Types of Assessment Data

Before conducting a local needs assessment, it is important to understand the types of data that are useful to the assessment process. Figure 1 lists the two main types of data – quantitative and qualitative – and common sources for obtaining each.

Figure 1. Local Needs Assessment and Data Collection
Objective: Collect information on the problems and related consequences, intervening variables, community readiness, and resources

Quantitative Data
Quantitative data show how often an event or behavior occurs or to what degree it exists. These data are usually reported numerically, often as counts or percentages. An example of this type of data is the percentage of high school students who reported NMUPO during the past 30 days. In addition to self-reported survey data, quantitative data can be mined from archival data sources, such as police reports, school incident and discipline reports, court records, hospital discharge datasets, and death certificates. For a list of possible quantitative data sources, refer to Archival and Survey Data Sources – A Community Data Checklist.

To define the needs of your community specific to substance misuse and abuse, problems and related behaviors are typically thought of in terms of consumption and consequence patterns. Both types of information may be collected from various quantitative data sources.

Data on consumption. Consumption patterns describe NMUPO in terms of the frequency or amount used. For example: percentage of high school students reporting current (past 30 days) non-medical use of prescription opioids. These types of data may be collected by national or state surveys, such as the National Survey on Drug Use and Health (NSDUH). However, local data specific to your community may not be as readily available. When collecting data from the community, it is ideal to use the same questions and wording as used in the national and state surveys, whenever possible. Many items in these instruments have been rigorously tested across multiple settings and may serve as good sources of comparative data in certain instances.

Data on consequences. NMUPO is associated with many social, economic, and health problems, including increased risk of overdose, injury, and death; delinquency and/or violent behavior; and poor
academic performance. Data related to consequences can help you better understand the substance misuse and abuse issue in your community. Some examples of consequence-related data include:

- Number of prescription drug-related arrests
- School incident and discipline reports
- ED admittances and hospital discharge data

**Qualitative Data**

Qualitative data may help you gain a deeper understanding of the substance misuse and abuse problem within your community by offering insight into the beliefs, attitudes, and values of various stakeholders, and it may help explain why people behave or feel the way they do. Common methods for obtaining qualitative data include key stakeholder interviews and focus groups.

**Key stakeholder interviews.** Community expert interviews can provide you with the perspectives of people who observe and monitor the way your community functions. Their perspectives can provide a meaningful assessment of substance use and consequences observed within their areas of responsibility.

They can also add to your knowledge of intervening variables and contributing factors by lending understanding to the “when, where, and why” of substance use and related consequences. Principals, teachers, school counselors, caseworkers, sheriffs, parks and recreation staff, shelter staff, probation officers, police officials, pharmacists, youth, doctors, hospital staff, and emergency responders are all examples of community experts. One inherent risk in this type of interview is that you may get a slanted or one-sided perspective on a problem. For this reason it is important to consider what others have to say and what your other data tell you.

Based on the initial data examined and the knowledge gaps that you have identified, you determined what types of experts should be contacted. Your next task is to develop a list of the questions that you would like to ask. Try to limit the number of questions to ten so that you can leave some time for open-ended discussion. The interviews use scripted, open-ended questions to obtain detailed responses about a specific topic. Some broad areas you may want to explore include the following:

- Do policies on substance use exist? If so, on what level (formal or informal)?
- Are there clearly defined penalties for violations?
- Are laws and policies enforced? Are they enforced consistently? If not, where are the variations?
- How do people access substances in your community?
- What substance(s) (i.e., alcohol, marijuana, prescription drugs or other) pose the most serious threat to the community? Why?
- What consequences of substance misuse has the interviewee witnessed?
- Is there a particular group of people (e.g., youth) that the interviewee feels is at the greatest risk or suffers the greater consequences?

Once you have decided whom you are interviewing and what questions you will ask, follow these steps:

- Obtain the names and contact information for local community experts that represent the perspective you would like to obtain.
- Contact the individuals and ask them if they would be willing to participate in an interview and, if not, could they designate an alternate.
- Explain the purpose of the interview and briefly discuss the purpose of the assessment.
- Assure the person that the responses to the interview questions will be confidential.
- Schedule a time to meet (or have a conversation on the telephone).
Again, make sure that the interviews focus on your identified knowledge gaps. Keep in mind that by interviewing different types of community experts, you will minimize the risk of obtaining information slanted by strong opinions and will keep the data more reliable. For example, people representing schools, hospitals or local non-profit agencies may offer perspectives that differ from those provided by judges, district attorneys, and law enforcement agencies.

You may use some yes/no or multiple choice questions in your expert interviews, which can be analyzed quantitatively. However, open-ended interview questions need to be analyzed in a way similar to that used for focus groups. The responses need to be carefully reviewed to identify the primary themes among interview participants. The themes should first be identified for a specific group (e.g., law enforcement) and then compared to other groups (e.g., emergency personnel). In some instances the groups will concur with one another, and in other instances the groups will report variations in opinions. Information on how to conduct interviews with key stakeholders, including a sample interview guide, is provided in Conducting Key Stakeholder Interviews.

Note: Engaging key stakeholders in all aspects of the assessment process promotes sustainability by securing their buy-in and laying the foundation for ongoing participation and support. It is likewise important to share the findings from the assessment process with key stakeholders and other community members. The better they understand the baseline issues, the more they will appreciate—and want to sustain—your substance abuse prevention efforts.

Focus groups. Focus groups can be used to gather qualitative information from your community about issues and attitudes. They are typically led by a facilitator who presents a small number of targeted questions and facilitates the discussion. Participants share ideas and observations that can clarify issues for you or present new perspectives. Compared with surveys and other methods, focus groups allow you to delve more deeply into a topic area or to probe for specific information. Focus groups also can lead you to topics, points, or perspectives that you had not considered. Recruiting and conducting effective focus groups, however, can be both challenging and time-consuming.

The purpose of your PFS focus groups is generally to gain the community’s perspective on substance abuse and related consequences. Your questions can be tailored to address specific areas in which you need more information, such as intervening variables and contributing factors. Your focus groups may be targeted to different age groups or you may wish to bring people from certain geographic areas or community sectors together. Your assessment committee will be especially useful in making decisions about who to invite and how to encourage them to participate. Below are some focus group guidelines.

Developing Focus Group Questions
When developing a focus group protocol and questions, there are some considerations to keep in mind:

- Rely on a small number of core questions, usually 8 to 10. Focus groups should not last more than 90 minutes and you need to allow enough time for everyone in the group to respond.
- Use broad, open-ended questions. Do not ask questions that elicit a “yes” or “no” response as these tend to end the discussion.
- Ask participants to speak from their own perspectives. It is more useful to ask about their experiences than what they or other people think.
- Start with an easy, non-threatening question that everyone should be able to answer. This will break the ice and provide a sense of who is shy and who might dominate the conversation.
- End by asking if participants have anything else to add.
Preparing for a Focus Group

When preparing for a focus group, follow these steps:

- Decide when and where the focus groups will be held.
- Find someone to lead the focus group. This person should have experience facilitating groups, be a good listener and know something about the topic, but have the ability to appear neutral about participant opinions.
- Find a note-taker to record what is said. Focus groups are often tape-recorded, but only with permission from the group members. Additional personnel, such as an interpreter, may also be required.
- Determine whether you will provide some type of incentive for people to participate.
- Consider providing snacks and drinks for participants.
- Decide whom you will invite. The groups should be carefully planned so as to create a non-threatening environment in which participants feel free to express their opinions.
- Review your focus group questions. Are there other questions you want to delete or add? Are there questions you wish to rephrase? Develop more probing questions if you feel it is necessary, particularly if they are based on other information you have collected.
- Recruit your members. It is suggested that your groups each have between six and ten people. Ensure that you obtain written permission from a parent or guardian for youth to participate.
- Make sure you have all of the materials you will need for the groups ready in advance (e.g., a copy of your questions and probes for the facilitator and the note-taker; pens or pencils).

Conducting a Focus Group

- Thank the participants for agreeing to be a part of the group.
- Have the participants introduce themselves by first name only.
- Explain the purpose of the group and why those in attendance were recruited to participate. Introduce the note-taker and/or interpreter and let participants know why these people are present.
- Explain how the conversation will be structured and the ground rules. Common ones are:
  - Only one person should speak at a time;
  - Be respectful of the opinions of others;
  - Everyone is encouraged to participate;
  - Participants will not be identified to anyone or in any report; and
  - Their opinions and responses will be anonymous.
- Make sure all participants have an opportunity to be heard. Sometimes, this means calling on someone who has not spoken up or asking someone else to let others speak.
- When you have finished with the focus group questions, ask if people have any other comments. Tell the participants how their input will be used and thank them for participating.
- You may want to prepare a summary of all of the focus groups you conducted and distribute the summary to the participants.

Analyzing Focus Group Results

Soon after each focus group, while the information is still fresh in your mind, review the information that was recorded. What are the common themes? Did you hear anything that you want to follow up on or learn more about? Write down your thoughts and keep them with the notes taken during the focus group.