The Community Tool Box

Our Mission

Promoting community health and development by connecting people, ideas and resources

Collecting Information About the Problem

Why should you collect information about the problem?

How do you collect this information?

What are the limitations of using this information?

You are working -- and working hard -- for a cause that you believe in. Maybe you were a teen mother, and now want to help others avoid the struggles you went through, so you became treasurer of a coalition that helps girls prevent pregnancy. Perhaps you joined a group aimed at smoking cessation after your father died of lung cancer. Or maybe you were just worried about the future your children will have, so you attended a town meeting on violence -- and now, somehow, you find yourself running the organization.

The point is, whatever the problem you are working on happens to be, you know how important it is. You have seen the consequences, and, to the extent possible, you don't want to see them anymore. But how can you convince other people of the problem's importance? That is where this section collecting information about the problem comes in.

One way to convince others about a problem is to tell stories or provide information about how the problem affects the quality of people's lives. People need to have an understanding of the human cost of an issue. Telling the story of how Shelly's pregnancy at age 14 changed her life can certainly help increase awareness of the problem of teen pregnancy, and may help you garner support for your organization.

But descriptions alone don't tell how extensive the problem is. If you can tell people just how many "Shellys" exist in your community compared to other communities, then that can be very helpful, for a variety of reasons. A quantitative approach helps you be very specific and accurate about the level of the problem both in your community, and in other communities as well. It helps you compare the problem across geographic regions and across periods of time.

That's what this section of the Community Tool Box is all about. In the next few pages, we'll be talking about hard data: where to get it, and also how to use it. We'll also talk about the limitations of using this information. Finally, at the end of this section you'll find specific examples of ways to display this information.

First, however, let's look at some of the reasons why you might want to collect this information when you are conducting your research.

Why should you collect information about the problem?

Many of us hate doing research. Perhaps you, too, have found yourself staring at pages of figures and equations and decided it was a really good day for a root canal. The advantages of having this information at your fingertips, however, are enormous. We think it's really a worthwhile task, for many reasons. Some of the best include:

- *Knowledge.* Reality talks. Knowing the facts is a stark way of determining the size of the gap between your vision of a healthy community and the reality in which you live. Gathering information from the time period before your organization got started (also known as baseline data) is an excellent way to show the magnitude of the problem.
- *Credibility counts.* If you are able to talk easily in a casual conversation about the exact numbers of people affected by the issue you are involved in, you come across as knowledgeable, serious, and well organized. Writing down those same figures (in greater detail, of course) as part of a grant application or project summary for potential funders and evaluators says that you are a well-run group who can get the job done.
- *Awareness leads to change.* You can use the statistics you have found to raise community awareness of a number of things: how serious the problem is, how well (or how poorly) your community is doing in relation to other communities or to the nation as a whole, and last but not least: how well your coalition is attacking the problem at hand.

How do you collect this information?

So, how do you go about finding this information? There are two ways to go about it: you can use information that's already out there (after all, there's no sense in reinventing the wheel); or, if what you are looking for just doesn't seem to exist, you can collect new information yourself. Either way, there are ten steps you will want to go through, to help make your information collecting as efficient and as painless as possible.

Ten steps in information collection

1. Agree on the value and purpose of the information that you will collect

As we have said, we think there are a lot of excellent, general reasons to have the facts about your issue at your fingertips. But why, exactly, does your group need this information? How will you use it? Will it be shown only to members of your organization, or do you want to make it public? For example, the AIDS project in a small community might come up against large amounts of prejudice trying to discuss the percentage of young people who practice safe sex. The staff of the project may decide that information is useful for planning purposes, but may decide to publicly discuss a different topic, such as the number of babies who are born HIV-positive.

2. Determine when you want to use this data

Another important decision you need to make is *when* is this data important. This is really two decisions:

For what time period do you want to find information? Often, it's helpful to look for information either *right now*, or from the time when your coalition first got started. This latter information, sometimes known as baseline data, tells the scope of the problem before you started work. Later on in the lifespan of your coalition, you can track how things have changed, and determine how effective you have been.

Additionally, many organizations find it a good idea to collect information on a regular basis, such as once a year. This helps you to keep on top of the latest information (always helpful for grantmakers, as well as for your constituents), as well as to determine your effectiveness, as we mentioned above. This also lets you examine the trends important to your group as they change from year to year.

When do you want to make this information public? Often, you want to make the information known right away. Other times, however, you might want to wait a bit. Maybe you would like to announce it in conjunction with a national/international event that is happening, in hopes of gathering even more media coverage. For example, you might want to announce the dramatic rise in the number of people in your city who are HIV-positive on December 1st, which is International AIDS Day. Alternatively, an important local event, such as a symposium on youth violence, can be an excellent time to get the message out.

3. Determine exactly what you want to know

What, exactly, do you want to know? Are you just looking for statistics, or do you want to collect some qualitative information (life stories, local heroes, etc.) as well? Do you want to determine incidence rate, or prevalence rate, or both (see the example at the end of this chapter for information on these rates)? And on which issues? The more precise you are in your thinking at the beginning, the easier you will find your search.

4. Determine who will find the information

Will it be you? A staff member? A volunteer? Do you want one person to focus on collecting the data, or do you want to have several people working on it? Brainstorm who in your organization has experience in collecting data, and also who might be interested in doing so. And do they have enough time to do the job?

5. Identify possible sources of information

There are a lot of different places where you can find relevant information, depending on your topic. Some of them include:

- *The state or county health department* can help you determine health indicators on a variety of issues.
- *The state human service department* should be able to tell you the number of recipients of Medicaid, and food stamp program participants.
- *Hospital admission and exit records* exist and can give you information on teen fertility, causes of death, etc. Depending on where you live, some of the data may not be part of the public record, but it may be possible to purchase some of it, or arrange to use it in some form.
- *Census data:* Demographic information is available for your community and the United States as a whole. This information can be found on **Bureau of Census** web site. Many states have similar information on their own web sites as well.
- County Health Rankings: This website provides health rankings for nearly every county in the nation. The County Health Rankings model includes four types of health factors: health behaviors, clinical care, social and economic, and the physical environment. The **County Health Rankings** illustrate what we know when it comes to what's making people sick or healthy, and can help community leaders see that our environment influences how healthy we are and how long we live, and even what parts of our environment are most influential.
- *Police records* can tell you crime rates and the incidence of problems such as domestic violence or motor vehicle accidents.
- *Chamber of Commerce data* discusses job growth, the unemployment rate, etc.
- Nonprofit service agencies, such as the United Way or Planned Parenthood, generally have records on a variety of different issues. Often, these agencies have already conducted surveys and found the information you need.
- S*chool districts* can tell you graduation rates, test scores, and truancy rates for your school and others. For comparative figures across school districts, check with your state department of education.

- **Centers for Disease Control** reportable disease files can give you national information on the rates of many diseases, such as AIDS.
- *Your reference librarian* is often a very helpful person.
- Other professional contacts you have can lead you to sources of information particular to your interest.
- *Statistical Abstract of the United States* is a good general source in print for national information. It's done annually, and is available in most local libraries.
- *Specialized local, statewide, or national organizations* may help. For example, if you were interested in Alzheimer's disease, or tree planting, or lead poisoning, you would want to track down and consult with an organization specializing in that field. (Gale's Encyclopedia of Associations is a good national source). Many such organizations have good web sites of their own, too.
- Many *web pages* not listed above may now exist with the information you are looking for. For some of the best, see the section of the Community Tool Box entitled *Connections and Links*, found under *Community Building Tools*.

6. Set limits as to how much information you want to collect

Too much information will be just as much of a problem as not enough. Decide on the limits of what you are going to collect, or you will just get lost among the stacks of data that have piled up on your desk.

7. Collect the data

If you have done all of the preparatory work up to this point, this is the easy part. List the sources of data you have found, both in order of those you think are best and those you think are easiest to find (see the Tools section for an example). Start with those, and then get to work.

8. Identify gaps in your knowledge

After you have finished collecting, it's time to take a hard look at the information you have found. Were you able to determine everything you were looking for, or did you not find some important data? Perhaps the information that you have found has made you realize there is other helpful information that you didn't originally research.

For example, when you were researching the rate of people who have HIV in your community, maybe you realized that many of these people have at least one other sexually transmitted disease (STD) as well. So then, you decide you would like to broaden your information gathering to include how many people with other STDs have contracted AIDS. Alternatively, you might decide that having another STD is a risk factor for HIV-positive. (See Chapter 19, Section 2: *Understanding Risk and Protective Factors: Their Use in Selecting Potential Targets and Promising Strategies for Interventions* for more information on risk factors).

9. Redo the process to try to fill those gaps -- or collect your own data

Now that you have identified what information you still need to find, you have two choices. You might have simply missed a good information source the first time, so brainstorm with others in your group to see if you can think of any places you missed. However, it's also possible, that the information you want to find just isn't out there, in which case it's up to you to collect it. See the following heading, *Collecting new information*, to learn how to do this.

10. If possible, you might want to compare data for your community with that of other communities, or that of the nation as a whole or to trend out your own community's data over time.

It's good to put the information you have found in context, either positive or negative. Saying, "The level of violent crime in our community is twice the national average," helps put the magnitude of the problem you are facing in the proper perspective for the rest of the community. And on the other hand, if you can say, "The rate of students who graduate from high school in our city is 10% above the national average," it's a great way to celebrate your community's strengths.

Collecting new information

Usually, when you are trying to determine facts about the problem, the information is already out there, in one form or another. If you've looked, though, and are absolutely sure that the information you need just isn't there, it's time to create it yourself. To do so, you'll still need to go through the ten steps listed above, except for number five; but in addition, you will want to do the following:

1. Identify the method of collecting information that is best suited to your purpose. Different methods that are often used include:

Surveys are one of the best ways to find the quantitative information that your organization may want to know. They can be written, face to face, or done by telephone. For more information on writing and conducting a survey, see Chapter 3, Section 7: *Conducting Needs Assessment Surveys*; Chapter 3, Section 10: *Conducting Concerns Surveys*; Chapter 31, Section 3: *Gathering Data on Public Opinion*; and Chapter 38, Section 7: *Using Behavioral Surveys*.

Focus groups, public forums, and listening sessions are all good ways to find information as well. However, these approaches are better suited to finding qualitative information than to determining quantified facts. See Chapter 3, Section 3: *Conducting Public Forums and Listening Sessions*; Chapter 3, Section 6: *Conducting Focus Groups*; Chapter 3, Section 12: *Conducting Interviews*; Chapter 3, Section 15: *Qualitative Methods to Assess Community Issues*.

2. Decide if you want to inform the public of what you are doing.

And if you decide that it is tactically wise, then let people know what you are doing from the start. (You will probably want to update them during and after the process as well.) You might consider writing a press release (see Chapter 6, Section 3: *Preparing Press Releases*) to do so. Include key facts that you have gathered from earlier data. For example, you might say, "In 1990, the teen pregnancy rate in Godnaw County was 26 girls out of every 1000, or 2.6%. The Godnaw County Teen Pregnancy Prevention Program is in the process of finding out how this figure has changed in the last eight years."

Remember, though, that when you tell people what you are doing, they will usually have questions. So be prepared with a clear process for responding to any queries or concerns that might arise.

3. Train the people who will be collecting the information.

Sending poorly trained staff members or volunteers to collect new information can cause serious problems and lead to results that are unhelpful at best. At worst, this can invalidate all of the time and effort you spent trying to determine the information. The manner in which questions are asked, who is asked, and even when they are asked can have a huge impact on the results you receive. So train your information collectors before you start. For information on training staff and volunteers, see Chapter 10, Section 7: *Developing Training Programs for Staff*, and Chapter 11, Section 4: *Developing Training Programs for Volunteers*.

4. Collect and tabulate your data.

Although this can take a while, as mentioned before, if you have done all the steps leading up to this, you're once again at the easy part. Good luck!

5. Report (and use) your findings.

Even if you decided during the planning process to wait to go public with your findings, you will still probably discuss them with members of your group right away. You might ask everyone at a staff meeting to talk about how this new information will change their individual projects, or work together to rewrite the project plan.

In any case, be sure to use the information you have found, don't just file it away somewhere!

6. Continue to review and collect information on a regular basis. Unless you're planning to conduct a short intervention or initiative and then leave town, you'll need to update the information you have. Communities and conditions change, and you can't assume that what's true today will still be true in six months or a year. If the data you have is more than a year old, it's simply not reliable. You have to plan to keep collecting data for the long term.

What are the limitations of using this information?

Of course, knowing the incidence and prevalence of a problem is certainly not a cure-all for solving all of your coalition's woes, nor is it the only information worth collecting. In the worst case, the information can actually mislead people who are trying to understand the problem. As Mark Twain was fond of saying, "There are lies, damned lies, and statistics." When you are collecting or speaking about your data, be sure to:

- Obtain your data from enough people to make it worthwhile. Or, if you are using previously gathered information, find out how many people were studied. As a rule of thumb, don't determine a rate from a population of less than 30 people - and although that's the smallest number that can be used to generate most statistics, it's probably nowhere near enough to give an accurate picture. There just aren't enough people for your data to be credible. If you did a voluntary survey on drug use among high school students and only got 5 respondents, your results might vary widely from the truth. For example, you may have had 5 students who don't use drugs at all, (There are no drugs in our schools!) or maybe four of the students were friends who all smoke marijuana regularly (80% of our students use drugs on a regular basis!) Probably neither of these statistics is close to the truth. The sample population simply wasn't large enough to get a true estimate.
- When you are giving a rate, never forget to give it, as the definition states, in terms of another measured quantity. Just saying, 43 students are smokers, doesn't give the listener enough information to really understand the problem. Is it 43 students out of 50? Or out of 5000? Always be sure to give your information in context. A confused listener is not someone who will be helpful to your cause.
- As helpful as statistics can be, they don't ever tell the whole story. People relate to individual stories: the friendly neighborhood mechanic who died of lung cancer, the fourth grader who was killed in a drive by shooting. Just the facts might be good police work; but for your organizations work, never forget the people behind those statistics.

In Summary

There is a story about a group of birds who took a class to learn to fly. They all attended the class faithfully for weeks, and then, when it was over, they all tucked their diplomas under their wings and walked back home. So use the information you have found to further your cause, and fly with it. There's no question that changing our communities for the better is a tough battle. But by being able to determine the magnitude of the problem, you've made a powerful first step towards winning the war.

Resources

Aspen Reference Group. (1996). Community Health: Education and Promotion Material. Gaithersburg, MD: Author.

Fawcett, S.B., et al. (1993). Concerns Report Handbook: Planning for Community Health.

Feldman, J.G. (1981). Indices of Community Health. In D.W. Clark & B. MacMahon, (Eds.), Preventative and Community Medicine. (pp.37-57). Boston, MA: Little Brown and Co.

The Healthcare Forum Leadership Center's Healthier Communities Partnership (1993). Healthier Communities Action Kit: A Guide for Leaders Embracing Change. Oakland, CA: Author.

The Health Care Forum. (1996). Best Practices in Collaboration to Improve Health: Creating Community Jazz. San Francisco, CA: Author.

U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. (1994). Healthy people 2000 review 1993. Washington, D.C.: Public Health Service.

U.S. Department of Justice. (1993). Crime in the United States, 1992. Washington, D.C.: Author.

Internet Resources

County Health Rankings & Roadmaps. Ranking the health of nearly every county in the nation, the *County Health Rankings* help us see how where we live, learn, work, and play influences how healthy we are and how long we live. The *Rankings & Roadmaps* show us what is making residents sick, where we need to improve, and what steps communities are taking to solve their problems. The health of a community depends on many different factors – ranging from individual health behaviors, education and jobs, to quality of health care, to the environment, therefore we all have a stake in creating a healthier community. Using the *County Health Rankings & Roadmaps*, leaders and advocates from public health and health care, business, education, government, and the community can work together to create programs and policies to improve people's health, reduce health care costs, and increase productivity.

Guide to Evaluation of Environmental Education Programs. Guidelines for Collecting Data by Dr. Michaela Zint, from the School of Education at the University of Michigan.

Eleven Proven Ways to Improve Data Collection from Americorps.

Methods of Collecting Data: interviews and questionnaires in practice. A slide presentation by Francesca Alby for the European Global Oral Health Indicators Development Project.