COMMUNITY READINESS

When tackling community issues, and prioritizing needs, there is no "one size fits all" approach for success. South Dakota communities present distinct challenges, resources, assets, and stakeholders and often times, programs and interventions are planned before determining if the community is on board to support the effort and engage in meaningful change-based strategies. This section is about how to understand – and measure – exactly how ready a community is to address a particular issue, and how to use that knowledge to stimulate community change.

Conducting a community readiness assessment provides the coalition with data to guide program planning and intervention designs in the following areas:

- To get a more honest and objective description of needs.
- To make sure any planned actions are in line with expressed needs of the community.
- To get more group and community support for the coalition actions.

Measuring community readiness is useful beyond planning for a new community, worksite, or school initiative. Consider assessing readiness with each new issue, when several different communities (or different segments of a community) are involved, or when planning an effort that involves a participatory process.

> **COMMUNITY READINESS IS THE DEGREE TO WHICH A COMMUNITY IS READY TO TAKE ACTION ON AN ISSUE.**[1]

DEFINITION OF COMMUNITY READINESS

Community readiness is the degree to which a community is ready to take action on an issue. It is the observable characteristics of a community that influence its ability to initiate change including, but not limited to, organizational resources (money, people, time), the capacity (knowledge, skills) and attitudes (opinions, viewpoints) of the community, and the involvement and investment of coalition members.[2]

Community readiness has some specific characteristics important to understand:

- **It is issue-specific.** A community can be more than ready to address one issue, while being at the very earliest stages of readiness in relation to another.
- **It is measurable.** It's measurable across multiple community dimensions. Not only can it provide an accurate assessment of community readiness, it can accurately measure where the community is on various elements of readiness.
- **It can vary across dimensions.** A community may be more ready to address an issue in some ways than in others.
- **It can vary across different segments of the community.** Some groups – those directly affected – may be far more ready to deal with it than others.
- **It can be increased successfully.** Communities can be moved toward higher levels of readiness.
- **It is essential knowledge for addressing an issue.** People will only support what they see as reasonable, logical, and doable.

UNDERSTANDING A COMMUNITY'S LEVEL OF READINESS

How can a community determine if it is ready to commit and move forward, vitalize community strengths, build on community assets, and mobilize for collective action? Use the following list of questions to provide an understanding of a community's readiness and ability to address needs and issues.

- How is the community organized?
- Who are the organized groups/individuals in the community? What is the leadership?

- Are all members of the community aware of this effort?
- Is the community ready for change?
- What is the level of awareness regarding concerns, needs, and issues?
- Will there be opposition to this effort? If so, can it be managed or overcome?
- When will the process begin?
- Is the community prepared to collect data and conduct a needs assessment?

COMMUNITY READINESS MODEL

The Community Readiness Model (CRM) is an innovative tool used to assess how ready a community is to address an issue and develop and implement community-based prevention plans. Matching an intervention to a community's level of readiness is absolutely essential for successful community health strategic planning.

The model examines six dimensions of community readiness and measures each dimension along nine levels of readiness for action. Using the CRM methods and tools allows community coalitions to tailor an issue-specific strategy to what the community is willing to accept and take action on.

The CRM has been used to assess readiness for a variety of issues, including drug and alcohol use, animal control issues, and environmental issues. Communities have found it helpful because:

- It is an inexpensive and easy-to-use tool.
- It encourages the use of local experts and resources.
- It provides a vocabulary for communicating about readiness.
- It provides a metric for gauging progress.
- It helps create community-specific and culturally-specific interventions.

BENEFITS OF USING THE COMMUNITY READINESS MODEL

- It conserves valuable resources (time, money, people) by guiding the selection of strategies that are most likely to be successful.
- It is an efficient, inexpensive, and easy-to-use tool. It doesn't take professional expertise to administer or score, it's free, and it works.
- It promotes community recognition and ownership of the issue and the model makes it easy for community members to see and understand the issue.
- It helps to assure that strategies are culturally congruent and sustainable because of strong community ownership.
- It encourages the use of local experts and resources instead of reliance on outside experts and resources. Local experts may be community members who understand the issue(s) and community.
- It creates a community vision for healthy change. The levels of readiness mirror the levels of community competency, and help describe how a healthy community handles issues.

DIMENSIONS OF COMMUNITY READINESS

Dimensions of readiness are key factors that influence your community's preparedness to take action on an issue. The six dimensions identified by the model are:

1. **Community efforts.** To what extent are there efforts, programs, and policies that address the issue?
2. **Community knowledge of the efforts.** To what extent do community members know about local efforts and their effectiveness, and are the efforts accessible to all segments of the community?
3. **Leadership.** To what extent are appointed leaders and influential community members supportive of the issue?
4. **Community Climate.** What is the prevailing attitude of the community toward the issue? Is it one of helplessness or one of responsibility and empowerment?

5. **Community knowledge about the Issue.** To what extent do community members know about the causes of the problem, consequences, and how it impacts your community?

6. **Resources related to the Issue.** To what extent are local resources – people, time, money, space, etc. – available to support efforts?

A community's status, with respect to each of the dimensions, forms the basis of the overall level of community readiness. Remember that readiness can vary – sometimes widely – across dimensions.[2]

LEVELS OF READINESS
The levels of readiness describe just how prepared a community is to tackle the issue in question. The assessment of dimensions in place determines the overall level of community readiness.

Communities throughout South Dakota are at many different stages of readiness to take action, ranging from none at all to a high level of community ownership in health issues and strategies. This readiness is a major factor in determining whether a local initiative can be supported by the community.

The community readiness model defines nine stages of readiness.
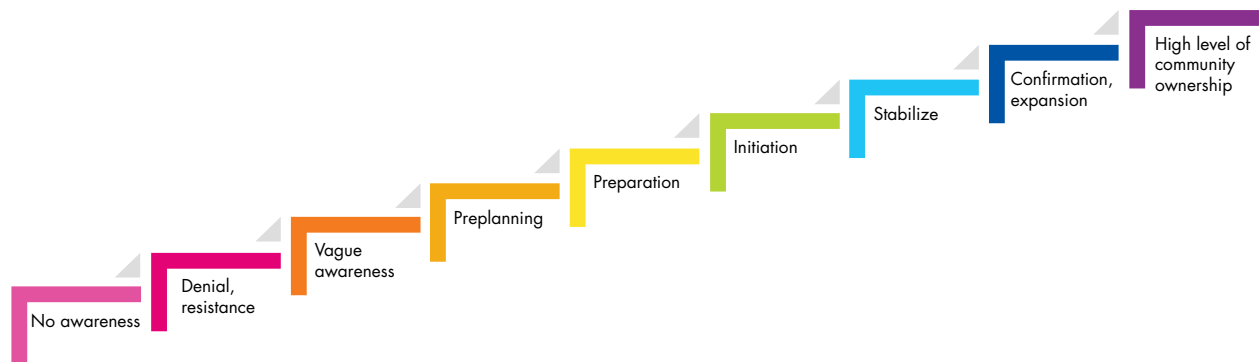
A level of readiness, from 1 to 9, is assigned to each dimension. Strategy development then relies on the community readiness scores, with dimensions with the lowest levels of readiness typically being addressed first.[2]

USING COMMUNITY READINESS INFORMATION
With the information gained about dimensions and overall readiness, a community is now ready to develop strategies that will be appropriate. It is ideal to facilitate this through a participatory planning process, perhaps involving some or all of the people that have been interviewed, as well as others representing various sectors of the community or various groups affected by the issue. The first thing to do is look at the distribution of scores across the dimensions. Are they all about the same? Are some lower than others?

TO BE SUCCESSFUL, ANY EFFORT TOWARD MAKING CHANGE WITHIN A COMMUNITY MUST BEGIN WITH STRATEGIES APPROPRIATE TO THAT COMMUNITY'S STAGE OF READINESS.

If there are one or more dimensions with lower scores than the others, focus efforts on strategies that will increase the community's readiness on that dimension or those dimensions first. Make certain the intensity level of the intervention or strategy is consistent with, or lower than, the stage score for that dimension.

Goals and General Strategies Appropriate for Each Stage

1. **No Awareness.** Here, the goal is to raise awareness that the issue exists.
   - Make one-on-one contacts with community leaders/members, friends and potential supporters.
   - Visit existing and established small groups to inform them of the issue.
   - Place items in the media that explain or call attention to the issue.

2. **Denial/Resistance.** To address this level, one must raise awareness that the problem or issue exists in this community.
   - Continue one-on-one visits and encourage those you've talked with to assist.
   - Approach and engage local educational/health outreach programs to assist in the effort with flyers, posters, or brochures.
   - Point out media articles that describe local critical incidents.
   - Prepare and submit articles for church bulletins, local newsletters, club newsletters, etc.
   - Present information to local related community groups.

3. **Vague Awareness.** Now that people recognize the problem, they have to be aware that the community can do something about it.
   - Present information at local community events and to unrelated community groups.
   - Post flyers, posters, and billboards.
   - Begin initiating events (i.e. potlucks, luncheons) and use those opportunities to present information on the issue.
   - Conduct informal local surveys and interviews with community people by phone or door-to-door.
   - Publish newspaper editorials and articles with general information and local implications.

4. **Preplanning.** At this level, people are ready to start thinking about how to address the issue.
   - Introduce information about the issue through presentations and media.
   - Visit and invest community leaders in the cause.
   - Review existing efforts in the community (curriculum, programs, activities, etc.) and determine who the target populations are.
   - Conduct local focus groups to discuss issues and develop strategies.
   - Increase media exposure through radio and television public service announcements.

5. **Preparation.** Here, the goal is information-gathering to lay the groundwork for planning community strategies to manage the issue.
   - Sponsor a community picnic to kick off the effort.
   - Conduct public forums to develop strategies from the grassroots level.
   - Utilize key leaders and influential people to speak to groups and participate in local radio and television shows.
   - Plan how to evaluate the success of your efforts.

6. **Initiation.** As a more serious community effort gets under way, providing community-specific information to support existing programs and initiatives is needed.
   - Conduct in-service training on Community Readiness for community members and leaders.
   - Plan publicity efforts associated with start-up of activity or efforts.
   - Attend meetings to provide updates on progress of the effort.
   - Begin library or Internet searches for additional resources and potential funding.
   - Begin some basic evaluation efforts.

7. **Stabilization.** Now that efforts and programs are in place, it's necessary to stabilize them to maintain the overall community effort.
    - Plan community events to maintain support for the issue.
    - Introduce your program evaluation through training and newspaper articles.
    - Conduct quarterly meetings to review progress, modify strategies.
    - Hold recognition events for local supporters or volunteers.
    - Prepare and submit newspaper articles detailing progress and future plans.
    - Begin networking among service providers and community systems.

8. **Confirmation/Expansion.** Once services are stabilized, the task is to expand and enhance them.
    - Formalize the networking with qualified service agreements.
    - Prepare a community health needs assessment.
    - Maintain a comprehensive database available to the public.
    - Initiate policy change through support of local city officials.
    - Utilize evaluation data to modify efforts.

9. **High Level of Community Ownership.** Once the community reaches the highest level, the trick is to maintain the momentum and continue growth. The effort will need to be sustained. No matter how good programs and services are, they could be better; stick to it – the job's never really done.
    - Maintain local business community support and solicit financial support from them.
    - Diversify funding resources.
    - Continue re-assessment of issue and progress made.
    - Track outcome data for use with future grant requests.
    - Continue progress reports for benefit of community leaders and local sponsorship. At this level, community members have ownership of the efforts and will invest themselves in maintaining the efforts.

Building a stronger and healthier community is about bringing these community assets into relationship with one another. When assets are connected, their capacities can be enhanced. Fundamentally, community building is about relationships among people. Mobilizing assets for collective action requires organizing relationships within a community.[2]

CONCLUSION

Community health improvement can be a large undertaking and often involves taking action in new ways. Understanding community readiness is an important tool for anyone concerned with community health and development. A community cannot be convinced to approach a health issue until it realizes that the issue exists and that it affects the community. A community cannot be forced into an action it is not ready for.

The Community Readiness Model analyzes a community in a way that makes it possible to pinpoint a community's level of readiness. Community coalitions and advocates can then use that readiness information to devise strategies for addressing the issue(s) that the community will support. The assessment tool can be used (and adapted) and scored by community members with a minimum of training, compelling the community to take responsibility for solving its own problems and use its own expertise and assets. That responsibility instills a sense of ownership, along with steady progress up the readiness ladder, and is likely to make community efforts successful.

Tools and Templates

Steps for Conducting a Community Readiness Assessment.
More information on how to gauge the readiness of the community.

Resources

Community Readiness
Community Readiness Model. College of Nature Sciences Tri-Ethnic Center for Prevention Research, Colorado State University.
Community Readiness: A Handbook for Successful Change. College of Nature Sciences Tri-Ethnic Center for Prevention Research, Colorado State University.
Case Study: Using the Community Readiness Model to Select Communities for a Community-Wide Obesity Prevention Intervention. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.
Community Readiness Assessment Methods & Questionnaire. Community Tool Box, University of Kansas.

References

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4. Sliwa S, Goldberg JP, Clark V, Collins J, Edwards R, Hyatt RR, et al. Using the community readiness model to select communities for a community-wide obesity prevention intervention. Prev Chronic Dis 2011;8(6):A150. Retrieved from http://www.cdc.gov/pcd/issues/2011/nov/10_0267.htm