

The logo for NC State, featuring the words "NC STATE" in white, bold, sans-serif capital letters on a red rectangular background.

EXTENSION

NC State Extension 2017 Needs Assessment County Commissioner Survey Instructions

County Extension Directors shall contact County Commissioners to request that they complete an online needs assessment survey. County Commissioners can be contacted in person, by phone, by mail, or by email based on the best form of communication in the respective county.

The survey can be introduced by stating that: NC Cooperative Extension would appreciate your assistance in identifying important issues and opportunities within our local community. Information provided in this survey will be used to help guide and shape the research and educational activities of Extension over the next five years.

The County Commissioners online survey is accessible at:
<http://go.ncsu.edu/amplifysurvey>

CONDUCTING NEEDS ASSESSMENT SURVEYS

You want to do something. You've got a bunch of people together. And you're just about ready to go out and act. Then someone comes along and says, "Wait a minute. Have you done a needs assessment survey?"

A needs assessment survey? Should you ignore that person, or tell him (politely) to get lost? Or should you listen to what that person has to say, and maybe even follow his advice?

This section will help you become clearer on what a needs assessment survey is, and on whether and when you want to do one and then, if you do, what to do next.

WHAT IS A NEEDS ASSESSMENT SURVEY?

Very briefly, it's a way of asking group or community members what they see as the most important needs of that group or community. The results of the survey then guide future action. Generally, the needs that are rated most important are the ones that get addressed.

Depending on your resources (time, money, and people) a needs assessment survey may take many different forms. It can be as informal as asking around with people you know in your community: your postal carrier, the people you work with, the woman at the corner gas station. Or, it could take the form of a professionally-written survey that is mailed to hundreds of people. In general, however, true needs assessment surveys have some common characteristics:

- They have a pre-set list of questions to be answered
- They have a pre-determined sample of the number and types of people to answer these questions chosen in advance
- They are done by personal interview, phone, or by written response (e.g., a mail-in survey)
- The results of the survey are tabulated, summarized, distributed, discussed, and (last, but not least) used

WHAT IS A NEED?

In most needs assessment surveys, a need means something that specifically relates to a particular group or community. It's not usually a universal need, such as the need for food or affection. But it's more than an individual need, as in I need a new couch for the living room, or I really need a vacation. Those may truly be needs, but they are not generally the types of needs that are assessed in needs assessment surveys.

Instead, such a survey usually asks about needs that concern your particular community or group. This could include hundreds of possibilities, ranging from trash on the streets to vandalism, or from stores moving out of downtown to ethnic or racial conflict. These are examples of needs that might be perceived as a group or community issue or problem.

Note that some surveys are very broad, and ask about any and all kinds of needs. Others are narrow, and limit themselves to learning more about one or two. Both kinds of surveys are common and helpful. Which to choose depends on what you want to find out.

WHY SHOULD YOU DO A NEEDS ASSESSMENT SURVEY?

TRY OUT THESE REASONS. DO THEY MAKE SENSE FOR YOU?

- To learn more about what your group or community needs are. A good survey can supplement your own sharp-eyed observations and experiences. It can give you detailed information from a larger and more representative group of people than you could get from observation alone.
- To get a more honest and objective description of needs than people might tell you publicly.
- To become aware of possible needs that you never saw as particularly important or that you never even knew existed.
- To document your needs, as is required in many applications for funding, and as is almost always helpful in advocating or lobbying for your cause.
- To make sure any actions you eventually take or join in are in line with needs that are expressed by the community.

AND ALSO FOR TWO MORE REASONS, WHICH ARE LESS COMMONLY UNDERSTOOD:

- To get more group and community support for the actions you will soon undertake. That's because if people have stated a need for a particular course of action, they are more likely to support it. And, for the same reason....
- To get more people actually involved in the subsequent action itself.

You may agree with some or all of these reasons. But you may still have concerns or objections. That's perfectly fine. Let's get them out on the table and deal with them as honestly as we can.

OBJECTIONS AND CONCERNS

- *I already know what the needs in the community are.*
 - Maybe you do. Maybe everyone knows what the community needs are, and there's no doubt about it. In other words, if the building is burning, put out the fire. You don't need a needs assessment to tell you that. If your community's crime rate has doubled, you know you need to do something about crime. And hopefully soon. Leave your surveys at home.
 - But a lot of the time, the needs are not quite so clear. You (and everyone else) have opinions and biases, but does everyone feel the same way? Wouldn't it be worth checking what other people think, just to clarify whether others share your point of view? You might or might not revise your opinions a little, but it's worth it to find out.
- *We're busy people. We want to get going.*
 - Fine...but you wouldn't usually want to get involved in something that most of the community doesn't really care about. If you do a needs assessment, you will feel more comfortable knowing that what you want to do meets a real community need. Otherwise, you might be wasting your time.
- *We don't have the time to do a survey.*
 - You probably do have enough time. The actual amount of time you need can vary a great deal. If you really wanted to do a full-scale scientific survey, you could spend a year or more collecting, tabulating, and writing up the data. But we're not normally talking about that kind of time investment. You can collect

useful data in hours, or even less. You can go to a meeting where your key audience is, and ask them a few questions, either verbally or with a printed questionnaire. All the forms come back to you in ten minutes. In about ten minutes more, you can get results that will be helpful. If you have a choice, you may want to survey more people, with different questions, in different ways. There are many different degrees of comprehensiveness. But any surveying is almost always better than no surveying at all. It's likely that whatever time you can afford will be worth it.

- Look at it this way: If you care about effective action, do you have the time not to find out about community needs?
- *We don't know how to do it.*
 - It's not that hard. Just about anybody can write useful survey questions, with a little bit of guidance. You don't have to be an expert. The survey doesn't have to be perfect. And there may already be an existing survey that you can borrow from, or simply repeat.
 - In any case, others can help you. You can get professional advice (from a local university, for example). And you can test out the survey on a sample group, to work out the kinks (which are almost always present, even in surveys designed by experts).
- *People are already surveyed to death. They'll resent you for asking them yet again.*
 - More often, the opposite is true. In fact, most people are rarely asked about what they think about community needs or projects. Usually, these projects seem to get going, or not get going, independent of collective opinion in the community.
 - When was the last time a group asked your opinion about community needs, as part of a formal survey? And if they did ask, did you resent them for it?
 - It's a myth that most people are assessed to death. The real problems are not assessing enough and not acting on the basis of assessment results.

Your concerns are valid. But we hope our answers make sense, too. So let's move on.

WHEN SHOULD YOU DO A NEEDS ASSESSMENT SURVEY?

Some good times to do a survey include:

- When your group is just starting out
- When there is doubt as to what the most important needs are
- When your group members disagree on this point among themselves
- When you need to convince outside funders or supporters that you are addressing the most important community problems (Sometimes, these assessments are required.)
- When the community asks you to do it
- When you want to be sure that you will have community support for whatever you choose to do.

And are there times when you shouldn't?

- There are. A needs assessment is not necessary before every action, and especially:
- When there is absolutely no doubt what the most important needs in the group or community are
- When it is urgent to act right now, without delay
- When a recent assessment has already been done, and it is clear that the needs have not changed

- When you feel the community would see an assessment as redundant or wasteful, and that it would be harmful to your cause

How do these factors bear upon your own situation now? Do you think things would work better if you had some needs assessment data to guide you?

And please note: There are other ways to learn about community needs. You can do interviews with community members, or conduct observations, or study community records. And certainly, you should always check about surveys that might have been conducted in the past, and use them as best you can. You don't have to reinvent the wheel.

HOW DO YOU CARRY OUT A NEEDS ASSESSMENT SURVEY?

A STEP BY STEP APPROACH

Here's an important point to consider: Most effective community actions start with thought that takes place not in the community, but inside the thinker's head. Needs assessment surveys are no exception. So if you choose to do a survey here are some internal steps you should take, and decisions you should make, before any information is collected at all:

Helpful hint: An assessment can be conducted by one person, acting alone, but generally speaking, a needs assessment survey will be more effective and more useful if it is designed and carried out by a group. This is especially true when no one has special experience in this field. In most needs assessment cases, many heads will usually be better than one. So start by assembling a small group of interested people to help you answer the questions below, make decisions, and carry out the job.

Ask yourself: What are our reasons for choosing to do this survey?

Why are we getting involved in this? The answers may be immediately clear to you. They may also include many of the reasons previously listed. But perhaps your reasons are not entirely clear. Asking these questions gives you the chance to become clearer.

Ask yourself: What are our goals in doing this survey?

What do we want to get out of it? How will the results be used? Again, your goals (and uses) may be very apparent; they may also relate to your reasons above. But you ought to be able to state them before you begin.

Ask yourself: Are we ready to conduct this survey?

Are we prepared to do the work that needs to be done, with high-quality effort? Before you begin, make sure your answer is Yes.

Decide how much time you have to do the survey, from start to finish.

How much time can you allow? Your answer will depend upon what is already known; upon the size of your target group; upon the importance involved; and upon the resources you have at your disposal. (How many people can help? How much money is available to spend?)

If nothing is known, the community is large, resources are low, and importance is high, your survey may take considerable time, several months or even more. But if the reverse is true, you could complete a good survey in a month or less.

These figures are approximations. We would like to be more specific, but there is no one universal answer to how much time a survey should take. A minimum standard might be this:

- Collect enough reliable information from a representative group so that you are sufficiently confident in using that information to guide future action.
- Apply this standard to your own situation. How much time do you think might be involved?

Decide how many people are going to be asked.

If you are surveying the needs of a small or even medium-sized group, you can (and should) include every single person. But if you have a neighborhood of 5,000 people, or a larger community, you probably will not be able to ask everyone directly.

When the group is larger, you can make your survey available to everyone who wants to answer it. But a more objective technique, which will usually give you more reliable information, is to construct a sample -- a pre-determined percentage of the total group -- and to ask each member of the sample for their input.

Decide what kinds of people will be asked.

For a smaller group, where you are asking everybody, this question will not arise. But with a larger group, when you are using a sample of the total population, you may want to be sure that certain parts of that population are included.

Decide what questions will be asked.

These questions will depend upon the scope of the assessment. If you are asking about all possible needs in the community, then phrase your questions accordingly, and allow for a wide range of possible answers. On the other hand, if you are asking only about certain types of needs -- transportation, or violence prevention, for example -- then your questions will naturally be geared to them.

Either way, you have a choice between asking more quantitative, or closed-ended questions, and more qualitative, or open-ended questions. Closed-ended questions involve a choice among fixed alternatives -- you might state your degree of agreement with certain questions, or place your preferences in rank order.

Open-ended questions allow more freedom; they give those answering the chance to say anything they want, even though the answers may be less precise. In many cases, your survey can include both types of questions.

Decide who will ask the questions.

If you do interviews, the more people asking, the more ground you can cover. However, you'll also have to train more interviewers, both in general interviewing skills and in using a standard procedure, so that results don't vary just because the interviewers operated differently. If you use written surveys, this question is less relevant, but those who give out and collect the surveys should be thoroughly and uniformly instructed.

And remember: If you can, bring together a group to help you design the actual questions. Your group members will almost always think of good questions and ideas you wouldn't come up with alone.

Create a draft of the full survey.

Include the instructions; this is an often-neglected part of survey work, but don't forget it. Your instructions will set the tone for those who will be responding.

Try out the survey on a test group.

The test group should ideally be composed of the same kinds of people who will be taking the full survey. A test group will let you know if your instructions are clear and if your questions make sense. Even if your survey is perfectly clear to you, it may not be clear to them. You need to find this out before the full survey gets dispersed. Don't bypass this step: your test group is like a trial run, or dress rehearsal, which will help you get rid of the rough spots before you hit the big time.

Revise the survey on the basis of your test group feedback.

Sometimes this test-and-revision process may need to be repeated more than once.

Administer the survey to the people you have chosen (once you are satisfied that all necessary revisions have been made).

Tabulate your results.

For closed-ended questions, this can be a matter of simple addition. For open-ended questions, you can code the results into categories. Get some feedback from others about what categories to use, because the ones you decide on will shape how you interpret the data -- the next step.

Interpret your results.

Interpretation goes beyond simple tabulation. It asks the questions: What is the meaning of the results? What are the main patterns that occur? What possible actions do the results point to? It's helpful if a group of people -- perhaps the same people who carried out the assessment -- review the results and share their own interpretations. Because the same numbers can mean different things to different people, it may take a fair amount of discussion here to clarify the most nearly accurate interpretation of the information you have.

Plan future actions.

Now comes the main payoff of your needs assessment survey, and your main reason for having done all this work. Bring the results and interpretations to your full group, and decide what to do next. A good answer may once again take thought and discussion, but you can now plan and implement future actions with greater confidence that those actions are based upon the real needs of the people you want to serve.

There are added benefits here, too.

- The actions you take are more likely to be supported by your group or community.
- Because they are supported, they are more likely to be successful.
- And let's not forget a basic principle of community work -- success attracts resources to your cause. Directly or indirectly, success can lead to more (and more favorable) publicity, to more members, to more dollars coming your way, to a variety of unexpected happy opportunities.

And many of those benefits might be traced back to your assessment. Aren't you glad you listened to that stranger who asked whether you had done a needs assessment survey?

Implement your actions.

Which of course is the reason we do these surveys in the first place. The results are there to be used for action; and your group should have already agreed to use them, going back to the beginning.

Now you really are ready to act. But this is a topic for another section.

We're not quite through yet, however. Very few aspects of community work are ever really finished, and conducting a needs assessment survey is no exception.

Repeat your assessment at regular intervals.

Just as it makes sense to see a doctor once a year or so for a checkup, even if you're young and healthy, it makes sense to revisit community needs as well. Community needs can change; you want to be sure you know if, when, how, and why they do. For needs assessment is really an ongoing process just like community action itself.

COMMUNITY NEEDS OR COMMUNITY ASSETS?

We've taken some time to talk about community needs, since knowing them is fundamental for good community development work. But despite their importance, needs are just part of the picture. The other part, at least as basic, is community assets -- the skills, interests, capacities, and other resources that can be found in any community. Those assets ought to be identified, just as thoroughly as needs