

Needs Assessment Techniques

Using Community Meetings

When putting together a needs assessment, remember that what looks like the problem may not be the real problem. Remember too, that different questions and situations may require different techniques, or combinations of techniques. There's an old saying that when someone has a hammer, everything begins to look like a nail. So to be sure we really are using the best technique for each problem and situation we have to spend some time thinking about our reasons for the needs assessment, the questions we are asking, and the current political climate in our community.

Needs assessments can be conducted for a variety of reasons--to find genuine needs because nobody "has a clue," to show skeptics in "objective numbers" that what you had guessed all along is, in fact, a need, to fulfill the requirements of a federal grant, to prioritize several needs, to build community involvement in whatever program comes out of the needs assessment, and all of the above.

Various needs assessment techniques can be combined to obtain information from a target audience or from the community as a whole. Surveys are usually the first technique thought of for a needs assessment, with good reason--they are usually very helpful. But other techniques can also provide valuable information. Focus groups can be used as an alternative or supplement to a survey. Nominal groups can generate and evaluate ideas, and can be useful for identifying the problems of a target population. Key informants can provide specialized information.

While these are all good methods, sometimes the situation may require a sensitivity to the political process. At its most basic level, this means that people are more likely to support and participate in programs when they have been involved in the decision-making process. Involving the community in needs assessment, needs prioritization, and program planning makes good sense!

While all the methods mentioned above can be used to facilitate community input, community forums and/or public hearings may be the best choice when political issues are important. They are an excellent way to involve the community in the needs assessment process, and to make sure people understand and believe the results of the needs assessment. Community forums can be particularly useful when a community has become polarized into opposing groups. The process of "refereed" dialogue, with all having a chance to explain their position, can be an important first step in understanding between the groups.



A cautionary note -- because public hearings and community forums make people believe something is going to happen, you need to be sure something really does happen!



The advantages and disadvantages of public hearings and community forums should be studied carefully.

ADVANTAGES	DISADVANTAGES
Provides an opportunity for people of diverse backgrounds to share ideas and experiences,	Requires good leadership and advance organization. Can degenerate into a political "free-for-all."
Can provide a quick, intensive picture of community concerns,	Opinions obtained are limited to those who attend--all viewpoints may not be heard. Probably discourages participation by those who see themselves as less powerful in the community.
Can effectively involve local citizens in planning, publicizing, moderating, evaluating, etc.	Poor advance planning and advertising may result in limited participation.
Gives community issues broad visibility	If not well-facilitated, only the vocal minorities will be heard.
Local citizens feel as though they have been heard.	A large turnout may prevent everyone from speaking and may limit time allowed for each speaker.
Inexpensive	May generate more questions than answers.
Useful to identify problems, assess needs, or to suggest questions requiring further study.	May raise citizens' expectations and frustrations if objectives are unclear, or if expectations are not met.
Design is flexible--a variety of techniques can be incorporated,	The public setting may restrict information people will reveal.

Public Hearings

Public hearings are an investigative and evaluative tool--much like a congressional hearing. Members of a committee hear testimony from selected witnesses, raise questions, cross-examine witnesses, and issue a summary report.

Public hearings are a good idea when there are many different perspectives and you need everyone to come together to make the program work. Hearings are also useful if the political atmosphere is such that a group of the community is likely to disbelieve or dismiss the results of the need assessment. "Blue-ribbon" committees can increase the public credibility of a need analysis and calm concern over its implications.

A public hearing can be organized and run by following these steps:

1. The Extension Advisory Council outlines what is likely to be addressed in the needs assessment for the public forum committee, selects committee members, appoints a chair, and identifies counsel and other professional support staff. The inclusion of representatives from affected groups, as well as experts from outside the management structure, will increase credibility.
2. Committee members and support staff prepare background work, brief other committee members, and identify witnesses. They also formulate questions.
3. Plan the hearing. Notify witnesses and inform them how the meeting will be run.
4. Conduct the hearing, including examination of witnesses. Credibility is in large part dependent on the seriousness of the hearing and the attention, reflected in questions, paid to the witnesses.
5. Chairperson and counsel draft a report that is reviewed by other committee members. The final report is submitted to the Advisory Council.

Community Forums

A community forum is less expensive and more public than a public hearing. It's like an open town meeting--a gathering of a designated part of the community. Forums are used more to build support than to counter skepticism.

The usefulness of a community forum depends on how representative participants are of the community, target audience, or stakeholders. Success depends also on the freedom participants feel to express themselves openly. Having an influential individual or respected organization sponsor the meeting can help to attract a wider range of participants. It is also possible to conduct meetings with segments of the population. For example, obtaining input from a variety of parents might be easier if the forum is sponsored, promoted through, and held in schools in different socio-economic areas of the city.

The more clear you are about the purpose of the forum the more focused and specific participants will be. Be sure to use an experienced leader to run the meeting. A community forum can be organized and run by following these steps:

1. Arrange for a politically neutral auditorium. Advertise widely. Publicize the rules for the meeting.
2. Clarify the purpose. Copy the questions/issues being addressed so they can be handed out at the meeting to help participants focus on the issues.

3. At the meeting, welcome everyone, explain the purpose of the meeting, and go over the rules so they are clear to everyone. (Rules should cover the length and content of public statements.) Enforce the rules. Pass around a sign-up sheet so you can mail thank-you cards later.

4. Have several people serving as recorders to free the leader to focus entirely on the audience discussion. Remember to keep the emphasis on how the community can help itself. Extension's role is NOT simply to provide services for others, but to provide education that will strengthen their ability and resolve to help themselves.

5. Mail thank-you notes to everyone who attended along with a summary of the results.

An Illinois Example¹

John Fulton, Logan County Unit Leader, was involved in a very successful community forum. His experience may be somewhat different from how others would plan their needs assessment. However, it serves as an excellent example of how to combine techniques and put together a needs assessment with high visibility and hi-impact.

CES worked with other agencies in a truly collaborative effort to get community input regarding community development in education, agriculture, and business. They persuaded donors/sponsors to cover the \$4,000 cost of the forum. The forum was heavily publicized. The day of the forum went like this:

- ! 160 participants came at 9:00 am.
- ! Kickoff speaker introduced the purpose of the forum, explained the groundrules (with a humorous spin), and reasons for community involvement
- ! People chose which group of 12-15 they wanted to participate in, and separated into those groups (groups dealt with various issues in education, agriculture, and business)
- ! Groups were run as nominal groups (See handout "Nominal Group Technique"). Each group had two facilitators who had been hand-picked and specially trained.
- ! People chose a second small group in which to participate.
- ! Free lunch
- ! Person who had been observing all morning spoke (again, with a humorous spin) to summarize what had happened.
- ! Secretaries who had been busy all morning finished copies of proceedings, which were given to participants as they left.

Long- and short-term goals were developed through these activities, which were incorporated in the county's overall Economic Development Committee's plan. The involvement of so many people, from all parts of the community, ensured a high level of commitment to those goals.

¹Information taken from: McKilip, Jack (1987). Need analysis: Tools for the human services and education. Newbury Park, CA: Sage. Butler & Howell (1980). Coping with growth: Community needs assessment techniques. Corvallis, OR: Western Rural Developing Center.