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# Assets-Oriented Community Assessment

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SYNOPSIS

Determining how to promote community health requires that community health workers first assess where the community stands. The authors maintain that Healthy Communities initiatives are better served by assets-oriented assessment methods than by standard "problem-focused" or "needs-based" approaches. An assets orientation allows community members to identify, support, and mobilize existing community resources to create a shared vision of change, and encourages greater creativity when community members do address problems and obstacles.

With the growing interest in community participation and self-determination—both central to Healthy Communities principles—the standard "problem-focused" or "needs-based" approaches to community health have come under criticism. Problem-focused theories and planning models share a common focus on problem identification and have permeated government, the media, professional training of all sorts, as well as funding agencies and organizations.[1] Kretzmann and McKnight contend that deficiency-based approaches can have negative effects even when positive change is intended because they force community leaders to highlight their communities' worst side in order to attract resources.[1] Needs-focused perspectives may also unintentionally create one-dimensional images that characterize communities and the individuals within them based on disease risk profiles or social problem categories, such as "low income," "welfare mom," "the handicapped," or "high crime neighborhood." In contrast, the movement toward promoting

greater community participation is grounded in theories, perspectives, and planning frameworks that focus on communities' strengths or give balanced attention to strengths and needs.

Community asset assessment is a method for collecting information about a community. Assessing a community's assets means identifying, supporting, and mobilizing existing community resources and capacities for the purpose of creating and achieving a shared vision. In the process of doing a self-assessment, community members also identify problems and obstacles that must be addressed in order to achieve their dream of a healthy community. An assets orientation does not imply ignoring problems and needs or throwing out rational, strategic planning; rather, a key distinction between assets-based approaches and needs-based approaches is the rallying point for bringing citizens together. In both needs-focused and assets-focused approaches, hard realities must be faced. By involving community members in visual, intuitive, and non-linear processes of self-assessment and discovery, assets-oriented approaches invite more creativity in assessment and planning than collection and perusal of statistical data alone can engender.

*For community assessment purposes, key informants include people in both formal and informal leadership roles.*

## HOW TO ASSESS A COMMUNITY'S ASSETS

Community health workers' choices of techniques for identifying community assets reflect multiple philosophical and practical influences. The techniques described below can be used to identify both needs and assets, even though the focus of this discussion is on assets as an emerging concept in community work. It should be noted that no particular technique for collecting information holds inherent power to build community capacities or create a participatory framework for action. The community assessment process can be ultimately empowering or exploitive regardless of technique; however, because the techniques described below involve community members in the assessment process, they can set the stage for future community-generated changes.

**Windshield and walking tours of communities.** Professional and lay researchers conduct driving and/or walk-ing tours of a geographic area at varying times of day and days of the week to observe and record information about community characteristics. Preferably, these tours take place within community-designated boundaries rather than geopolitical boundaries; or if geopolitical boundaries are used, community self-designations are also noted. Observers can easily conduct windshield tours with an observational guide or checklist. While this technique is ideal for introducing outsiders to a community in which they will be working, community members can be actively involved in driving and walking tours, both as tour guides and as observers/auditors.

Working in pairs or small groups (one driver and one or more observer-recorders), observers make notes, take photos, and make videotapes (where appropriate) about community characteristics. These might include the location and characteristics of recreational areas, transportation and traffic patterns, landmarks, housing, commons and informal gathering places, terrain and greenspaces, safety, businesses, churches, and health and social services facilities. In addition, Walters[2] and Anderson and McFarlane[3] have included boundaries, signs of development/decay, religion and churches (including spiritual and folk healers), and art/media. Wilson and Mitrano[4] have assessed community values through attention to community symbols evident in graffiti, billboards, T-shirt slogans, and lawn ornaments.

Windshield and walking tours can broadly document a community's assets, resources, and concerns, or they can focus on specific environmental and social factors related to a particular objective. For example, in Sumter, South Carolina, coalition members conducted walking tours using community survey tools to assess the "walka-bility" of their neighborhoods.[5,6] Written narratives, tables and diagrams, collages, slide shows, or maps (see also "Assets maps" below) summarize and display tour results.

**Key informant/key leader interviews.** The key informant interview is a one-to-one interviewing technique for qualitative data collection with a long history of use in ethnographic studies. The term *key informant* implies that an outsider is conducting the interview, which may be the case for research. However, when community coalition members initiate the assessment or work with outsiders to conduct it, many of the key informants or key
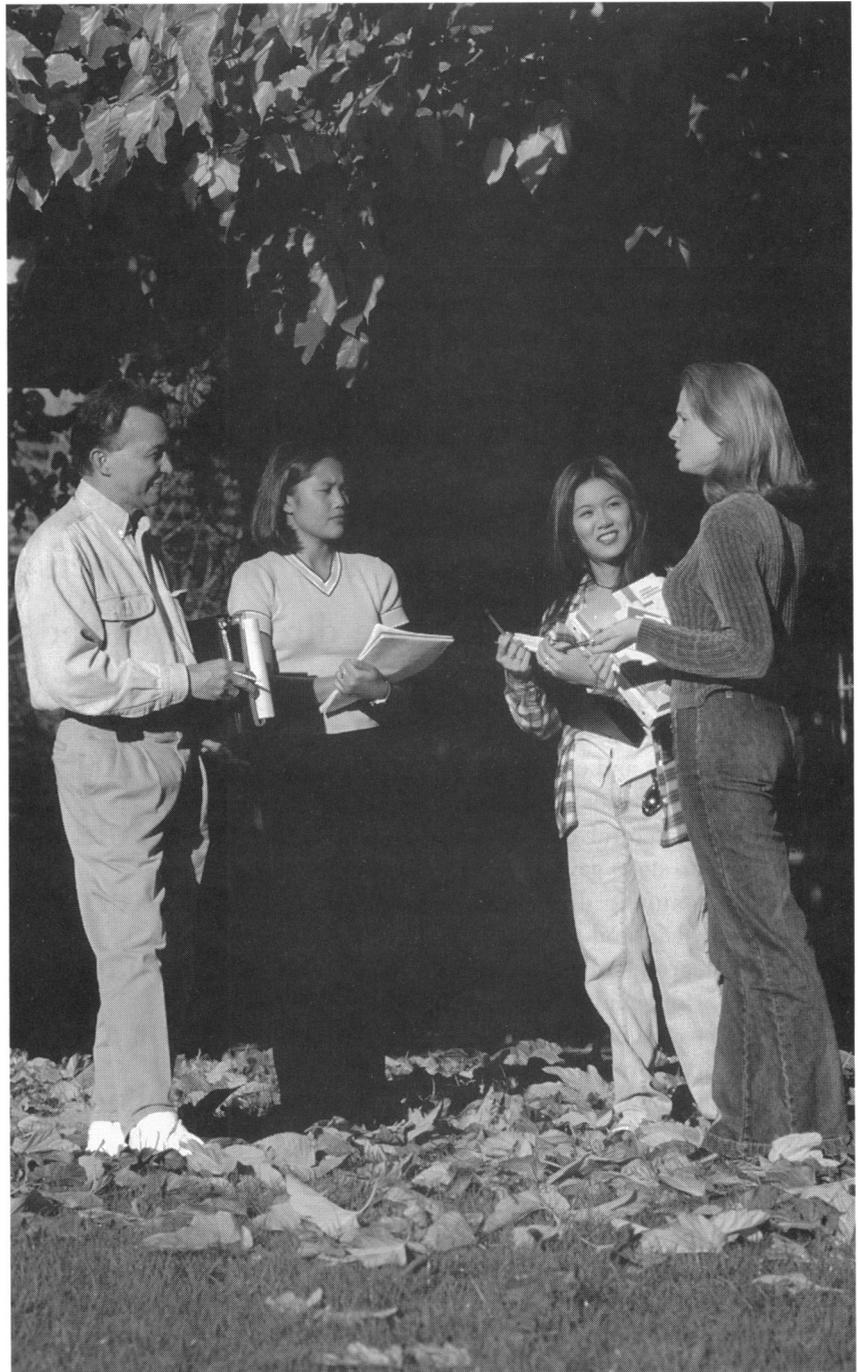
leaders are, in fact, the coalition members themselves and their neighbors. For community assessment purposes, key informants include people in both formal and informal leadership roles representing diverse stakeholder groups, amateur community historians, and community caretakers[4]—those trusted people who keep track of the everyday events in a neighborhood and are often at the center of informal helping networks.

Identification of key leaders usually begins with community coalition members generating a list. It is essential that this list contain more than the community members who hold political power. The list expands through a snowballing process of referral, with each key informant naming others he or she thinks ought to be interviewed. The goal is to cover the range of opinion in a community. Examples of potential topics include:

• how the community has met challenges or accomplished goals in the past;
• sources of community pride;
• who gets things done in the community;
• the nature of social connectedness, cohesion and affiliation among neighbors (social capital);[7-9]
• the level of trust between citizens and local government, business, financial, and social service institutions;
• the array of community values and interest groups;
• and perspectives on what a healthy community is.



Responses are compiled in narrative form and/or in summary charts, along with a roster of names of community leaders.

**Assets maps.** An assets map is a geographic map on which physical assets such as schools, landmarks, playgrounds, public gathering places, churches, schools, airports, and recreation areas may be designated. When the community has already determined a focus for its initiatives, more than one map might be created: a global one and one highlighting characteristics of special relevance (for example, all the factors of special significance to children's health and safety). Wilson also suggests identifying *human activity settings*, locations within the community in which people carry out day-to-day activities of living, such as where they work, play, shop, go to school, congre-

gate, worship, get health care and services, and so forth.[4] These features are observed and assessed in terms of the meanings the community assigns them and the participants' values, roles, and purposes in everyday human interaction.[10,11] For example, assets mapping in a Columbia, South Carolina,[12] neighborhood revealed that almost none of the members of a particular church (a potential asset) lived in the surrounding neighborhood, and residents did not feel any connection to the church. Prior to assets mapping, outsiders' assumptions about the church's significance as a venue for community gatherings would have been in error.

An advantage of creating an assets map is that community members can be directly involved in the map's creation and interpretation, can identify desirable and undesirable patterns, and can use the map as a springboard for creating a healthier vision in dialogue with city planners and officials. Sources of input for an assets map include key informant interviews; coalition meetings and other community forums; windshield and walking tours; archival data from city, county or state government; existing community directories and inventories; and research. Community groups can create assets maps with simple materials. Land use maps are often available from city or county government, and coalition members can use simple adhesive symbols or push pins to designate community characteristics and assets. Recently developed community planning and evaluation software tools include the capability to import or scan maps and save bitmapped images for assets mapping. The user adds icons to the map to represent community assets.[13]

For communities that wish to undertake a detailed geographic study of community assets, Geographic Information Systems (GIS) software provides a powerful tool for working with spatial data.[14,15] GIS technology allows the user to examine the locations and distribution of specific features of a geographic area and to display data in map form. Data layers may include features such as population distribution, road networks, school district bound-

aries, and the locations of health care facilities. Communities can use this technology to examine where people live in relation to where community resources are located, to look at patterns in the distribution of resources and services throughout the community, or to answer questions about the relationships between specific features and community attributes.

Data for creating data layers are available through government or private agencies or can be developed. Remote Sensing and Global Positioning Systems (GPS) are tools used in creating data layers.[16] Airplane and satellite remote sensing systems are commonly used to obtain information about an object, feature, or area by abstracting data collected with a device not in contact with the feature being studied. For example, a user may take a handheld device and walk the boundaries of a park or along a trail or sidewalk to collect data on the geographic location. Remote Sensing and GPS data can be imported into the GIS system for analysis and mapping. Although GIS, Remote Sensing, and GPS involve specialized expertise and some expense, their use is becoming common enough that community organizations could partner with government or academic institutions for access to this technology.

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**Focus groups and dialogue groups.** The focus group has become a widely used method in community assessment and evaluation. A skilled moderator uses open-ended questions to lead a group of five to 12 people in a discussion of about an hour to an hour and a half's duration. Questions for use in a general discussion of community assets might include:

- What would you say are some of this community's strengths?
- What are some of the gifts and talents of the people here?
- What is the community's greatest source of pride?
- Who are the people in the community who take care of others when it is not part of their jobs? For example, who makes sure that children are safe; who makes sure that families have food?

- What groups, clubs, or associations in the community make a difference in the well-being of the community?
- To what extent do people in this community know their neighbors?

A number of guides to conducting focus groups are available.[17-21] In community settings, groups should take place among a wide variety of constituencies so that the entire domain of ideas and viewpoints is tapped. Because effective focus group discussions require a degree of skill on the part of the moderator, this technique has been under the purview of professionals; however, Krueger and King have written a guide to developing focus group skills among community members.[22] Focus group discussions are usually tape-recorded and transcribed, although careful note-taking during the discussion may be adequate for some purposes. Researchers often use qualitative data analysis packages to examine the transcripts and identify important themes. Reports include narrative summaries with illustrative quotes and summary tables or diagrams.

Discussion groups need not strictly conform to the guidelines for focus groups research. For the Healthy Communities Agenda project, Norris and Howell suggest having a team convene community dialogue events with groups of five to 500 participants in a variety of settings.[23] A hybrid event that combines elements of focus groups, nominal group process,[24] or community forums, may be appropriate in some communities.

> In visioning, skilled facilitators bring people together for a full day or more and pose questions to guide participants in visualizing their greatest desires for how their community will look some years into the future.

**Inventories.** Assets and capacities inventories are documents that catalogue and describe individual and organizational capacities. With adequate mechanisms in place for connecting capacities to opportunities for action, inventories can be the first step in putting untapped potential to work. Capacities inventories of individual community members assess talents, skills, and experiences that might lead to employment, volunteering, community activism, bartering systems, or microenterprise opportunities.[1] This process draws attention to the often overlooked talents of children, older residents, and labeled or stigmatized people.[25] People may have difficulty identifying their own range of talents and assets. Wilson leads community groups in an exercise called an assets auction, in which participants identify assets they own or skills they possess, and then involves them in bartering with their neighbors.[4] Families can benefit from doing inventories to identify their strengths and sources of mutual support and connection within the community.[12]

Useful inventories of associations and organizations include information about a group's goals and mission, membership, impact on community health, projects in progress, and potential for partnering with others in promoting community health.[1] Inventories stretch traditional definitions of who can be a partner in community health enhancement projects. An inventory can be a tool for creating new links among diverse groups that may not have traditionally worked together or considered their work, hobbies, or pastimes as having the potential to positively affect community health. The information for the inventory comes from key informant interviews; windshield tours; printed sources such as community directories, Yellow Pages, and local libraries' reference sections; and telephone interviews with associations' contact people.[1,26]

**Visioning.** Visioning is a process whereby a group of community stakeholders collectively define a shared dream of what their community can become. The degree of formality for conducting visioning varies; a retreat or workshop format has been used in some communities.[27,28] In general, skilled facilitators bring people together for a full day or more and pose questions to guide participants in visualizing their greatest desires for how their community will look some years into the future, how people will interact, what daily life will be like, and how all sectors of the community will operate to contribute to a healthy community environment. Working in small groups, participants illustrate and describe their vision creatively with words, drawings, or collages. The groups reconvene and discuss their images and categorize or summarize the elements in the images. A smaller core group may follow up on the retreat by creating a document to return to the participants. Follow-up

meetings may be held to refine the collective vision and to develop plans for incorporating it into a planning process. Because the visioning process puts no limits on participants' dreams, it can be powerfully motivating.

Wilson has used a visioning process called *community buildout*. In developing countries, community members have used modeling materials (clay, for example) to build models of their community visions. In Columbia, South Carolina, children have used craft materials to build a healthy community model (Personal communication, K Wilson, Institute for Families in Society, University of South Carolina, September 1996).

**Creative assessment.** Creative assessment refers to the use of techniques for documenting community members' perceptions of their community, its assets and its problems. Community groups use photography, film, theater, music, dance, murals, puppet shows, storytelling, or drawings for multiple purposes: to portray a problem and its solutions; to enact a community vision; to celebrate cultural and civic pride; to protest; and to grieve. Creative techniques provide an acceptable forum of expression for community emotions and a mode for reaching diverse groups of community members who may be uncomfortable with structured assessment methods. For example, Wang and Burris[29,30] put cameras into the hands of women in rural China to create a participatory process of assessment, analysis, and action. Wallerstein involved New Mexico adolescents in visits to, and interviews at, emergency rooms and jails to observe and explore the experiences of people involved with alcohol and drugs.[31] Creative assessment activities stimulate conversation and may provide triggers that can be incorporated into a process of dialogue, reflection, and action.

## THE CHALLENGES OF CONDUCTING ASSETS-ORIENTED COMMUNITY ASSESSMENT

Even though the language of assets and capacities is spreading, the question of whether community participation is real or represents tokenism in most initiatives remains.[32] Giving attention to assets is not the same as fostering community participation. Numerous examples of token community advisory boards or outright exploitation of community assets for furthering agencies' agendas exist.[32] Many, if not most, funding sources remain categorical in focus and require a problem-focused grant application. Additionally, giving attention to assets is not the same as ignoring problems, but there is the potential for misappropriating an assets orientation to justify funding cuts by using the argument that assets-rich communities must have no need for dollars and resources from the outside. While communities may have tired of constantly having their problems highlighted,[33] they may also look with suspicion on the rhetoric of assets orientation unless a groundwork of mutual respect and trust has been established. As new perspectives emerge and rapid changes occur in public health, health care, and civic life, articulation of unspoken assumptions and values in research and service projects and constant self-reflection[32] will be necessary.

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