

## Community Themes and Strengths Assessment

The Community Themes and Strengths Assessment answers the questions: “What is important to our community?” “How is quality of life perceived in our community?” and “What assets do we have that can be used to improve community health?” This assessment results in a strong understanding of community issues and concerns, perceptions about quality of life and a map of community assets. The information gathered during this phase will feed into the Identify Strategic Issues phase of the MAPP process (the other three assessments will also provide important sources of information). By including Community Themes and Strengths in the MAPP process, two benefits are gained. First, community members become more vested in the process when they have a sense of ownership and responsibility for the outcomes. This occurs when their concerns are genuinely considered and visibly affect the process. Second, the themes and issues identified here offer insight into the information uncovered during the other assessments.

### Recommended Participants and Roles

**Subcommittee** — designs and prepares for the Community Themes and Strengths Assessment, oversees the information-gathering process, and compiles results.

**MAPP Committee** — oversees subcommittee activities and provides recommendations for gaining broad community participation.

**Broad Community Involvement** — is included to gather the thoughts, opinions, and concerns of community residents — an especially important component of this phase.

### A Step-by-Step Overview of the Community Themes and Strengths Assessment

1. Prepare for the Community Themes and Strengths Assessment by establishing a subcommittee to oversee the activities. Identify necessary resources and individuals. Determine the most effective approaches to gather information from a cross-section of the community. These might include community meetings, focus groups, windshield surveys, individual discussions or interviews and surveys.
2. Implement activities that gather community themes and strengths and engage the community in the MAPP process. Use open-ended questions that elicit opinions, thoughts and issues. Also, gather feedback on quality of life issues and community assets. Meetings or discussions should be held in accessible places and at times that facilitate broad participation.
3. Compile the results. Be sure to list issues, potential solutions and assets.
4. Sustain community involvement and empowerment throughout the remainder of the MAPP process.

### What are Community Themes and Strengths?

Listening to and communicating with the community are essential to any community wide initiative. The impressions and thoughts of community residents can help pinpoint important issues and highlight possible solutions. More importantly, by involving community residents and truly listening to their concerns, every participant feels like an integral part of the process.

Mobilizing and engaging the community may be a daunting task, but when successful, it ensures greater sustainability and enthusiasm for the process.

During this phase, three tiers of information-gathering should occur. Open discussion to elicit community concerns, opinions, and comments in an unstructured way – Asking open-ended questions ensures that issues of concern and interest to the community are raised. If concerns are properly addressed, this activity can raise the credibility of the process and underscore the community-driven nature. For example, community residents may express concern about potholes in the streets. While potholes are not generally seen as a public health issue, community conveners work with appropriate agencies in the community to address the problem. The success of this effort can raise the credibility of the community conveners in the public’s eye and generate trust among residents for the process.

Perceptions regarding community quality of life – Questions about quality of life in the community can pinpoint specific concerns. This helps to highlight aspects of neighborhoods and/or communities that either enhance or diminish residents’ quality of life.

A map of community assets – Asset mapping is an important tool for mobilizing community resources. It is the process by which the capacities of individuals, civic associations, and local institutions are inventoried.

Below is a comparison of a needs-based versus an asset-based approach:

<b>Needs Based</b>	<b>Asset Based</b>
Focus on deficits	Focus on assets
Problem response	Opportunity identification
Charity orientation	Investment orientation
Programs are the answer	People are the answer
More services	Less services
Grants to agencies	Grants, loans, contracts, investment, leverage dollars
High emphasis on government agencies	Emphasis on associations, business, agencies, churches, etc.
Focus on individual	Focus on community or neighborhood
See people as “clients”	See people as “citizens”
	Develop potential
<i>Source: United Way of Metro Atlanta</i>	

All of this information — open community discussions, quality of life perceptions and a map of community assets — leads to a portrait of the community as seen through the eyes of its residents. While the broader community should be involved in the entire MAPP process, it is during the Community Themes and Strengths Assessment that formal community dialogues are established and community ownership begins. Dialogue, which is more fully discussed in the section about Engaging the Community, can be defined as the “skillful exchange or interaction between people that develops shared understanding as the basis for building trust, fostering a sense of ownership, facilitating genuine agreement and enabling creative problem solving.”

**Benefits and Challenges of Identifying Community Themes and Strengths**

One benefit of identifying community themes and strengths is that community members become more vested in the process when they realize that their concerns are being genuinely considered

and are influencing the process. The themes and issues identified in this phase shed light on the information uncovered in each of the other assessments.

There are many challenges associated with conducting community dialogues. These include limited resources and time, difficulty in reaching all populations and residents, and ensuring that the process is truly community-driven. Revisit the section on Engaging the Community for ideas about how these challenges can be overcome. Dialogue is a particularly well-suited tool for the Community Themes and Strengths Assessment, as it moves communities away from a “discussion” model and toward a “participatory” model of developing shared understanding. As a methodology it enables broad exploration of the many aspects of an issue or initiative. Issues that initially appear to be relatively simple often have completely unexpected consequences or implications when exposed to the light of open community dialogue. By respectful listening, less enfranchised constituents of the community may begin to participate. A facilitator in this sort of process should be prepared for the possibility that what at first appears as disruptive participation will often turn out to be quite the opposite. It is this sort of openness and sensitivity to the process of participation that can lead to the emergence of “a new way of thinking together.”

## **How to Conduct the Community Themes and Strengths Assessment**

The following steps outline a general process for initiating the Community Themes and Strengths Assessment. It is especially important to tailor activities to the community’s needs, resources, and characteristics.

### ***Step 1 – Prepare for the Community Themes and Strengths Assessment***

Establish a subcommittee to oversee Community Themes and Strengths Assessment. Thoughtful selection of participants helps to ensure that subcommittee members represent diverse segments of the community and bring different ideas to the table. Individuals proficient in qualitative data collection should be included.

Identify the skills and resources needed to conduct the activities. When choosing the approaches (listed below) to be implemented, consider the types of resources needed for each approach. Resources may include meeting space, food and drink for meetings, staffing support, equipment (tape recorders, projectors), and copying costs. If a community survey will be implemented, consider how that will be developed, disseminated, gathered, and analyzed. Identify a facilitator and recorder for community discussions and focus groups. See Facilitation within the MAPP Process for helpful hints on identifying and working with a facilitator.

Consider the resources needed to reach broad segments of the population. Local media may be useful for informing residents about the process. Multiple approaches can be used to engage the community. These include:

- Community Meetings
- Community Dialogues
- Focus Groups
- Walking or Windshield Surveys
- Individual Discussions / Interviews
- Surveys

The information gathering mechanisms matrix describes each of these approaches, along with their advantages and disadvantages. Consider implementing a variety of options. For example, surveys may be useful for data gathering as a first pass, while community meetings and individual

discussions can delve more deeply into the identified issues. Or alternatively, focus groups may reveal themes that can be explored more thoroughly through surveys. The committee should tailor its activities to the characteristics of the community. It is vital that the broader community have a voice in determining the activities to be undertaken. For example, a town hall meeting for gathering community themes will be unsuccessful if those involved are uncomfortable with that type of venue. Committee members should use their connections with others in the community to explore the various options. Additionally, ensure that resources are available to implement the activity effectively. For example, leaders of community meetings and focus groups require strong facilitation skills.

Finally, give strong consideration to gathering information through meetings or mechanisms already established within the community. Identify organizations within the community that have established meeting times and try to get on the agenda of those meetings. Examples might include meetings of the local Parent Teacher Association (PTA), community-based organizations, elected officials, as well as numerous others. This approach is less resource-intensive and, assuming that a variety of community meetings are used, assures input from diverse perspectives.

## ***Step 2 – Implement Information-Gathering Activities***

When implementing selected activities, be sure to facilitate the broadest participation possible. Conduct a community scan to identify subpopulations or individuals whose voices are not being heard. For methods that require specific meeting times (i.e., the community meeting or focus groups), ensure that the logistics — how, when, and where the meetings are held — promote good participation. Give consideration to barriers to participation, such as child care and transportation. Each meeting should be accessible to all who wish to attend and it should be held at a time and date that accommodates the schedules of the desired participants (i.e., in the evening to accommodate those with day jobs).

All meetings, focus groups, or discussions should begin with an overview of the MAPP process, a description of community health (as contrasted with personal health) and a statement of the goal of the information-gathering mechanism. Similarly, written and telephone surveys should include a cover letter or a verbal introduction that informs respondents of the survey objectives. Three levels of information-gathering should occur during the Community Themes and Strengths Assessment. These are described below:

- 1. Open-ended, unstructured questions to gather information on community concerns, opinions, thoughts, and suggestions.** Community meetings or discussions should open with an invitation to provide feedback virtually anything that provides insight into the issues of importance to the community.

The following questions may be useful for gathering information on Community Themes and Strengths:

- a) What do you believe are the 2-3 most important characteristics of a healthy community?
- b) What makes you most proud of our community?
- c) What are some specific examples of people or groups working together to improve the health and quality of life in our community?
- d) What do you believe are the 2-3 most important issues that must be addressed to improve the health and quality of life in our community?

- e) What do you believe is keeping our community from doing what needs to be done to improve health and quality of life?
- f) What actions, policy, or funding priorities would you support to build a healthier community?
- g) What would excite you enough to become involved (or more involved) in improving our community?

## **2. Perceptions regarding the quality of life in the community**

Information on perceptions about quality of life in a community can be gathered through a community survey and/or community discussions. See the section on Quality of Life Questions for more information.

## **3. Mapping the community's assets**

Asset mapping involves developing a "capacity inventory" for the jurisdiction, community, or neighborhood and literally placing symbols on a map for the various social, cultural, economic, environmental and other community attributes and assets identified by community residents. Asset mapping can also be conducted through the use of walking or windshield surveys. Include regional assets, such as universities, airports, or national/state parks outside the local boundaries. After the map is complete, community members can analyze whether there are unrecognized assets from which it can draw upon and whether all segments of the community can access its resources. Community members should work together to build additional resources — including the social capital of mutual trust and civic engagement — to enhance the quality of life for all community residents.

### ***Step 3 – Compile the Results of the Community Themes and Strengths Assessment***

Keep a running list of ideas, comments, quotes, and themes while activities are being implemented. More than one person might want to record the ideas to ensure that all suggestions and comments are documented and to capture nuances that one person might miss. Also note possible solutions to identified problems or innovative ideas for providing public health services. Issues and solutions are both important outcomes and will be a crucial contribution to the identification of strategic issues.

The results of this phase should be compiled into one central list. The worksheet Community Themes and Strengths: Issues, Perceptions, and Assets may be used or another customized worksheet can be developed by your subcommittee. In addition, the ongoing results should be made available to participants of the other assessments so that the Community Themes and Strengths Assessment can inform the other assessments' findings. The results should also be shared with the entire community.

### ***Step 4 – Ensure that Community Involvement and Empowerment is Sustained***

While the specific activities conducted (i.e., focus groups, windshield surveys) occur on a finite timeline, the dialogue that has opened up within the community should be never-ending. The participants who have become involved in the Community Themes and Strengths Assessment should continue to meet. Their dialogue will be enriched by the findings of the other assessments and their creative and informed participation will be a critical resource throughout the MAPP

process. Be sure to record names, addresses, phone numbers and email addresses of participants whenever it is appropriate in order to build a master list of contacts. Persons on that list are not only candidates for direct participation in the remaining MAPP phases, but are also potential recipients of progress reports and the final plan and may assist in implementation or evaluation during the Action Cycle. Building this broad participation is also vital to ensuring community ownership of the strategies and action plan. Additionally, the community dialogues that have occurred may extend to other activities within the community and can benefit relationships of all types. It is the expectation that these dialogues will take on a vital life of their own within the communities themselves around issues and initiatives that may or may not be MAPP-related.

## **Conducting a Community Dialogue**

The following process is a useful method for structuring community dialogue.

### **Preparing for the Dialogue**

Select a site that can readily accommodate 20-35 persons. The room should be set up with participants seated in a circle. This encourages participation by all persons in attendance.

Notification should be clear and given in a timely manner so as to avoid confusion. Care should be taken that the time and place facilitate as broad attendance as possible. In some communities, several different venues and schedules will be required to engage stakeholders with differing schedules or lifestyles.

### **Beginning the Dialogue**

Set the tone prior to opening the dialogue session by greeting participants when they arrive, arranging for clear signage and offering light refreshments. Helping people feel comfortable upon arrival and communicating to participants the importance of their presence can go a long way toward the more difficult work of building trust and commitment.

Open the meeting with an explanation of MAPP and why dialogue is important. The meeting should then be turned over to the facilitator(s). Skilled facilitation will play a particularly large role in helping to create an environment of trust, commitment and openness at the outset. It will also provide for timely introduction of dialogue skills and practice when required.

Checking-in is a very simple way of breaking tension and encouraging broad participation. This may be as simple as beginning the meeting with a question such as "Why is this meeting important to you?" or "What needs to happen here today in order for this meeting to be a success to you?" and allowing each person in the room to introduce themselves and briefly respond. The value is to honor the various voices that are present in the room, rather than allowing the meeting agenda to drive the outcome. Observing a similar protocol at the end of the meeting (check-out) helps to bring closure and ensure that all voices have an opportunity to be heard.

### **Content of the Dialogue**

A trained facilitator will broadly frame the focus of the group and help important themes and issues to emerge. For instance, a dialogue around quality of life issues or the mapping of community assets may stimulate participants' ideas of community assets or quality of life. Through discussion, participants will be able to identify areas of agreement and disagreement. As new insights emerge, they should be captured and clarified.

### **Follow-up and Sustaining the Dialogue**

Sustain the dialogue over time by using sign-in sheets to facilitate follow up, summaries of brainstorming or other types of sessions and possible outside information sources. For example, the Community Health Status Assessment may reveal some data that are surprising to the community, and having that data clearly available in a timely way will make the community dialogue more productive. In all likelihood, this responsibility will fall to a lead agency or community partner at the outset, but as the process continues, the participants will increasingly assume this role.

**References:**

Coalition for Healthier Cities and Communities. *Healthy People in Healthy Communities: A Dialogue Guide*. Chicago, IL: 1999

Daniel Martin. *The Spirit of Dialogue. International Communities for the Renewal of the Earth*: 1999.

## A Step-by-Step Approach to Conducting a Focus Group

Below is a brief outline of the eight steps recommended in focus group research. MAPP recommends the use of focus group resources or guidebooks to ensure effective implementation.

1. Decide if focus groups are the right tool for you to get the information you need. Focus groups are useful if the discussion among participants will help provide insight, the group atmosphere will stimulate honest response, the discussion can be limited to well-defined topics and the logistics can be managed.
2. Determine who should participate in your focus group(s). Consider factors such as social class, life cycle, user and nonuser status, age, culture, literacy/formal education, etc.
3. Draft a screening questionnaire to help recruit and place participants.
4. Develop a topic guide. There are four primary stages of the focus group discussion; the topic guide should follow this basic flow:
  - a. Introduction – The moderator provides an overview of the goals of the discussion and introductions are made. (Approximately 10 minutes.)
  - b. Rapport Building Stage – Easily answered questions are asked to encourage participants to begin talking and sharing. (Approximately 10 minutes.)
  - c. In-depth Discussion – The moderator focuses on the main questions in the topic guide, encouraging conversation that reveals participants' feelings and thoughts. (Approximately 60 minutes.)
  - d. Closure – The moderator summarizes the impressions or conclusions gathered and participants clarify, confirm or elaborate on the information. (Approximately 10 minutes.)
5. Design forms for the moderator and note taker to use. The moderator may want a summary sheet with a reminder of key information about participants. The recorder (which all focus groups should have) can use forms with the focus group questions on it, or another option is a two-column format organizing comments and quotes in one column and observations and interpretations in the second.
6. Draft a self-evaluation form. The self-evaluation form can help the moderator to improve his/her skills over time.
7. Practice a focus group discussion in advance so that everything will run smoothly. Then, conduct the focus group(s), being sure to tape them so that everything is captured.
8. Organize your notes for the focus group report. After conducting the focus groups, the moderator and note taker should review notes to fill in gaps and ensure accurate and complete information has been gathered. Keep a list of participants who were at the focus group sessions (i.e., have a sign-in sheet) so that you can keep them informed about next steps and gather additional feedback.

*References: Academy for Educational Development. Skill-Building Guide for Making Focus Groups Work . Washington, DC: 1995.*

## **Community Themes and Strengths Assessment – Issues, Perceptions, and Assets**

Review the Community Themes and Strengths that have been identified. Identify common themes that have emerged, as well as the solutions or barriers that have been discussed. This will be an important source of information during the Identify Strategic Issues phase. Record the information on the worksheet below. Continue onto another page if needed.

1. \_\_\_\_\_

2. \_\_\_\_\_

3. \_\_\_\_\_

4. \_\_\_\_\_

5. \_\_\_\_\_

6. \_\_\_\_\_

7. \_\_\_\_\_

8. \_\_\_\_\_

9. \_\_\_\_\_

10. \_\_\_\_\_

## Quality of Life Questions

The following information is generally collected through a community survey, which can be conducted by telephone, in person or by mail. This information may also be collected through focus groups, informal discussions, or other community gatherings. Record the responses to the 12 questions below.

If gathering the information through a survey, consider eliciting responses through a Likert scale (i.e., 1 – 5 with 1 being low and 5 being high.) If gathering the information in person (i.e., via focus groups, informal discussions, or other mechanisms), use open-ended questions. Engage the community in an in-depth discussion (through focus groups, community dialogues or town hall meetings) about the 12 questions. Explore the following issues for each question: 1. What is the preferred future? 2. What is the current reality? 3. What are the gaps, leverage points or strategic opportunities?

Total Number of Community Residents Surveyed: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Quality of Life Questions	Likert Scale Responses (1 to 5, with 5 being most positive)
1. Are you satisfied with the quality of life in our community? (Consider your sense of safety, well-being, participation in community life and associations, etc.) [IOM, 1997]	
2. Are you satisfied with the health care system in the community? (Consider access, cost, availability, quality, options in health care, etc.) [IOM, 1997]	
3. Is this community a good place to raise children? (Consider school quality, day care, after school programs, recreation, etc.)	
4. Is this community a good place to grow old? (Consider elder-friendly housing, transportation to medical services, churches, shopping; elder day care, social support for the elderly living alone, meals on wheels, etc.)	
5. Is there economic opportunity in the community? (Consider locally owned and operated businesses, jobs with career growth, job training/higher education opportunities, affordable housing, reasonable commute, etc.)	
6. Is the community a safe place to live? (Consider residents' perceptions of safety in the home, the workplace, schools, playgrounds, parks, and the mall. Do neighbors know and trust one another? Do they look out for one another?)	
7. Are there networks of support for individuals and families (neighbors, support groups, faith community outreach, agencies, and organizations) during times of stress and need?	
8. Do all individuals and groups have the opportunity to contribute to and participate in the community's quality of life?	
9. Do all residents perceive that they — individually and collectively — can make the community a better place to live?	
10. Are community assets broad-based and multi-sectoral?	
11. Are levels of mutual trust and respect increasing among community partners as they participate in collaborative activities to achieve shared community goals?	
12. Is there an active sense of civic responsibility and engagement, and of civic pride in shared accomplishments?	