



GUIDE: Undertaking Needs Assessments

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PURPOSE

Purpose of this guide

The purpose of this guide is to assist learners to understand the role of and the step-by-step process for undertaking needs assessments. The principles in this guide focus on undertaking needs assessment to ensure effective planning and implementation of health based initiatives.

Units of Competency

This resource supports learning and completion of assessments for the following units of competency:

- HLTPOP502C Work with the Community to Identify Health Needs
- HLTPOP503C Plan a Population Health Project

Acknowledgement

This guide has been adapted from *ATAPS Clinical Governance Implementation Resource Kit: Needs Assessment Framework*, Australian Medicare Local Alliance, 2013.

INTRODUCTION

What is a Needs Assessment?

A needs assessment is a process for determining needs and priorities for a particular population cohort. A needs assessment can also be a process for identifying gaps between current conditions and desired conditions.

Why are Needs Assessments Undertaken?

Needs assessments are an important part of any planning process. They help to gain a comprehensive picture of the health problems in a community to guide planning and delivery of health interventions for that community.

There are a number of elements involved a needs assessment process such as data collection, community consultation, data analysis, communication and consensus building.

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There are two main stages in a needs assessment:

1. Identifying the priority health issue
2. Analysis of the priority health issue

Both stages include a number of key steps that are outlined in a linear sequence. You will find that the amount of time you spend on each step will depend on the community you are working with, the purpose of your needs assessment and the work that may have been undertaken beforehand.

The diagram below provides a summary of the key steps involved in undertaking a needs assessment.



Step 1: Consultation

This step involves going out and talking to the people living and working in the community to gain some insight into the issues and concerns that are important to those who may receive a particular service or initiative. Speak to a range of people to get an understanding of the breadth and depth of a particular issue including the public, health agencies, community organisations, volunteer networks, local doctors, midwives, researchers, culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) organisations, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations, teachers and other health professionals.

When undertaking this consultation it is important to find out:

- What the main health problems or concerns are
- What health workers think
- What groups are experiencing these problems

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Step 2: Data Collection

There are many existing sources of information you can choose from depending on what you are researching, including published material or statistical and demographic information from a range of organisations.

Collecting data provides critical information on the make-up and composition of your target population, the population's health and use of health services. After reviewing existing data you will be in a position to make decisions about any additional data which you may need to collect yourself.

Step 3: Presentation of Findings

Anyone who has been involved in the planning and development of a program should be provided with regular updates on the progress of the program. This may include groups who contributed information and advice to your project or organisations, groups and individuals who may play a key role in the success of the intervention.

It is very important to involve the community in all phases of the program including planning, development and implementation to open up the process for wider scrutiny. The participation process will be significantly enhanced if the data is presented clearly and in a fashion likely to generate comments and analysis. You should attempt to make your presentation as attractive and stimulating as you can to promote interest and discussion of your findings. Consider putting your key points into an e-bulletin or other online communication mechanisms. Have on hand a full report for presentations at more formal meetings.

Step 4: Determining Priorities

Unfortunately there are never enough resources to develop programs to address all of the issues identified. Decisions will need to be made to determine which issues are prioritised. As part of this process you will need to determine who makes these decisions and how these decisions will be made. Prioritising issues can sometimes mean undertaking another round of consultation with the community and key stakeholders to ensure the issue that is prioritised meets the needs of the target group. If you anticipate a number of different issues might emerging from an initial consultation process, incorporating strategies to prioritise these issues during the initial process would be recommended.

Step 5: Literature Review

The next step is to undertake a full literature review by researching existing sources of information such as published papers, evaluation reports and case studies. Reviewing the existing literature will help you determine:

- Factors known to be contributing to the problem or issue.
- The types of interventions that have already been tried and tested, and their success rates.

This will help you to identify what has worked well and what hasn't worked so well to assist you to determine if your own intervention or program will be effective in addressing the identified issue.

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Step 6: Describe the Target Group

As part of your needs assessment it is important to describe the target group for your intervention in more detail. This should include demographic characteristics such as age, gender, ethnic composition, identified disadvantaged group (if appropriate), and also such factors such as place of residence and education level. It is important to be able to list these factors, as later in your process evaluation you will assess the characteristics of the group that was actually reached by your intervention and determine how well they represented the intended target group. Specifying this group in detail is also important so that health workers in other areas can compare your group with their own population before they decide to duplicate aspects of your intervention.

Step 7: Explore the Health Problem

The research you undertook in steps 1, 2 and 5 will help to inform this step. Before you set out to design an intervention or strategy for your own group, you will need to explore the factors that seem to be contributing to the problem such as limited knowledge of services available, potential stigma associated with the issue, access to services in the area and so on.

This information will significantly assist you to determine the focus and delivery style for your intervention or program.

Step 8: Analyse the Factors Contributing to the Health Problem

By this step you should be able to list all the contributing factors that might be leading to the health problem or issue such as:

- Lack of available services
- Limited knowledge about local services
- Barriers to accessing services
- Cost of services available
- Low self-esteem
- Stigma associated with the issue

What you now have to do is sort these factors into a logical order that will help tease out the causal pathways leading to the problem, that is, the series of factors and events that seem to contribute to the problem.

The task is to sort these contributing risk factors into the following three areas:

- Pre-disposing factors—knowledge, attitudes and beliefs.
- Enabling factors—enable a behaviour or situation to occur.
- Reinforcing factors—reward or punish the carrying out of a behaviour, or maintenance of a situation.

It is important to sort these contributing factors into above areas as later on in your program planning you will see that unless your intervention or program is focusing on factors in all three categories it is very unlikely that you will bring about and maintain any change in the identified problem or issue. By the end of this step, you should have a clear idea of the sorts of factors you are going to attempt to target in your program.

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Step 9: Reassess and Strengthen Community Resources

Many communities we work with have resources and infrastructure already available which can support the implementation of a program. When you are planning a new intervention or duplicating an existing program, you should first be aware of existing resources and programs available in the local community. Many new health interventions should be planned in partnership with the community and associated resources that are already available.

Keep in mind that too often the focus of needs assessments is on community deficits rather than community strengths. Instead of focusing simply on needs, you should also make a careful assessment of community strengths and capacities. You may also take this opportunity to enlist the support and involvement of different organisations and members of your target group for the planning of your intervention or program, if they are not already part of the process.

Outcomes of the Needs Assessment

By the end of the needs assessment you should have:

- An agreement on a high priority health problem.
- An indication of the magnitude of the health problem.
- A target group with a set of clearly identified characteristics.
- A set of contributing factors for the health problem, sorted into pre-disposers, enablers and reinforces.
- An indication of community resources to be involved in the health planning process.
- Commitment from a range of stakeholders to bring about change.

ADDITIONAL READING AND LINKS

Comcare. *Conducting a Needs Assessment for Work Health Programs*. Australian Government. 2012. http://www.comcare.gov.au/data/assets/pdf_file/0014/110813/Conducting_a_needs_assessment_for_work_health_Programs.pdf

EACH. *What is Health Promotion: Planning*. <http://www.each.com.au/health-promotion/health-promotion-at-each/what-is-health-promotion/planning/> Accessed: November 2013.