

KANSAS HEALTH MATTERS PARTNERSHIP

Community Engagement Tools and Tips:

Primary Data Collection

The purpose of this document is to provide a quick reference to some resources that can help understand the principles and practice of community engagement for a community health assessment.

There are many different methods and techniques that can be used to promote community engagement and participation in a community health assessment. We will briefly overview the following:

- Community opinion survey
- Key informant interviews
- Focus groups
- Community forums

Community Opinion survey

The purpose of a community opinion survey is to find out what the community perceives to be as its main concerns and assets. With a community opinion survey you can find out what the community thinks about a specific nutrition and/or physical activity issue such as adult obesity, child lead poisoning, cancer, or the nutrition and activity concerns among children with special health care needs.

A community opinion survey usually is conducted to broadly identify opinions that may be prevalent in a certain community. Responses are examined to identify common themes and prevailing opinions, but also to recognize important points of view that may be held only by a small group of people. For this purpose it is not necessary to use a probability sample (such as a simple random sample), but it is important that the survey be inclusive and reach all the segments of a community. If a survey is designed to produce exact statistics on how many people share the same view of an issue, then probability samples must be used and statistical analyses performed. Keep in mind that the community opinion survey is just one way to assess community opinion and community opinion is just one element of the community assessment process.

Tips

How to Conduct a Community Opinion Survey

1. Decide who will be involved in administering the community opinion survey including the lead contact for this work.
2. Identify the topic(s) you will focus on in your survey and identify some of the perceptions you hope to assess.
3. Develop a survey.

4. Decide on a distribution plan that includes who will be surveyed, how many people will be surveyed, and how you will administer the survey. Factors such as budget, time, politics, and the focus of the community assessment will affect these decisions. In addition, some distribution channels may limit your ability to get a representative sample of the population or may limit your ability to collect perceptions from your target audience. Some distribution ideas are inserting the survey in the local newspaper, partnering with other community-based organizations, distributing the survey at a place of high concentration of people (e.g., mall or movie theater), etc.

5. Tabulate and summarize your survey results.

Confidentiality

Before the survey is designed, discuss with your team things like how results will be used, how results will be reported, and who will see the individual surveys. Be sure to tell the people you are surveying how confidential their results will be.

Length of survey

Be conservative on the number of questions you include in the survey – you are likely to have a better response rate with fewer questions.

Response rate

Obviously, the more surveys you receive the more confident you can be with your survey conclusions. Be creative in your effort to get surveys returned. Below are some examples of strategies that have been used to increase response rates.

- One community required the community opinion survey be completed by participants in a community wellness program. They received 380 surveys.
- A small, rural community distributed a survey to every household in the county through a countywide household mailing. Immediately before the surveys were mailed, volunteers went through the phone book and called every 20th listing alerting them to the survey that was coming in the mail. The survey distribution plan was well promoted. The survey was printed in the local newspaper, advertisements were placed in the newspaper, and some articles were printed. Extra copies of the survey were also placed in waiting areas of local agencies. The survey included a tear off portion so people could enter a raffle for a \$50.00 cash prize. They received 491 surveys.

Key informant interviews

A key informant is a community resident who is in a position to know the community as a whole or know a particular demographic in the community. Interviewing a diverse array of key informants will help you understand what people in your community think are the health assets and health concerns of the community. Conducting key informant interviews is one way to collect community opinion relatively quickly.

How to Conduct a Key Informant Interview

1. Decide who will be involved in conducting the interviews, including the lead contact for this work.
2. Identify the topic(s) you will focus on in your interviews, e.g. nutrition and physical activity, breastfeeding, physical activity among the elderly, food security, school environment, etc.
3. Make a list of the key informants you will interview. Throughout the process of interviewing people you will be referred to other key informants in the community, so your list will likely expand.
4. Decide if you will use a formal or informal approach. Informal: Talk with key informants in an unstructured way to get a sense of the community opinion on an issue. Formal: Develop a questionnaire and mail it to informants, or use the questionnaire in a telephone or personal interview, group interview.
5. Develop a questionnaire. Even if you choose an informal approach, writing down what you'd like to learn will be helpful.
6. Record the interview summary. As soon as possible after the interview review your notes and prepare a summary of the interview.
7. Summarize results. Group similar answers to questions or similar ideas and themes from your interviews.

Tips

Number of interviews to conduct.

A good rule of thumb is to keep interviewing until you start hearing the same ideas repeated. But, make sure you have interviewed a mix of people that reflects the diversity in your community.

Confidentiality

Before starting your interviews, think about how you will use the results of your key informant interviews. This, in turn, affects the confidentiality you offer to those you are interviewing. One strategy is to plan on reporting results only in the aggregate, and then ask permission if you want to quote an individual.

When to use key informant interviews.

- Use key informant interviews as a one-time event to collect community opinions. Or, do key informant interviews on a regular basis to stay current with community developments.
- Use key informant interviews in combination with other community opinion results.

Good interviewees

Find key informants who understand the community and who think strategically about issues.

Multiple interviewers

If you plan on having more than one person conduct the interviews make sure everyone is trained by the same person and that they all use the same interview questions.

Active listening

Your job is to get as much information from the person as you can on the topic you are interested in. Paraphrase people's responses to make sure you understand the person and periodically summarize their ideas. Do not judge the person's responses or argue with the person you are interviewing.

Focus Groups

A focus group is a guided, small-group interview that uses group interaction to elicit information from group members. You need a skilled facilitator and experienced note taker to generate useful results. Focus group data provides insights into the attitude, perceptions, and opinions of the group participants. The group dynamics in a focus group tend to generate more ideas than individual interviews. A focus group, or a series of focus groups, is useful in gathering details regarding opinions and perceptions found through other techniques. Focus groups are not for developing consensus or for finalizing a plan.

The power of focus groups resides in their being focused. The topics are narrowly focused, usually seeking reaction to something (a program, product, shared experience, and similar). Focus groups are not intended to explore complex life issues with depth and detail. Examples:

* A focus group of pregnant women to discuss prenatal care needs.

* A focus group of senior citizens to discuss healthy lifestyle programs addressing their needs. What do they think of the programs being offered? What are their own suggestions and ideas?

Participants in focus groups are usually homogeneous: they all share an interest or experience about the issue being discussed. The group's composition and the group discussion are carefully planned to create a nonthreatening environment, in which people are free to talk openly. Members are actively encouraged to express their own opinions, and also respond to other members, as well as to questions posed by the leader.

If your team would like to conduct focus group interviews and you don't have an experienced facilitator on the team, then consider a local community college, state college or university, or public relations firm. These organizations might have resources and/or staff with experience and expertise in conducting focus groups.

One advantage of focus groups is that members can often stimulate new thoughts for each other, which might not have otherwise occurred. But there are some downsides, too. For example, focus groups

usually take more time per respondent than individual surveys -- because the group has to be recruited, and because the group itself takes time. Some group members might feel hesitant about speaking openly. And the focus group leader may sometimes need to be paid.

Community Forums

For a local assessment, a community forum (also known as public forum, or town hall meeting) is a relatively inexpensive and quick way of finding out about people's opinions and perceptions on issues such as health, nutrition, or physical activity. Focus groups are best for deeper understanding of a perception, a program idea, a health education message, a handout, etc. For example, if a randomly-distributed community opinion survey indicated that people are opposed to collecting height and weight on grade-school children, then you could hold some focus group interviews to learn why parents of grade-school children are opposed, to learn what children think of the issue, or to test some messages for a possible campaign to change community opinion.

A community forum is similar to a town meeting. It's open to the public and includes facilitated discussion on a specific topic. At a community forum people can meet and discuss the barriers and opportunities to eating healthy and being physically active in their own community. In addition to finding out community opinion on an issue a community forum can build community support for an idea or project.

To hold a community forum follow these steps.

1. Meeting Location. Find a site that is accessible and inviting to the intended audience. You wouldn't want to hold the community forum in a corporate conference room in the city's financial district if you are targeting people living in public housing. Market and promote the meeting date, time, and location through media outlets your intended audience uses. You will need more than one meeting, held at different times and/or at different locations if you want opinions that are representative of the different demographic groups within your community.
2. Handouts. Have pens and a sign-in sheet(s) available in the room. Be sure to have multiple copies of an agenda and/or project the meeting agenda onto a large screen or a wall.
3. Open the Meeting. Welcome everyone, ask people to sign in, review the purpose of the meeting including how the information from the meeting will be used. Review your rules for conducting the meeting including things like no interrupting, talking time limits per person, how people will be recognized, etc.
4. Meeting Content. Have a few specific questions to ask the meeting participants. In your agenda you can set a time limit for group discussion on each question.
5. Close Meeting. If possible, spend a few minutes summarizing the main points raised during the meeting and let people know what happens next. Remind people to sign in and thank them for their time.

6. Note Taking. Have several people on site to take notes. This frees the facilitator to manage the participants.

7. Facilitator. A neutral person who is experienced at managing large group discussions will make a good facilitator. The facilitator needs to try and make sure everyone is heard while keeping within the time limit.

8. Meeting Follow-up. Send people a thank you note for participating and include a brief summary of the meeting.

Holding a community forum on a controversial subject is not advised, because it may be very difficult to keep the meeting civil. There are other ways to solicit community opinion on controversial subjects including holding a public hearing, distributing community opinion surveys, or conducting key informant interviews.

WHAT IS THE BEST COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT TECHNIQUE?¹

Listed below are some pluses and minuses for the community engagement techniques reviewed in this document.

	Strengths	Cautions
Community Opinion Survey	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Can provide you with numbers and percentages which can help build a case (especially if probability sampling is used). • You can collect information from several people relatively quickly. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • It's easy to ask too many, and probably unnecessary, questions making the survey too lengthy, which can affect response rate. • The cost can be high. • Results can be generalized only if the surveys were randomly distributed and the response rate was high.
Key Informant Interviews	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Because you seek people out to interview, key informant interviews are a good way to obtain information from many different people. • You may discover minority viewpoints, or more importantly silent majority views. • The cost is minimal. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Results may be biased if only prominent leaders are interviewed.
Focus Groups	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Focus groups are best for deeper understanding of a perception, a program idea, a health education message, a handout, etc. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • High quality results from focus group interviews require a skilled facilitator/interviewer. • Although the actual interview time is short, 30 minutes to two hours, focus group interviews require several days' worth of time from conceptualization to completion of a final report.
Community Forums	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Community forums tend to make residents feel more involved and heard. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • You may hear only from vocal people and those who are comfortable speaking in front of others and their

¹ Adapted from *Moving to the Future: Nutrition and Physical Activity Program Planning*.
<http://www.movingtothefuture.org/>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The cost is minimal. 	<p>opinions may only reflect what some of the community thinks.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A meeting can turn into a gripe session or a pep rally to advocate for a cause or idea. • Careful planning and outreach is needed to help you get a good turnout.
--	--	--

Resources

University of Illinois Extension Service – Office of Program Planning and Assessment
<http://ppa.aces.uiuc.edu/NeedsAsmnt.htm>

Community Tool Box: http://ctb.ku.edu/en/tablecontents/sub_section_main_1048.htm

http://ctb.ku.edu/en/tablecontents/sub_section_main_1212.htm

http://ctb.ku.edu/en/tablecontents/section_1018.htm

http://ctb.ku.edu/en/tablecontents/section_1047.htm

Patton, MQ – Qualitative research and evaluation methods. 3rd edition. Sage publications, 2002