

# COMMUNITY HEALTH NEEDS ASSESSMENT GUIDELINES

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Manitoba  
Health



# Community Health Needs Assessment Guidelines

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# Before Getting Started



## Introduction

Putting people first...meeting the needs of communities and involving them more directly in decisions...shifting more emphasis to prevention, promotion and wellness...focusing more on outcomes. These are the new directions for Manitoba's health system.

Community members want a health system that is responsive to their needs. Easy to say, but exactly what are those needs? How do Regional Health Authorities (RHAs) get a clear picture of health needs, community resources and the effectiveness of policies, programs and services currently in place? How can that information be collected, analyzed and used to make decisions about the most effective ways to provide health services to improve health in each of the regions?

This guide sets out a process that regions should use in answering these important questions and is intended as a resource to assist Regional Health Authority staff in approaching the task and getting the job done.

The approach we've taken in this guide is to provide basic information and to set out a process for assessing community health needs. We have reviewed processes nationally and internationally, and adapted the information to the Manitoba context. Manitoba Health can provide assistance as Regional Health Authorities begin the community health needs assessment process by sharing information, providing education, training, and consultation for participants as required.

Manitoba Health has produced several documents for reference in carrying out the community health needs assessment process including: *A Framework for Health Planning*; *A Manitoba Population Health Assessment Template*, *Regional Population Health Profiles* and *Guidelines to Core Health Services in Northern and Rural Manitoba*.

**Let's begin with a definition of community health needs assessment:**

A community health needs assessment is a dynamic ongoing process undertaken to identify the strengths and needs of the community, enable the community-wide establishment of health priorities and facilitate collaborative action planning directed at improving community health status and quality of life.

## **Why Assess Community Health Needs?**

In many regions across the province, considerable work has been done to assess community health needs. This guide builds on some of that work and also provides a comprehensive and consistent approach for you to consider.

### **Community Health Needs Assessment:**

- Provides baseline information about the health status of community residents.
- Ensures that decisions are based on solid information and evidence.
- Helps set priorities.
- Helps Regional Health Authorities assess outcomes and results in the longer term.
- Gets community members, stakeholders and a wide variety of partners involved in the decision-making process, helps them understand the difficult choices that need to be made, and builds support and commitment for addressing health needs on a community-wide basis.
- Can be used to guide policy and program development.
- Can provide information on which to base funding allocations.
- Can assist in mapping out links and interdependence to other sectors.
- Can provide insight into the fundamental causes and pathways of disease and ill-health and provide population-based information to identify opportunities for disease prevention, health promotion and health protection.

## **Let's consider some of these points:**

**First, baseline data collection.** Rather than making decisions based on past practice about what is needed and what works, assessing community needs gives solid information—a base of facts and data to guide decisions. Good planning and good decisions require good information. Assessing community

health needs and gathering essential indicators of health in your region will provide the information you need for **evidence-based** decision making in the future.

**Second, setting priorities.** To respond to community health needs, you must start with a clear understanding of what they are, what capacity communities already have for addressing those needs, and what new options and solutions are available. **To ensure programs and services are efficient and effective, it is essential that priorities be placed on meeting the greatest needs.** For example, if you find that there is a high proportion of occupational injury and disease (farming and mining accidents, lung disease) in your region, you may decide that the top priority action should be in those areas. Or if you find that the leading cause of premature death in the region is car accidents, you may decide it's more important to focus your efforts on that issue. Understanding community health needs and issues can give you a clearer picture of the strategies that should be used to improve health in the region.

**Third, assessing outcomes status.** Do the policies, programs and services you have available improve health in your region? Are they achieving the desired results? Unless you do a thorough job of assessing needs and tracking results, you won't be able to answer those essential questions and effectively target limited resources.

**Fourth, linkage and interdependence to other sectors.** As indicated in the document *A Framework for Health Planning*, health is influenced by numerous determinants. Improving the health status of residents in your region will require establishing linkages and working collaboratively with other sectors (i.e., justice, education, transportation, income and social security, etc.) to collectively identify and plan for needs in the community.

And finally, **community participation and education.** Involving community members in the decision-making process is important. Not only does it help them to understand their health needs and the resources they have available to address them, it also gets them involved in the process, talking about issues, sharing ideas and proposing solutions. Many health issues, such as preventing injuries, require community commitment and action. An informed and involved community will also be in a better position to understand and support decisions and to take ownership for its health status.

**The key point is:** information about community needs helps communities and Regional Health Authorities to set priorities and to address the most pressing needs of the community.

# How Do You Prepare for a Community Health Needs Assessment?

Assessing community health needs is an essential component of the health planning cycle. Whatever planning approach you take in your region, it is important that decisions and policies are grounded in solid information about the health needs of community members.

Talking about the importance of assessing community needs is one thing. Actually undertaking and implementing a comprehensive process is another. It is a complex and time-consuming job.

Some suggestions to consider before you get started on the process are:

**First, it's a big job.** It takes **time, people** and **resources**. Since community health needs do not change rapidly, plan on doing an initial comprehensive health needs assessment, an annual scan of your environment, and then an on-going comprehensive health needs assessments about every three years, preferably as part of the regular regional health planning cycle. Because this will be the first time comprehensive community health needs assessments have been done for most regions, plan on spending more time on the first assessment so that you have a solid base for the future. Then put the systems in place so that information can be maintained and updated regularly. Build in an ongoing communication process to directly involve and provide feedback to community members, other stakeholders and partners. This may be done through district health councils and other channels.

**Second, build on expertise in your region** but also plan to involve outside expertise when necessary. Build on the skills, resources and information that already exist in your organization and communities.

In view of the integral part the community health needs assessment will play in the overall regional health planning process, Regional Health Authorities should seriously consider setting up of a responsibility centre within their region. This responsibility centre will need people with the following skills:

- leadership abilities
- community development abilities
- strategic planning experience
- understanding of health care systems and population health concepts
- strong organizational and process skills
- analytical skills
- verbal and written communication skills

- computer skills
- research skills (or access to them)

**Third, community health needs assessments can be done at different levels.** In addition to a broad and comprehensive assessment, there will be times when more in-depth work should be done to target a particular issue in the community or develop a program response for a particular consumer group. This can provide a clearer picture of the problem and possible solutions.

**Fourth, be realistic and practical.** There are lots of data that can be collected, but it takes time and money. Rather than trying to get all the data that could be collected, concentrate on the key data that will allow your region to track important issues, trends and results.

**Fifth, it is important to distinguish between needs and wants.** This is not a simple task and it often will be controversial. For example, to prevent outbreaks of communicable diseases, children clearly need to be immunized. On the other hand, wants are things we often think will solve a problem or meet a need. They are just one of the many ways of approaching a problem and they may not necessarily prevent that problem from occurring or address a basic need. For example, elderly people who can no longer manage alone “need” a safe, supportive living environment. The community may “want” a new long-term care facility. However, expanded community care or assisted living may be a better alternative and more appropriately meet the need. A community health needs assessment provides an opportunity to educate and involve community members and consumers in making choices about new ways to meet needs.

# A Process for Assessing and Taking Action on Community Health Needs



There are some essential steps involved in assessing community health needs. The following is a step-by-step approach that may be used in determining community health needs.

- Step one - Decide what information you need
- Step two - Review existing health information
- Step three - Collect the data
- Step four - Analyze the data to identify community health needs
- Step five - Assess needs and possible solutions
- Step six - “Reality check” with community members
- Step seven - Integrate into the regional health plan and take action
- Step eight - Plan for: 1. Ongoing Monitoring and Assessment  
2. Evaluation

On the following pages of this guide, we’ll go through each of the steps, provide key information and suggest actions that may be taken.

The essential elements you should strive to include are:

- a solid base of information about health needs and community resources in your region;
- a thorough involvement of community members;
- a set of priorities and action plans designed to address community health needs; and
- a plan for monitoring and evaluating performance and building community needs-assessment information into your ongoing health planning cycle.



## STEP ONE:

# DECIDE WHAT INFORMATION YOU NEED

You will be interested in indicators that describe or measure particular characteristics, events and factors that are important for health planning, decision-making and evaluation. The reference document *A Manitoba Population Health Assessment Template* will describe what information should be included in a comprehensive community health needs assessment. The indicators that will be most helpful to you are measures used to describe the state of health and well-being of the population, and the factors that determine or influence health. Many factors such as socioeconomic, productivity and wealth, health service system, environmental, and genetic endowment influence the health of persons, families and communities. These factors are referred to as the determinants of health.

Different categories of indicators are:

- self-reported health
- life expectancy
- morbidity (sickness)
- existing health services
- behaviours, values and lifestyles
- cultural environment and historical circumstance
- use of health services and programs

You need to know exactly what you want before you start. Answer these questions:

- What exactly do we want to know?
- Why do we want to know it?
- What will be done with the information when we get it?

You have to be clear from the outset about what information you need. Otherwise you will waste valuable time and resources.

## STEP TWO:

# REVIEW EXISTING HEALTH INFORMATION

## What health information do we already have?

*The Manitoba Population Health Assessment Template* outlines some descriptors and indicators that describe the broad determinants of health. Using this document as a reference, determine what information you already have and what information you need to collect.

Begin by reviewing existing health information:

- Locate and review regional and provincial reports, briefs and statistical profiles
- Review regional population health profiles provided by Manitoba Health
- Talk to people who know about information available within the region
- Compile an inventory of all the health-related programs and services available in your region. As part of your regional health planning process, you have done a great deal of this work already. To get an overall picture of services and resources in your community, you should expand the inventory to include not only those expected to be provided by your RHA, but also by volunteer, non-profit and charitable organizations or private sector businesses.

After identifying the information available, determine what other information is needed to assess the health needs and strengths of the region.

## STEP THREE:

# COLLECT THE DATA

## What are the Approaches to Collecting Data?

Now that you know what other information you require to assess the health needs and strengths of the region:

- Determine the best and most effective ways of collecting information currently not available

There are some common approaches to collecting information. These include focus groups, public forums and/or surveys. Each approach has its advantages and disadvantages. You may choose to use any or all of the approaches depending on the unique characteristics of the region.

- Choose methods that best address the questions that need to be answered. For example, surveys are useful to collect information on problems, diseases or individual views. This could be done by telephone, mail, questionnaire or face-to-face interviews. Public meetings, focus groups and/or workshops are useful for community groups to discuss their needs and strengths and prioritize needs accordingly.
- Using more than one method to collect information is more reliable than any one method or one source by itself.
- Keep an open mind and do not restrict yourself to one method because it is familiar.

In conducting information-gathering sessions in communities, some points to remember are:

- **The purpose of the sessions should be made clear to all participants.**
- **Strong leadership is needed in community sessions.** It's important for people handling the sessions to come prepared to listen, to treat people with respect, and to be open and honest with information. It may take several sessions to get people to shift their focus of attention to underlying health issues in their communities.
- **Ensure that all communication for community meetings is in language that people can understand and culturally appropriate.** The health field is full of technical language and jargon that makes sense to health providers but not to community members.
- **Develop a clear communication plan for community meetings to inform people about dates, times and locations.**
- **Following the sessions, plan to provide a summary to participants and keep them informed throughout the entire community needs-assessment process.**

Broad community involvement is essential to any community health needs-assessment process. Those who live and work in a community are an excellent source of ideas and insight into community health needs. They can provide information about common problems and causes of health problems and areas where prevention and promotion could make improvements in health. In addition, health-care providers within the region have a wealth of information and experience in working with community members and assessing health needs.

#### STEP FOUR:

## **ANALYZE THE DATA TO IDENTIFY COMMUNITY HEALTH NEEDS**

The next task is to turn the facts and data into usable, practical and concise information. This is where you begin analyzing and interpreting the data. The objective is to look for common elements, to combine data, to interpret and synthesize the information and then to distill it down to a manageable list of identified community health needs. Manitoba Health will be available on a consultative basis to assist you in the analysis of the data.

There are a number of factors that need to be considered in analyzing the data.

**Correlation:** Data you gather may show that certain factors are related. Before you make judgments, consider whether the factors are correlated (meaning that they regularly appear at the same time). For example, a high number of chronic lung disease cases may or may not be related to the number of smokers in a population.

**Sample and population:** Typically, information is not gathered about the entire population because it is too costly and time consuming. Samples are used instead. However, it is important to remember that samples must be reflective of the population and selected carefully in order for you to generalize the conclusions and findings to the entire population of the region. Information and consultation are available on appropriate sample size from Manitoba Health.

**What are some questions to consider when analyzing information and identifying community needs?**

1. How can we best describe the communities we serve, both at present and in the future? What conclusions can be drawn about the needs and strengths of the region from this basic information?

- age categories
- income levels
- educational levels
- employment
- family structures
- cultural backgrounds
- service use
- geography
- environment
- economy

2. What are the five to 10 major themes/concerns that came from the community discussions or focus groups? Are those concerns consistent with health needs identified by experts, professionals and health providers?

3. What are the most common health needs and health issues identified through the surveying process? What are the common themes/concerns?

4. What are the leading causes of death or disability? What are the leading causes of premature death or disability?

5. What are the most common diseases or injuries? What is the burden of illness, or the cost of resources use, for these diseases or injuries?

6. What are the most common reasons for hospitalization?

7. What are the reasons for the use of emergency service and out-patient visits?

8. Where are there opportunities to make substantial gains in health status?

9. What are the key areas where we think we can move the system to reduce and prevent disease/injury and hospitalization, and promote health and well-being? For example: alternative health interventions; primary prevention, etc.

## STEP FIVE:

# ASSESS NEEDS AND POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS

## How do you set priorities?

Once you have prepared a thorough list of issues and health needs and strengths in your community, the next step is to assess each of the health needs you identified and to consider all the possible solutions. At this point answer these two questions:

1. How important is the problem?
2. Are there programs and services that are now in place or could be put in place to address the problem?

By combining answers to both these questions, you can establish a manageable list of priorities and focus your actions on the most pressing needs.

## How important is the problem?

The following criteria can be used to help assess the importance of the problem.

**1. Preventability:** A number of health needs on your list have a serious impact on health in your region, but there is little that can be done to reduce them. On the other hand, many health problems can be prevented through education, through changes in policy, or through health promotion programs. Problems that can be prevented or substantially reduced should receive higher priority than those that can't.

**2. The number of people potentially affected by the problem:** Based on your knowledge of the community and the health information you collected, consider how many people are potentially at risk as a result of this problem. The higher the proportion of people in your region that are potentially affected, the more important and more urgent the problem.

**3. The number of people actually affected by the problem:** Knowing how many people are potentially affected is important, but that information needs to be combined with an estimate of the number of people who are actually affected. For example, all women are at risk for breast cancer, and all men are at risk for prostate cancer. Comparisons made among age groups and regions will provide a context to determine risk and will give a better indication of a problem's urgency.

**4. Prevalence of premature death or years of potential life lost:** Mortality rates can give you a biased picture of which problems are most serious because they tend to emphasize problems that affect older people. Looking at years of potential life lost gives a clearer picture of the leading causes of early death—and an indication of which issues need to be balanced in order to identify the most pressing for your region to address.

**5. Severity:** Another measure that highlights the impact of a problem is the extent to which the problem limits people's choices and their ability to live their life the way they want to. For example, the problem may limit people's ability to work, or require nursing home care or regular and extensive therapy. If the problem severely limits people's choices and independence, it should be considered more important than problems that have only a small impact on people's day-to-day lives.

**6. Public concern:** From your community meetings and discussions with community members, which issues did they raise as the highest concern? Are there cultural diversity issues that must be addressed? While issues raised by community members may not always be consistent with factual information, they reflect the public's perception of the leading health issues in their community.

**7. Economic burden to the community:** Estimating the economic loss to the community and to people that results from the problem is an important part of determining its importance. Consider the costs to the community of having to address the problem. For example, if it costs an average of \$20,000 in health care costs for every victim of a car accident and there are regular accidents in your communities, this represents a high cost for your community. Think about other cost factors such as lost productivity and taxes as a result of premature death, the costs of providing rehabilitation and support services and so on. This is a difficult task, and, in some cases, it may not be possible to get a full economic impact assessment.

### **ARE THERE PROGRAMS AND SERVICES THAT NOW ARE IN PLACE OR COULD BE PUT IN PLACE TO ADDRESS THE PROBLEM?**

A wide variety of health service providers, experts, users of the health system and community members should be involved at this stage.

Take each of the health needs and compile a list of the possible programs/services, initiatives or solutions that could be put in place to address the need. The purpose is to identify those problems that have the greatest potential for solutions. Begin by looking at the inventory of programs and services that cur-

rently exist in your community. Match those community resources as well as people resources with the problems and needs you have identified.

Consider the effectiveness of programs and services currently in place. Are these programs providing effective results? Are there overlaps in the services provided by a number of organizations, and are there opportunities to co-ordinate and integrate services to provide better results?

Then consider a broad range of new and/or redirected services that could be put in place. Consider not only those that your Regional Health Authority can or should provide itself, but also those that you could initiate or participate in along with other partners in your community.

**Consider these questions when determining possible solutions:**

1. What can be done to prevent this problem before it occurs? (for example, by community /service provider)
2. What can be done to detect the problem earlier and ensure prompt treatment?
3. What can be done to make the best of the situation or prevent the problem from getting worse?
4. What programs can you put in place or redirect to maintain and promote independence of people in their own home?
5. What programs or services could produce changes in the entire community? (for example, media campaigns and community health events)
6. What programs or services could be put in place to change organizations, policies, laws or regulations? (for example, smoke-free policies in malls, arenas, and schools)
7. Are the proposed programs or services feasible and realistic?
  - Does the program or service fit within the guidelines to core health services identified by Manitoba Health?
  - Does the proposed program of service fit within the Manitoba Health provincial priorities?
  - Can you afford it?



- Do you have the legal authority to put the program in place? Is it within your mandate or do you need others to work with you?
- Do you have staff with the right expertise to implement the program?
- Is it acceptable to your community? Would your community members think this is the right approach, consistent with their values and needs?

#### STEP SIX:

## “REALITY CHECK” WITH COMMUNITY MEMBERS

Before you go ahead with actions to address the priorities identified, it is important for you to review the priorities and to go back to community members for confirmation that the priorities meet their expectations. At this point, community members should be provided with information describing what you learned through the community health needs-assessment process and what actions you propose to take.

The purpose of consulting with community members is to answer the following questions:

1. Are the priorities the right ones?
2. Do community members support the actions being proposed to address the priorities?

You may want to consider a variety of approaches including focus groups, district health councils, public meetings and open forums, and special sessions with interested parties. It is essential to keep community members well informed and to build their support for your regional health plan and subsequent actions.

Based on the feedback you receive, you may decide to adjust your priorities, to change or reject some of the programs or actions you proposed, to delay certain programs or speed up others. Any actions that were or were not taken as a result of community advice, along with supporting rationale, will have to be communicated back to the community. Also, you will need to consider whether the priorities and proposed actions are consistent with the goals and objectives set in your regional health plan.

## STEP SEVEN:

# INTEGRATE INTO THE REGIONAL HEALTH PLAN AND TAKE ACTION

You need to build the priorities and proposed actions into your health plan.

Consider these questions:

1. Is the overall approach one of preventive sustainable healthy community development?
2. What financial and human resource adjustments are required? Consider the costs of each proposed action and build this into your budget plans.
3. What are the time-lines? Do the actions fit within your three-year regional health plan or do they extend beyond the regional health plan time-frame? Can you achieve reasonable results in the time-lines you have set, keeping in mind that health promotion and prevention programs take time to realize results?

Assessing community needs should be a central part of the regional health planning process. The information from the community health needs-assessment process and the identified priorities should provide the evidence for making decisions in your regional health plan.

## STEP EIGHT:

# PLAN FOR: 1. ONGOING MONITORING AND ASSESSMENT 2. EVALUATION

Monitoring, Assessment and Evaluation are all tools to ensure that services and programs are meeting the needs that the community health needs assessment has identified. Information from these three sources can also help to refine and focus subsequent assessments.

## MONITORING AND ASSESSMENT

- Plan for a management information system to track the “outputs” of the program: The Who, What, How, When & Where. This type of information allows you to monitor your program as it goes along by giving you information about your clients, service and service providers.

- For example, the needs assessment may show a particular group of people need the service, but monitoring information may show they are not accessing it. Having that type of ongoing information helps to fine-tune the service or program.

## EVALUATION

Evaluations usually focus on one or more of the following:

- Efficiency
- Effectiveness
- Accountability
- Potential or identified problem

Planning for evaluation should begin when you are planning the program. Make sure there are logical connections among client needs, program objectives, activities and planned outcomes.

- Identify realistic indicators that will support measurement of client outcomes, based on client needs and program objectives.
- Information about the need the program is addressing will come from the needs assessment.
- Information about structure and process will come from monitoring.

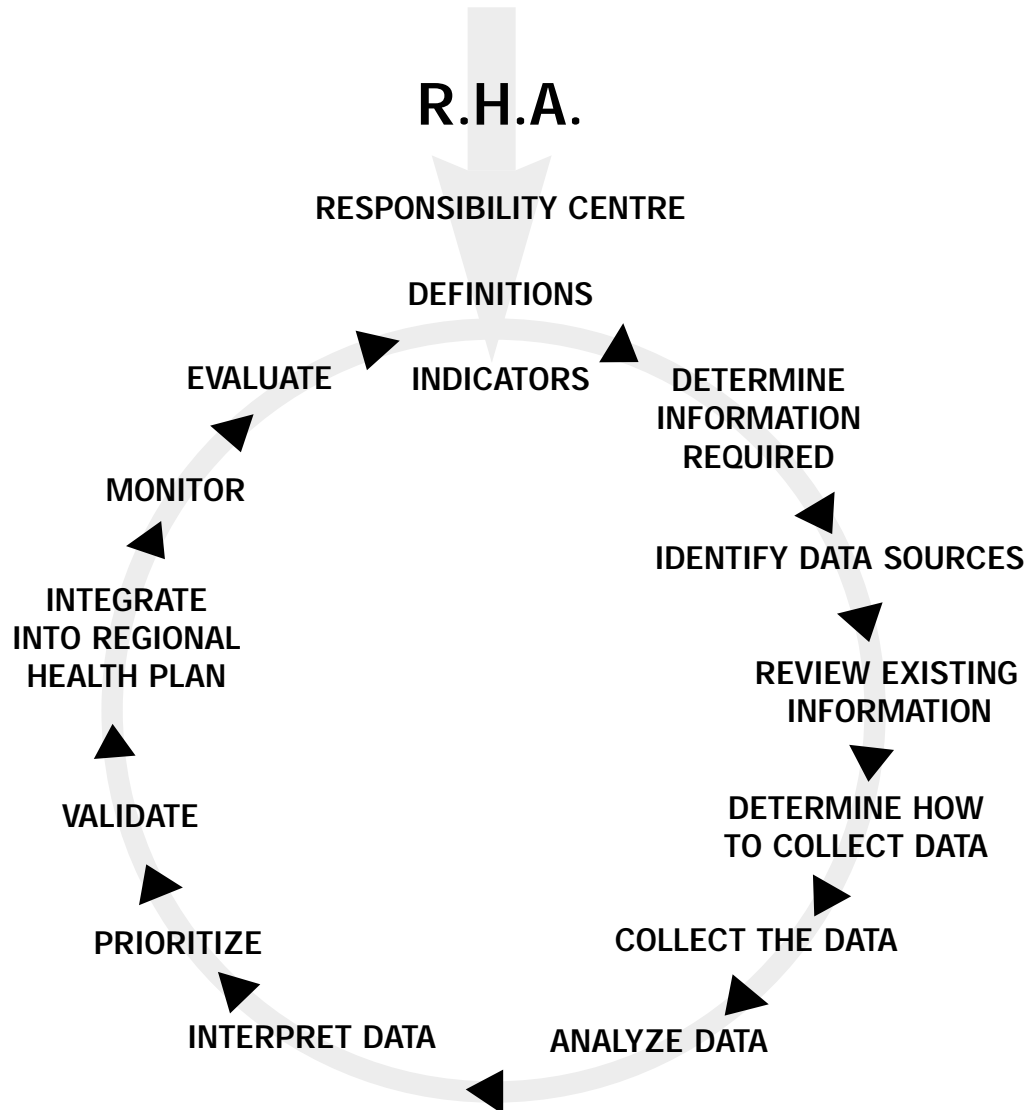
## CONCLUDING COMMENTS

This guide has outlined a process for your region to assess community health needs and to use that information to set priorities, choose appropriate actions, and assess results. The following identifies some major action steps to follow in the process outlined in this document.

# ACTION STEPS:

- Establish a **responsibility centre** to implement an ongoing community health needs-assessment process
- Start with a clear definition of **health, community** and **need**
- Determine the **indicators** you will use to determine health status in your community
- Based on the indicators, determine what information you need
- Identify data sources
- Review the existing information
- Establish how you will collect additional information
- Collect the data
- Analyze and translate the data into meaningful information
- Interpret information to identify health needs and possible solutions
- Prioritize health needs
- Check back with community to validate findings
- Integrate findings into regional health plan
- Monitor
- Evaluate

# Community Health Needs Assessment Process



A thorough and comprehensive community health needs-assessment process will ensure that each Regional Health Authority has a solid base of information about the needs, capacities and expectations of communities. It ensures that you are, in fact, responding to the most pressing needs and listening to your communities, and that your regional health plan addresses community health needs.

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## Appendix A: List of References

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