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A Needs Assessment Method for Extension Educators

Abstract

This article offers a methodology Extension educators can use for conducting a needs assessment. It uses existing data and key informant interview responses. Results of the interviews were shared with individuals and agencies that work with children and families. An evaluation showed that 61% intended to use the information to plan for future programs, services, or activities that their organization may provide. Educators from other program areas could easily adapt this methodology to conduct a local situational analysis.

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Situation Statement

When a new Extension educator begins work in a county, one of the first priorities is to conduct a needs assessment or situational analysis that will help the educator. A thorough situational analysis provides the basis for priority setting and helps identify program focus (UW Extension Program Planning Web Site, 2003).

Educators have used a variety of methods to collect information for a needs assessment (Etling, 1995), including but not limited to: advisory committees, survey questionnaires, focus groups, interviews with key informants, or a combination of methods. This article describes the use of multiple methods for conducting a needs assessment used by the Family Living educator in a small, rural Wisconsin County. This method included reviewing census data and existing local needs surveys, as well as conducting key informant interviews. Using this methodology, the educator was able to gather information from both qualitative and quantitative sources.

In addition to identifying areas for potential programming, this method accomplished two unexpected outcomes. Specifically, the educator became aware of local agencies and programs already in place to meet the needs of families and children in the county and identified potential partners for future Family Living educational programs.

Objectives

The objectives of the methodology were:

1. To learn about the needs of families and children living in Waushara County,
2. To use information gleaned to help identify programming areas for Family Living Education,
3. To develop a methodology that could be used by other Extension educators and/or professionals, and
4. To share the completed Key Informant Interview Report with others in the community who work with and for families and children.

Methodology

First, the educator asked the office Department Head and other key community leaders for names and contact information for staff belonging to social services, the childcare resource and referral agency, CAP Services (a not-for-profit community action organization), and school district administrators. A total of six individuals were contacted by phone. Next, the Family Living educator requested copies of recently completed needs assessments, surveys, and grant applications. These data were read, and common issues and areas of significant need were identified.

Third, recent state and county census data were reviewed. Demographics for the county were compared to adjoining counties similar in size, composition, and characteristics. Some of the categories researched included: income, poverty, housing, race/ethnicity, age group populations, commuting patterns, and language spoken at home.

Census findings from 1979, 1989, and 1999 as well as county and regional land use planning reports were then further analyzed for trends and indicators of future issues that may affect the county's families and children.

Finally, 25 key informants were interviewed. These informants were from a variety of agencies and organizations, including county government departments, law enforcement, the court system, not-for-profit agencies, and religious organizations. One general, open-ended question was asked of all informants: "In your opinion, what are some of the major needs/issues facing families and children in Waushara County?" For individuals who were known to work with the Hispanic/Latino population, a second question was asked: "Are there specific issues or needs you see confronting the Hispanic population?"

Primary Findings

The educator reviewed the information gathered from past needs assessments, surveys, grant applications, census data, and key informant interviews. Specific needs facing the families and children of Waushara County were repeated throughout the different forms of data. They included: parent education, affordable housing, and financial stability. For the Hispanic population, these needs were intensified by the language barrier and cultural differences.

Secondary Findings

Once the interviews were completed, responses were compiled into the Key Informant Interviews Report, which was then shared with school district administrators, county department heads, as well as all of the individuals interviewed. Sent along with the report was a survey evaluation for each individual to complete and return.

Of the 23 individuals who received copies of the report, 18 returned the survey questionnaire. The majority of the respondents (77%) stated that they found the information valuable. Sixty-one percent said that they intended to use the information to plan for programs, services, or activities that their organization may provide for children and families in the future. Eighty-three percent stated that they planned on sharing the information from the report with others who also work with or for children and families.

Implications for the Profession

The methodology explained in this article may be most useful to new Extension educators. A needs assessment method such as this should be seen as the first effort in an ongoing situation analysis. Once the area of programming has been identified, clientele should be surveyed in order to better understand what specific topics are needed and in what forms they prefer the education.

A well thought out and documented needs assessment is not only beneficial to the Extension educator, but may

also be valuable to others who work with or for similar clientele.

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