

Insights

Seven Steps for Conducting a Successful Needs Assessment



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When launching a public health program, one of the first things to do is conduct a needs assessment. A needs assessment helps you determine *what needs to be accomplished to reach your project goals*. This assessment of needs then informs a project's overall plan and approaches by helping you identify targeted strategies and prioritize resources.

Needs assessments serve as incredibly powerful tools for decision making, resource allocation, and ultimately reaching programmatic goals. They can be utilized across a range of settings (e.g., community, school, hospital, state) to shed light on a variety of topics, such as what programmatic actions should be taken to improve breastfeeding rates in a hospital or increase kindergarten readiness across a state. It's important to conduct needs assessment at the onset of the project, so that programs are appropriately tailored to the individuals and communities you serve.

Not sure where to begin? To help you get started, we've compiled the seven tips below. Following them will ensure that your needs assessment planning, analysis, and subsequent actions are efficient and effective.

Step one: Clearly define your needs assessment objectives

When defining your objectives, ask yourself: Why are you conducting the needs assessment and what do you plan to do with the findings? For example, if you are working on a program seeking

to increase breastfeeding initiation among first-time mothers in a community, your needs assessment objectives may include:

- Understand breastfeeding knowledge and intentions of first-time mothers in your community
- Understand perceived assets and barriers to breastfeeding among first-time mothers in your community
- Assess assets and barriers related to the provision of breastfeeding support in local hospitals and after discharge
- Determine necessary training and supports to increase breastfeeding among first-time mothers in your community

Concretely identifying a few, key objectives at the onset will help you identify your needs assessment activities—including who to collect data from and what questions to ask. The objectives in the breastfeeding example show that the needs assessment should collect data from first-time mothers as well as from health care providers and, possibly, lactation consultants and social service providers in the community. The objectives also suggest that survey and/or focus group questions should target topics including, but not limited to, knowledge, intentions, assets, and barriers related to breastfeeding.

Step two: Be realistic about your resources and capacity

Consider how much time, money and staff capacity you can devote to the needs assessment. For example, do you need to assess the current state of your program and implement changes within three months, or do you have an entire year to examine your program's landscape? Also, how many staff are working on the project and what percentage of their time are they devoting to the project? The availability of resources will greatly impact the needs assessment activities you are able to conduct. If a needs assessment must be conducted quickly and/or with few staff resources, a simple online survey to key stakeholders serves as a powerful (and often free!) tool to collect data critical to informing programmatic efforts. Teams can also tap into secondary publicly available data, such as the National Survey of Children's Health or the CDC WONDER databases.

Step three: Identify target audiences and data sources

Needs Assessment in Action

Conducting a needs assessment was integral to NICHQ's programmatic planning and evaluation efforts for the Supporting Healthy Start Performance Project. Over a three month-period, NICHQ reached 145 stakeholders, including funders, participants, staff and project directors. Through focus groups, surveys, and interviews, NICHQ captured their current state of knowledge and readiness as well as successes and challenges related to undertaking the aims of the Healthy Start project. After collecting, cleaning, and analyzing both qualitative and quantitative data, NICHQ synthesized findings and produced a comprehensive report shared with project stakeholders and funders. Now, NICHQ can continue to provide technical assistance that is appropriately tailored to support grantees.

Given your objectives and resources, consider the target audiences and data sources that will help you assess your needs. Is it most effective to administer a survey to a wide range of community members, to hold several focus groups with hospital administrators, examine existing reports, or directly observe project participants? Sometimes you'll need to conduct several, complementary needs assessment activities to collect data for a range of stakeholders.

Consider, also, the competing priorities of your target audience and how to encourage them to participate in your needs assessment. If sending surveys, include an introductory sentence that shows your appreciation and why the survey responses matter, and be prepared to send multiple reminders to increase response rates. If conducting focus groups, be gracious and consider providing snacks, water, or other incentives to participants to thank them for their time and contributions. Helpful new tools can also increase participation. [Photovoice](#) is a tool that helps people use videos and photos to share their environment and experiences with others, which can then inform the needs assessment. This tool can be especially powerful for engaging communities that may have been less likely to participate due to language barriers, poverty, or other social determinants.

Step four: Think small and big when summarizing results

You've collected the necessary data to achieve your needs assessment objectives. Now, it's time to dig into that data. Try to summarize and reflect on data for each of your needs assessment objectives individually. Depending on the nature of your data, you may want to develop graphs, tables, and other visuals to display data as well as a narrative describing results.

Then, take a step back, and think about cross-cutting themes that may apply to multiple needs assessment activities, which may help inform priorities for action. For example, in the breastfeeding program example, was there a salient theme, perhaps a barrier to breastfeeding

initiation, that emerged when collecting insights from first-time mothers, health care providers, and other social service providers? If so, highlight this finding and ensure recommendations address this cross-cutting theme.

Step five: Get feedback

While developing the needs assessment deliverable, whether it is a formal report, peer-reviewed manuscript or presentation, discuss results with a diverse and inclusive audience—including community members, colleagues, funders, project partners and other target audiences—who may interpret your needs assessment results differently and identify unique recommendations. From an equity standpoint, it is especially important to engage community members as equal partners in understanding and translating results from the needs assessment. This ensures that the people most affected by the program will have power in determining its design.

Step six: Disseminate

You've done the work, now share your findings internally and externally. This helps ensure that all project stakeholders are on the same page regarding project priorities and resource allocation. Present your findings at community events, professional conferences and other relevant venues. Your efforts may inform and inspire other public health programs working on similar initiatives, and feedback from others can help you move your work to the next level.

Step seven: Take action

At the conclusion of the needs assessment process, review your original objectives with the final results and recommendations. Doing so will highlight what steps are needed to achieve your goals—whether that's addressing gaps in knowledge or building capacity among project participants. Then, most importantly, take action and use those findings to develop your project approaches. To ensure that your needs assessment learnings come to fruition, consider developing a workplan that outlines key approaches and strategies, and identifies a team lead and deadline for each