communities.

Why do an assessment? During this time of economic downturn it is important to understand the extent of needs within our communities as well as the resources that are available to address those needs. Needs and assets assessments can provide valuable information to inform strategic decisions about how to best use resources. They can be used to inform strategic planning and fund development efforts. Asking people for their input through an assessment process can create buy in, understanding about the reasons decisions are made and even participation in those decisions especially if constituents are engaged in data interpretation. Organizations, networks focused on particular issue areas, communities and even entire regions can benefit.

What are some examples? Organizational needs and asset assessments can be conducted ***before a new program is created.*** For example, a nonprofit interested in developing a new program to address the issue of school truancy is conducting a needs assessment to determine the extent of need for, and interest in, participating in such a program.

Organizations may also find that assessments are a valuable tool for reflecting on existing programs. An example would be an agency that provides multiple social service-focused programs and is interested in understanding how the needs for their ***existing programs*** have been affected as a result of social and economic changes impacting the constituencies they serve. They would like to know: How have the types of services needed and the numbers of individuals needing those services changed? This information will be used in proposals to funders, to develop new strategic alliances, and to make internal decisions about how to prioritize and to use their existing resources (e.g., staff, monies, funding, space and volunteers).

Communities also conduct assessments. In one county, nonprofits and funders partnered to conduct a combined needs and asset assessment. The information collected was used by non-profits in their proposals to funders to document the type and extent of community need for their services. Economic development organizations (including the Chamber of Commerce) used this information to encourage businesses to re-locate to the area by being transparent about community strengths as well as challenges. Local funders used the information to develop funding priorities and strategies for creating community-level impact. United Ways, community foundations, and human service collaborative entities can join with other nonprofits to develop and fund this type of study.

Asset assessments shift from a focus only on needs to encompass the capacities and resources that are already in place and that can be built upon. These assessments can help link people in a community to available resources. They can also be used for planning purposes. Two examples of asset assessments are: Youth asset mapping - In one community young people received stipends during the summer months to identify resources of interest to young people and to map where they were located. Resources included places providing recreational and learning opportunities (e.g., parks, recreational centers), volunteer/leadership opportunities, and organizations offering crisis hotlines, substance abuse-related services and other types of supports. Youth yellow pages that include contact information for organizations that youth might want or need to access are often a product of such a study. Generally these yellow pages are produced in a small format that is easy to carry in a pocket or backpack.

Mapping after school programs is another example. One city created a web-based map of all afterschool programs. Parents used this map to identify opportunities for their children and to learn more about these programs. The city used the information to better understand existing resources, geographic gaps in access to afterschool programs and for planning purposes.

How are they done? There are multiple ways to collect data about needs an assets. Assessments can use a range of methods including: surveys (online, paper or telephone), focus groups, individual interviews with key community leaders, ethnographic case studies, GIS mapping, analysis of existing documents and data, and community forums. For example you can ask community residents or people who comprise the population you serve, what they see as the high priority needs. This type of needs assessment will give you individuals' perceptions of what are high priority community needs. It is important to remember that perceptions and experiences of reality are valid ***and*** that they may vary dramatically depending upon their age, gender and race or ethnicity, sexual orientation, physical and mental abilities/disabilities and socio economic status. Understanding the assets and needs of particular sub-population groups is critical. Communities will want to use the methods that will best reach the people they would like input from. Often multiple methods are used.

A second way is to draw from existing data that has already been collected by different organizations and/or groups in the community. For example, a homeless coalition, or area council on aging, are but two examples of groups that might already have collected data about the needs of specific groups within the community. Some of the challenges with using existing data is that it will most likely have been collected for different timeframes and using different methodologies. It can also be time consuming to track down this type of data. Finally, organizations and communities can collect new data documenting actual needs or assets.

Interested in pursuing this further? For more information contact FERA (734) 994-9060 www.feraonline.com or the Michigan Association for Evaluation, www.maeeval.org or your local evaluator.

Karin Tice, Ph.D. is President of Formative Evaluation Research Associates (FERA). FERA conducts program evaluation, facilitates the strategic planning process, and provides workshops on evaluation and planning, and has been an MNA member since March 1998. For more information visit www.feraonline.com.