

Chapter 6

The Planning Stage and Needs Assessments

Why become informed about prospective clients before designing a new intervention?

The need for a new program or practice area should be sufficiently documented before valuable resources are committed to its development. The planning stage is the primary period when this documentation can happen. During this stage, various stakeholders can identify, document, advocate, and debate the need for a new program or practice area. In other words, well-conceived, well-conceptualized programs and practice areas are typically preceded by an important planning period that involves a variety of helpful inputs.

This chapter describes what can be done to document the need for a proposed program or practice area before it is implemented. Figure 6.1 provides an overview of many of the activities. As figure 6.1 indicates, only a few activities may be directly classified as evaluations (e.g., needs assessments,

FIGURE 6.1 Spectrum of Activities during the Planning Stage

Planning Stage

Types of evaluations

- Needs assessments for programs
- Crafting program/practice goals and objectives
- Designing a program/practice approach
- Needs assessments in practice areas

Other types of activities involved in planning

- Literature review to understand theoretical underpinnings of approach
 - Literature review to find empirical evidence of program effectiveness
 - Proposal writing
 - Identifying funds
 - Identifying and recruiting clients
 - Hiring/training staff
 - Finding facilities
 - Purchasing equipment and technology
 - Determining decision-making and accountability mechanisms
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104 Social Work Evaluation: Enhancing What We Do

crafting goals and objectives, designing a program). Others have an obvious indirect bearing, including reviewing the literature to find out more about a proposed approach, writing a proposal, hiring staff members, and carrying out fund-raising or development activities.

Although rigorous planning makes sense during this period before implementation, such preparation is often ignored or underplayed, and there are many excuses. The agency provider may be rushed into getting a program under way prematurely because of deadlines imposed by a funding agency, an agency board, or another party. Or perhaps a needs assessment seems unnecessary because there is plenty of anecdotal data available in support of a program. Another excuse is that there is no expectation to systematically document the need. Finally, program administrators sometimes are not well versed in the necessary planning work for a new program. Thus, this chapter provides guidelines for planning a new program.

Introducing the Logic Model

The logic model is a tool to theoretically analyze a program. The logic model helps highlight how the stages and elements of a program can be logically linked to an organic whole. With this model, it is important to examine the sequence of steps in a program's development, beginning with the problems of prospective clients and culminating in anticipated client outcomes, which helps stakeholders link the stages together. In brief, the tasks especially pertinent to the logic model at each stage of program development are the following:

Planning or input stage

- Identify the problems and unmet needs of prospective clients and link them to underlying causes.
- Craft goals and measurable objectives as guideposts or signs that the problems have been resolved and unmet needs filled.
- Design a program to address client problems or unmet needs and their underlying causes.

Implementation stage

- As the program is implemented, monitor whether it actually does what it is designed to do.

Output and outcome stage

- Measure whether and the extent to which clients' goals and measurable objectives are reached. These outcomes are typically measured for the short, intermediate, and long runs.

The example that follows outlines some steps taken by one group in implementing the logic model in the design and implementation of a parent-

ing education program for teenage mothers. In this example the outcomes are established at three different points in time: initial, intermediate, and long run, reflecting what is expected at the completion of the program and at two later times. Unfortunately, the problems, unmet needs, and underlying causes are not explicitly stated during the input steps and become apparent only in the outcome stage.

Example of a Description Using the Logic Model of a Parenting Education Program for Teenage Mothers

Input steps

- Agency and high school identify pregnant teens to participate in program.
- Agency provides appropriate teaching materials, staff, etc.

Program activities implemented

- Program provides parenting classes on prenatal care, infant nutrition, safety, proper care, feeding, and so on, twice a week for one hour to teen mothers with a child from three months prior to birth to one year after delivery of child.

Output steps

- Pregnant teen mothers attend all sessions of the program.

Initial outcomes

- Teens are knowledgeable about prenatal care and nutrition.
- Teens are knowledgeable about proper care and feeding.

Intermediate outcomes

- Teens follow proper nutrition and safety guidelines.
- Teens deliver healthy babies.
- Teens provide proper care and feeding.

Long-term outcomes

- Babies achieve appropriate twelve-month milestones for physical, motor, verbal, and social development (Ross, Lipsey, & Freeman, 2004).

Introducing the logic model into the program-planning process has the potential to create fundamental changes in how a proposed program is shaped and implemented, especially when the effort is initiated in an early stage, such as during conceptualization of a program. Aspects of the logic model are increasingly being built into funding agencies' requirements for most grant proposals. Grant proposals are expected to document such

106 Social Work Evaluation: Enhancing What We Do

things as the links among clients' problems, causes, and the program approach proposed to help them. This chapter and those that follow describe some of the issues that are raised and addressed when the logic model is incorporated into the planning process, such as the following:

- Identifying the link between problems and specific needs
- Determining how problems and needs relate to underlying causes
- Identifying the goals of the program from the problems, needs, and underlying causes
- Crafting measurable objectives for these goals
- Logically linking the goals and objectives to a program approach that can be effectively implemented so that clients achieve them
- Anticipating that the introduction of the program approach will result in clients progressing satisfactorily toward the goals and measurable objectives initially identified and crafted

Example of the Use of the Logic Model in Designing a Program

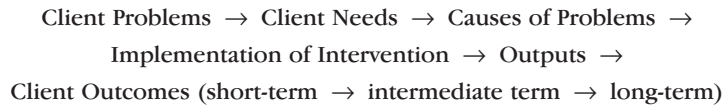
A group of students were asked to design a program that would effectively help clients overcome substance abuse problems. They used the logic model to complete this exercise. They began by identifying some suspected causes of substance abuse, including heredity, peer influence, low self-esteem, social isolation, and inadequate coping skills. Next they decided to design a program to address only the suspected causes that revolved around interpersonal issues, including peer influence, social isolation, low self-esteem, and inadequate coping skills. They decided to offer psycho-educational groups to teach clients the skills needed to manage these and other personal and interpersonal issues. They decided to cover specific topics such as how to find positive peer influences and avoid negative peer influences, how to find and participate in support groups, and some self-esteem building exercises. They anticipated that once participants had completed the psycho-educational group sessions they would be able to identify the factors that reduced their self-esteem, to identify specific ways to build more positive self-esteem, and to learn three or four new coping skills. By completion of the program, participants would also have made two or more visits to a support group in the community to help them stop using substances.

The Link between Problems and Needs

The logic model is introduced during the program-planning stage to stress the vital need for evident connections among clients' problems and needs, the underlying causes, and the link to the goals and objectives of the pro-

gram or practice area, the selection of the approach, and the expected outcomes for clients. Figure 6.2 shows these relationships.

FIGURE 6.2 Clients' Problems, Needs, and Causes



A note about the link between needs and problems is helpful here. The reference to a needs assessment may imply that problems are not pertinent. For example, why isn't this process referred to as a problem assessment? Although clients' problems and needs are similar, there are some important differences. Some prefer using the term *needs* over *problems* when referring to the nature of the help clients receive because it puts a more positive face on the focus and less on client deficits. *Needs* may also imply something that is manageable and capable of being changed, whereas a larger social problem may seem more insurmountable and unsolvable, at least in the immediate future. *Needs* also refers to some aspects of a problem that can be immediately addressed, while that may not be possible for other aspects of the problem.

DePoy and Gilson (2003) view needs as a systematic, evidence-based phenomenon linked to all or part of the problem. They suggest that identification of the need-related aspects of a problem helps specify the conditions and actions necessary to address the focus of the problem. For the purposes of this text, a revised version of DePoy and Gilson's definition of needs is used. Needs are considered only part of an overall problem that is identified by a client and selected because there is evidence that it can be overcome, alleviated, or ameliorated by an intervention (see table 6.1).

Note that the problems in the examples of table 6.1 are usually stated in broad terms that may fit many different client circumstances. In contrast, the needs linked to each problem are more specific and intended to fit some clients with these particular circumstances and not others. For example, truancy is a problem that could result from any number of needs going unmet. In table 6.1, truant students face two types of needs: trying to cope with challenging family conflicts and needing more supervised time before and after

TABLE 6.1 Examples of Connections between a Problem and a Need

<i>Problem</i>	<i>Specific need</i>
1. Inadequate housing	1. Housing needs plumbing repairs
2. Unemployed	2. Needing a job
3. Marital estrangement	3. Healthy marital communication
4. Truancy from school	4. Buffer from family conflicts and having something to do after school
5. Social isolation	5. Healthy social contact with peers

108 Social Work Evaluation: Enhancing What We Do

school because parents are employed outside of the home during the day. In other instances, truancy results from a lack of preparedness for academic courses, a lack of interest in school, a substance abuse problem, interpersonal difficulties pertaining to acceptance at school, difficulty adapting as a recent immigrant, and so on.

The Link between Problems and Needs, and the Underlying Causes

So a need is an aspect of a larger problem identified by a client and perceived to be amenable to change. Meeting a set of needs, then, is the intended focus of a proposed program. However, before rushing too quickly into the design of such a program, another important question is, What are the underlying causes of the problem that prevent the need from being met? This is a critical question for stakeholders to explore if a proposed program or practice area is to be designed to directly confront underlying causes. Underlying causes partially reflect barriers and other resistant factors that prevent needs from being met. Therefore, identified needs are likely to be met only if the underlying causes are understood and confronted.

Let's return to the example of the five sets of problems and specific needs described in table 6.1. Once we identify the underlying causes, problems, and needs as described in table 6.2, we discover that we have a more

TABLE 6.2 Examples of the Connections among a Problem, Need, and the Underlying Causes

<i>Problem</i>	<i>Need</i>	<i>Underlying causes</i>
1. Inadequate housing	1. Housing needs plumbing repairs	1. Deteriorated housing conditions, limited funds for repairs, and no repair skills or repair resources available
2. Unemployed	2. Needing a job	2. Lacks training in a skilled job area and lacks hope and motivation
3. Marital estrangement	3. Healthy marital communication	3. Lacks communication skills, no models for healthy marital relationships, and no incentives to stay married
4. Truancy from school	4. Protection from family conflicts and having something to do after school lacking	4. Problems involving parental relationship and parental guidance
5. Social isolation	5. Healthy social contact	5. Lacks social skills and no groups or organizations available to offer positive social contacts

complete understanding of what a program has to be designed to do to be effective.

Let's look more closely at the first example in table 6.2 of inadequate housing as the problem and plumbing repairs as the specific need to be met. We might next ask why the plumbing (and other aspects of housing) has not been addressed. After all, most plumbing repairs seem fairly straightforward and relatively easy to make. Yet the example suggests that the group of clients with this housing problem have modest incomes, no funds available for major repairs, and no plumbing repair skills or resources available even if funds were found.

You may still wonder why it is so important to identify and distinguish problems, needs, and underlying causes. This will become more evident in later chapters when the focus is on developing an intervention that will succeed in meeting unmet needs. For now it is important to remember that an effective new program or practice approach must be linked to a clear sense of what the problem and needs are and how they can be solved. Let's look first at how needs assessments are important for developing programs.

Input Stage and Planning the Proposed Program

The input stage of program development is when planning becomes the major focus. Several important tasks are completed in this stage, including identifying the prospective client population that is to be the focus of a new program and the problems of the clients that the proposed program is to address. Here is where the complex tasks of exploring the problem in more depth occur. The clients' problem, the specific needs that are part of the problem, and the underlying causes are all a focus of this task. Once the client population has been identified in general terms and the target problem has been examined in more depth, a decision needs to be made as to how to assess, in a systematic way, the clients' problems and needs. This is where a needs assessment becomes front and center.

Before delving into the mechanics of a needs assessment, it is important to emphasize that this is both a subjective and a political process. Meenaghan, Kilty, and McNutt (2004) identify some key overall social and political factors that can influence the implementation of a needs assessment. They recommend that evaluators and stakeholders be fully aware of the people and groups involved in each of the following activities:

- Who chooses what problems are to be examined?
- Who identifies what information is collected and why?
- Who analyzes and interprets the information that is collected?
- Who controls access to dissemination of the information collected?

These activities are critical to the shape that a needs assessment will take, to how the data will be analyzed, to the results that will be emphasized and ignored, to who will have access to the results, and to how the results

110 Social Work Evaluation: Enhancing What We Do

will be disseminated. These points illustrate how the evaluation process is always a political process as well as a research undertaking, as mentioned in chapter 1. The specific stakeholders, in particular, can be crucial in influencing this process. Thus, it is important to identify all relevant parties who have a stake in the results and to get them involved as early as possible. It also means that the stakeholders should be as fully involved as possible in every step. The participant action approach along with the empowerment approach, described in chapter 2, are good models to follow in this regard.

Why Conduct a Needs Assessment?

Why conduct a needs assessment? A broad, systematic research effort like a needs assessment can be highly beneficial in addressing many community-wide needs and problems. Most important, such an assessment can provide valuable information for understanding a particular social problem that is troubling a local community. The alternatives—depending on hearsay or a few case examples as evidence, or having hunches about a problem—are not enough documentation to take the problem seriously (Marlow, 2005).

Needs assessments are particularly useful when considering a new policy or program initiative or when considering changes to or discontinuation of an existing program. Also, if outside funding sources (e.g., federal, state, or local government; private foundations; corporate support) are needed to support a program, the documentation from a needs assessment takes on even greater importance.

A needs assessment can answer several important questions. Consider the example of parenting children in a low-income neighborhood. Several questions could be asked about their parenting in this neighborhood:

- To what extent and how are the (biological, step, surrogate) parents actively involved in raising their children?
- To what extent and how are the parents economically able to provide for their children?
- What problems do mothers and fathers face in their roles as parents?
- What trends are evident in teen pregnancy, unmarried parenting, single parenting, and divorce? Are these family patterns increasing or decreasing?
- To what extent do services exist in the community to help parents with their parental roles?
- What are the demographic characteristics of the mothers and fathers who use existing services? What are the characteristics of those who do not use existing services?
- What barriers exist to access existing services?
- What service gaps are evident?
- What new policy initiatives could benefit these parents?

Some Purposes of Needs Assessments

You may ask, “What good will a needs assessment do, anyway?” Of course, there are no guarantees, but many positive benefits can come from a needs assessment of a particular group of people. Further, the more stakeholders and potential stakeholders that are involved and committed to such an assessment and informed by it, the more likely it is that a genuine communitywide concern for a client group will emerge.

Although a needs assessment is particularly important in documenting the need for a new program, it has other important purposes:

- Determining the adequacy of existing programs
- Determining the adequacy of existing informal resources
- Assessing client accessibility
- Obtaining data for crafting goals and measurable objectives for a new program

New Programs

One purpose of a needs assessment is to explore in more depth whether a new program is needed. A key question in this exploration is whether there are enough prospective clients to warrant such an initiative. Specific questions could be asked about the activities or programs that the respondents would be interested in using, possible priorities for some activities over others, how important the activities are to clients, and the times when they would be most likely desired and used. Another set of questions can explore possible barriers that prevent some people from accessing any of the activities. Potential barriers could emerge related to decisions about particular times a program is offered; the location, costs, and need to charge any fees; and possible psychological issues related to such things as how welcomed clients would feel.

Adequacy of Existing Programs

A needs assessment can also be very useful in determining the extent to which programs are already available to meet the needs of a particular group. This line of questioning naturally precedes attempts to document the need for a new program, even though this may not be taken seriously because of competition among agencies. Assessing the existence of other programs similar in nature to a proposed program is desirable to determine whether the need is already being met. Such a task is important not only to avoid program duplication but also to explore and create complementary and collaborative relationships with relevant existing agencies and programs.

An assessment of programs that already exist begins with finding them. Next, the programs could be visited and evaluated in terms of their relevance

112 Social Work Evaluation: Enhancing What We Do

to the needs of the particular group targeted for the proposed new program. The assessments should also explore the ability of existing programs to serve additional clients, particularly the targeted group that is the concern of the initiators of the needs assessment.

The sources of information for a needs assessment of existing programs may include the administrators and service-delivery staff members of the agencies that provide such services. Assessment tools can help obtain information on such topics as demographic characteristics of the people who use services, characteristics of those who tend not to use them, explorations of the nature of their services, and any indicators that the programs are effective. The barriers that keep some groups from accessing services could be explored and service gaps documented. In addition, the assessment process could explore the agencies' views on new program initiatives that would be beneficial to particular groups in the community.

Adequacy of Existing Informal Resources

Although it is important to assess whether existing agency programs are available to address a pressing need, it can be equally important to assess the adequacy of existing informal resources. Informal resources may include extended family; other family members not in the household; neighborhood clubs, centers, and civic groups; advocacy groups; churches, synagogues, mosques, and other religious groups; libraries, museums, and theatrical resources; and so on. Often informal resources are the first line of defense and the easiest resources for clients to approach.

Client Accessibility

There are many potential barriers that will inevitably discourage some people from using the services of a program, such as an unfriendly receptionist, a delay in returning a call, a misunderstanding of the purpose of a program, unawareness of the program, or a perceived insensitivity to a particular group's culture. Access issues are important to consider in the planning stage of program development. Serious consideration must be given to the various groups that are targeted as recipients and to the factors that could prevent any of them from using the program's services.

Chapter 8 describes several factors that could be sources of confusion or resistance that keep potential program recipients from using services. The most effective way to identify these access issues is to ask potential recipients to share their views on accessibility. Such questions can be included as a component of a needs-assessment questionnaire or as interviews with recipients. Stakeholders who are concerned about the recipients can also be enlisted to share their views. Also, access issues can be relevant to consider when selecting a particular program approach or deciding on what kinds of staff members to hire.

Crafting Goals and Objectives

An additional purpose of a needs assessment can be to gather data pertinent to the goals of a proposed program. Goals of proposed programs tend to be crafted from the providers' perspectives. To address this bias, a needs assessment could be used to obtain specific data from the perspectives of potential recipients. Most of the questions would be open-ended explorations. Questions can be designed to obtain information related to the proposed goals and objectives of the program by exploring the following:

- What do clients perceive as realistic goals for themselves?
- What do they perceive to be some measurable objectives? In other words, how might things be different once they reach their goals?
- How motivated are they to seek these goals?
- How important are the goals to others in their immediate circle of social support?

Example of Needs-Assessment Questions on Family Planning Asked of Potential Recipients

- Do you have an interest in planning the size of your family?
 - Would you consider using any existing birth control methods that are available?
 - Would you have an interest in discussing your family-planning needs and questions with a professional counselor if one were available?
 - What are some questions about birth control that you would want to discuss with a counselor?
 - Would you be open to possibly obtaining a birth-control method such as an IUD if a program was available to fit one for you?
 - Do you currently have easy access to the birth-control methods you want to use?
 - Would you be comfortable using a family-planning program if it existed?
 - What would be your hesitations in using such a program, if any?
-

Methods of Conducting Needs Assessments

A needs assessment is an organized, systematic effort to assess the need for something, in this case the need for a new program or practice area. Conducting a needs assessment of some or all of the prospective recipients of a program is often wisest, because they are some of the people who will choose whether to use the program. The more that the program takes into account their specific needs, the more likely it is that they will find it relevant

114 Social Work Evaluation: Enhancing What We Do

and use it. The specific methods for conducting a needs assessment can take many forms, including using existing data, constructing and administering a questionnaire, conducting interviews, conducting focus groups, arranging public forums, observing, or any combination of these.

Documenting Needs with Existing Data

Sometime existing data is available to provide all or some of the documentation of the need for a new program. If so, this may be the place to start. Thus, the first recommended step in documenting the need for a new program is to explore whether relevant data already exists. This will be the least expensive way to conduct a needs assessment.

Steps for Reviewing Existing Data

DePoy and Gilson (2003) recommend a rigorous set of steps to effectively and efficiently review existing data for a needs assessment.

1. Determine the purpose of the review.
 2. Set some search parameters.
 3. Access relevant databases.
 4. Obtain relevant information from the databases.
 5. Organize the selected information.
 6. Critically evaluate the information.
 7. Prepare a report of the selected information.
-

Let's take a closer look at the numerous sources from which relevant existing data can be obtained (see steps 3 and 4 in DePoy & Gilson's list). There are often several relevant choices: local studies, governmental studies, studies of research firms and academic units, secondary research, data available from social agencies, and mapping resources. Let's take a closer look at what each of these sources can offer.

Local Studies. Local studies can be an excellent source of data because they may include the actual client populations considered for the proposed new program. Local studies also may have more credibility with some stakeholders, especially when sponsored by colleagues in the geographic area. Local agencies may include the local United Way office, a local governmental agency, or the local newspaper. All of these organizations are known to conduct such studies. A simple way to begin an investigation of local studies is to do a Google search of the name of your community, county government, university, or local agency, followed by the words *needs assessment*. For example, a United Way agency in North Carolina conducted a needs assessment that focused on eliminating disparities in access to and use of available social agencies.

Example of United Way Needs Assessment

In July 2003, a United Way agency (United Way of Central Carolinas, 2003) conducted a needs assessment that focused on how to make the elimination of disparities a priority, so that “everyone [could] get the services they need without bias or fragmentation.” This meant that services would be provided in a way that enables access to all who need them, with priority to those who have the greatest need and those for whom services could promote significant and lasting improvements in their lives. The study involved focus groups with various community and agency constituencies. Common themes that emerged from analyzing the data coalesced around six factors that contribute to inequities in access and outcomes and ten values that are central to addressing disparities.

Six Themes

1. Complexity of service delivery systems
2. Ineffective service provider–client relationships and engagement (e.g., lack of cultural competence in service provision, unclear expectations, lack of trust)
3. Communication issues (e.g., language barriers, illiteracy)
4. Transportation barriers
5. Economic constraints (e.g., limited program capacity, lack of insurance or other means of affordability)
6. Limited education and awareness (e.g., of needs, services, and systems)

Ten Values

1. Client centered
 2. Decentralized and available in communities where people need them
 3. Collaborative
 4. Holistic
 5. Agency board members and staff reflect characteristics of people who need service
 6. Accepting and nonjudgmental
 7. Culturally sensitive and culturally competent
 8. Based on a relationship of trust between service provider and person receiving service
 9. Fair
 10. Including an emphasis on lifelong learning
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Governmental Studies at the National and State Levels. Governmental agencies at the national and state levels conduct studies of relevance to social service agencies. Two good sources are the U.S. Census (www.census.gov)

116 Social Work Evaluation: Enhancing What We Do

and the National Center for Health Statistics (www.cdc.gov/nchs). The U.S. Census conducts not only a census of the entire U.S. population every ten years but also numerous smaller studies, known as Current Population Surveys, with nationally representative samples in between years. The surveys are conducted on numerous topics, have a good reputation for accuracy and reliability, and often are pertinent in documenting the needs of many subgroups in a population (e.g., elderly, families, children).

Studies of Nonprofit Research Firms, Academic Units, and Professional Journals. Many research firms and academic groups are also known to conduct and disseminate large-scale studies. Reports on some of these studies can be found on the Internet. Such firms often have large representative samples that can be generalized to even larger populations. A good example is Child Trends (www.childtrends.org), a nonprofit, nonpartisan research organization dedicated to improving the lives of children by conducting research and providing science-based information to improve the decisions, programs, and policies that affect children. Child Trends produces books, research briefs, and full research reports on such topics as child poverty, child welfare, health, marriage and family structure, teen sex and pregnancy, parenting, and family dynamics. They widely disseminate their reports, which are often free.

University-conducted studies can also be useful and are often reported on university Web sites and in professional journals. Several professional journals focus specifically on program and practice evaluations, including the following:

- *Evaluation: The International Journal of Theory, Research and Practice*
- *Evaluation Review: A Journal of Applied Social Research*
- *Evaluation and the Health Professions*
- *New Directions for Evaluation*
- *Evaluation and Program Planning: An International Journal*
- *American Journal of Evaluation*
- *Practical Assessment, Research and Evaluation*
- *Canadian Journal of Program Evaluation*

Evaluation reports can also be found in many other professional journals, such as *Social Work*, *Child Welfare*, and *Families in Society*.

Example of a Needs Assessment in a Professional Journal

Weinman, Buzi, and Smith (2005) focused on the risk factors, service needs, and mental health issues of 143 young fathers (aged sixteen to thirty-three) when they entered a fatherhood program. They found that almost 70 percent were unemployed, 42 percent had been in jail, and 39 percent were school dropouts. The most fre-

quent mental health issues that the fathers identified included sadness and depression, nervousness and tension, helplessness, and aggression. Although the fathers identified these and other risk factors, they did not often request services to address them; the most frequently requested services were related to jobs and training. Because the results of this study were mostly problem focused, the authors recommended that future assessments use a strengths perspective.

Secondary Research. Another option to consider when relying on other studies is secondary research or data from a previous study. This option is pertinent only if a data set from a previous study exists and is available. Many research firms offer their data sets to interested parties for secondary analysis, and usually for a reasonable fee.

Example of a Study Using Secondary Analysis

John O'Donnell (1999) conducted a secondary analysis of data from an earlier federally funded research and demonstration project on casework practice in kinship foster care. Kinship foster care refers to the placement of children in the home of a relative approved by the agency as a foster parent. The data was collected in the prior study from caseworkers in two private child-welfare agencies. O'Donnell reported on a subset of the original data set that focused on the involvement of African American fathers. His findings documented the lack of fathers' involvement in the caseworkers' assessment and planning of foster-care services for their children. Although useful secondary data was available about several of these fathers, the data had limitations because it emphasized their problems, not their strengths. Further, the data did not explore some issues of importance to O'Donnell, such as why more fathers of children in paternal kinship homes participated in casework services than fathers of children in maternal kinship homes.

Agency Data. Virtually every social agency, school, and institutional setting collects an enormous amount of data on their clients. Often these data have great potential as resources for a needs assessment. For example, the client records of these organizations can be valuable in providing information about the demographic and diagnostic characteristics of clients, numbers of clients with specific problems, different types of interventions that have been used to help them, the amount of time that clients have received services, and in some cases outcome data for current and former clients.

118 Social Work Evaluation: Enhancing What We Do

Example of Using Agency Data

A study by Faithfull, Cook, & Lucas (2005) investigated the need of patients with malignant brain tumors and their caregivers in a cancer and palliative care program for support services. The evaluators were interested in finding out which community support services clients were using. Data were drawn retrospectively from case notes and clinical records for a population of 1,254 patients referred to the palliative care program over one year. Data collected from the records included demographic characteristics, extent of palliative care service use, other health and social service use, symptoms experienced, and time from diagnosis to referral and death. This evaluation identified some important clinical needs and questions for this particular client group related to palliative care. A critical question recommended for investigation in a later study was what services the caregivers needed. A limitation of the study was that it was not known how accurate the case notes and records were.

In another instance, a study was conducted of runaway and homeless lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and questioning youths in New York City (Nolan, 2006). The agency wanted to find out what happened to the youths after they left a transitional living program by using case files about them. The files included information on the youths discharged from the program over a five-year period. Information was taken from the files on demographic characteristics, pre- and post-housing status, pre- and post-educational status, foster-care history, abuse history, length of stay in the transitional living program, and reason for discharge. The case files had an abundance of helpful data. For example, in the area of abuse history, the study found that half the youth had reported experiencing physical abuse, and one-third had reported being sexually abused, mostly by family members, boyfriends, and family friends. Half had reported experiencing verbal or emotional abuse, including homophobic and transgender-phobic remarks.

Mapping Resources. Another recently developed approach uses computer and electronic files. Mapping visually locates specific groups or clusters of people or problems in a particular geographic area and helps users recognize where there are concentrations of problems. The concentrations can then be explored in terms of how they are associated with other characteristics, such as income level or ethnicity. For example, the U.S. Census tool American Factfinder (AFF) can be used to select specific Census data and map it across a geographic area of interest, such as a city or county. The tool, which allows for creating, viewing, printing, and downloading maps, is available online at www.factfinder.census.gov. The Reference Maps tool can be used to view boundaries of Census geographies, such as counties, cities and towns, urban areas, congressional districts, Census tracts, and Census

blocks. The Thematic Maps tool can be used to view geographic patterns in Census data. Thematic maps are available for the 2000 Census, the 1990 Census, the Economic Census, and the Population Estimates program. The tutorial “Creating and Using Maps” is available for guidance.

Thematic maps may be particularly helpful when you want to compare statistical data of specific groups, such as population or median income, displayed in a map format. You can change the view of the thematic map by clicking on the area of the map you want to view in more detail or by selecting a new geography, theme, or data set. The Quick Tips command assists in navigating or customizing your map.

Example of Mapping as a Form of Assessment

A specific mapping program, referred to as a geographic information system (GIS) can help an evaluator gather more information about the characteristics of a local community, city, or county. The GIS can create maps for such things as the location of all senior centers, the degree to which neighborhoods are healthy, poverty levels in a community, locations of Medicaid users, crime rates, and particular agencies. More information can be found about the GIS program and its various features in the work of Hillier (2007).

Administer a Questionnaire

A questionnaire is a frequently chosen method to obtain relevant data for a needs assessment. A questionnaire can be an excellent way to inquire about the needs of a particular target group on a specific topic, such as family planning, housing improvements, or social activities for seniors. The questionnaire could be mailed to the intended audience, hand-delivered door-to-door, or handed out at a meeting or community gathering. An advantage of a questionnaire is that it can be distributed to a fairly large group of people without much effort. However, the questionnaire must be constructed so that it is completely self-explanatory and simple enough to fill out, as an interviewer will not be present to clarify anything.

Example of a Parks and Recreation Needs Assessment

Using a questionnaire mailed to every resident of the neighborhood, Line (2007) used a community needs assessment to explore neighbors' interest in several activity areas considered by an expanding community center. First, respondents selected from a list of activities the ones that they believed their family members would likely participate in, including baseball, T-ball, volleyball, tennis, after-school programs, nature and bike trails, tutoring, senior social clubs, educational seminars, and concerts. Next, respondents were asked about their interests in specific classes, such as karate, CPR

120 Social Work Evaluation: Enhancing What We Do

and first aid, self-defense, arts and crafts, gardening, cooking, and safety. Then they were asked what methods they would prefer to receive information about upcoming park and recreation events. Options included monthly newsletters, flyers, public service announcements, e-mail, announcements in local newspapers, and information posted at the community center. Several questions followed about the best times for their availability, such as the best times for children's activities (e.g., mornings, midday, afternoons, evenings, weekdays or weekends). In addition, respondents were asked how they felt about existing activities at the center. On a scale of 1 (very unsatisfied) to 5 (very satisfied), questions included how much they felt that various existing activities met their needs and how satisfied they were with the community center generally. Finally, they were asked about their readiness to participate in new activities if they were provided (e.g., "Would you come to the center to preregister for these classes, and how much could you afford to pay for such classes?"). A final question asked if respondents wanted to be contacted about a particular program interest and, if so, to list the program and their name and phone number.

A disadvantage of questionnaires is that they almost always use quantitative methods and ask forced-response questions, because respondents are not likely to answer more than one or two open-ended questions. Another disadvantage is that questionnaires usually have low response rates. This problem could be addressed by administering the questionnaire to people attending a social event and encouraging them to fill it out at the event, which can work especially well if either the evaluator or the organization sponsoring the event are known and trusted by the people asked to participate.

Examples of Questions Used in a Domestic Violence Needs Assessment for the Victims

Stewart (2005) administered the following questionnaire:

1. How important is it for you to have information about domestic violence? (Circle 1 response.)
Not important Somewhat important Very important
2. How important is it for you to have a safe place to stay if there is an emergency? (Circle 1 response.)
Not important Somewhat important Very important
3. How important is it for you to attend an educational/support group? (Circle 1 response.)
Not important Somewhat important Very important

The Planning Stage and Needs Assessments 121

4. How important is it for you to have help when you go to court? (Circle 1 response.)
Not important Somewhat important Very important
5. How important is it for you to have individual counseling? (Circle 1 response.)
Not important Somewhat important Very important
-

The example from Stewart (2005) uses a forced-response question format and identifies a few of the questions used by an MSW student to assess the needs of victims of domestic violence. Although the questions are effective for quickly finding out the degree to which respondents need each program area, qualitative questions could be added to gain insight into how the specific needs manifest and how respondents would *use* such a set of services if available.

Another way to structure a needs assessment in an agency that serves victims of domestic violence is to focus on victims' knowledge of what constitutes domestic violence and how it should be addressed. Examples of some of the types of question that could be asked are the following (Women's Commission, 2005):

Multiple-choice questions

Domestic violence affects

- (a) Only children who observe the violence in their home
- (b) All children living in homes with domestic violence
- (c) Only teenagers
- (d) Only young children
- (e) Does not affect children

[Correct answer is b]

True/false questions

Domestic violence only occurs in low-income families.

- (a) True
- (b) False

[Correct answer is false]

A batterer is never nice to his/her partner.

- (a) True
- (b) False

[Correct answer is false]

Questionnaires with informants could also be implemented, particularly if there are experts with special knowledge on a topic and who are well acquainted with the needs of the community. Informants can share their own

122 Social Work Evaluation: Enhancing What We Do

and others' perspectives. Informants might be professionals or volunteers in counseling or advocacy programs, or teachers, administrators, and others who have frequent contact with a population of interest. Their expertise would be based largely on their familiarity with the population.

Example of Informant Interviews

Charla Williams (2006), an MSW student, conducted a needs-assessment inquiry of staff members of a crisis intervention unit of a family agency that provides shelter, case management, counseling and advocacy services to victims of domestic violence or sexual assaults. The purpose was to find out from informants what additional programs they felt were needed for those experiencing domestic violence. The results of the questionnaire ranked support groups and transitional housing as the most important missing programs. The study also revealed that the family agency sponsoring the crisis intervention should advertise its services more, as many agencies were not familiar with it.

Conduct Interviews

Interviews are also a good choice for conducting needs assessments. An interview could be conducted with the target population, similar to using a questionnaire. Because an interview takes more time to administer than a questionnaire and requires training of the interviewer, interviews likely focus on a smaller group of respondents. Yet an advantage of interviews is that they can probe more deeply to elicit the views, attitudes, and needs of interviewees, which results in valuable qualitative data.

Informant interviews are a particular type of interviewing approach to consider, particularly if there are experts with special knowledge and who are well acquainted with the needs of the community. The informants can share not only their own perspectives but also those of others who may be more difficult to reach. Informants could be civic leaders, gang leaders or former leaders, representatives of advocacy groups, teachers with extensive experience in the community, volunteers and staff members of community agencies, and others.

Eliminating Health and Social Disparities: Some Interview Questions to Ask Agencies

- What role do you think your agency can play in community-based efforts to eliminate health and human service disparities?
- What does it take for agencies to be effective in eliminating disparities in the community?

The Planning Stage and Needs Assessments 123

- What other resources exist in the community aimed to eliminate disparities? How can these resources be strengthened?
 - What goals do you think need to be measured in determining whether the community is making progress in increasing access to services and reducing health and social disparities?
-

Case studies and other in-depth interviews with a few people are another way to conduct a needs assessment. Case descriptions can be very useful in determining the need for a program by providing a fuller understanding of someone's circumstances and experiences or something of interest. By illuminating the complexities of the social circumstances faced by one or a few prospective clients or client families, for example, case studies can provide insights that may be relevant to understanding their struggles and resilience as well as how to help them.

The professional literature provides many examples of case studies that have focused on a few individuals or on a larger social system such as a cultural group, gang, or social system such as a mental institution or prison. These studies have often been enormously helpful in providing new insights into the lives of a particular group not previously understood or known in society and in discovering new ways to help effectively address unmet needs.

Goffman's book *Asylums* is a case study of a mental hospital in the 1950s. In this case, his study was a catalyst for beginning the deinstitutionalization movement of the 1960s, which led to the creation of a whole new system of community-based residential and vocational programs for people with mental illness and mental retardation intended to replace programs that had been provided in institutional settings.

Example of a Case Study

Erving Goffman (1961) conducted a two-year participant-observation study of a large state mental institution in a book titled *Asylum*. In *Asylum*, Goffman vividly depicts what life was like in this institution and how the patients were regimented into a rigid, imposed schedule. The case description was most effective in conveying how the institution was harmful and counterproductive to patients. The book was timely and served as a strong catalyst for the deinstitutionalization movement initiated a few years later.

A case description of an undocumented family of immigrants from Mexico could also provide valuable insights about the numerous difficulties they face. Using an in-depth interview approach with one family, an interviewer could obtain information about the difficulties that recently arrived families

124 Social Work Evaluation: Enhancing What We Do

face in the United States and programs that could be developed to help. Likely problems that could be more fully understood through a case study approach include how to receive adequate medical care, find adequate housing, enroll children in day care and public schools, find transportation, get help if exploited on the job, and obtain legal assistance.

In-depth interviews with a sample of staff members and volunteers of local agencies that provide similar programs or help similar clients are another way to proceed with a needs assessment. Often social workers and others on the front line have a wealth of information from their daily contact with clients. Tapping into this wealth of information is another valuable data source for a needs assessment.

The number and variety of possibilities for conducting a needs assessment with either a questionnaire or an interview method are almost endless.

Examples of Other Needs Assessments

1. Residents of an older-adult assisted-living center were assessed on the basis of the importance of their spiritual beliefs and practices (Franco, 2004). A major intent of the study was to explore the need for additional programs to address residents' spiritual needs. Ten residents were interviewed with such questions as, Do you belong to an organized religious group? What spiritual practices do you use? How important is prayer or meditation to you? What do you think happens after death? How can the center provide more assistance to you in response to your spiritual needs?
2. In exploring the need for a new program for Latino children who had witnessed domestic violence, Wolochwianski (2005) administered a questionnaire for mothers who had been victims of domestic violence about their children. The simple questionnaire asked whether they had any children, their ages and sex, and whether they would be interested in their children receiving services for witnessing domestic violence. Further, mothers were asked about convenient locations, transportation, whether children could receive services while the mother was receiving counseling, and the best times for such services.
3. Caliento (2004), whose field placement was in a foster-care agency, assessed the need for a specific program for teen mothers in foster care. She asked the professionals serving the teens to fill out a structured questionnaire using a five-point Likert scale (strongly agree to strongly disagree). She asked them to rate the mothers on the basis of their needs for

parenting-skills training, one-on-one in-home support, their ability to parent, education for preventing further pregnancies, child-care services for the baby, and several existing programs offered by the agency.

Conduct Focus Groups

Focus groups are a special form of group interview in which participants are invited to discuss a particular topic, for example, the needs of African Americans for hospice care. Focus groups can be used to find out the views of several people on an issue of importance to a needs assessment. Members of focus groups are usually selected because they have personal knowledge about or expertise in a particular topic. The leader of a focus group facilitates a group discussion by asking members several general questions on the topic.

Example of a Needs Assessment Using Focus Groups

The United Way of Central Carolinas (2003) conducted a needs assessment focusing on eliminating disparities in social services. To “put its arms around” the complexity of the disparities issue, the group solicited input from the broader community. It convened thirteen “learning conversations” with community members and service providers to better understand disparities and to identify strategies in practice to eliminate them. They also facilitated four problem analysis sessions with community stakeholders to answer three basic questions: What are the precursors to disparities? What are the consequences of not addressing them? and Where can we, as a community, most appropriately intervene?

Arrange Community and Other Public Forums

Community forums are similar to focus groups in that a fairly open selection process is used to bring people together to discuss a topic of interest to all of them, such as new or improved housing or fighting crime. This open selection process can be a special invitation to selected members of the community or a more open invitation to the entire community with a public announcement informing people of the upcoming community forum and its purpose. Participants are likely to belong to the same community or neighborhood, and the topic is likely to focus on an issue that has broad implications that affect large numbers of people.

126 Social Work Evaluation: Enhancing What We Do

Example of a Community Forum on the Growing Mortgage Foreclosure Rate

The local newspaper wrote a series of articles on the growing rate of foreclosure among homeowners, particularly in lower-income neighborhoods. After that, a housing assistance agency decided to pursue this need further in one of these neighborhoods. It held a community forum to openly discuss the problem and to determine the extent to which it was a concern of residents. Along with a presentation of the results of the newspaper series and an open discussion of the problem, agency personnel handed out a confidential questionnaire on foreclosures for affected residents to fill out about themselves or close friends. Some of the questions asked were the following:

- What kinds of loans did you/they purchase?
 - What were the interest rates and other charges in the mortgages?
 - Did you/they feel that the rates were unusually high or unfair?
 - How much down payment was required?
 - What circumstances led to the foreclosures for individual families?
 - What kinds of help do they want?
-

Make Observations

Observations are another approach for assessing the need for a program. Social workers regularly depend on their observational skills in practice, such as when visiting clients in their homes. The nonverbal communication of clients, in particular, is often considered as important as their verbal communication. Observational evaluations use all of the senses, particularly sight and hearing, to collect data about a program and/or the needs it intends to address. Observations focus on what can be seen or heard, especially the behaviors of people. Behavior includes any number of things, such as a verbal comment or nonverbal expression, a conversation between two or more people, body movements, and physical contact between people.

Windshield surveys are one form of observation in which an individual new to a neighborhood drives through it to gain information (Shuster & Goeppinger, 1996). A windshield survey is usually structured such that the observers know what they are looking for. Usually these observations focus on the physical aspects of a neighborhood, such as types of housing, physical conditions of housing, street conditions, commercial entities, people who are out and their activities, and other observable characteristics.

Some Guidelines for a Windshield Tour of an Agency's Neighborhood

Kelly Koney (consultant to Council for Children's Rights, Charlotte, NC, personal communication, 2002) provides the following guidelines for a windshield tour:

1. Keep your observations objective.
 2. Observe what can influence how a client uses the agency's services.
 - Is there a nearby bus stop?
 - Is there an easily accessible parking lot?
 - How safe is it to walk around?
 - Is this an affluent neighborhood that may intimidate some lower-income people?
 3. Is the agency located in a residential neighborhood? Are there mostly houses, apartments, or businesses? What are the conditions of the buildings, streets, sidewalks?
 4. What types of people are out? What are they doing? What are their facial expressions toward you and others?
-

An important variation in observation studies is whether the evaluator participates in the activities or event being observed. Sometimes participant-observation is used, which is unstructured observation involving the evaluator as a participant. A participant-observer role helps the evaluator become more of an insider who observes people and their social context without drawing excessive attention to his or her presence. Participant observers are likely to use fairly unstructured interviewing methods and unstructured observations in their data collection (e.g., Patton, 1987).

Example of a Needs Assessment Using Participant Observation

An MSW student (Jordan, 2005) wanted to evaluate the extent to which collaboration occurred in decision making of teams of collaborative agencies meeting at a child advocacy center. She used the participant observation method to collect data on the leadership styles of team leaders and the activities evident in the team meetings. She chose to observe a random sample of client cases discussed by the teams at each meeting. Leadership style was defined and measured as of four fairly distinct types: telling, selling, participating, and delegating (Hersey & Blanchard, 1977). Participating and delegating styles reflected a more collaborative leadership style.

128 Social Work Evaluation: Enhancing What We Do

Jordan's thesis was that the leadership styles were related to such activities as number of information disclosures, number of team agreements toward action steps, and number of team recommendations.

An example of how one evaluator took on the participant-observation role in a needs assessment of the stigma problems of people with mental retardation was partially revealed in several activities that he participated in with these participants once they informed him of their comfort with his presence (Dudley, 1983). The activities provided firsthand exposure to some stigma problems in social situations and facilitated more open sharing of reports of stigma problems:

- Dancing with the people being studied
- Eating with them at restaurants
- Riding public transportation with them
- Joining them for visits at their home
- Sitting with them at their workstation at a sheltered workshop
- Double-dating
- Talking with them or listening to their conversations at various social occasions

An important caveat for the participant is to minimize or avoid any interference with the behaviors being observed. This requires a balance between being able to participate enough to become an insider but not too much so as to create unnecessary reactivity. A drawback to participant-observation is that it takes a much greater amount of time to build rapport and to gain acceptance from those being observed before fully concentrating on data collection. This initial period is a time in which such things as informed consent issues and the evaluator's role can be clarified and supported. This method also usually takes additional time during the data collection period to obtain a saturation of types of behaviors that reflect the many possible variations that could be key to a special area of need. In the example on stigma, it is evident that observations occurred during a variety of activities to obtain a saturation of various types of stigma expressed with a wide range of familiar people and strangers in several different social situations.

Using a Combination of Approaches

Many needs assessments use multiple methods of data collection to capture a picture of a community from several different perspectives and formats. Considering the variety of approaches described previously, a comprehensive needs assessment could, for example, involve obtaining demographic data from the U.S. Census or from a local health department, administering a questionnaire to the population of interest or informant interviews with key neighborhood leaders, observing discussions at neigh-

neighborhood meetings, and carrying out informal interviews with professionals from social agencies in the area.

Example of a Multimethod Needs Assessment

Hymans (2000) reported on a multimethod study in which BSW and nursing students joined together to complete a comprehensive communitywide assessment of a local neighborhood as part of a macro practice course. The goals of the project included understanding community assessment, assessing how a community functions, developing a broader understanding of social work practice, and providing a service to a community. The students used several data collection methods, including interviews with key informants, observations of neighborhood meetings, gathering existing demographic data, reviewing official documents, using mapping tools, conversations with political and religious leaders, and networking with professionals in the area.

Practice Areas and Needs Assessments

Although needs assessments are commonly used to plan new programs, they are much less frequently considered in planning new or expanded practice approaches. Yet needs assessments at the practice level can have some of the same purposes as programs. For example, needs assessments can help in planning new practice areas or approaches by providing information on clients' needs, their perceptions of their needs and prior experiences in addressing them, and their thoughts on how helpful a proposed practice approach appears to be.

Needs-assessment information can also be helpful in investigating any accessibility barriers for a new practice approach. A most effective way to learn more about accessibility barriers is to explore this issue with prospective clients. Psychological and cultural accessibility may be the largest accessibility areas to confront. In this regard, a needs assessment can uncover whether a new practice approach comprises goals, techniques, and lines of questioning that are sensitive to and compatible with particular cultural beliefs of some groups. For example, a practice approach intended to help clients gain new insights into their problems may not be as practical or even relevant to some groups as a training approach that stresses learning new skills.

Similarly, a needs assessment can be a vehicle for learning more about how to craft goals and objectives for a new or expanded practice area. Goals crafted from the provider's perspective may need to be cross-checked by the perspectives of potential recipients. Asking recipients questions about proposed goals and objectives of a practice approach such as the following may help:

130 Social Work Evaluation: Enhancing What We Do

1. What do you perceive as realistic goals for yourself?
2. What might be some measurable indicators that your goals are being reached?
3. How important are these goals to you and others in your circles of social support?

Assessments conducted in practice areas, like those conducted for new programs, have several methodological options at their disposal. They can be qualitative or quantitative. Qualitative methods can include in-depth interviews with clients, minimally structured observations, and brief questionnaires with open-ended questions. Pertinent qualitative data for a needs assessment can also be drawn from existing client records and client journals. Family genograms and ecomaps can also be used as assessment tools and can provide visual descriptions of family relationships and complicated connections to external social systems.

Quantitative needs assessments are also frequently used in developing practice areas. Standardized scales are one form of assessment. These scales are used to assess a wide range of needs and issues, such as self-esteem, depression, addictions, family well-being, and other complex and multidimensional variables. Several sources of standardized scales are available in social work and related fields (e.g., Fischer & Corcoran, 1994; Ginsberg, 2001; Jordan & Franklin, 2003; Royse, Thyer, Padgett, & Logan, 2006). These scales should have strong validity and reliability. Questionnaires and interviews developed by experienced practitioners are other quantitative tools that can be used.

Example of a Standardized Scale Used in Assessments of Practice

One agency used an anger evaluation scale as a needs-assessment tool in developing a new group approach. This scale helped adolescent clients focus on discussing goals and objectives in this problem area of their behavior (Patrick & Rich, 2004). The individual items of the scale were used to facilitate discussions with clients about the many ramifications and variations in expressions of dysfunctional anger. They also used the scale as a baseline measure of the clients' dysfunctional anger and as an ongoing measure of their anger at different points in their work together. The anger evaluation scale consisted of ten statements on anger using a five-point Likert scale (strongly agree to strongly disagree). Examples of scale items are the following:

- I often get angrier than necessary.
 - I usually stay angry for hours.
 - As a result of my anger, I use threatening language or gestures.
 - I use alcohol or drugs to calm my rage.
-

Steps in Conducting a Needs Assessment

A needs assessment should not be planned and executed in a vacuum for its results to be well received by all stakeholders. Several steps are important to consider that focus primarily on involving stakeholders from the beginning and incorporating them into each step to the extent possible. Keep in mind the participatory action approach, described in chapter 2, as one guide. Other resources provide additional information on these steps (e.g., Meenaghan, Kilty, & McNutt, 2004).

1. **Create a broad-based committee or team to sponsor the assessment.** Attempt to include all actual and potential stakeholders. Make sure that they represent the varying views of their constituencies, including different views and experiences on how the program or practice area should look.
2. **Have an extensive discussion with the committee on the general intent of a proposed program or practice area.** General intent can include identifying target groups of clients that you wish to help, general goals for helping them and their families, and initial assumptions about the causes of their problems and possible solutions.

Example of Data Gathering from Different Types of Fathers

A coalition of several local agencies prepared to conduct an assessment of the needs of uninvolved and minimally active fathers and existing services to fathers in the county. Fortunately, a nearby foundation was willing to provide a small grant to complete the study. A strategic-planning firm was enlisted to assist. The coalition proposed to conduct a needs assessment of four subgroups of fathers using multiple methods: fathers living with their very young children, nonresidential fathers who pay child support, nonresidential teen fathers, and fathers with children with special needs. Fathers of special needs children were selected because of the coalition's previous commitment to such children. The other three groups represented fathers perceived to have special needs that could be realistically met by the coalition's effort. Five methods were identified: (1) a series of focus groups with representatives of the four targeted subgroups of fathers, (2) one-on-one interviews with fathers, (3) key informant interviews with pertinent professionals, (4) an assessment of existing agency services to fathers, and (5) further examination of existing U.S. Census data on fathers in their county.

3. **Explore funding support for your project** and incorporate the ideas of potential funding agencies in your continued articulation of the problem and goals of your project. Also, begin articulating a pro-

132 Social Work Evaluation: Enhancing What We Do

posal for obtaining funds. Possible funding supports could be identified earlier in the process in a more general way.

4. **Decide on the methods that you will use** to conduct your own needs assessment. This is often a firsthand, in-depth study of the community. Possible methods to consider are focus groups, informant interviews, interviews of a sample of prospective recipients, and interviews with existing agency resources and services. Decide whether you need either a professional firm or an individual consultant to help develop your research methodologies.
5. **Conduct your needs assessment** and compile an easy-to-read report of your findings for your stakeholder committee.
6. **Involve all stakeholders in your committee in articulating a proposal for a new program or practice area.** Develop the proposal by supplementing and revising any earlier versions of your problem definition and goals on the basis of your needs-assessment results. Then develop a set of general strategies and specific program/practice components that you could implement to achieve your goals.
7. **Be sure to consider program/practice interventions at various levels** in your general strategies. These could include individual and family services to prospective recipients, group services, community education efforts, advocacy, and new agency policies initiatives that would directly or indirectly support your new program.

The preceding steps are designed especially for a needs assessment of an at-risk group in a city or county. This general outline has been used to conduct a needs assessment with one at-risk group and could be used with other at-risk populations as well, such as teenage mothers with their first baby, recent immigrants from Mexico or Central America, cancer survivors, homeless people without access to adequate housing, and elderly, socially isolated lesbian women.

Steps in a Needs Assessment of Caregivers

An evaluation group conducting a needs assessment of family caregivers of older adults defined its own steps for conducting a needs assessment (Kietzman, Scharlach, & Dal Santo, 2004).

1. Describe the current population of caregivers by compiling a descriptive profile.
2. Determine the existing and unmet needs of caregivers by obtaining input from professionals, consumers, and advocates.
3. Inventory existing caregiver resources and services by identifying all programs and services already serving caregivers.
4. Identify service gaps including existing barriers to equitable access to caregiver resources and services by assessing what the gaps and barriers are.

5. Prioritize the identified service needs of caregivers by synthesizing information gathered and ranking the needs.
6. Design a plan for the delivery of caregiver services that reduces identified barriers to access, supplements existing services, and creates new services where none exist, in the most effective and efficient manner possible by implementing a decision-making process that results in a plan of action.

As an exercise, compare the steps of Kietzman, Scharlach, and Dal Santo (2004) to the seven steps proposed just before them in this chapter. Who might be some of the stakeholders in Kietzman and colleagues' project? How do you think their stakeholders could become more involved in conducting their needs assessment? What would be some of the advantages and disadvantages of adding the PAR steps to their needs assessment?

The next chapter considers a third important topic of the planning stage, crafting goals and measurable objectives. It is important to carefully craft goals and objectives before implementing a new program or practice area.

Key Terms

- Community forums
- Conducting interviews
- Constructing questionnaires
- Data available in social agencies
- Focus groups
- Governmental studies
- Local studies
- Logic model
- Mapping
- Needs assessments
- Observations
- Participant-observation
- Purposes of a needs assessment
- Secondary research
- Steps in conducting a needs assessment
- Studies in professional journals and on the Internet
- Studies of nonprofit organizations
- Using existing data

Discussion Questions and Assignments

1. Use the logic model to design a program for older adults who have lost their spouses and are socially isolated, have some chronic medical problems affecting their mobility, and live in multicultural neighborhoods. Begin by finding a needs assessment article or report that identifies some of the needs for this population. Then brainstorm

134 Social Work Evaluation: Enhancing What We Do

with classmates or other colleagues to identify some ways to meet these interpersonal and mobility needs. Describe a proposed program that addresses many of the needs so that the adults can maintain their independence and natural supports in their neighborhoods.

2. This is a project for two or more students to complete. Focus on assessing the needs of families in a community context. Conduct an informal, multifaceted needs assessment of families in the community and the resources that already exist to help them. This assignment is partially intended to help you integrate work at several different system levels, especially family and community assessments. Specific suggestions for carrying out this assignment are as follows:
 - Attempt to talk with a variety of parents and other adult family members in the community, asking them what they think are the critical needs and problems that families and family members face. Ask for their opinions on how these needs can be met. What types of resources and services are needed, and how can social workers help them overcome the problems they identify? Be sure to explain to them your purpose and your intention to keep all information that they share confidential.
 - Consider observing what is happening with the family members (e.g., parents, grandparents, children, teenagers, babies) that you see. What are they doing, what does their affect seem to communicate, what strengths do they appear to have, and what problems and needs seem evident through your observations?
 - If you have difficulty talking with parents and other adult family members because they are unwilling or hesitant, identify and talk with advocates of families in the community, such as community leaders, volunteers, teachers, agency personnel, and other informal leaders.
 - Look at the findings of any recently conducted local studies that might reveal something about the needs of families. Consider newspaper articles and community hearings. Explore citywide and countywide studies and the U.S. Census if they offer data that pertain to your particular community.
 - Think about and share other ways to learn about the needs of families in the community. Thinking outside of the box is often overlooked in doing an assessment like this.
 - After assessing the needs of families, identify and locate social agencies, community centers, churches, schools, day-care centers, businesses, and other organizations in the community and find out how they are attempting to help families or individual family members.

The Planning Stage and Needs Assessments 135

3. Using data from the U.S. Census, investigate the needs of children younger than five years of age in your community. This can be done online at www.census.gov. Select one report and describe what you learn about their needs.
4. Conduct a windshield tour of the neighborhood surrounding your agency or another neighborhood in which a large concentration of your clients live. Use the suggestions in this chapter to help you conduct the assessment. Then share what you learned with the class or agency colleagues.
5. Conduct a needs assessment using the American Factfinder mapping tool available at the U.S. Census Web site (www.factfinder.census.gov). Use the Thematic Maps tool to view some of the geographic patterns in the Census data. Select a city or county of interest to you, identify a data set of the Census, and create a map that visually displays data for the city or county.
6. Work in small groups of three to five to complete this project (which can be carried out in conjunction with a policy course and is a variation of an exercise that appeared on the Baccalaureate Social Work Program Directors Listserv).
 - Select a community and identify a policy question that highlights an apparent unaddressed need (e.g., Do children need somewhere to go after school? Do teens need something to keep them off the street? Is a domestic violence hotline needed in the community?) You may want to seek assistance in identifying your policy issue from local agencies or funding agencies.
 - Once you have identified a policy question, conduct a needs assessment of the local community that provides data to tentatively confirm or refute your initial policy question. One of the questions of your needs assessment can be the policy question that you identified. Other questions can be used to document the suspected need(s) that you have identified.
 - Write a policy change proposal that can address the need that you have begun to document. Your proposal should include the following:
 - (a) What is the unmet policy reform that is needed?
 - (b) How did you discover and document it?
 - (c) What do you propose to do to meet this need?
 - (d) How can it lead to advocacy for social justice issues?
 - (e) Where will you get funding?
 - (f) How will you secure other resources (e.g., space, materials)?
 - (g) Who will be your staff and volunteers? How will they be paid?
 - (h) How will they be recruited and trained?

136 Social Work Evaluation: Enhancing What We Do

- (i) What will be your budget?
- (j) What are the limitations or obstacles to implementing your plan? How might these obstacles be overcome?
- A reaction paper of one or two pages can also be requested from each group member reflecting on such questions as, What was difficult? What was fun? What did you learn about the field of policy reform and community-based social work?

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The Planning Stage and Needs Assessments 137

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