

The Role of Needs Assessment Research in the Planning and Development of Volunteer Programs

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The needs assessment can be a valuable tool for the manager of a volunteer program. While the needs assessment is often perceived as a part of the program planning process, it can also aid the manager who seeks program development or revision of services provided by an existing program. The needs assessment focuses on the needs of a client group and enables the manager to identify unmet needs. New programs or program revision can be tailored to provide only those services needed by clients.

There is a tendency to assume that client needs are obvious. The volunteer program manager often uses conventional wisdom as a base for program planning and development. As a result, the program developed can be fragmented, inefficient, and fail to meet adequately the real needs of the client group.

The needs assessment does require the investment of time and other scarce resources. However, the advantage of decision-relevant information in the planning process outweighs the value of the resources invested. It is usually wiser to delay implementation of a volunteer program until the needs and available resources have been clearly identified.

Several writers have defined the needs assessment enterprise. Kaufman (1972) refers to the needs assessment process as a discrepancy analysis. The role of the needs assessment, then, is to gauge the difference between those situations that are and those that should be.

Warhiet, Bell, and Schwab's (1977) definition extends the function of a needs assessment. In dealing with community mental health programs, they define a needs assessment as "...a research and planning activity designed to determine a community's mental health service needs and utilization patterns." For these researchers, the needs assessment also looks at the existing resources in the community.

For our purposes, we will conceptualize the needs assessment endeavor as exploring both existing services and needs in a systematic manner to provide decision-relevant information for the planning development, management, and evaluation functions.

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Pharis (1976) states that "planning and evaluation are conceptually related processes in the management of complex organizations." Needs assessment, as the logical prerequisite to planning (or as part of the process itself), is therefore directly related to evaluation. Some models (Sumrall and Roberts, 1978, Hagedorn, 1977, Kaufman, 1972) consider both needs assessment and evaluation to be part of the planning process. Certainly, the generation of information about the current situation is important to the planner and, eventually, to the evaluator.

Planning is also a function of volunteer program management. The volunteer program manager can use needs assessment in planning, and in monitoring and controlling as well. A further planning consideration is locating resources. In this age of scarcity, fiscal resources are especially difficult to find. Both needs assessment and evaluation results can help the planner secure funding by enhancing the credibility of the volunteer program.

The functions of planning management, evaluation, and needs assessment are interrelated. It is this interrelation that makes the needs assessment essential to proper execution of other functions of the planning process.

NEEDS ASSESSMENT FOCUS

The needs assessment seeks to identify the availability of existing resources to meet the identified needs.

Naturally, the exact nature of the information needed will vary from volunteer program to volunteer program. As the nature of the decision to be made changes, so will the nature of the question to be answered.

A critical variable is the type of need. A finding that the target group needs tutoring and educational counseling will demand a different response than a finding that job counseling and vocational assistance are needed. The potential for such findings may be interpreted as a reason for not doing a needs assessment. A volunteer program with a one-to-one relationship thrust may feel threatened by a finding that legal counseling is a higher-priority need than one-to-one counseling. It should be remembered that, with limited exceptions, there are few needs that cannot be efficiently and effectively met by a volunteer program. A responsive program is almost always more sure to survive than a similar nonresponsive program.

Another important variable is the location of those in need. You may want to recruit volunteers from areas which are close to large concentrations of clients. You

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may also want to locate stationary services, like your office, near client concentrations. You cannot take advantage of these location features unless you know where the clients are.

Another issue is the severity of the problem (Federico, 1980). Obviously, a simple headache is less severe than a brain tumor. In the realm of social problems, such a clear distinction is often difficult. Differentiating between severe and moderate depression is often possible only with the services of a trained psycho-diagnostician. However, a rough estimate of problem severity is usually possible. When needs vary in the amount of damage they cause and in the responsiveness to treatment, the needs must be prioritized. Volunteer programs then can apply resources to critical areas. In order to make proper decisions concerning resource utilization, we must know which client groups have the most severe problems and which of those problems should be considered first.

Incidence is also important. We must know how many people are affected. Organizing a major volunteer program for one or two individuals is usually not cost-effective. It is possible for a volunteer program to concentrate on a minor problem while leaving a major problem unattended. This misallocation of resources may reduce credibility and limit client satisfaction.

Federico (1980) notes that one issue is who defines the needs. Our perspective may differ greatly from the client's perspective and from the perspective of agency employees, concerned citizens, or political groups.

The existing services available in a community represent another significant set of issues. One might assume that because there is an agency designed to meet a need, the need will be met. This is not always the case. At times a program will not accept certain types of clients. There are also situations where no service is offered. These service "gaps" are deficiencies in a community's service delivery system which might be met with a volunteer program.

Sometimes a service is available, but not accessible to all or some of the client group. An agency on one side of town may be inaccessible to those clients who live on the other side of town and who do not have transportation. A program that is open from nine to five may not be available to employed clients. Physical barriers may make a program inaccessible to handicapped clients.

Duplication of services is another problem. This occurs when two agencies provide the same service to the same population, creating services that go unused. Considering the current economic situation, this problem may be even more serious than before. The needs assessment can prevent additional duplication or maximize use of existing duplicated services.

A needs assessment can also enhance continuity of care. Clients are often lost in the "cracks" between agencies and programs, or even within programs. Continuity of care refers to the continuous nature of treatment as experienced by a client. The lack of this quality has often been referred to as fragmentation. Strong linkages between agencies are needed to insure continuous treatment of clients and are possible when accurate

information is available. The volunteer program can be designed to provide continuity of service among existing agencies.

The planner must also consider the caseload of existing programs. If a service is available but overburdened, the agency providing the service will not accept new clients. Information must be gathered about the costs involved in expanding existing programs to meet the needs of the target client group.

Finally, some programs are underutilized because clients (and referring persons) are unaware of them. This can be due to lack of awareness of the entire program or a service it offers.

The needs assessment must examine the service delivery system in its entirety. The data developed should provide the researcher with an accurate view of the state of the delivery system. The volunteer program can then be tailored to provide the services the clients need.

The final output of this process is a statement of needs, ranked in order of priority. Naturally, priority denotes importance, and importance suggests a value judgement. In addition, a profile of existing services and their availability to the target clients is developed. From this the unmet needs of the clients (and thus the possible program services) are clearly identified. The volunteer program manager then can make informed decisions about volunteer program development.

METHODS USED IN CONDUCTING A NEEDS ASSESSMENT

Warhiet, Bell and Schwab (1977) propose a comprehensive strategy using five approaches:

1. The Survey Approach
2. The Rates-under-Treatment Approach
3. The Key Informant Approach
4. The Social Indicators Approach
5. The Community Forum Approach

This model advocates that these approaches be used in conjunction with each other.

Anyone who has filled out a census questionnaire is familiar with the survey approach. The survey approach solicits information from a selected portion of the target group called a sample. Both in terms of technical skills and cost factors, the survey approach is usually the most expensive component of the needs assessment. Surveys, however, usually enable the researcher to develop a broad information base. Some of the methods used in the survey approach are mailed questionnaires, in-person interviews and telephone interviews.

Pharis (1976), in discussing survey use in mental health programs, identified four types of information that can be obtained through survey research:

1. Opinions and judgement of community need.
2. Attitudes toward mental illness
3. Individual's statements about their own conditions

that may reveal the need for a particular type of service or provide information about specific symptoms

4. Attitudes about the quality or accessibility of existing services

Information can be gathered from clients, agency employees, recognized experts, community service programs, and the community at large. The needs assessment should gather information from each group which is involved with the targeted client group. The same instrument can be designed for several different delivery formats. You might use a mailed questionnaire for social service agencies, a personal interview schedule for clients, and a telephone interview schedule for community subjects. The advantage of the approach is the comprehensiveness and accuracy of its information. As Warhiet and Schwab (1977) contend, "the survey is one of the most scientifically valid methods when properly used."

There are technical problems in conducting a survey. It is often difficult to construct a valid instrument. Aside from the technical problems, cost is also a factor. Many organizations planning a survey would do well to consider outside technical assistance.

The rates-under-treatment approach looks at the clientele of other agencies currently providing services to the target group. The basic belief is that these persons will represent the types of clients which the agency is likely to see in the future. A criminal justice program could pull probation records or survey the characteristics of prison inmates to obtain information about the number and types of clients these agencies are likely to see.

Warhiet, et al. (1977) see this approach as being useful in terms of cost and access. They note, however, that the technique does not guarantee a representative sample, so external validity could be a problem. Pharis (1976) raises the issue of comparing data between programs. Each agency will deal with a different population even if the same class of offenders are served. The data gathered from a particular agency should be used only to make decisions about the volunteer program which provides service to clients of the studied agency.

The key informant approach looks at the problem area through the eyes of people who are in a position to know something about it. For instance, a sheriff, judge, and probation officer probably know more about crime in their communities than the average citizen.

In applying the key informant method, you determine what types of information you will need. You then select a number of persons who are knowledgeable about the area in question and send each a questionnaire. Another method is to develop an unstructured interview schedule and interview the informants. The data is then assembled and analyzed. While this method is quick and inexpensive, it does have some drawbacks. Warhiet, et al. (1977) feel that the "purposive" nature of the sample can be biased. Pharis (1976) sees the possibility of influence on the data of any vested interests of the informants. In spite of these problems, the strategy does have value.

Social indicators are indirect measures of social phenomena. For instance, crime rates, birth rates, and

census data are familiar sources of social indicator data to most people. We know that crime rates do not represent all crime committed in a given area. Crimes that go undetected or that are not reported to the police often are not counted. We do assume, however, that if crime rates go up, actual crime is also on the increase.

While Warhiet, et al. (1977) point out that a low-cost flexible research design is possible with the social indicator method, more explanation is necessary than is possible here. The reader is referred to Warhiet, et al. (1977), Garn, et al. (1976) and Blum (1974) for more detailed treatment. It should also be pointed out that municipal planning departments often have sophisticated collections of social indicator statistics. A trip to such an office may prove fruitful in raw data and technical assistance.

The community forum approach is, in essence, a public hearing or community hearing. Interested parties come together to meet and discuss the problem or need. While this method does not in any way provide a representative sample group, it can draw out those with a burning interest in the issue. Breadth of information can be developed and depth of community feeling can be assessed with this approach. Meeting sites should be as accessible as possible. While data collection is difficult, it is not impossible. A good method has been developed by Warhiet, et al. (1977) using a structured questionnaire. Recording of comments is also possible.

There are some problems with this approach. Warhiet, et al. point out that negative reactions, enhanced expectations and issues concerned with the usefulness of data limit the usefulness of this approach. In addition, the information developed is not necessarily representative of beliefs and conditions in the community.

PROBLEMS ENCOUNTERED IN IMPLEMENTING A NEEDS ASSESSMENT

There are problems in conducting needs assessments to be considered by the volunteer program manager. While not intended to be exhaustive, the following list considers some of the more salient problems:

1. Political Problems. Several writers (Warhiet, et al., 1977; Sigler, 1974; Weiss, 1972; and Gates, 1980) have pointed to the political environment associated with action programs and their research efforts. Resistance may come in many ways. Access to clients may not be allowed in situations where the information is perceived as potentially damaging to the service provider. Another problem is illegitimization of the research effort. This may include questioning of the motives, competence or biases of the researchers. Where a group fears the effect of the potential information, it may respond by attacking the source of anxiety (the researcher) or by passive non-cooperation.

2. Technological Problems. The methodology of social research is not without flaw. Valid questions concerning techniques, approaches, tools and design of social research can be raised. Some concepts, such as social justice or personality change are potentially difficult to measure. While the technology of research is

improving daily, there are many things we still cannot do effectively with available resources.

3. Value or Moral Problems. If the subject (or method) of a needs assessment is considered immoral or improper, resistance may occur. Programs may create an entire class of resistant people, who were previously unaware, by conducting a needs assessment. If there is high likelihood of this happening, a non-reactive measure should be considered.

4. Problems of Resources. Resources of time and money are finite and more of either (or both) may be needed than you expect. Always leave a safety margin.

ANTICIPATED COSTS

Cost will depend on many factors. Your largest cost, if you cannot recruit enough volunteers, is personnel. Your personnel budget must include the cost of fringe benefits. If you lack the expertise to do the technical work, you may need to hire a consultant.

Printing and production costs also will be a factor. Generally, mimeographing is less expensive than Xerox or offset. If you use mailed questionnaires, you will need money for postage. Remember that you will need return postage for each questionnaire.

In the event you need to use data processing equipment to tabulate and analyze results, you should allocate money for computer time and key punching costs. You will also need to provide for secretarial services and typing.

Other expenses are office space, office equipment (typewriters, mimeo, etc.), office supplies, mileage and travel funds, and telephone costs (local and long distance). Naturally, many organizations will have all these items "in house." The total cost figure therefore will depend on the resources already available in your organization which can be applied to the needs assessment task.

SOURCES OF ASSISTANCE

Most volunteer programs lack the resources to develop, conduct, and properly analyze data developed in the needs assessment. While private businesses exist which provide these services, many programs lack the funds to purchase these services. There are paid consultants who will assist an agency or volunteer program in conducting a needs assessment. Paid consultants can be an economical alternative if the volunteer program exercises care in the type of assistance requested.

Most communities have access to institutions of higher education. Members of the faculty and doctoral or masters students can provide valuable assistance in exchange for access to the data developed. Faculty members will want to prepare articles for professional journals while students will seek thesis or dissertation data. This exchange will enrich the academic program and the volunteer program planning process.

Volunteers also can assist in the needs assessment process. Sophisticated technical skills are needed for

design development and data analysis. However, the most time-consuming part of the needs assessment process is the gathering and coding of data. Volunteers can be trained to gather and code the data after effective instruments have been developed.

SUMMARY

We have covered a number of issues and approaches related to the needs assessment enterprise. Needs assessment techniques are highly useful and valuable in volunteer program development and planning. We hope the information contained here will whet your appetite for continued learning and practice.

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