COMMUNITY ASSESSMENT

The first component (building block) of community health worker programs is a clear understanding of what role is needed and culturally appropriate for community health workers to play in different communities. This understanding comes from a community assessment that includes data collection; needs and resource assessment; and identification of community, funding, and physical resources. Effective community health worker programs develop and reflect a deep understanding of and familiarity with the values, diversity, spirit, culture, and organizations that make up a community.

Collecting Data

Data collection resources include National Health Interview Survey data, State and county data on cancer-specific mortality, locally developed data, Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System data, key informant interviews, community forums, focus groups, newspapers, medicare/medicaid data, community resource manuals, and the National Cancer Institute's Cancer Information Service. Data collected from these sources can help determine the scope of the problem and the population that is most affected. Many factors should be considered during data collection.

- Is the problem a recruitment problem, or are there too few providers?

- Can the program needs be addressed by developing or expanding a community health worker program?

- Will focus groups and interviews with key community leaders help define the problem to be addressed?

- How receptive is the intended community? (How have past experiences with the health care system shaped receptivity?)

- What is known about the knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors of the intended audience? (Important historical and cultural factors may influence clients' feelings about trusting others or touching or showing their bodies.)

- How do language and literacy skills affect the knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors of the intended audience?

- What barriers exist to reaching the intended audience (e.g., age, ethnicity, language, and cultural sensitivity of the provider)?

- What percentage of the eligible population has the program been funded to serve? (This may be determined using county census or poverty data

sorted by race and age. Collect baseline data on the number of participants eligible for program services.)

•   What percentage of the eligible population has coverage for program services (e.g., medicare or medicaid recipients)?

Assessing Needs and Resources

Needs and resource assessments identify both the real and perceived needs and resources of the intended audience. To conduct the assessment, collect and analyze community data on health, sociodemographics, service use rates, and so forth. Then present the data analysis to the planning committee or management team.

Needs assessment determines the groups that are most affected by the problem and their level of concern. Think about the following issues when identifying the intended audience:

•   Is there any ethnic or socioeconomic group in your county that is not being screened routinely for breast and cervical cancer?

•   Are there certain areas within the county where women are less likely to seek or have access to screening?

•   Which age groups in your county are least likely to seek screening and most likely to be at risk?

•   What are the incidence and death rates for breast and cervical cancer in your county over a 5- or 10-year period?

•   Is there a certain race or ethnic group in your county that has a higher incidence or death rate from breast and cervical cancer?

Identifying Community Resources

Part of identifying community resources is deciding whether using community health workers is considered a culturally appropriate method of outreach and community health promotion for each community under consideration. Work with key community leaders to identify possible candidates for community health workers.

Another step in identifying community resources is finding the preferred channel of communication and education of the intended audience. Then decide whether this strategy or another one (e.g., one-to-one services, group presentations, mass media, printed materials) fits best with the preferred communication channels of the intended audience.

Conducting focus groups of members of the intended audience is a useful way to evaluate this strategy. However, focus groups need to be conducted by trained focus group leaders. Be cautious when using the results of focus groups. They provide an understanding about an idea or product, but the results of a focus group cannot be directly applied to the general population.

Identifying Funding Resources

Finding funding resources may begin with finding program funds. For example, is there money in the health department budget that is earmarked for the community health worker program? Subcontracts also can be used to hire community health workers and should be investigated for use in your program. Funding also may be available from foundations (e.g., Susan G. Komen Breast Cancer Foundation, W.K. Kellogg Foundation, Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, Pew Charitable Trust Foundation). Go to your local library and request a reference book for grants and foundations. Each institution specifies the health issues and type of programs it funds.

Identifying Physical Resources

Partnership or collaboration can help maximize resources. Identify physical resources by deciding what partnerships can be formed with other community programs that already fund community health workers. These programs may be willing to include your program message or health issue (e.g., diabetes; maternal and child health; women, infants, and children).

Other community programs may be looking for ways to avoid duplicating services and to maximize resources. They may be willing to share an employee, office space, or other resources. Programs with volunteers who are interested in your program message or health issue may already exist.

Analyzing Assessment Data

Analyzing the community assessment data entails summarizing what you learn from collecting data, assessing needs and resources, investigating community funding, and identifying physical resources. From the summary, programs can draw conclusions for further program planning and approach selection.

Other factors to consider in selecting an approach include existing programs and their results, agency relationships, personal preferences, and a review of the literature. A summary report of the assessment data analysis with conclusions and implications for program planning should be distributed to all staff members involved in planning any aspect of the community health worker program.

Using the Action Steps Template

Take a few minutes to think about how using the suggestions about community assessment might enhance your community health worker program. List two action steps related to community assessment that you will take on the Action Steps Template on page 33.