



KNOW YOUR COMMUNITY

You want to serve your community. But to do it effectively, you must learn what your community *needs*. Conducting a community needs assessment will help you measure those needs and what is already being done to address them.

Conducting a community needs assessment

A community needs assessment proves that your club's work is relevant and necessary. In fact, it is important that your club conduct the community needs assessment rather than relying on findings from another organization. You will gain a better understanding of the area you want to serve — whether it's an entire city or a small neighborhood. You will learn about the community's resources, engage with community members and potentially develop new community partnerships.

Here are some additional benefits:

- Your club will better understand what needs the community has, why they exist and how they can be addressed.
- Community members will become engaged with your club and how they can contribute to solutions.
- Your club can use the data you gather to make a case to other potential project funders.
- Other community organizations and members can use the data you collect. It can inform strategic planning, assist in priority setting and help improve existing programs.

Follow these steps to conduct your own community needs assessment.

STEP 1: Define the scope.

Community issues are complicated. One issue is often related to many others, and it's easy to expand the range of issues until it's hard to know what to do or where to begin. Remember, you need to identify the problem you want to solve before you create a project to address it.

Begin your community needs assessment by clearly identifying:

- The geographic area to be assessed
- The community members who will be served

This can be as big or small as you determine. For example, as big as a city or as small as a school in your community.

As you conduct research, continuously ask yourself whether you are going beyond your original area of study. Remember, to qualify for a club grant, your project must address at least one Children's Fund cause area: health, education or youth leadership development.

STEP 2: Decide whether to go solo or collaborate.

Your club can “go solo” and complete all of the community assessment activities on your own — or you can work with community partners to complete the assessment.

If you decide to collaborate, consider working with potential partners such as corporations, nonprofit organizations, local community organizations or foundations. By collaborating with others, you may gain additional resources, engage more community members and establish relationships beyond the reach of your club.

STEP 3: Collect data.

Collect data regarding the community need you have chosen to address. Remember to stay within the previously defined scope of your assessment.

There are different methods for collecting data. Your club can determine which data collection methods best suit you. Here are four examples:

Community meeting

This can be a public gathering that invites community members to discuss issues, voice concerns and express what the community’s needs and priorities are. Choose a convenient time and location, and promote the event throughout your community. Set an agenda and follow it.

Focus group

While a community meeting will provide you with opinions from a broad audience, a focus group lets you hear from a specific, pre-selected group. If your project is associated with a school, you could create a focus group that includes parents, teachers and community members. Invite six to 12 people and select a club member to be a facilitator. With a smaller, more specific audience, you can hold more in-depth conversations, so prepare open-ended questions.

Interviews

Even more individualized than a community meeting or a focus group, interviews allow you to speak one-on-one with community members. You’ll gain a deeper understanding of individuals’ opinions. Questions should be prepared in advance, but this setting also allows for further conversation.

Survey

With a survey, you can collect information and opinions from community members in person or via email, phone or mail. Keep the survey short and simple, but make sure to explain its purpose and provide ample time for respondents to complete it.

Whether you gather data through one of the methods above or you choose your own, here are some useful tips:

- Establish goals.
- Prepare questions in advance.
- If meeting in person, select an easily accessible location and a convenient time.
- Set an agenda and follow it.
- Take notes.

STEP 4: Determine key findings.

You will likely collect a lot of data and information about your community's needs in Step 3. Next, analyze the data to identify your key findings, which will:

- Validate anecdotal evidence of community needs and assets.
- Highlight significant trends.
- Reveal differences across segments of the community.

Key findings can be organized into categories to help summarize the data. Common categories include strengths, gaps, opportunities and challenges.

STEP 5: Set priorities and create an action plan.

Armed with key findings, your club can now make informed decisions about how to address your community's needs. Based on the key findings, create an action plan complete with goals and objectives for your project. Determine how you will measure your project's effectiveness and track it over time.

STEP 6: Share your findings.

Distribute your action plan — allow the community to benefit from your findings. Community members are more likely to support your efforts when they clearly understand the work you have done and how it meets the community's needs.