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Steps to conducting a successful REACH Program community assessment

1. Create a coalition charged with carrying out a community assessment in your community. Think carefully about how the assessment process can help nurture and grow the coalition.

2. Understand your current reality by building a common understanding of the existing supports and opportunities for youth development within your community. You will need to document your findings so that you can use this information to develop your community assessment design.

Consider beginning by identifying supports and opportunities that we know from research contribute to youth being able to develop into self sufficient, caring, and contributing adults. For example:

- Adequate nutrition, health and shelter
- Multiple supportive relationships with adults and peers
- Challenging and engaging activities and learning experiences
- Meaningful opportunities for involvement, membership and leadership
- Physical and emotional safety
- Academic preparedness and support
- Skill-building and enrichment opportunities
- Support for positive identity development and engagement across different racial, ethnic, linguistic, and social groups

Once you have identified existing resources, needs and opportunities, determine currently available information, groups, and individuals that will help in better understanding youth development supports and opportunities and the extent to which they support youth ages 10-15. This information might include existing (secondary) data as well as research literature.

Consider using questions like these to foster discussions that will help you better understand what you have learned.

- Has the community tried to strengthen the above-mentioned supports and opportunities before and with what results?
- What strategies seem to have been most effective in delivering these supports and opportunities?
- Who are the individuals or groups already addressing these supports and opportunities? (Be sure to think outside the standard “programs” box!)
- To what extent do youth (ages 10-15) have access to existing supports and opportunities? Consider youth of different ages, racial/ethnic/language groups, socio-economic backgrounds, geographic locations, academic performance levels, etc..
- Are there “experts” inside or outside the community who can help understand issues around the supports and opportunities? “Experts” might include community leaders, youth groups, long-time residents who have close and mutually respectful relationships with young people, and/or people working in related fields.

Timeframe: August - September 06

SHF Deliverable: Assessment Design due Sept 29, 2006

3. Identify the resources, assets, and capacities that you want to learn more about by gathering additional information (primary data) and use this information to create a Community Profile.

A designated Assessment Team should be responsible for actually implementing the work spelled out in the Assessment Design and sharing the resulting Community Profile with the broader Coalition and community so that the information can be used to develop an Implementation Plan.

At this point in time it might be helpful to consider the developmental outcomes associated with the supports and opportunities you've identified. Examples of developmental outcomes are:

- Learning to be productive in school, establish outside interests and establish basic life skills
- Learning to connect with a diversity of adults, peers, and larger social institutions
- Learning to navigate across diverse settings, take responsibility, and make healthy choices
- Developing the skills and attitudes to be and become civically engaged community members

This information will help to ensure that you frame the community assessment and guiding questions around desired outcomes rather than activities and services.

The actual assessment process will include three phases:

- Designing the assessment process
- Collecting data
- Analyzing data

An overview of basic steps to collecting data for a community assessment is included in this document.

Timeframe: October 06 – January 07

SHF Deliverable: Community Profile: due February 28, 2007

4. Develop strategies that will serve as the basis of an Implementation Plan. The first step in developing these strategies should be having the assessment team share the Community Profile (which include both primary and secondary data) with the broader coalition and community to collaboratively identify strengths, resources, and areas for improvement.

Timeframe: January - February 07

5. Create an action or Implementation Plan (who will do what and by when). The implementation plan should identify and prioritize high-leverage strategies to make the most of what you currently have in order to get where you want to be. When developing your strategies, consider ways to involve people from multiple sectors of the community and to address a range of strategies. The plan should identify the specific changes to be sought and the desired long-term outcome(s) for your community-based youth development initiative.

Desirable long-term outcomes include economic self-sufficiency, healthy family and social relationships and civic engagement, and community sustainability.

Timeframe: February - March 07

SHF Deliverable: Implementation Plan due March 23, 2007

6. Evaluate the process. How do you know you've been successful? What have you learned from the process? How might you improve based on what you've learned?

Timeframe: March 07

General criteria for all REACH deliverables

- There must be evidence that a diversity of youth are authentically involved.
- There must be evidence of Coalition led planning and decision-making (not a one person/organization process).
- There must be evidence that the underlying framework for all products/deliverables supports youth engagement principles.
- There must be documentation that shows all products/deliverables are evidence based/data driven.

Useful definitions

Community Assessment: For the purpose of the REACH Program, a community assessment is a community planning process with the desired outcome of generating community-scale strategies for supporting the successful transition of youth to adulthood. Community assessments are based on a positive and inclusive approach to inventorying the existing resources, interests and needs of a specified neighborhood or community. Emerging strategies are responsive to a local vision and build upon local resources and capacities.

Community Profile: For the purpose of the REACH Program, a community profile is being defined as a diagnostic and evaluation tool that identifies existing community resources, interests and needs from the vantage point of key stakeholders, including young people and their caretakers. This profile should help community stakeholders make decisions about how to best allocate investments that will strengthen local supports and opportunities for youth.

Implementation Plan: For the purpose of the REACH Program, an implementation plan is being defined as a comprehensive document outlining community strategies for building on local capacity to strengthen supports and opportunities for children and youth. The plan should include the assessment of capacities, interests and needs, next steps, resource allocation strategies, and methods for assessing the effectiveness of strategies and bringing that information into ongoing coalition planning processes.

Data: Distinct pieces of information. Data can exist in a variety of forms -- as numbers or text on pieces of paper, as bits and bytes stored in electronic memory, or as facts stored in a person's mind.

Primary Data: Information that is obtained directly from first-hand sources by means of surveys, observation or experimentation.

Secondary Data: Information already gathered.

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Basic steps to collecting data for a community assessment

These basic steps to collecting data for a community assessment have been prepared for the purpose of the REACH Program. They are intended to be used as guidelines. The actual process may vary based on how your Coalition approaches this work. Additional assistance and resources to assist you with this process are available through the Center for Community School Partnerships (CCSP).

A. Design the data collection and analysis process

1. Decide who will be involved in this process, and how. Key criteria to consider are availability and commitment, necessary skill-sets, and knowledge of /connections with the range of stakeholders from whom you hope to gather information and with whom you want to be building relationships. Define clear roles and responsibilities for all (including youth).

2. Clarify your assessment goal (what is it that you want to know more about). Framing this in terms of the developmental outcomes that are relevant to your investigation will help you focus on desired outcomes rather than activities and services.

3. Develop 3-5 overarching questions that will guide the process and 3-5 specific questions for each of your overarching questions. Taking this important step will keep you focused on your assessment goal, help you decide what types of data you should collect, and will be useful in designing your data collection instruments.

4. Decide what information will help you answer the questions you developed in step 3. These are the data you will want to collect.

5. Decide what data collection instruments (e.g., surveys, interviews, focus group questions, etc.) you will use to get the information you have decided to collect, and from whom you will collect this information. In thinking about whom, consider who knows what you need to know, and the range of perspectives/vantage points that are important to include. Remember that different questions and audiences call for different outreach and data collection strategies.

6. Determine if existing data from secondary sources and the research literature can help answer your questions.

7. Identify and/or design data collection instruments.

8. Determine where you will store and manage the data to be collected and assign someone that responsibility.

9. Make sure that the people who will be collecting the data have the necessary skills and training they need (interviewing skills, focus group facilitation, field notes). Arrange for training as necessary.

B. Collect the data

1. Develop a firm schedule for data collection, including who is responsible for collecting data, dates, time, and subjects.

2. Build in opportunities for community researchers to check-in and receive additional support during the data collection process.

3. Collect the secondary data and research literature that you've identified as useful in answering your guiding questions.

4. Collect primary data using the data collection instruments you've identified and/or designed.
Enter the data into your documentation system and store it as quickly as possible.

C. Analyze the data

1. Decide what the data tells you about your guiding questions.
   Write down your first impressions
   Organize the data into manageable pieces that reflect your guiding questions
   Review the data to discern emerging themes

2. Summarize and interpret your findings so that other people can understand and use it. Make sure that your findings can be backed up by solid evidence.

3. Consider whether there are any gaps in your data that might be affecting your analysis and account for that in finalizing your findings.

4. Develop a set of preliminary recommendations for action. This might include recommendations about further data collection needs.

D. Presentation Development

1. Think through the most compelling and engaging way to communicate what you learn and your resulting recommendations to community stakeholders. It is important to have a preliminary plan developed BEFORE you begin data collection, as your data collection process should support the final product development. (For example, if the final product is going to be a video, data collection strategies might need to include video.) Be realistic about available resources, including time, funds, skills, and equipment.

2. Assign clear roles, responsibilities and timelines.