



Out of the Box Strategies for Interpreting your Community Needs



Strategy 1. Data Doesn't Tell the Whole Story

Data is vital to a strong community assessment and can tell you how many people do a certain thing or how many people are impacted by a specific community issue, but it is unlikely to tell you how or why they do it. Qualitative methods such as focus groups, interviews, and personal stories can better answer the how and why questions. In addition, they also allow for a deeper examination of situations or conditions within your community. This allows the *human factor* to shine through in your community assessment and makes it easier for you to use your community assessment to make program decisions.



Key questions to consider when you are collecting qualitative data using interview or focus group strategies could include the following:

- ✓ How do families experience conditions in the community?
- ✓ What are your service area's hidden strengths and underutilized resources?
- ✓ Ask respondents how their awareness or knowledge level about a specific issue has changed over time?



Strategy 2. What Matters Most?

Most organizations begin their community assessment by collecting data from a variety of sources. However, it is important to envision what your community would look like in its ideal state. After you have created a clear picture of your community it is easier to identify needs as *the gaps between the current state of your community and what it should be like*. One way to begin this process is by reviewing your organizational mission or by brainstorming with your team about the features of a healthy, thriving, community in which all families and children are provided equal opportunities. This also provides time for staff to sort out their subjective feelings and comments before you begin the process of collecting objective data to describe your service area. Key brainstorming questions that could be used include:



- ✓ If you could make one change that would make the community better what would it be?
- ✓ What is the most important issue impacting families and children?
- ✓ What do you feel are the major challenges facing families and children in poverty?



Strategy 3. Create Neighborhood Profiles

Community assessments are used for a variety of purposes that extend beyond the Head Start program such as for community level planning and to obtain additional grant funding. Therefore, it may be helpful to include information that allows you to quickly and effectively to conduct a community scan. A brief snapshot of each community you serve or of specific high need neighborhoods in your area can help you clearly understand the context in which families live and the issues that impact them (please note, this is in addition to a comprehensive view of your area). Listed below are some questions that may be helpful to consider and out of the box data illustration methods.



- ✓ How does poverty or other issues impact each neighborhood or community differently?
- ✓ What is it like to live in this neighborhood for a child?
- ✓ Use photos, maps, and media reports to describe neighborhood characteristics.