

The Needs Assessment Process



Before a YAC can make effective grants it needs to understand the youth issues in the communities and region it

serves. Conducting a youth needs assessment or doing youth asset resource mapping are two strategies to help YAC members learn more about the concerns of youth. This process helps the YAC identify problems, potential resources, and possible solutions. It also gives credibility to the funding decisions made by the YAC. There comes a time when YAC members realize that they need to be able to explain to their peers why they were not able to fund all of the requested grant applications, and the needs assessment gives them the justification they need.

Through the process of developing, implementing, and compiling information from a needs assessment, YAC members find a deeper understanding of local youth issues, such as drunk driving. They often discover viable resources for youth that need added publicity to encourage more youth involvement. In addition, members find themselves with the opportunity to challenge existing community services that are perhaps not reaching out to youth or need help to involve youth in developing new programs. The understanding of issues from a needs assessment process can contribute to shared ownership of problem-solving among youth and adults.

Consider establishing a committee of YAC members to develop the needs assessment questionnaire by using their own experiences and the insights they gain from others. Several YACs have invited a foundation trustee or a representative from a local youth-serving organization to help in this process. Collaborating with other youth groups is also encouraged. A needs assessment does not need to be done every year. Most of the YACs do a needs assessment every third year and use the years in between to focus on how they can learn more about one of their top issues.

Key items for the needs assessment committee to consider are:

- **Numbers.** Focus on a representative sample of the target population defined by most YACs as teen age youth, such as youth in grades 7, 9, and 11 or a classroom representing every grade level from grades 7 to 12.
- **Format — Questionnaire, Interview or Focus Group.** Generally, YAC members choose to develop and administer a questionnaire-type needs assessment. The survey is typically one page and lists concerns or problems with three columns to rate them—first, second, or third priority. Demographic questions (such as age, race or ethnic group, and sex) usually appear at the beginning or end of the questionnaire. The questionnaire is anonymous. Two sample surveys and a sample cover letter (i.e., [Letter for Needs Assessment](#), [Needs Assessment Example 1](#), [Needs Assessment Example 2](#)) can be found on the [Youth Grantmakers website](#). These documents may be customized to meet the needs of your YAC.
- **Diversity.** Gather information from a diverse pool of participants. For example, include the teens in the alternative high school as part of the representative sample.
- **Core Questions.** Recognizing the need to focus on top youth issues, too many broad and open-ended questions can result in too much vague information for the YAC to deal with. The YAC may decide to limit its survey to three to five issues that the media and other sources are talking about as youth issues, while always leaving room for other issues to be written in.

While issues can be locally based, such as the relationship between youth and local law enforcement, the top five issues that consistently appear in Michigan youth needs assessments are:

- **Violence**
- **Substance abuse**
- **Teen pregnancy**
- **Lack of recreational opportunities**
- **Lack of jobs and employment readiness**

Other strategies for the needs assessment have included: personal interviews, in which each member has been asked to interview at least ten peers about the top three priorities and meeting with local youth-service providers to discuss the top priorities. Several YACs have used Focus Groups as an added way to gain additional insight into local youth needs. This method is most useful if the group being surveyed can be divided into smaller groups or is focused on one issue (for example — youth groups, males and females, substance abuse). Typically, a group of 12 to 15 participants are involved. A trained facilitator focuses discussion around a particular topic or issue. In general, the facilitator only asks questions and helps the group clarify points, while someone else takes notes. The notes are later summarized and organized around key themes or subjects.

- **Where and When.** In order to save on potential costs, most YACs administer their needs assessment surveys at schools in the fall. The goal is to have the surveys completed over a month period so analysis can be completed by a committee or the whole YAC at the next monthly meeting. If it is the first year for the needs assessment, the YAC should develop a letter of introduction to the middle/junior and senior high schools' principals explaining the purpose of the needs assessment and requesting their cooperation.

Typically, committee members are invited into a school where the survey is presented to several classes at the middle/junior and high school levels. A youth advisory committee member explains what the survey is for and how it will be used, and gives the students up to 10 minutes to complete it. The member then collects the surveys and completes a one page summary for the next YAC meeting when the results from all classes are discussed. Instead of having the surveys delivered to classes by the school office, YACs have found that this approach results in the survey being treated more seriously by their peers.

- **Cost.** While conducting a needs assessment does not have to be expensive, it is wise to include the cost of the paper, copying and any special mailings in the annual budget for the YAC. There may also be added meeting costs for the YAC committee in charge of developing and analyzing the needs assessment survey.
- **Analysis and Use.** YACs using a survey questionnaire order the issues based on the number of responses to each. While many do the tabulating by hand, there is often a member with a home computer who is more than eager to do the tabulation. If the sample size exceeds 500, several YACs have enlisted the assistance of a computer class at their schools to help compile the results.

The YAC should produce a short, one-page summary document that gives the results of the needs assessment process and share it with the community foundation board as well as other youth serving agencies. This document can also announce the priority issue or issues that the YAC has decided to focus its grantmaking on. Experienced YAC members have learned that changing the grantmaking priorities every year is not practical as the needs being addressed are long-standing and entrenched. The needs assessment information is also used in the development of the "request for proposals," the next step in the grantmaking process.

In the needs assessment process it is vital to identify issues and needs as well as assets for youth. Across the country, community builders are refocusing attention on capacities and assets, and are inventing new methods for assessing issues and assets in the community. These efforts are generating new relationships and influence for local assets such as the neighborhood school, church, park, or community organization and the impact that they have on youth. How might these building blocks be combined into a strong and dynamic community-building strategy for youth?

The following steps identify how an entire community's assets can begin to be mobilized around a vision and a plan for youth.

- Mapping completely the capacities and assets of individuals, citizens' associations and local institutions to serve youth
- Building relationships among these local assets for mutually beneficial problem-solving with youth
- Convening as broadly representative a group as possible for the purposes of building a community vision and plan for youth
- Mobilizing the community's assets to implement the vision and plan for youth

Taken together, these steps begin to point the way down a community-building path which is asset-based, internally focused and relationship driven.

Experienced YACs understand that concentrating on problems will not address the larger issue of how to use young people as resources. Identifying assets for youth and providing access to those assets can be a powerful strategy for addressing youth issues. Resources on asset mapping and community building are identified below.

40 Developmental Assets is another way to find out what the needs are in your community. It identifies 40 critical factors for young people's growth and development. When drawn together, the assets offer a set of benchmarks for positive child and adolescent development. The link is <http://www.searchinstitute.org/>