Methods of Data Collection

Data may need to be collected at two different stages in the needs analysis process. Data on trends, demographics, etc. may need to be collected prior to conducting the needs analysis to give the planning team an accurate “picture” of the situation or climate that the agency faces. Once issues or programs have been identified, data that will assist in the development of those programs may also be collected. For example, if it is determined that the agency's clients need training in family budgeting, the planning team might want to find out if there are curriculums that other agencies have used successfully to teach this topic.

There are four primary methods for collecting data:

- Surveys or questionnaires
- Observation
- Examining existing data
- Focus groups

Surveys or Questionnaires

Surveys or questionnaires are used to collect the opinions of program participants or others who may be affected by your programs. They can be given verbally by a survey collector (in a public place like a mall, or over the telephone), or in a paper form immediately following a program. Surveys may also be mailed to program participants or stakeholders. You can collect data from 100% of the program participants if you give it immediately following a program. If mailed to participants afterward, only a fraction will return them. If at least ½ of the mailed surveys are returned, that is considered an acceptable return rate. See Mail and Internet Surveys: The Tailored Design Method, by Don A. Dillman (2nd edition) for steps for increasing the rate of return on mailed surveys.

Questionnaires have several benefits. They are quick and easy to administer to program participants. They can be written in several formats where participants rate their opinions on a sliding scale (Likert scale), rank order their answers, or provide short answers to open-ended questions.

A drawback of questionnaires and surveys is that they are difficult to construct. Questions must be written so that they do not lead the participants to certain answers. Questions must also be clearly written so that they elicit the information that the agency seeks. Questionnaires/surveys that are developed by the agency should be reviewed and pilot tested before being used to collect data.
Observation

Direct observation is the best method to identify problems/issues in the community or to observe if clients/volunteers have made the required changes as a result of your programs. Observation is a very time and labor-intensive method to collect data. The key to using observations is to make sure that they are planned and recorded in a systematic way. An example would be volunteers or staff who observe seat belt usage in the community. Observers might stand on the corner of an intersection and watch drivers as they pass through and record the number of drivers wearing their seatbelt. This would help the agency determine the need for educational programs in this area.

Examining Existing Data

Examining existing data can save a lot of time. Your agency may regularly collect data or make reports that you can examine. Other agencies/organizations/government entities also collect data or may have done surveys that will provide useful information. For example, The United Way regularly conducts surveys in the communities in which they have a presence. This data is then used by many nonprofit organizations to plan programs and determine needs.

Focus Groups

Focus groups are a powerful means to evaluate services or test new ideas. Basically, focus groups are interviews of 6-10 people in a group setting. One can get a great deal of information during a focus group session. A focus group session should last no more than 1.5 hours. During this time, the facilitator can ask at most 5-6 key questions. These questions should be well thought out beforehand and written to elicit the type of information that the agency can use to improve its services or operation.

Planning the Session

- Scheduling - Plan meetings to be one to 1.5 hours long and at a time that is convenient for the participants.
- Setting and Refreshments - Hold sessions in a conference room, or other comfortable setting. Configure chairs so that all members can see each other. Provide name tags for members, as well. Provide refreshments.
- Ground Rules - It's critical that all members participate as much as possible without bogging down the process. Because the session is often a one-time occurrence, it's useful to have a few, short ground rules that sustain participation. Consider the following three ground rules:
  - keep focused on the question at hand,
  - maintain momentum, and
  - get closure on questions.
- Agenda - Consider the following agenda:
• welcome of participants  
• review the agenda  
• review the goals of the meeting  
• review the ground rules  
• introductions  
• questions and answers  
• summary of meeting.

• Membership - Focus groups are usually conducted with 6-10 members who meet some criteria related to the organization, e.g., similar age group, status in a program, represent target population, etc. Select members who are likely to be participative and reflective. Attempt to select members who don't know each other.

• Plan to record the session with either an audio or audio-video recorder. Don't count on your memory. If this isn't practical, involve a co-facilitator who is there to take notes.

Facilitating the Session

• Major goal of facilitation is collecting useful information to meet the goal of the meeting.
• Introduce yourself and the co-facilitator, if one is used.
• Explain the means to record the session.
• Carry out the agenda.
• Carefully word each question before it is addressed by the group. Allow the group a few minutes for each member to carefully record their answers. Then, facilitate discussion around the answers to each question, one answer at a time.
• After each question is answered, carefully reflect back to the group a summary of what you heard (the recorder may perform this task).
• Ensure even participation. If one or two people are dominating the meeting, then call on others. Consider using a round-robin approach, going in one direction around the table, giving each person a minute to answer the question. If the domination by one or two participants persists, note it to the group and ask for ideas about how the participation can be increased.
• Closing the session - Tell members that they will receive a copy of the report generated from their answers, thank them for coming, and adjourn the meeting.

Following the session, the audio/video should be transcribed and the findings reported to the decision-makers within the organization.