

In simplest terms, a community health needs assessment (CHNA) is defined as a ‘snapshot’ of the health of a community. In more broad terms, The Association for Community Health Improvement defines a community health needs assessment as both the activity and product of identifying and prioritizing a community’s health needs, accomplished through the collection and analysis of data... used to inform the development of strategies and plans to address prioritized needs.¹ Both quantitative and qualitative methods may be used to systematically collect and analyze data relative to the community’s health status. An ideal assessment includes information on risk factors, quality of life, mortality, morbidity, community assets, social determinants of health and health inequity, and information on how well the public health system provides essential services.

The assessment process involves prioritizing needs and laying the groundwork for action to address gaps and unmet community health needs. The results will ultimately inform local strategic health improvement planning efforts and drive a community’s work toward chronic disease prevention.

There are a variety of tools and resources that may be used to support the community health needs assessment process. The methods used by communities can vary according to its size and nature, the coalition infrastructure, partners and stakeholders, resources available, and other local factors. To conduct a successful CHNA, community engagement, local involvement, and collaborative participation are essential.

The Institute of Medicine has defined assessment as “the systematic collection and analysis of data including statistics on health status, health needs, and other public health and health systems issues.”²

CONDUCTING A COMMUNITY ASSESSMENT

To understand both needs and benefits for conducting a Community Health Needs Assessment, community health advocates and stakeholders must have first identified the community’s readiness for change toward health improvement in their community. What is assumed about why a community’s health is the way it is is not always true. Advocates often realize that sufficient data is unavailable to help understand the true health of their community.

A CHNA is one method that provides valuable information regarding why and how to improve their community’s health status. A comprehensive CHNA gathers information using sound data collection methods and reflects the behaviors, beliefs, and demographics of community residents. A well-designed assessment will provide community planners with strong data to support local decision-making to address a healthy community environment.

Community health needs assessments can also be used to assess and generate awareness of the issues being studied and to promote citizen interest in creating change. An effective CHNA helps to assemble information to guide decision making, marketing efforts, and the development, implementation, and evaluation of a community health action plan. (See the section of the Toolkit, *Writing a Community Health Action Plan*, for more information.)

WHY DO A CHNA?

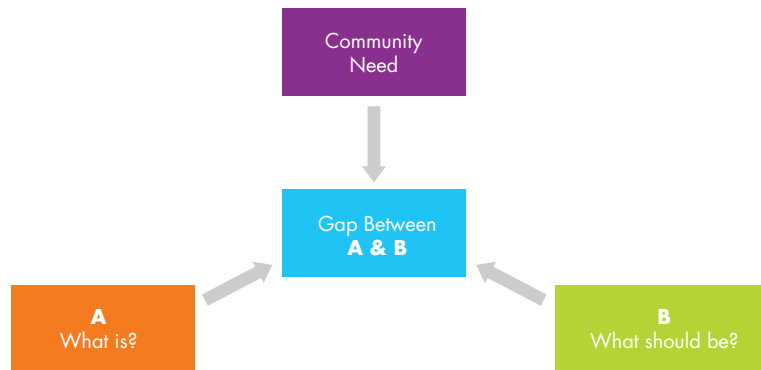
- To provide data for decision-making
- To promote awareness and action
- To satisfy a mandate
- To meet grant requirements

In 2010 IRS regulations began requiring non-profit hospitals to conduct assessments in their communities. This mandate, The Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act (ACA), provides an opportunity for communities to strategically align their community health assessment efforts and collaborate with non-profit hospitals to meet these requirements. (See the section of the Toolkit, *Collective Impact and Community Benefit*, for more information.)

Finally, foundations and other funding institutions that provide resources to communities to support action planning will often require a formal assessment of needs and resources.

BENEFITS OF A COMMUNITY HEALTH NEEDS ASSESSMENT

There are many valuable reasons to conduct a CHNA. Before you can begin, it is important to understand the difference between needs and assets.



Community needs are the gaps between what a situation is and what it should be. Community assets are those things that can be used to improve quality of life.

Community needs can affect a large or small number of its members. This may include families, individuals, businesses, faith-based organizations, community groups- essentially, anyone who 'belongs' to the community. Community assets include organizations, people, partnerships, facilities, funding, policies, regulations, skills and talents- any positive aspect of a community that can be used to leverage or support health improvement.

The list below contains benefits and opportunities that a community may receive from conducting an assessment.



- To identify the community's strengths and weaknesses.
- To develop an informed understanding of the gaps or needs in a community, their impact upon the population, why they exist, and why it is important for the needs to be addressed.
- To develop a detailed analysis of community assets and resources that currently exist in a community that can be used to help meet those needs.
- Create an inventory of the resources currently available within the community that can be leveraged to improve the quality of life for community members.
- Community engagement is increased because members from different parts of the community are included in discussions about needs, assets, and the community's response.
- Use of data for making decisions about the actions that can be taken to address community needs and how to best use available assets.
- Use of data to inform action planning, priority setting, program outcomes, and health improvements.

BUILDING CAPACITY

Capacity building for communities is defined as the combined influence of a community's commitment, activities, resources, and support that strengthens the skills and abilities of people and community groups to take effective action and leading roles in the health needs of their communities. Within the CHNA process, building capacity in the community supports and addresses community needs with activities that will positively impact sustainable chronic disease prevention and control efforts in communities.

Communities that engage citizens and institutions in a collaborative CHNA process are more likely to share a collective vision for its future, use an integrative approach to policy and environmental change, and develop sustainable living principles to promote healthy communities. Select tools and approaches that easily allow for updating information and evaluating progress toward community health goals. The value of a CHNA is enhanced when the data and process become part of ongoing strategic collaborative effort.

Each time a person uses his or her capacity, the community is stronger and the person more powerful. That is why strong communities are basically places where the capacities of local residents are identified, valued, and used.

(Kretzman, J.P. & McKnight, J.L.)³

In order to begin effectively, here are some key questions that can guide a community in the CHNA process and provide better understanding of and to the community.

- What community issues should be focused on?
- Who should be involved?
- What questions should be asked?
- How is the data collected?
- What is done with the data after it is collected?

CONCLUSION

In addition to collecting data, defining health issues and concerns, and using community assets to plan and address community needs, the CHNA process also identifies health indicators, quality of life, and risk factors in the community. After completing the assessment, communities should have the answers to these questions:

- How healthy are our residents?
- What does the health status of our community look like?
- What are the concerning issues among our residents?
- How do lifestyle behaviors of our residents contribute the community's overall health status?
- What factors impact the health and quality of life of our community?
- How does the health status of our community compare to that of ten years ago; to that of other communities; to that of the state and the nation?

With those questions answered a community is more prepared to make and support policy, systems, and environmental changes that will impact and improve its health.

The following sections of the *South Dakota Good & Healthy Community Health Needs Assessment and Improvement Planning Toolkit* include resources, tools, and templates to further prepare, guide, and assist a community through the community health needs assessment process, prioritizing needs, and developing a sustainable community health action plan. These tools are tailored for all South Dakota communities in obtaining, understanding, and using CHNA data to best meet their needs and join the *Good & Healthy Initiative*.

Resources

Refer to the following resources for additional information and methods regarding a community health needs assessment.

Community Health Needs Assessments

Healthy Carolinians Community Assessment Guide Book. North Carolina Department of Health and Human Services.

A Handbook for Participatory Community Assessments. Experiences from Alameda County. Alameda County Public Health Department

Center for Community Health Development

Healthy Communities Network

Washington State Department of Health, AssessNow

The Community Toolbox, University of Kansas

ACHI's Community Health Assessment Toolkit

References

1. Association for Community Health Improvement. (2012). *In Association for Community Health Improvement Community Health Assessment Toolkit. A Practical Guide to Planning, Leading, and Using Community Health Assessment*. Retrieved from <http://www.assesstoolkit.org/>
2. Institute of Medicine of the National Academies. (1988). *The Future of Public Health*. Washington, D.C.: Committee for the Study of the Future of Public Health, Division of Health Care Services.
3. Kretzmann, J.P. & McKnight, J.L. (1993). *Building Communities from the Inside Out: A Path Toward Finding and Mobilizing a Community's Assets*. Chicago, IL: ACTA Publications

