

## **COMPREHENSIVE COMMUNITY NEEDS AND STRENGTHS ASSESSMENT**

### **Why do a Community Needs and Strengths Assessment (CNSA)?**

As part of a community social planning tool, a CNSA is used -

- to find out what people want (i.e. what kind of programs and services different groups would like to see in the community)
- to find out how people feel (i.e. how people might feel about going to a particular place for a certain activity, or how much people might pay for a particular service)
- to find out which groups are not receiving the services they need (i.e. are there enough services for seniors in the community, or teens, or single parents, etc.)
- to improve program planning and delivery

### **How would you use the CNSA information?**

- to help with planning and evaluating the quality of programs and services you offer; to serve as the benchmark data or starting point for evaluating the difference you made in the community
- to provide information for developing long and short term plans for programs and services to provide to the community
- as a planning document to revisit every couple of years to see what's working, what's not working and what needs to be changed or improved
- to distinguish between programs and services that are necessary and those that are good but not necessary (i.e. to make sure you're using your resources of money, staff and time, most effectively according to what the community demands)
- to provide the background or rationale for why a particular program or service will be developed or expanded

### **Things to think about**

- if you ask the questions, you have to be prepared for the answers – answers you want to hear and answers you don't want to hear - don't take it personally!
- just by doing a needs assessment you set up an expectation or hope that something will be done; asking people what they need or want can make them think they'll get it
- if you ask the questions, you must make a plan for responding to them and letting the community know what that plan is (i.e. what you're going to do with the information you gathered)
- if you conduct a needs assessment over the summer months, you run the risk of missing residents because of vacation; as well, people are more apt to take the time to respond to surveys or participate in focus groups in the fall or winter months because they're more willing to give up their time than they would in the nice weather summer months

- often, a community or agency steering committee or working group will be struck to oversee the CNSA; who should be on your steering committee? why?
- have the steering committee brainstorm your preliminary planning: set goals, realistic timelines, and agreements about what you're doing, why you want to do it and how you're going to do it, so that:
  - you have a committed core working group from the outset
  - a core group agrees on goals for the needs assessment and a shared plan for reaching the goals
  - a core group will "talk up" the reasons why doing a needs assessment is a good thing!
- develop your research plan, prepare any surveys, train interviewers, etc.

### **Should you contract out or do it yourself (staff and volunteers)?**

- if you do it yourself:
  - it will get people involved in the community and more vested in the problem-solving, service planning and achieving positive outcomes
  - community may be more comfortable in responding to surveys or participating in focus groups
  - it will cost less than hiring a consultant
  - it will take longer than having a consultant do it
  - it will take a lot of staff time
- if you hire a consultant:
  - community may be more skeptical about responding to an outside consultant
  - make sure you do a thorough interviewing process so you are very comfortable with the consultant and that he/she will work for you and with you, not take over with his/her "expertise"
  - it will cost more
  - it will be done faster
  - you won't have to rely on volunteers or use up staff time

**Remember – a CNSA is a major project that will take time, people, energy and commitment**

## **Develop a Research Plan**

step one = identify the purposes of the research = why are you doing this? what do you want to find out? who will use the information gathered? how might it be useful to them?

step two = what resources do you have to get the job done? staff, volunteers, time, money; when does the needs assessment have to be completed with a final report? decide whether to contract out or do in-house

step three = develop preliminary time line

step four = identify what types of information you need to gather: what people need? what people want? how they feel about something? what information do you really need and what is interesting but not really necessary; community profile (with demographics, social characteristics, economics, etc.)

step five = identify sources of information/data that already exists: i.e. needs assessments, service plans, statistics from municipality, CFSA, RHA, service agencies, etc

step six = decide what method to use (telephone survey, mailed questionnaires, interviews, focus groups) what is the time and cost for each method? what resources do you have to get the work done?

step seven = prepare to do assessment: decide sample size and sampling procedure (how many people you need to contact to have a fair representation of the community, who definitely must be contacted); depending on what method or combination of methods you use, develop information-gathering tools (i.e. surveys, or interview questions, or focus group questions); get people ready to do the work; train interviewers and/or facilitators

conduct the assessment

tabulate the results and analyze the results

write up the final report

plan next steps = develop program planning strategy (goals, action plans)