OVC's Technical Assistance Guide Series

Guide to Conducting a Needs Assessment

Online Guides from OVC

Publication Date: January 2010

This guide will help you conduct a comprehensive needs assessment of your community, target populations, and the services available to them. It will also guide you in using the results of your needs assessment to further develop, refine, and implement your program.

How can needs assessments help? Here's an example: After conducting an assessment, you learn that domestic violence victims in your area need dental care. With this information, you reach out to local dental offices and ask them to provide this service. You also learn that a local community-based organization has already established relationships with dental care providers, and you invite this organization to become part of your initiative. You even consider including dental referrals when you initially refer victims to medical services.

Needs assessment: the systematic effort to gather information from various sources that will help you identify the needs of victims in your community and the resources that are available to them. It will help you pinpoint reasons for gaps in your program's performance and identify new and future performance needs.

About This Series

OVC's series of four technical assistance guides are tools for victim service providers and allied professionals, like you, who want or need to conduct program evaluations or needs assessments. The guides will help you make critical decisions and ensure that you make the best use of your funds to promote the goals and purposes of your program. These four guides were originally developed for OVC and the grantees who received funding to serve victims of human trafficking. The guides have since been adapted for use by other grantees and organizations that provide programs for victims of any type of crime.

Guide to Performance Measurement and Program Evaluation
Prepare goals and objectives, identify performance measures and program outcomes, identify evaluation questions, create a program planning or logic model, select evaluation design, decide on data collection methods, analyze and present data, use evaluation data

Guide to Conducting a Needs Assessment
Design your needs assessment, determine data collection methods, analyze and present data, use the needs assessment results for planning

Guide to Hiring a Local Evaluator
Find a local evaluator, determine questions to ask and what to look for, decide on what to include in job descriptions, find out how to work effectively with evaluators

Guide to Protecting Human Subjects
Read about the law related to protecting human subjects, learn about key issues you need to address when conducting research that involves human subjects, learn about Institutional Review Boards and how to involve them in your research

About This Guide

Overview

This guide contains basic information on how to conduct a needs assessment. The guide is organized around six key steps, each of which should be addressed in your needs assessment:

1. Formulate needs assessment questions.
2. Review existing data sources.
3. Collect new data.
4. Analyze data.
5. Report findings.
6. Use your findings.

The guide includes a resources section with references and a glossary and appendixes containing sample tools, templates, and instruments to assist you with your needs assessment.

How To Use the Guide

You may or may not need to use the entire guide. If you need help formulating questions for your needs assessment and identifying data sources, refer to steps 1–3. For help presenting the results of your needs assessment or using them to inform program planning, refer to steps 5–6. If you are looking for sample instruments for collecting data, refer to the appendixes. In short, look to this guide for whatever help you need in conducting your needs assessment.

Other guides are available in this OVC series to assist you with needs assessment and program evaluation:

- ***Guide to Performance Measurement and Program Evaluation***
- ***Guide to Hiring a Local Evaluator***
- ***Guide to Protecting Human Subjects***

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Step 1. Formulate Needs Assessment Questions

One of the first tasks of conducting a needs assessment is to identify what you want to learn about your community. What questions do you need answered to help you develop the best program for victims in your area?

Here are some questions to consider:

- What victim services are being provided within your community? How accessible are these services (e.g., hours, location, language capacity)?
- How familiar are the key partners and community members with the issue you are trying to address?
- Have providers in your area been trained on the issue? What are some additional training needs?
- What outreach efforts are made to educate the public about the issue and the services you provide?
- Who in your area is best suited to identify potential victims?
- Which organizations are currently working with the victims you are trying to help?
- What types of victims have these organizations seen? Are the victims from other countries? What languages do they speak?
- What services do the victims need? Are you able to meet these needs? What additional support do providers need?

- Do you have collaborations in place for working with victims? Are you able to pool your resources?
- Are there any obstacles to accomplishing your mission? What are they? How can they be resolved?

These are just examples of some of the questions you may want answered about your community. The key partners of your initiative will play an important role in framing the issues to be addressed in the needs assessment. Clearly, understanding and articulating what it is you want to learn will help keep the needs assessment focused and purposeful.

Step 2. Review Existing Data Sources

The next step in the needs assessment process is to answer your needs assessment questions. First, review any data sources that already exist, such as previous studies conducted in your area and documents and records from relevant organizations. When reviewing these, keep several things in mind:

- Do the existing data directly address your community and your issue? Are the data recent or outdated?
- Do existing documents and records provide enough information to answer your needs assessment questions?
- Do you have access to all relevant data from key organizations? How can you gain access? What if you cannot gain access?
- What additional data do you need to answer your needs assessment questions?

If additional data are needed to answer your needs assessment questions, it may be best to collect new data. The next section discusses how to collect your own data.

Step 3: Collect New Data

The three primary methods for collecting new data for a needs assessment are interviews, focus groups, and surveys. This section discusses each data collection method; sample instruments are provided in **appendix B** (PDF 101 KB). Make certain to obtain informed consent from people who participate in the data collection. For guidance on the protection of human subjects, refer to the ***Guide to Protecting Human Subjects*** in this series.

Interviews

Using a structured set of questions, you can conduct interviews in person or over the telephone. Face-to-face interviews allow you to observe a respondent's nonverbal communication, which can help shape the direction of the interview. Telephone interviews can be useful when time, travel, and budget limitations prevent meeting in person.

Here are some tips for conducting an interview:

- **Talk slowly with a moderate tone.** A measured pace and tone will facilitate the flow of information to and from respondents.
- **Keep the discussion focused.** Because the time available for each question is limited, focus on the topic at hand. Be willing and able to rein in the conversation if it goes astray.
- **Use silence to allow for elaboration.** Allowing for pauses will give respondents an opportunity to formulate their thoughts on a topic, think of additional information, and transition from one question to the next.
- **Probe for clarification.** Answers to questions are not always direct and may require clarification or followup. Steer the respondent toward the issue at hand.

Focus Groups

A focus group is similar to an interview but involves talking to a group of people who have direct experience or information to share on a given topic. Focus group questions should guide the group's discussion.

A focus group requires a lot of planning. This checklist can help you with the planning process:

- ✓ Determine the participants you will need (e.g., number, type) and generate a contact list.
- ✓ Secure a location for the meeting. Visit the site to make sure it is accessible and comfortable.

✓

Send an invitation letter to prospective participants that explains the purpose of the focus group, the types of questions that will be asked, that participation is voluntary, and that any information participants give will be kept confidential. Provide contact information in case the letter's recipients have questions.

✓

Be sure to invite people with diverse perspectives. However, if you are aware of individuals who may have strong opinions and tend to dominate group discussions, you may want to interview them separately. It is important to ensure that the focus group itself is a comfortable environment in which people can share their different points of view.

✓

Hire a skilled facilitator. Select someone who has experience conducting focus groups with diverse participants and who has succeeded with previous groups in making sure the goals of the focus group are met. Meet with the facilitator beforehand to review the goals of the focus group and the focus group guide. If necessary, also hire an interpreter.

✓

Develop the focus group guide (e.g., script, questions). Seek feedback from the facilitator, who will need to be familiar with the guide. Develop a form to collect basic demographic information (e.g., gender, age, race).

✓ Identify and hire a skilled note taker for the day of the meeting.

✓

Send a reminder to participants. If possible, collect informed consent statements prior to the meeting. For minors (younger than age 18), secure informed assent from the minor and informed consent from a parent or guardian.

✓

A few days before the meeting, visit the site to make sure you have all the resources you need (e.g., projector, boards, chairs, tables). At this time, you may want to determine the types of refreshments to be served.

✓ On the meeting day, arrive early to set up the room to foster a positive environment.

✓

If you have not already obtained the appropriate forms from participants, ask them to complete the demographic information and the informed consent forms.

✓ Conduct your focus group meeting.

✓ After the discussion, give participants information about who to contact if they have more to say. Thank everyone for contributing.

✓ Shortly after the meeting, analyze the notes to determine if any followup is necessary.

The questions asked during the focus group should be broad enough to foster a discussion, yet structured enough to keep the discussion focused on the information you need. Using a skilled facilitator will help you to get the data you need from the meeting.

Sample focus group materials can be found in **appendix B** (PDF 101 KB).

Surveys

A survey is a research tool used to collect information using structured questions that are primarily closed-ended (e.g., yes/no questions, rating questions). You may also decide to include a few open-ended questions that ask respondents to explain their answers so you can obtain more information about an issue. Surveys can be administered by mail, in person, or over the telephone.

Exhibit 1 illustrates examples of questions you might ask as well as the format for different answer choices.

Exhibit 1
Sample Survey Questions and Answer Choices

Question	Formats for Answer Choice
Are you familiar with the Crime Victims' Rights Act of 2004?	Circle one: No Somewhat Very 1 2 3 4 5
What outreach efforts have you used to educate the community about the Crime Victims' Rights Act?	Check all that apply: ❑ Media campaigns ❑ Seminars and workshops ❑ Newspaper articles and newsletters ❑ Other: _____
Does your state or local community have legislation on victims' rights?	Check one: ❑ Yes ❑ No
Please describe the difficulty you have experienced trying to enforce victims' rights in your area.	Describe: _____ _____ _____

Using a combination of open- and closed-ended questions will help keep the respondent engaged and help you obtain the data you need to answer your assessment questions. Furthermore, pilot testing your survey instrument will help you ensure that the questions are asked in a way that will yield meaningful answers.

Exhibit 2 presents the pros and cons of each data collection method presented in this guide.

Exhibit 2
Collecting New Data

Method	Advantages	Potential Challenges	Time Required To Conduct	Time Required To Anlalyze	Resource Intensity
In-Person Interviews	You can obtain more detailed information about complex issues, ask followup questions immediately, and observe nonverbal communication that can help shape the direction of the interview.	It can be more costly to conduct site visits, and you may have to limit the number of people that you interview.	High	High	Medium to High
Telephone Interviews	You can obtain detailed information from respondents who are geographically dispersed, and you may save costs compared with in-person interviews.	It may be difficult to get someone to talk to you for an extended period. Scheduling the interview may be difficult.	Medium to High	Medium	Medium
Focus Groups	You are able to convene a group of experts on your topic, and the discussion can yield insightful information generated by the discussion.	Some participants may not feel comfortable sharing their true feelings or knowledge in a group setting.	Medium	High	Medium to High
Surveys	You can solicit specific information from a larger number of people. If	If administered over the telephone, it may be difficult to schedule a	Low to Medium	Low	Medium

	you mail surveys, you allow people to complete them at a time most convenient for them. You also can administer them online to increase the response rate.	time to talk or to get people to talk for an extended period. If administered via mail, it may be difficult to motivate people to complete and mail in the survey, which may result in a lower response rate.			

Using a combination of the methods described in this section may work best for you. For example, you may decide to conduct a telephone survey and then, based on the preliminary findings, conduct a focus group to further explore what was learned from the survey. When selecting a data collection approach, remember that the ultimate goal is to collect the best information you can to help you learn about the service needs and resources available in your area.

Step 4. Analyze Data

Once you collect the data, you will then need to analyze the data to learn more about your community resources and needs. Your approach to analyzing the data depends largely on the type of data collected: qualitative or quantitative.

Qualitative data are typically obtained from open-ended questions, the answers to which are not limited by a set of choices or a numerical scale. For example, qualitative data include answers to questions such as “What experiences have you had working with victims of sexual assault?” or “How can services to sexual assault victims be improved in your area?”—but only if the study participant is not restricted by a preselected set of answers. These types of questions are usually asked during interviews, focus groups, or as open-ended questions on a survey instrument. They yield responses that explain in detail the participant’s position, knowledge, or feelings about an issue. Qualitative data are analyzed to look for trends or patterns in the responses. These trends or patterns are the general statements that you can make about your community.

Quantitative data are data collected in surveys or through other means in the form of numbers and are usually presented as totals, percentages, and rates. For example, quantitative data include answers to questions such as “How many hours do you spend looking for resources for your domestic violence clients?” or “How many radio announcements have you put out this year?” These closed-ended questions are usually asked on a survey instrument in which the participant circles a preset answer choice or provides a numeric response. Quantitative data are used to generate averages or percentages across the responses. These averages or percentages tell you what proportion of your respondents feel a certain way or have a certain level of knowledge about an issue.

Depending on your skills as a qualitative or quantitative data analyst, you may want to hire a local evaluator or consultant to help you analyze your data. Some questions to ask when considering whether you need outside help include the following:

- Do you have enough experience analyzing qualitative and quantitative data to make sense of the data collected?
- Do you have sufficient time to thoroughly analyze the data?
- Do you have the funds to hire an evaluator?
- Are you able to use the data to answer the needs assessment questions in the most effective way?

Assuming that funds are available, consider hiring a local evaluator if the answer to many of these questions is no. The ***Guide to Hiring a Local Evaluator***, included in this series, can help you do this.

It is also critical to manage and protect your data. Information received through research or assessment efforts must remain confidential and protected from exposure. The ***Guide to Protecting Human Subjects*** contains additional information about protecting information collected during your needs assessment.

A Brief Note on Data Storage and Analysis

You will need to store the data you collect in a data management system that works best for you. Data management systems can include software packages such as SPSS, Microsoft Access, and Excel. Consult with key partners, your local evaluator, or experts on data management for how you should store your data.

After you store the data, you need to analyze them to understand what they mean. Data analysis techniques vary depending largely on which data management system you use and the types of data

collected. Here, your goal is to glean answers to your needs assessment questions so that you have as complete a picture as possible of your community and its resources and needs. For more information on data analysis, consult with key partners, your local evaluator, or experts on data analysis. Because the data management and analysis tasks can require an inordinate amount of skill, you may want to seek assistance.

Step 5. Report Findings

After data have been collected and analyzed, report the findings to the key partners and interested stakeholders of your initiative. Listed below are the basic components of a needs assessment report. For an example of a full report, see ***Needs Assessment of Victim Service Providers and Trafficking Victims***.

Introduction

The introduction tells your readers why you conducted the needs assessment and the main questions you attempted to answer. It also includes the roadmap for the report, which lets readers know, up front, what to expect in each section of the report.

Background and Understanding

This section lays out the foundation readers will need to understand the issue at hand. A general discussion of the issue can educate your readers on the scope and complexity of the problem. For example, you may want to discuss federal rules and regulations that have been enacted to combat a particular type of crime and the reality of working under these guidelines. You might then discuss the extent of the problem within your state and local community such as local legislation (or the lack thereof) that is in place to help combat the problem and the realities of working under these local guidelines. This discussion should lead readers to the justification for why the crime problem in your area needs to be addressed.

Methodology

The methodology section discusses the steps taken to formulate and conduct the needs assessment. In this section, describe in sufficient detail how you developed and administered your data collection protocols; how you got people to participate and who, generally, those participants were; and how you handled any problems you encountered. In addition, you might describe what documents you reviewed and how you gained access to them. This discussion should provide adequate detail so that readers will understand exactly how you conducted your needs assessment and be able to conduct similar needs assessments in their own communities.

Key Findings

After you have set the stage for the needs assessment study (e.g., main questions you attempted to answer, scope of the problem, method used to obtain data), you will discuss your key findings. This section should answer your needs assessment questions—overall, what you learned about your community so that you can improve the services you provide to victims. This section is often of utmost importance to funding institutions that need concrete information on the state of the problem in your area and information to support or justify your plans for your grant. Give special consideration to how you present the findings (e.g., bar charts, pie charts, graphs, maps) so that you capture the reader's interest.

Recommendations

In this section, describe the lessons you have learned from your needs assessment. Here, supported with actual local data, you tell the reader what ought to be done to best assist victims. These recommendations will guide your initiative and help to develop and refine your program and its services.

Step 6. Use Your Findings

Once the needs assessment report is written, highlighting all the things you have learned about your community, you need to use this knowledge to take action. Take what you have learned to set your initiative's goals and objectives for the grant. Use the findings to point yourself in the right direction for developing, refining, and implementing your overall program plan.

You can also—

- Post findings on your Web site to educate the field.
- Present findings at meetings, workshops, seminars, and conferences.
- Communicate key findings in a brochure, fact sheet, or poster.

All of these efforts will help you get the word out about your project, the needs of victims in your area, what is being done, and what yet needs to be done to combat the problem.

Additionally, your needs assessment findings can serve as baseline data for your program evaluation. Consult the ***Guide to Performance Measurement and Program Evaluation*** to learn more about using your needs assessment data to evaluate your program.

Conclusion

This guide gives you insight into the needs assessment process, an undertaking that will greatly help you develop and implement your programs. For sample materials to assist you with this endeavor, see the appendixes.

Resources

References

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Glossary

Data are factual information, especially information organized for analysis or used to reason or make decisions. They are pieces of specific information collected as part of an evaluation.

Data analysis is the process of applying systematic methods or statistical techniques to compare, describe, explain, or summarize data.

Evaluation plan provides the framework for conducting the evaluation.

Evaluator is an individual trained and experienced in designing and conducting evaluations.

Focus group is a small-group discussion guided by a trained facilitator for gathering data on a designated topic.

Goals are measurable statements of the desired longer term, global impact of the program. Goals generally address change.

Key partners are organizations that are partners of your program through formal agreements or memorandums of understanding.

Needs assessment is the systematic effort to gather information from various sources that will help you identify the needs of victims in your community and the resources that are available to them. It will help you pinpoint reasons for gaps in your program's performance and identify new and future performance needs.

Objectives are specific, measurable statements of the desired immediate or direct outcomes of the program that support the accomplishment of a goal.

Performance measurement is the ongoing monitoring and reporting of a program's accomplishments and its progress toward preestablished goals.

Program evaluation is a systematic process of obtaining credible information to be used for program assessment and improvement.

Qualitative data are a record of thoughts, observations, opinions, or words. They are difficult to measure, count, or express in numerical

terms.

Quantitative data are numeric information, or a rating of an opinion on a scale, usually from 1 to 5. They can be counted, measured, compared, or expressed in numerical terms.

Research questions are questions developed by the evaluator to define the issues to be investigated and are worded so that they can be answered using research methods.

Appendixes

- **Appendix A: Sample Needs Assessment Action Plan Template** (PDF 19.9 KB)
- **Appendix B: Sample Data Collection Instruments** (PDF 101 KB)