Community Health Assessment & Improvement Processes

Introduction

Assessment is one of three core functions of public health. National Voluntary Public Health Accreditation recognizes the importance of assessment. In order for a health department to be eligible for accreditation application, it must complete a community health assessment, community health improvement plan, and an agency strategy. Further, many accreditation standards require documentation illustrating the fulfillment of community health assessment and improvement planning activities. Not only does the public health field acknowledge the importance or community health assessment and improvement planning, other community stakeholders, such as hospitals, United Ways, community health centers, government agencies, and advocacy groups want to participate in and benefit from community health assessment and improvement processes. This fact sheet describes what comprises a community health assessment and community health improvement process.

Community Health Assessments

A community health assessment is a process that uses quantitative and qualitative methods to systematically collect and analyze health data within a specific community. Health data include information on risk factors, quality of life, social determinants of health, determinants of inequity, mortality, morbidity, community assets, forces of change, and information on how well the public health system provides essential services. The design and implementation of community health assessments should include community stakeholders such as residents, businesses, nonprofit organizations, and government agencies. Community health assessment data inform community decision-making, the prioritization of health problems, and the development and implementation of community health improvement plans.[1, 2, 3, 4]

Assessment is one of three core public health functions. Data collected through community health assessments inform the other two core functions: policy development and assurance. Community health assessments provide information for problem identification, policy formulation, implementation, and evaluation. Well-informed policy development, in turn, fulfills the assurance function to ensure the conditions, programs, and interventions that maintain and improve health. Assessment also helps measure how well a public health system is fulfilling its assurance function.[5, 6]

A community health assessment answers the following questions:
- What are the health problems in a community?
- Why do health issues exist in a community?
- What factors create or determine the health problems?
- What resources are available to address the health problems?
- What are the health needs of the community from a population-based perspective?[7, 8, 9]

Community health assessments build upon the strengths of existing assessment models including organizational, marketing, and needs assessments; as a result, community health assessments can identify the full magnitude of health problems.[10] A comprehensive community health assessment process uses broad networks of data, mobilizes community members, and garners resources to comprehensively approach public health issues.[11, 12]

Community representatives are an integral part of a community health assessment because they know community habits, customs, attitudes, social groups, and where things happen.[13] Successful community health assessments build trust and community ownership of the process through active engagement of organizations and residents. Meaningful engagement involves the community in developing assessment protocols, identifying priorities, and implementing and monitoring community improvement efforts.[14] Moreover, community members help promote and bring visibility to community health assessment and improvement initiatives.[15]

Most community health assessment processes include some variation of the following steps:
- Develop an assessment plan;
- Engage the community;
- Define the population;
- Identify community health indicators;
- Collect data;
- Analyze data;
- Identify health priorities; and
- Report results.

Community Health Improvement Planning
A community health assessment should be part of a broader community health improvement planning process. A community health improvement planning process uses community health assessment data to develop and implement strategies for action and establishes accountability to ensure measurable health improvement.[16] A community health improvement planning process looks beyond the performance of an individual organization serving a specific segment of a community to the way in which the activities of many organizations contribute to community health improvement.[17] Community health improvement planning processes provide a framework for addressing issues identified by community health assessments to ultimately improve the health of communities.[18, 19]

Over the past 30 years, public health experts have created a variety of public health assessment and improvement processes. Table 1 outlines commonly referenced community health improvement planning processes. Common elements of community health improvement planning processes include the following:
- Prepare and plan;
- Engage the community;
- Develop a goal or vision;
- Conduct community health assessment(s) (see community health assessment steps listed above);
- Prioritize health issues;

- Develop community health improvement plan;
- Implement community health improvement plan; and
- Evaluate and monitor outcomes.

Even though many community health assessment and improvement planning processes have similar components, they differ in terms of scope and philosophies. Processes may focus on a programmatic area, agency division, local health department, or public health system. Some models address one specific health condition, while others identify underlying factors that affect several or all health conditions. Processes may be based on a biomedical or a socio-ecological model of health. Some models are informed by health promotion theory, while others are informed by strategic planning and performance measurement theories. The philosophy and scope of a given process will affect overall assessment and improvement results.

References
1. Issel, L. (2004). *Health program planning and evaluation: A practical, systematic approach for community health*. Sudbury, MA: Jones and Bartlett Publishers.
2. Cibula, D., Novick, L., Morrow, C., and Sutphen, S. (2003). Community health assessment. *Am J Prev Med, 24,* 118-123.
3. Dever, G. (1997). *Improving outcomes in public health practice: Strategy and methods*. Gaithersburg, MD: Aspen Publishers Inc.
4. Public Health Accreditation Board. (2010). *PHAB e-newsletter, 27*. Accessed June 17, 2011, from http://conta.cc/iGPOVA.
5. Ibid.
6. Institute of Medicine of the National Academies. (2003). *The future of the public's health in the 21st century*. Washington, DC: The National Academies Press.
7. Issel.
8. Dever.
9. Institute of Medicine of the National Academies. (2003.)
10. Issel.
11. Dever.
12. Public Health Accreditation Board.
13. Edberg, M. (2007). *Essentials of health behavior: Social and behavioral theory in public health*. Sudbury, MA: Jones and Bartlett Publishers.
14. Dever.
15. Institute of Medicine of the National Academies. (2003.)
16. Durch, J., Bailey, L., & Stoto, M. (1997). *Improving health in the community: A role for performance monitoring*. Washington, DC: The National Academies Press.
17. Ibid.
18. Ibid.
19. Public Health Accreditation Board.
20. McKenzie, J., Neiger, B., & Thackeray, R. (2009). *Planning, implementing, and evaluating health promotion programs: A primer, 5th Edition.* Benjamin Cummings.
21. Ibid.
22. Institute of Medicine. (1988). *The future of public health*. Available at www.iom.edu/reports/1988/the-future-of-public-health.aspx.

23. National Association of County and City Health Officials. (1996). *Assessment Protocol for Excellence in Public Health*. Washington, DC: National Association of County and City Health Officials.

24. Institute of Medicine. (1997). *Improving health in the community: A role for performance monitoring*. Available at http://www.nap.edu/openbook.php?isbn=0309055342.
25. National Association of County and City Health Officials. (2004). *Mobilizing for Action through Planning and Partnerships, Achieving Healthier Communities through MAPP, A User's Handbook*. Washington, DC: National Association of County and City Health Officials.

Acknowledgments

For More Information, Please Contact:
Julia Joh Elligers, MPH
Director of Assessment, Planning, and Workforce Development
202-507-4234
jjoh@naccho.org

Table 1. Examples of Community Health Assessment and Improvement Processes

	PRECEED-PROCEED[20]	Healthy Communities[21]	Planned Approach to Community Health [22]
Basic description	PRECEED-PROCEED is a health promotion assessment and planning process. Communities "precede" by defining their desired outcome and conducting social, epidemiological, educational, ecological, administrative, and policy assessments to identify causes of health issues. Then, they "proceed" with intervention and evaluation.	Community-owned health improvement process	A community engaged process to improve health departments' abilities to plan, implement, and evaluate health promotion programs. Process includes community health needs assessment.
Steps	PRECEED 1. Social assessment (defining end result) 2. Epidemiological assessment (identifying community health priorities) 3. Educational and ecological assessment 4. Administrative and policy assessment PROCEED 5. Implementation 6. Process evaluation 7. Impact evaluation 8. Outcome evaluation	1. Mobilize community 2. Create a community vision 3. Assess assets, resources, barriers to vision 4. Select an issue to focus on 5. Develop a community-wide strategy and plan 6. Implement action plan 7. Track progress and monitor outcomes	1. Mobilize community 2. Collect and organize data 3. Choose health priorities and target groups 4. Develop plan 5. Evaluate
Principles	• Identify desired outcome first, then the causes of the outcome before implementing a solution • Community-based interventions • Collaboration	• Community ownership and empowerment • Diverse partnerships • Citizen participation • Systems change • Very broad definition of health • Social determinants of health • Collective action	• Community participation and collaboration • Data-informed program development • Enhanced community health promotion capacity • Vertical and horizontal networks (i.e., strengthen local capacity within intergovernmental framework)
Notable characteristics	• Typically focuses on one health problem • Uses a medical model of health	• Popular in Europe and Canada • Not the same as Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's "Healthy Communities" program • Influenced the philosophical development of MAPP (see Table 2)	• Typically focuses on health promotion and chronic disease programs

	Assessment Protocol for Excellence in Public Health[23]	Community Health Improvement Process[24]	Mobilizing for Action through Planning & Partnerships[25]
Basic description	Tool for local health departments (LHDs) to (1) assess organizational capacity to perform core functions; (2) assess and prioritize community health issues; and (3) develop and implement community health improvement plans.	Community health improvement process that includes performance monitoring and two iterative cycles: (1) problem identification and prioritization and (2) analysis and implementation	Community-owned strategic planning and implementation process for improving health and the local public health system. Four assessments inform the process.

Steps	Part 1: Organization capacity assessment
	1. Prepare
	2. Select indicators
	3. Identify strengths and weaknesses
	4. Analyze and report strengths
	5. Analyze weaknesses
	6. Prioritize problems
	7. Develop and implement action plans
	8. Institutionalize assessment process
	Part 2: Community process
	1. Prepare
	2. Collect and analyze health data
	3. Form a community health committee
	4. Identify community health problems
	5. Prioritize community health problems
	6. Analyze community health problems
	7. Inventory community health resources
	8. Develop a community health plan
	Part 3: Completing the cycle
	1. Create a plan
	2. Implement plan
	3. Monitor and evaluate plan
		Problem identification and prioritization cycle:
		1. Form a community health coalition
		2. Prepare and analyze community health profiles
		3. Identify critical health issues
		
		Analysis and implementation cycle:
		1. Analyze health issues
		2. Inventory resources
		3. Develop health improvement strategy
		4. Identify accountability
		5. Develop indicator set
		6. Implement strategy
		7. Monitor process and outcomes
			1. Organize for success
			2. Visioning
			3. Four assessments
			  a. Community health status assessment
			  b. Community themes and strengths assessment
			  c. Local public health system assessment (National Public Health Performance Standards Program local assessment)
			  d. Forces of change assessment
			4. Identify strategic issues
			5. Formulate goals and strategies
			6. Action cycle
			  a. Plan
			  b. Implement
			  c. Evaluate

Principles	• Focuses on LHD's capacity • Involves community	• Iterative process • Broad definition of public health • Multi-determinants of health • Accountable community collaboration • Shared community goals • Performance measurement and monitoring	• Strategic planning • Community owned & engaged process • Local public health system focus • Dialogue • Focuses on assets in addition to needs • Broad definition of public health • Iterative process
Notable characteristics	• Precursor to MAPP (see right) • Process focuses on LHD	• Includes guidance on what should be included in a community health profile • Influenced the development of MAPP (see right)	• NACCHO's gold standard in assessment, planning, and community health improvement • Builds upon previous assessment and planning processes