Accurately assessing the situation in your community is important when making decisions about what ministries you will provide. Many projects fail because the people who planned them did not do a good needs assessment.

WHAT A COMMUNITY NEEDS ASSESSMENT CAN DO FOR YOU:

The purpose of a community needs assessment is to determine how well your ministries are currently meeting the needs of your community and what other types of resources and ministries you can provide in the future. This information can also be used to determine:

- How extensively your ministries are being used and to identify gaps
- Who uses the services and ways to reach new people
- How successful your ministries are and how they can be improved to reflect the community’s needs
- Whether the space and physical building are adequate for providing certain ministries
- How the community is changing
- Identify needs for new or expanded ministries
- Whether or not you have adequate staff and operating hours for certain ministries
- Gather information to establish priority areas of need in the community and create a specific plan to address those needs
- Gather information about possible future needs so that your ministry can prepare for them
- Ways your community might develop ministries that will prevent needs in the future
- Gives you a baseline of information so you can measure improvements in the future
- Gives you a true picture of the community’s needs and problems

All communities are in a continual state of change—through births and deaths of citizens, through people moving out and new people moving in, and through the natural growth and development of the community over time. As a consequence, what once may have been an appropriate ministry can eventually become inappropriate. The character or attitude of a community can shift as a result of the interplay of social, cultural, and economic changes.

The needs of different groups of people in a community are difficult to identify and frequently interrelated. In many instances, people do not express their attitudes and feelings openly. Sometimes community needs and opinions are not revealed until a crisis occurs. This makes priority setting and long-range planning essential. However, planning and action cannot be carried out effectively without accurate and up-to-date information about citizen needs and desires.

HOW OFTEN SHOULD YOU PERFORM A COMMUNITY NEEDS ASSESSMENT?

Performing a community needs assessment can be a major undertaking. If the demographics of your community change regularly, you need to assess it more often; a more stable community may not require frequent assessments. On the average, a community needs assessment should be done every five years to be sure you are providing ministries that meet current needs.
There are four steps to conducting a community needs assessment:
1) Determine who will conduct the study
2) Determine what kind of information should be collected
3) Determine how the information will be collected
4) Determine how the information will be used

WHO WILL CONDUCT THE STUDY?

The church staff should be involved as well as people in your church who are interested in meeting needs of people in the community. People who are retired make good information gathers because they are available during the day when community leaders are in their offices.

Because the information you gather about the community will be the same for all the churches in your community, it is recommended that you try to get your association involved in the community needs assessment. All the churches that want to participate can share information gathering and then share the results. You might also want to include other evangelical churches.

WHAT KIND OF INFORMATION WILL BE COLLECTED?

The second step is to decide what you hope to learn about your community and what kind of information you plan to collect. For example, do you hope to perform a broad-based study or one that is focused on a particular area of ministry?

Some categories may include:
- Demographic information
- Economic data
- Geographical and transportation information
- Historical development
- Social, cultural, educational, and recreational organizations
- Other helping agencies

HOW WILL THE INFORMATION BE COLLECTED?

The quality of information about a community is only as good as the techniques used to gather the information. A single technique may be too narrow in the information it provides. Using too many methods may be costly in terms of time and dollars. Different information gathering techniques are appropriate for different needs. Analyze the situation and the most significant questions being asked, and then weigh the advantages and disadvantages of several techniques. You can collect data by interviewing key informants in the community, holding a community forum, researching social indicators/demographic information from public records and reports, and performing field surveys. It is best if you can use more than one of these data collection methods in combination.
Key Informants

The key informant approach identifies community leaders and decision makers who are knowledgeable about the community and can accurately identify priority needs and concerns. Key informants complete a questionnaire or are interviewed to obtain their impressions of community needs. The information is then analyzed and reported to the church or association.

Key informants of the community, also known as gatekeepers, are people who hold socially responsible positions such as educators, public officials, clergy, and business representatives or are active in community events. Key informants, by virtue of their positions in the community, have wide contact with people in the community. Typically, community members turn to key informants for help in answering their questions. By interviewing key informants, you can get a better understanding of their impressions of your ministry and how well it serves the community.

The objectives of the needs assessment can help determine the most appropriate kind of people to act as key informants. These might include long-time residents, business owners, community leaders, church leaders, and people representing a variety of life styles, ages, viewpoints, or ethnic backgrounds. Few people in a community will be able to speak about everything. Therefore, the problem should be in focus before the informant is selected.

Community Forum

Another data collection option is to hold a community forum. A community forum involves holding a group event that may include the entire community. It is a good idea to include as many as possible of the people who use or potentially could use your ministry to help decide what should be available through your ministry. Community forums can give visibility to your ministry and raise its status within the community. The community forum should provide an opportunity for people in the community to get together and make an honest, objective assessment of what the community has to offer and what the community’s needs are as well as offering some suggestions for improvement.

The community forum could also take place in the form of a block party. Forms could be provided for people to fill out. Offer to interview people and fill out the forms for them. If people cannot read or are low readers, they may have difficulty filling out the form and will not even try. Offering to fill it out for them keeps them from being embarrassed and ensures that you get everyone’s opinion.

Possible questions to ask in a forum are:
1. What are the strengths and the positive things about living in this community? What do you like about living in this community? This can be a good way to start the discussion and get people to open up and share their thoughts about the positive aspects of living in their community.

2. What are the problems or negative things about living in this community? What do you not like about living in this community?
3) What are some things you would like to see changed? What would make this a better place to live?

4) What are some things a church or group of churches could do to make the community a better place to live?

Public Records

Already existing statistical data is used to obtain insights about the well-being of people. This approach uses descriptive statistics such as census data, labor surveys, bank deposit data, sales tax reports, police reports, school, and hospital information to prepare an assessment report for the community.

A more objective method of data collection is to use public records such as the national census to find out the social indicators or demographics of your community. Using these techniques, research has found several factors that tend to contribute to use of ministries such as age, gender, educational level, income level, locality, and marital status. To obtain a demographic report of your community send an e-mail to demographics@namb.net or call (770) 410-6000.

Surveys

Information is gathered from a representative sample of community residents about issues pertaining to their well-being. Data is collected by personal interviews, telephone surveys, hand-delivered questionnaires, or mail questionnaires. Responses are generally representative of the whole community.

Surveys and questionnaires involve asking individuals in the community about their needs. Surveys can be implemented in several ways:

- Mailing questionnaires to randomly selected members of the community, or in small communities, to all households
- Performing telephone surveys
- Handing out surveys while people are in your church or ministry center
- Posting questionnaires on your Web site
- Knocking on doors randomly in the community and asking people the questions on the questionnaire form

The survey technique is unique in that it is the only needs assessment method, other than talking to every citizen that has the potential of representing all people in the community. In this respect, it is a relatively inexpensive way to gather information from a large number of people. If a survey is well designed and implemented, the results can be generalized to a larger population.
HOW WILL THE INFORMATION BE USED?

To make use of the information you have collected, the results have to be interpreted. To interpret the data, some statistical analyses are often applied to identify what the majority of the community feels are the most important needs. An important feature of the results should be a reflection of whether the current goals of the ministry are meeting and will continue to meet the needs of the community. Is the ministry providing services for the present needs of the community or for past needs?

When the data analysis is complete, it should be possible to produce a rank-ordered list of the most important changes identified by the community. This ranking can be used to set budget and ministry priorities.

How will the data obtained be organized, analyzed, and presented? The results should be tabulated and summarized. Interpretation of the survey results involves summing up responses to individual questions. Try to identify trends and draw conclusions. After the results have been thoroughly analyzed, a report should be issued. It is often very helpful to illustrate results using graphs or bar charts.

For more information about conducting a community needs assessment, see His Heart, Our Hands: A Guide to Ministry Evangelism available at LifeWay Christian Bookstores or at www.namb.net/catalog. You can also get more information at www.namb.net/training.