A NEW PERSPECTIVE ON THE NEEDS ASSESSMENT

The Program Cycle with Continuous Improvement

Communities are dynamic and their needs change over time. Therefore, the Needs Assessment process should not end with a grant proposal or receiving funding; rather, it should be ongoing throughout the program life cycle and be regularly updated.

When developing a new program, the Needs Assessment establishes the rationale and sets the foundation for the program by showing where there are gaps between what exists and what should be. Once a program is up and running, the Needs Assessment can continue to identify current needs of a community and also be used to inform continuous program improvement. Population and community needs likely change after interventions have been implemented, so examining the overall status of the entire target population after implementation is important for future programming.

Using the Needs Assessment for Continuous Improvement

With continuous improvement in mind, programs should focus on two main questions when developing their Needs Assessment: 'Is our program meeting the needs of the target population?' and 'How can we improve our program?' Below are guiding questions a Needs Assessment could address.

Is our program meeting the needs of the community?

- What is the current state of the problem we are working to address?
- Are there new trends?
- Is the program still relevant?
- Are we serving the right people, in the right places, and with the right intervention(s)?
- What are the community assets and barriers that exist now?
- What other nutrition and physical activity promotion programs are there in the community?
- Do participants value the program?
- Have policy, systems, and environmental change efforts changed the capacity of the community to support healthy eating?
- For programs that have been in place for a while: What has been the effect of saturation of programming in the targeted environments.

How can we improve our program?

- Is the program achieving its objectives?
- Have the outcomes become stagnant?
- Are we reaching our target audience?
- Is the program sustainable?
- Is the program affecting change in the long-run?
- Is collaboration possible with other organizations doing similar work?

Tip:
Look at your evaluation plan for Needs Assessment data, including participant and key stakeholder feedback.

Common Pitfalls to Avoid

- *The Square Peg*: Making the Needs Assessment fit your program instead of using the Needs Assessment to guide your program.
- *The Kitchen Sink*: Collecting too much information. Focus on information that relates to the need(s) you are addressing. [1]
- *Apples to Oranges*: Applying county or state level data to describe a local need. County or state data may be used as a comparison to local data, but use current, community-level data as much as possible.
- *The Low-Hanging Fruit:* Missing the opportunity to reach those who have yet to make changes or who are hard-to-reach by not examining and adjusting programming.
- *On the Same Page*: Assuming proposal reviewer(s) will automatically see there is a need or understand the conditions of your community and target audience. It is up to you to inform and convince them! [1]
- *Chasing the Tail*: Making one of the possible solutions to a problem as the problem itself. For example, 'We need more walking trails because we do not currently have accessible walking trails.' [1]

Learn more about Needs Assessments!

How to Conduct a Needs Assessment (USDA)

Assessing Community Needs and Resources (Community Tool Box)

Community Health Assessment & Health Improvement Planning (CDC)

[1] "Identifying and Writing about the Need for the Project." https://www.utc.edu/research-sponsored-programs/pdfs/r-t-needforproject.pdf