

Community Needs Assessment

**Your Guide to Understanding the
'Hows' and 'Whys' of Assessing the
Needs of Youth in Your Community**



A Division of the Canadian Forces Personnel Support Agency
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Why do a youth community needs assessment?

As the name suggests, community needs assessments gather information to learn about the main issues that a community faces, in this case youth. The purpose of youth community needs assessments is to understand the challenges youth face and to get a sense of what types of programs and services may help to address these challenges, while evaluating the extent to which youth are accessing existing services within the CF environment. Additionally needs assessments sometimes consider if youth are currently using programs and services through other civilian groups and if so, which ones. In short, these needs assessments allow organizations to vet assumptions on what youth want and need PRIOR to the planning process.

Three main reasons organizations do community needs assessments

1. To inform service planning

Planning involves making priorities. A needs assessment gives planners the information they need to prioritize the types of services to offer in a community. In this way, information from a needs assessment helps match services with needs – needs that are demonstrated to be real and not just based on intuition, assumptions, or current issues.

2. To increase accountability

Funding bodies want to know if what they are supporting is worthwhile. Needs assessments help establish that dollars are being spent where they are needed most. This is particularly important during times of limited resources.

3. To highlight the opinions of community residents

A needs assessment promotes citizen participation. It allows people within communities to give their opinion on the community's current situation and what they would like it to be in the future. Community members have direct input in suggesting the types of supports they think are needed. Needs assessment also give equal weight to people's voices. Too often it is only the "squeaky wheel that gets the grease." The systemic research of needs assessments provides all citizens equal opportunity to express their opinions.

Benefits to youth:

1. Youth can increase their understanding of and commitment to their community – involvement brings dedication and empowerment.
2. Youth involved in the planning and execution of a needs assessment learn facilitation, research and critical thinking skills.
3. Involving youth in the development of needs assessments helps ensure the 'right questions' are asked so real answers are found.

Choosing the "right" method to conduct needs assessments

Why is it important to use multiple methods to ask the same questions?

Some community needs assessment tools offer in return a small amount of information from a large

sample of people while others return more detailed information on a smaller number of respondents. Youth are no different from adults in that they have different likes and dislike and respond differently depending on the stimulus. It stands to reason that not all youth will respond to a written survey with enthusiasm, but may be more forthcoming with valuable opinions in a face-to-face forum such as a focus group setting. It is important to determine which tools are most efficient and effective for the group of youth trying to be reached. Some methods include:

- Individual interviews—a process by which an interviewer seeks information and description from another person. Done one-on-one, either on the phone or in person.
- Questionnaires—a series of open or closed ended questions. These can be delivered in a variety of ways: in person one-on-one, over the phone or completed individually in writing.
- Focus groups—a group of people (usually 7-10) who meet with a facilitator to discuss a specific topic or topic.
- Participant feedback forms; and
- Community forums

Other things to consider:

- determine in advance the number of youth to be interviewed or surveyed
- factor in the cost of administration (copies, postage...)
- language requirements
- determine in advance what number of replies/respondents are required to have a reasonable representation of the youth in the community
- confidentiality

What is DHRRE?

DHRRE , the Director Human Resources Research and Evaluation, is the body responsible for reviewing all materials used to survey/evaluate CF population segments. DHRRE review and approval is conducted under the guidance of CAN-FORGEN 145/02 ADMHRMIL 079 UNCLASS DEC 02. DHRRE approval must occur prior to the application of any research tool.

It is particularly important to ensure that all such research (in this case the youth needs assessment) must be reviewed and approved by the local Base/Wing Commander prior to submission to DHRRE.

Once command approval has been received, the DHRRE form (Annex 1) must be completed and submitted with the survey plan and tool.

The submission and approval process may be quite lengthy and must be considered when creating timelines for the proposed research methodology.

What questions to ask?

Unfortunately there is no cookie cutter approach...the resources and challenges of each community are different and the youth in each community are different...therefore the questions (and subsequent answers are different). Whatever the questions, ensure that they are specific enough and that they are understandable. Youth speak differently. Ensure the questions are written in a language that is understandable and easily relatable.

The template provided (Annex B) is a general use survey that has been approved for use by DHRRE. Be aware that any and all questions related changes/modifications made to the template must be submitted to DHREE (through the process previously mentioned) for approval prior to being used.

Other keys to success:

- Make it fun. Thinking in a youth centred way may challenge how your organizations present information. Consider using fewer words in the questions and providing more “check off the answer” than written descriptive replies.
- Consider having food at focus groups/community meetings...sometimes getting them in the door is the biggest battle.
- Consider attaching some form of incentive or prize to the completion of the survey or attendance at a focus group (i.e. draw or door prize).
- Share information with other community agencies (and ask for the results of similar research conducted in the community).
- Consider asking schools for assistance. Schools are a great place to access a captive audience – especially at some CF locations.
- When youth speak...LISTEN. Use the information – nothing is more frustrating than being asked for a reasonable opinion and having it ignored.

Now that you have all of this information what do you do with it?

Once you have gathered all of the information analyzing and getting what you need out of it can seem like a very onerous task. Deciding what to do with the information can be an equally foreboding task.

To begin it is best to simply read through the results, whether that be the completed surveys or the records from focus group questions. It is best to familiarize yourself with the material before attempting to organize it. As you review the answers, jot down any observations that you have about what you are reading.

Next, decide the best way to analyze/examine the responses. There is no right or wrong approach. The organization of the responses should be done in the way that best suits your needs. To help scope your approach go back to the questions you had originally planned to answer through the process. This will again help to contextualize the responses you have received.

Review the responses again and begin to attempt to identify important points or common themes. For quantitative data, summarize the responses to each question and calculate the averages or number of times each response was chosen.

If you are looking at responses from youth who have different characteristics (ie those who live in CF housing versus those who do not), analyze their responses differently to examine if there are significant differences.

Once you have begun to compile the results in useful 'chunks', you are now ready to put the findings into report format, identifying important learnings, themes and recommendations.

So I have a report...now what?

It is important that the results from your needs assessment not collect dust on a shelf somewhere, but instead be put to good use in the planning and development of programs and services for youth in your community.

When planning events in conjunction with your local youth committee, make sure to share the results of the community needs assessment, carefully considering the findings as you go about planning.

Additionally, it is incredibly important to share the findings both internally and with other youth serving agencies in your community. Questions related to health and employment, for example, may be of significant interest to health and employment centres and may provide a catalyst for the creation of partnerships.

After the fact:

Once the research has been done and the results compiled it is important to take time to reflect on the process and learn. Consider:

- What worked well?
- What work less well?
- Was the timing right?
- Did you ask the right questions and get the information you required?
- Did youth share their opinions freely?
- Was the response large enough to be a true reflection of the community?
- What changes can be made to make the process more efficient and effective?

**For more information on Community Needs Assessments visit :
www.cfpsa.com/en/psp/dmfs/resources/communityNeeds_e.asp**

References:

The following documents were used in the creation of this document

Finding our Way: A Participatory Evaluation Method for Family Resource Programs/Une methode d'évaluation participative pour les programmes de ressources pour la famille (1998). Diana Ellis, Canadian Association of Family Resource Programs (FRP Canada)

Good Practice and Resource Guide: Community Needs Assessment and Services Evaluations in Military Family Resource Centres/Guide de ressources et des bonnes pratiques : évaluation des besoins et des services dans les Centres de ressources pour les familles des militaires (2004). Director Military Family Services

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