What Is a Community Assessment?

The community assessment (CA) is the collection and analysis of data related to the needs and characteristics of Head Start-eligible children and families in the grantee service area (i.e., geographic area). It identifies program and community resources available to meet their needs and specifies where there are gaps. It provides important community demographic data you can use to direct your recruitment efforts to those children and families most in need of Head Start services.

The community assessment also helps you identify and understand the most significant issues and trends affecting families with young children in your service area. For example, it might identify a low-income housing shortage that could result in under-enrollment for your program. It could reveal a population shift from one geographic area to another, so the location of centers might need to be reassessed.

Ultimately, the information from the community assessment is used to inform programmatic decisions, including planning, service delivery, and evaluation, both at the grantee level and the federal level. Areas where the community assessment report impacts grantee level decisions include recruitment and selection criteria, staffing patterns, program options, location of centers, and how services will be delivered to children and families. Findings from your community assessment may also influence your program's long-range goals and short-term objectives.

On a federal level, community assessment findings gathered across grantee programs may point to emerging or changing needs within specific populations or geographic areas, which may in turn drive new priorities at a national level. For example, community assessments across a region may indicate a need to increase support for dual language learners or target training for staff coping with the aftermath of natural disasters.

> Community assessment data informs policies, programs, and practices, allowing resources to be allocated in ways that ensure equity and optimal child outcomes.

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Why Conduct a Community Assessment?

Through the community assessment process, programs are able to provide the Office of Head Start (OHS) with information about the changing needs of eligible children and families. This process also establishes baseline information and a current snapshot of the community. This, in turn, enables programs to project trends, develop strategies, and support continuous quality improvement.

The following pages describe eight basic reasons why programs conduct a comprehensive community assessment. Some reasons have to do with the program's funding requirements and internal planning; others relate to the program's external relationships with the community. However, all reasons point to this essential question: *How can Head Start ensure that the correct services are provided to the appropriate population?*

1. Meet Federal Regulations

- The Head Start Act </policy/head-start-act> sets forth requirements related to community-wide strategic planning.
- The community assessment process meets requirements in the HSPPS </policy/45-cfr-chap-xiii>.
- Aggregated community assessment data informs the OHS of child, family, and community needs.

What are the primary reasons your program conducts a community assessment? How does this motivation influence your community assessment report?

2. Make Decisions and Program Planning

- Community assessment data is integral in establishing long-term goals and measurable objectives.
- Program leadership, including governing body/Tribal Council, Policy Council, and program management, are required to use data from the community assessment in making decisions about program options, program calendar, types of services and collaborative partnerships, location of centers, recruitment areas, and recruitment and selection priorities.
- Community assessment data is used for designing and implementing comprehensive services that meet the needs of eligible children and families in a culturally competent manner. The community assessment provides data on child and family needs and strengths that help inform the program's coordinated approach to service delivery. (45 CFR §1302.101(b)(2) and (3) </policy/45-cfr-chap-xiii/1302-101-management-system>).
- Community assessment data helps with decision-making around enrollment criteria, such as what ages of children will be served, whether 3-year-olds must be prioritized, or if higher income private pay families will be enrolled in non-Head Start slots (45 CFR §§1302.14(a)(3) </policy/45-cfr-chap-xiii/1302-14-selection-process> and 1302.11(b)(3) </policy/45-cfr-chap-xiii/1302-11-determining-community-strengths-needs-resources>). These can be essential components of a program's selection criteria.
- Community assessment data informs policies, programs, and practices, allowing resources to be allocated in ways that ensure equity and optimal child outcomes.
- Through the community assessment, programs can determine the skills and competencies needed in the existing workforce, as well as gaps in professional development that need to be addressed to better serve children and families. This data helps inform the program's coordinated approach to professional development (45 CFR §1302.101(b)(1) </policy/45-cfr-chap-xiii/1302-101-management-system>).

New Director Tip

Equity and Community Assessments

Creating equitable learning opportunities for young children is fundamental to responsive program planning. Consider how your community assessment can help you recognize and build on each child's unique set of individual and family strengths, cultural background, home language, abilities, and experiences.

3. Educate Staff and Stakeholders

- A comprehensive community assessment is an effective way to educate staff, parents, advisory groups, the governing body, community members, and consultants about the needs, strengths, and characteristics of families, trends in the community, and how the grantee has designed its services.
- The community assessment can be used to orient new staff and volunteers and, with consideration of other program data, to plan training.
- The community assessment can help other agencies and organizations ensure their services are responsive to community needs. As part of this process, information from the community assessment can be used to establish memoranda of understanding (MOUs) between the Head Start program and other parties as a way to support continuity of service delivery.

4. Address Changing Priorities and Policies

- Community assessment data supports strategic responses to evolving priorities identified by OHS based on the latest evidence and research findings.
- Community assessment data supports strategic responses to changes in federal or state legislation and policy initiatives.

New Director Tip

Trends

Identifying trends is an important part of program planning. Being aware of changes in your community facilitates the development of goals that support responsive program services.

5. Respond to Trends and Changes in the Community

- The community assessment process, including the annual review and update of data, identifies community trends and changes.
- The community assessment helps identify the impact of demographic, social, and environmental changes—such as changes in the economy, local infrastructure, and natural disasters—on the Head Start program and eligible children and families. These events can impact a program in a variety of ways, including causing it to temporarily close, relocate, or adopt a different approach for service delivery.
- As a strengths-based process, the community assessment can help you anticipate and successfully address the impact of changes, such as identifying potential new partners. It provides information programs and staff need to design daily activities and experiences that meet the needs of children, neighborhoods, and communities.

6. Mobilize Community Resources

- The community assessment aids in identifying a range of existing community resources.
- The community assessment process identifies gaps in available services for Head Start-eligible families.
- Community assessment reports share information and opinions from employers, community groups, and a range of organizations throughout the community.
- With community assessment information about community need and available resources, social service agencies, healthcare providers, refugee and immigrant agencies, community support agencies (e.g., United Way), local school districts, and state child care and child welfare agencies can better coordinate programs and services to support low-income children and families.

7. Maximize Community Partnerships

- Head Start programs must establish ongoing collaborative relationships and partnerships with community organizations to facilitate access to community services that are responsive to the needs of children and families (45 CFR §1302.53(a)(1) </policy/45-cfr-chap-xiii/1302-53-community-partnerships-coordination-other-early-childhood-education-programs>).
- The community assessment reinforces the need for concerted efforts and provides information to help establish community-wide priorities.
- The community assessment can be used to identify new community partners.
- Working together with partners can result in improved service delivery, optimal use of existing resources, and the expansion or creation of new services.

8. Increase Financial Resources

- A comprehensive community assessment can be used to support private, state, or federal funding applications that require demographic information and needs assessment results.
- The community assessment can be used to identify and reinforce the need for new programs.
- Findings from the community assessment can be used to support requests to local businesses for funds, supplies, or other in-kind contributions.

Which of these eight reasons for community assessments do you most value?

Read more:

Community Assessment, Program Planning