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Conducting Community Health Needs Assessments: An Eight-Step Process

An assessment process centered around convening a broad-based Community Group that reviews data and information to identify health needs of the community, provides qualitative input, and makes recommendations to the health facility.

Prepared by

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A community health needs assessment is a systematic process that involves the community to identify and analyze community health needs and assets. The process also involves prioritizing needs and laying the groundwork for action to address unmet community health needs. In addition to satisfying regulatory requirements of the Affordable Care Act, needs assessments: (1) provide access to timely input from the local community and providers; (2) summarize secondary data related to health conditions and indicators; (3) assemble information to guide decision making, marketing efforts, and the development of a strategic plan; and (4) encourage community engagement and local involvement that informs the future of health care delivery.

Based on a model developed by the National Center for Rural Health Works, the Center for Rural Health at the University of North Dakota adopted an eight-step process for conducting community health needs assessments. At the heart of the process is convening a broad-based Community Group that meets at least twice, reviews data and information to identify health needs of the community, and prioritizes the identified needs.

The Eight Steps of the Assessment Process

Step 1: Identify a Community Group

Identify community members to serve on a Community Group. Over the course of two meetings, group members will review data and information to identify and prioritize health needs of the community.

When compiling the list of community members to serve on the Community Group, include 15 to 20 individuals who are viewed as community leaders representing the broad interests of the community across varying sectors (e.g., education, health, business, agriculture, faith). The group must include person(s) with special knowledge of or expertise in public health as well as leaders, representatives, or members of medically underserved, low-income, and minority populations, and populations with chronic disease needs. Some group members also may be asked to participate in one-on-one interviews.

Step 2: Collect and review data

While organizing and planning for the Community Group, begin compiling secondary data to share with the Community Group to help inform its analysis and decisions. Sources for secondary data may include the U.S. Census Bureau, County Health Rankings, and the North Dakota Department of Health. Typical secondary data related to the hospital's service area includes demographic information (such as population trends, age, poverty rates, educational attainment), the prevalence of health conditions and diseases, levels of insurance and other factors affecting access to care, clinical care measures, environmental factors, causes of death, rates of preventive measures, and information about children's health. Share basic demographic data about the hospital's service area at Meeting One of the Community Group and save the more detailed information for Meeting Two when the Community Group is reviewing survey results and making decisions about area health needs and priorities. For Meeting One, compile information about how the hospital's service area was defined, the services and community benefits it currently provides, and its economic impact.

Step 3: Convene the Community Group for Meeting One

On the agenda for Meeting One of the Community Group:

1) Introductions
2) Overview of the process
3) Define the hospital's service area
4) Explain the hospital's services, facilities, and community benefits
5) Share demographic data
6) Conduct a focus group session exploring the topics of the survey in greater detail, using a neutral facilitator

7) Explain the process for distribution of the survey to additional community members
8) Completion and distribution of surveys
9) Discuss next steps (next meeting, additional survey distribution)

Step 4: Administer survey to community members and health care professionals

Develop two versions of a health needs assessment survey – one version for community members and one version for health care professionals. Distribute the surveys as widely as possible to area residents and health care professionals, taking care to make them available to different demographic groups, including lower income residents, medically underserved residents, minority residents, and residents with chronic health conditions. Surveys may be distributed in an online format, by hard copy, or both. In this process, surveys are intended to be an additional tool for collecting qualitative information about community perceptions, not a method of collecting statistically valid data.

Step 5: Collect and analyze survey data

Hard-copy surveys should be returned via mail to help ensure anonymity and confidentiality. Compile the data and prepare a report of the results. Include in the report the secondary data assembled in Step 2 about health conditions and indicators. During this time, also consider having a neutral party conduct a number of key informant interviews, with those findings also included in the report.

Step 6: Convene the Community Group for Meeting Two

At Meeting Two, the Community Group will review survey results, findings of the focus group session of Meeting One and any key informant interviews, and secondary data about health conditions and indicators. Based on this aggregated information, the Community Group should prepare a list of community health needs and then prioritize those needs.
A typical agenda for Meeting Two of the Community Group is:

1) Review of Meeting One
2) Presentation of secondary data about health conditions and indicators in the service area
3) Presentation of results of consumer survey and health care professionals survey
4) Presentation of findings of key informant interviews and the focus group session of Meeting One
5) Develop a list of community health needs
6) Prioritize the identified health needs
7) Final comments

Step 7: Draft Community Health Needs Assessment written report

Based on the decisions and recommendations of the Community Group, draft a Community Health Needs Assessment written report.

The Center for Rural Health has compiled a checklist of the requirements of a community health needs assessment written report and implementation strategy. Hospitals should refer to this list often during the process to confirm that they are collecting the appropriate information, seeking input from all required sources, and sufficiently documenting the methods used.

Step 8: Draft Strategic Implementation

After completion of the needs assessment report, draft and adopt a strategic implementation that describes how the facility plans to meet the prioritized needs identified in the assessment.