Handout 3: Assessing The Community’s Needs

What is a Community Needs Assessment?

Community groups are usually formed when members of the community consider there is a need that must be met. While members of the group may be clear about WHO is in need, they may be unclear about HOW to meet this need and, WHAT strategies would be most effective.

The community management model sees participation as critical if the empowerment of the community is to be achieved. It is essential to consult the community about what their needs are and what they consider the most effective ways to meet those needs. Needs assessment is critical in the planning process if workers are to avoid imposing services/programs on target groups who have not been properly consulted.

Why is a Good Needs Assessment so Important in Systems Advocacy?

A good needs assessment involves rigorous, participatory research. It seeks to:

- develop an information base on the issue/need/problem effecting the community
- validate community concerns therefore legitimizing the advocacy effort
- locate evidence of need to support a submission for government grants or changes in to other areas of governance and/or legislation
- provides evidence of need and the impact of this need on a population group. This helps to inform a response to government and other power brokers on their policies and activities.

What Does a Community Assessment Involve?

- **Issue/s Identification**
- Identification of Key **stakeholders** or WHO the issue effects
- An **understanding** of how the issue affects them
- Gathering ideas and **information** through consultation
- Gathering & Collation of **Expert Evidence** which can validate the experiences and perspectives of the community
- Identifying the **priorities** and action that is needed.

A Model for Assessing Community Needs

**Objective:** (Clear statement on WHAT you want to research).

**Rationale:** reason/s why this is an issue which needs to be addressed by systems advocacy.
Background: to the issue. This includes socio-demographic data, changes in the population, community needs and the social and economic impacts upon the population.

Strategies/Tasks: what are the research methods that will be used to collect the evidence of need? For example surveys, focus groups, public meetings, review of academic literature, expert support for need etc.

Responsibility: which workers and community members will be responsible for the needs assessment.

Time Frame: what are the deadlines for different components of the activities.

Resources: what types of physical and human resources are needed to complete the needs assessment?

Ethical Issues in Assessing Community Needs

Privacy and Confidentiality: Professional community service workers are required to comply with the rights of clients to privacy of information. In practice this means information about clients cannot be used without their prior knowledge and consent. An analysis of client data kept by the service is permissible as long as it does not reveal any identifying information about the client. Similarly, information gathered at consultations must not contain any identifying information.

When conducting community consultations, it is critical that intending participants are provided with information about the project to enable them to make an informed choices about participating. It is similarly not ethical to seek information about particular experiences other than in a general way, e.g. “do you think…” type questions rather than “have you experienced…”

Referencing: All documents and data used in the research must be identified and sourced correctly.

Supporting the Case for Change - Collecting Expert Evidence of Need

Another critical component of your community needs assessment project is about identifying and gathering reports from field experts, including academics and practitioners, who have researched and even published in areas of concern to your community. For example, if you are researching issues relating to family violence you will need to look at current literature on this subject in order to support the outcomes of the research, that is o provide evidence at a broader level of the importance of this issue.

In addition, it is important to identify the relevant government legislation and policy. This should be examined as part of the need’s analysis. The government’s legislative and policy framework is recognition of the importance of this issue in the context of the state’s service framework and a statement of the state’s policy intentions.
One way of increasing the level of understanding about a need within a community is to examine published socio-demographic statistics and present them as part of the evidence of community need.

For example, if you were conducting research on the groups affected by poverty within a particular community, you would need to examine ABS data with particular attention to:

- total number in the community
- the age groups
- gender
- income levels
- accommodation types
- education
- health status
- occupation
- family size.

As with literature, the sources of data must appear at the point of use and also appear in the appendices.

It is important to note that not all published data is reliable. Even data coming from reliable sources may not be current or valid in terms of your research concerns. The Australian Bureau of census collects data from every household every six years. It is usually about 12 months before early data from each census is released. Researchers when using ABS census data can be using statistics that are between 6 months and 6 years old. This means it may be necessary to find more recent data from other sources to ensure the accuracy of the statistics. Other sources of statistics include the Australian Bureau of Crime Statistics (across most areas of crime and provides comparative data to demonstrate increase or decrease in criminal activities), Department of Immigration & Multicultural Affairs (settlement data of those recently arrived) and Centrelink (utilization rates across various benefit types).

To make the most of other people’s research it is best to approach it with a critical mind. Some things you might wish to consider are:

- How useful is the research? Does it present any new information that enhances your understanding of a particular social situation?
- Does it present information to you in a new way? That is does it take information you are already aware of and analysis it in a way that changes your thinking in the area?
- What is the ideology of the research? What political agendas seem to be operating?
- Who conducted the research? Who was the research prepared for and why? Who are the political masters of the project?
- What types of research methods were used on the project? What are some advantages and disadvantages of these methods?
• How are the key concepts defined in the research? Are these appropriate definitions? How do these definitions influence the information that has been collected?
• Did the research develop from a comprehensive understanding of the social situation it is studying?
• How reliable and valid are the research methods?
• How accessible is the research? Is it open to public scrutiny?