

Need Analysis

DEFINITIONS:

Need Analysis is the process of identifying and evaluating needs (see sample definitions below) in a community or other defined population of people. The identification of needs is a process of describing “problems” of a target population and possible solutions to these problems. A need has been described as:

- A gap between “what is” and “what should be.” (Witkin et al., 1995)
- “A gap between real and ideal that is both acknowledged by community values and potentially amenable to change.” (Reviere, 1996, p. 5)
- May be different from such related concepts as wants (“something people are willing to pay for”) or demands (“something people are willing to march for”). (McKillip, 1987)

Need analysis focuses on the future, or what should be done, rather than on what was done as is the focus of most program evaluations. Some people use the related term “needs assessment”

STEPS and EXAMPLES:

These steps may seem familiar to people aware of general guidelines for evaluation planning (see, for example, the “Key Questions for Evaluation Planning” in the ICYF Spring 2000 newsletter and logic model descriptions). The focus here is entirely on “gap” or need analysis. The following steps are suggestions from McKillip, 1998.

1. First, you identify the audience and purposes for the analysis (what McKillip, 1998, calls the users and uses). For example, members of a rural community might have concerns about youth loitering at a local park. The PTA might commission a need analysis to investigate the issue and to try to find solutions to youth “hanging out” and getting into trouble.
2. Second, you fully describe the target population and service environment. Altschuld et al. (2000) point out three levels of target groups and their respective needs: Level 1 (Primary) targets are the direct recipients of the services; Level 2 (Secondary) targets include the individuals or groups who deliver the services; and Level 3 (Tertiary) involves the resources and inputs into the solutions (e.g., buildings, salaries, facilities, etc.). These researchers emphasize that the focus of the need analysis should be on Level 1 because that is the reason for the existence of levels 2 and 3, not the other way around. In this example, the primary target population would be the rural youth. The local teachers, coaches and school personnel would be one set of secondary targets. The salaries, facilities, equipment, curricula and support mechanisms for the school personnel would be tertiary targets.
3. The third step is need identification where descriptions of the problems (beyond the general level noted in step 1) and possible solutions are generated. This is where you illustrate the gaps between expected/ideal and actual outcomes. You want to gather information from more than one level of target, although you should focus on the primary targets. For example, if you only asked school personnel about the perceived needs of the rural youth, you might get a different set of answers than you would if you asked the youth themselves. Include a description of the expected outcomes of the various solutions and, if possible, the estimated costs of each possible solution.
4. The fourth step is called needs assessment by McKillip (1998). This is the time to evaluate the identified needs. Which are the most important? Do any of the needs conflict with other needs? Is there consistent agreement across levels of target groups about the relevance and importance of the needs? For example, an after-school program might want to increase academic achievement of youth by offering extra activities that take time the youth otherwise might have spent finishing their homework. An unexpected outcome might be lower grades due to incomplete homework. Therefore, the youth might not hold the same value for “extra” academic activities as the program staff who created the program in the first place.
5. Finally, you communicate your results to the audience identified in the first step.

TECHNIQUES/METHODS:

Space here is limited so only a list of sample techniques and possible steps where they could be used are included. Refer to the web sites and other citations below for a complete description.

Resource Inventory (Who provides What to Whom?; STEP 2)

- Secondary Data Analysis (US Census, other data archives; STEP 2)
- Surveys (Key Informants, Client Satisfaction, Training; STEPS 2, 3, 4)
- Group Procedures (Focus Group, Nominal Group, Public Hearing, Community Forum (ALL STEPS))

CAUTIONS/PITFALLS:

"...the most serious conceptual flaws in needs assessment research involve problems with sampling, failing to gather the right information to measure the desired components of need, and using methods inappropriate to justify the conclusions. These weaknesses reflect a basic failure to develop a conceptually coherent, logical, and well-integrated plan for conducting the needs assessment" (p. 70, Reviere, et al., 1996). In addition to the above description, other common problems include the following (from Soriano, 1995; Witkin, 1995):

- Missing primary target population (e.g., not asking clients of services, holding meetings at inconvenient times/locations)
- Confounding means (solution strategies) with ends (outcomes) or needs with wishes (wants)
- Using only one method for gathering information
- Assuming levels of need are similar across levels of target groups
- Failing to set priorities based on collected data

SELECTED REFERENCES:

• BOOKS

- Altschuld, J. W. and Witkin, B. R. (2000). *From Needs Assessment to Action: Transforming Needs into Solution Strategies*. Sage Publications: Thousand Oaks, CA.
- McKillip, J. (1987). *Need Analysis: Tools for the Human Service and Education*. Applied Social Research Methods Series, Volume 10. Sage Publications: Thousand Oaks, CA.
- McKillip, J. (1998). Need Analysis. In Bickman, L and Rog, D.J. (Eds). *Handbook of Applied Social Research Methods*. Sage Publications: Thousand Oaks, CA.
- Reviere, R., Berkowitz, S., Carter, C.C., Gergusan, C.G. (Eds) (1996). *Needs Assessment: A Creative and Practical Guide for Social Scientists*. Taylor and Francis: Washington, DC.
- Soriano, F. (1995). *Conducting Needs Assessments: A Multidisciplinary Approach*. Sage Human Services Guide #68. Sage Publications: Thousand Oaks, CA.
- Witkin, B. R. and Altschuld, J. W. (1995). *Planning and Conducting Needs Assessments: A Practical Guide*. Sage Publications: Thousand Oaks, CA.

• SAMPLE WEBSITES:

- Needs Assessment: The First Step (http://www.alumi.caltech.edu/~rouda/T2_NA.html)
- Guide for Conducting a Multi-Level Needs Assessment (<http://www.cpms.osd.mil/pmo/wgtrain2.htm>)
- Guiding Service Improvements Through Community Assessments (<http://www.hec.ohio-state.edu/famlife/bulletin/volume.2/bull22e.htm>)
- What are the Steps in Assessing Community Needs? (<http://www.familiesandworkinst.org/forums/f01.html>)
- United Way Needs Assessment (<http://fch.evansville.net/unwaynofr.html>)
- National Technical Center for Substance Abuse Needs Assessment (<http://www.ntc.org/>)
- CYFERNet State Strengthening Guide (<http://ag.arizona.edu/fcr/fs/cyfar/evalgde.htm>)