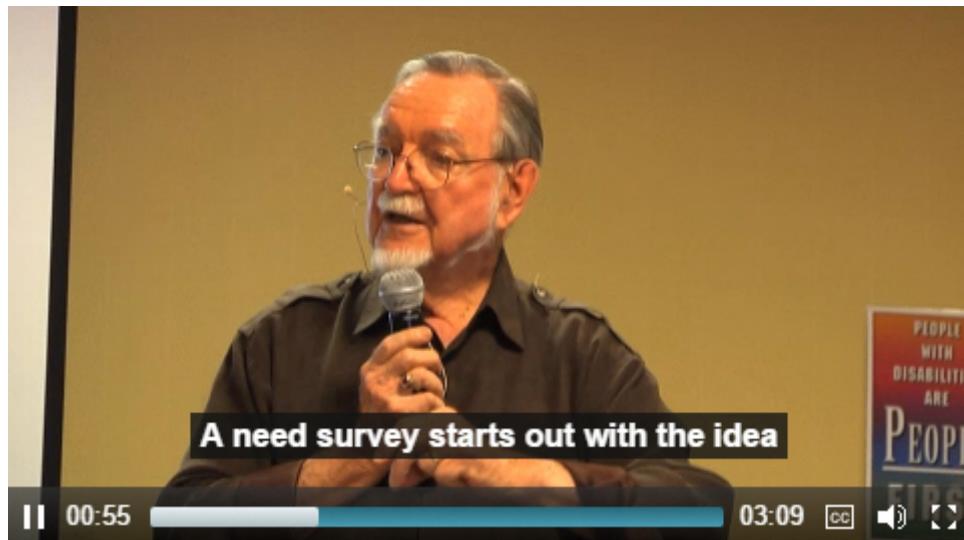# COMMUNITY TOOL BOX

Section 8. Identifying Community Assets and Resources

> Learn how to identify community assets and resources, and how to engage them in the community change effort.

A need survey starts out with the idea

Many community organizations focus on the needs or deficits of the community. Every community has needs and deficits that ought to be attended to.

But it is also possible to focus on assets and strengths -- emphasizing what the community does have, not what it doesn't. Those assets and strengths can be used to meet those same community needs; they can improve community life.

To draw upon a community's assets, we first have to find out what they are. So in this section, we will focus on identifying community assets and resources. We'll also show how they can be harnessed to meet community needs and to strengthen the community as a whole.

WHAT IS A COMMUNITY ASSET?

Our definition is broad. A community asset (or community resource, a very similar term) is anything that can be used to improve the quality of community life. And this means:

- It can be a *person* -- Residents can be empowered to realize and use their abilities to build and transform the community. The stay-at-home mom or dad who organizes a playgroup. The informal neighborhood leader. The firefighter who risks his life to keep the community safe. These are all community assets.
- It can be a *physical structure or place* -- a school, hospital, church, library, recreation center, social club. It could be a town landmark or symbol. It might also be an unused building that could house a community hospice, or a second floor room ideal for community meetings. Or it might be a public place that already belongs to the community -- a park, a wetland, or other open space.
- It can be a *community service* that makes life better for some or all community members - public transportation, early childhood education center, community recycling facilities, cultural organization.
- It can be a business that provides jobs and supports the local economy.
- You and everyone else in the community are potential community assets. Everyone has some skills or talents, and everyone can provide knowledge about the community, connections to the people they know, and the kind of support that every effort needs - making phone calls, stuffing envelopes, giving people information, moving equipment or supplies - whatever needs doing. This suggests that *everyone in the community can be a force for community improvement if only we knew what their assets were, and could put them to use*.

> One student of communities, John McKnight, has noted:
> "Every single person has capacities, abilities and gifts. Living a good life depends on whether those capacities can be used, abilities expressed and gifts given."

WHY SHOULD YOU IDENTIFY COMMUNITY ASSETS?

- They can be used as a foundation for community improvement.
- External resources (e.g., federal and state money) or grants may not be available. Therefore, the resources for change must come from within each community.
- Identifying and mobilizing community assets enables community residents to gain control over their lives.
- Improvement efforts are more effective, and longer-lasting, when community members dedicate their time and talents to changes they desire.
- You can't fully understand the community without identifying its assets. Knowing the community's strengths makes it easier to understand what kinds of programs or initiatives might be possible to address the community's needs.

- When efforts are planned on the strengths of the community, people are likely to feel more positive about them, and to believe they can succeed. It's a lot easier to gain community support for an effort that emphasizes the positive - "We have the resources within our community to deal with this, and we can do it!" - than one that stresses how large a problem is and how difficult it is to solve.

WHO SHOULD IDENTIFY COMMUNITY ASSETS?

Community members of all stripes and from all sectors should be involved in identifying assets. One reason here is the commitment to participatory process that you'll find in most Community Tool Box sections. An even more important one, however, is that community members from a broad range of groups and populations are far more likely to identify assets that may not be apparent to everyone. The community's perception of what constitutes an asset or a resource is at least as legitimate as the "standard" list of institutions and people with specific skills.

A number of garbage-strewn, overgrown empty lots in a neighborhood can be seen as an eyesore and a neighborhood shame. But those lots can also be seen as open space that can be turned into playgrounds, pocket parks, and farmers' markets with volunteer labor that in itself provides a neighborhood community-building opportunity. Community perception is crucial, because seeing something as an asset can make it possible to use it as one.

WHEN SHOULD WE IDENTIFY COMMUNITY ASSETS?

EVERY DAY. BUT HERE ARE SOME SITUATIONS WHEN IT'S ESPECIALLY DESIRABLE TO DO SO:

- When you are conducting a community assessment and need to find assets to mobilize to address community needs.
- When the community includes talented and experienced citizens whose skills are valuable but underutilized.
- When you can't provide traditional services, even if you wanted to, and are looking for other ways to build up the community.
- When you want to encourage residents to take pride in and responsibility for local concerns and improvements.
- When you want to strengthen existing relationships and build new ones that will promote successful community development in the future.

HOW DO YOU IDENTIFY COMMUNITY ASSETS?

The techniques for identifying community assets aren't very hard. You don't need a lot of special training or expertise to do the job well.

Before you begin, though, you do need to answer some important questions. You can do this yourself, in the privacy of your own home. But we recommend strongly do so before you start. Here they are:

What is the size of the community you're concerned with?

An entire county? Town? Neighborhood? Housing development?

The bigger the community, the more work is involved - and you might need and probably different study methods for a large community than for a small one.

What people are available to do the work?

An individual? A small group of people? A larger organization? If you're starting out alone, it makes sense to reach out to others, get them excited about the project, and recruit them to work with you. (Unless your community is very small, identifying all or most of its assets is a big job for one person).

How much time do you have for the task or how much time can you allow?

Tonight? A week? A month? As much time as it takes?

The more time you have, the more assets you will be able to uncover.

What financial resources, if any, can you count on to support the work?

If available, resources for copying or printing and to support human resources (time) can be helpful.

What do you want to do with the results?

Will they be posted in an online directory? Contacted about an opportunity to take action? If so, what action, and how?

WHAT COMES NEXT?

There are different approaches to identifying community assets. Each can be valid and useful. Which approach is right for you? The answer will depend in large part on your answers to the starting questions above. So, once again, answer them before you start.

But below are two basic approaches you could use in your own community. They complement each other. One of them focuses on the assets of groups -- specifically, associations, organizations, and institutions. The other focuses on individual people.

IDENTIFYING THE ASSETS OF GROUPS

The central task here is to take an inventory of all the groups (associations, organizations, and institutions) that exist in your community. You want to make a list. But how do you figure out what goes on the list in the first place? Some suggestions follow:

Start the list with what you know. Write down anything that comes to mind. You can always correct your list later.

You can do this work by yourself; but it might be more useful and fun to work with others. Are there other people who could join you and make this a group project?

This is a great project for students or interns.

USE OTHER SOURCES OF INFORMATION TO ADD TO YOUR LIST

.

These can include:

- *United Way's 211 Information and Referral System* (http://ctb.ku.eduhttp://www.211.org/) contains information on non-profit organizations for many communities.
- *Community websites*. Many cities and towns have their own websites, as do other community agencies. These can not only give you information about community resources, but also give you the names of people you can contact who might know a great deal more.
- *The yellow pages*
- *Town directories*, published for your community alone.
- *Lists of businesses*, probably available from the chamber of commerce.
- *Lists of organizations and institutions that are not generally published*. For example, your local newspaper may have its own unpublished list that it could make available to you.
- *Bulletin boards*. Physical or virtual bulletin boards, and community-calendar type listings.
- *Your friends and colleagues*. They may know about other lists available. And even if they don't, they may know of groups, organizations, and community assets that are not on anybody else's lists.

Refine and revise your list.

You can also break your list down in several different ways: alphabetically, geographically, by function, etc.

You now have an inventory of groups and group assets in your community -- the associations, organizations, and institutions that are a fundamental part of community life and that can be used for community improvement. That's an important step.

But what do you do now?

- *It's possible to put these assets on a map*. For more information on how to do this, see the heading on Mapping Community Assets, coming up.
- *It's now desirable to think about how your list (or map) of assets could be used.* See the heading on Using Community Assets, toward the end of this section.

IDENTIFYING THE ASSETS OF INDIVIDUALS

Compiling a list of key groups is one approach for identifying community assets. Another approach is to compile the assets of individuals. This can be challenging, because:

- There are many more people than groups. To survey large numbers of people will take a lot of time.

- We often don't know people's assets unless we ask them. Their abilities and talents are often unknown. When listing organizations, you often immediately know what that group is about. But we probably won't know what individuals' talents and skills are until we ask them. That takes more time.

For both these reasons, identifying individual assets often takes place over a smaller community area such as a neighborhood.

But many of the above suggestions still apply. Here's how identifying individual community assets could be done in practice:

Answer the 5 "starting questions" previously given.

This step is the same as for studying the assets of groups.

Decide on the geographic area you want to cover.

Do you want to focus on a specific neighborhood or community? Or do you want a broad sampling of the community? Keep in mind the time and resources you have available as you make your decision.

Decide on how many people you are going to ask within that area.

Everyone? A certain fixed percentage? As many as you can find? Resolve this question in advance.

Draft some questions you want to ask that will get you the information you need.

Are you interested in skills, ("I can play the piano"), or interests ("I'd love to learn")?

If it is skills, what kind of skills -- academic, artistic, athletic, interpersonal, manual, office, organizing, parenting, vocational...? Human beings have many talents, and you probably want to narrow down your search, at least a little.

If interests, what kind as well? These too come in many and varied types.

Keep in mind:

- Why am I collecting this information?
- What do I want to use it for?

Design a method by which these questions can be asked (http://ctb.ku.eduhttp://ctb.ku.edu/en/table-of-contents/participation/encouraging-involvement/contact-participants/main) .

> **For example:**
>
> - Will you mail out a survey (http://ctb.ku.eduhttp://ctb.ku.edu/en/table-of-contents/assessment/assessing-community-needs-and-resources/conduct-surveys/main) ?
> - Will you (more simply) have a survey available to pick up?
> - Will you go door to door?
> - Will you call people on the phone?
> - Will you have scheduled interviews (http://ctb.ku.eduhttp://ctb.ku.edu/en/table-of-contents/assessment/assessing-community-needs-and-resources/conduct-interviews/main) ?
> - Will you meet people in groups (http://ctb.ku.eduhttp://ctb.ku.edu/en/table-of-contents/assessment/assessing-community-needs-and-resources/conduct-focus-groups/main) ?

Each method has its pros and cons.

Try out your questions on a sample group.

Based on their answers and their suggestions, you will probably want to make revisions. That's a good idea, and a natural part of the process. Professional surveyors do the same thing, many times over.

Collect your data.

You've now got a territory to cover, some good questions that meet your needs, and a method for getting the answers. Good work. Now it's time to put your plan into practice and collect your data.

> **An added bonus**: When you ask people about their talents and abilities, that can also help encourage people to share them with others. So your survey may not only be identifying assets, but also promoting their use.

MAPPING COMMUNITY ASSETS (HTTP://CTB.KU.EDUHTTP://CTB.KU.EDU/EN/TABLE-OF-CONTENTS/ASSESSMENT/ASSESSING-COMMUNITY-NEEDS-AND-RESOURCES/GEOGRAPHIC-INFORMATION-SYSTEMS/MAIN)

Once you have collected asset information, it's often especially helpful to put it on a map. Maps are good visual aids: seeing the data right in front of you often increases your insight and understanding. There are several ways to go about this:

One mapping method is to find a large street map of your community, with few other markings. (Your local Planning Department may help here, or you can probably print one out from Google Maps or some other similar site.) Then just mark with a dot, tag, or push-pin (maybe color-coded by type) the geographic location of the groups and organizations you have found. The patterns that emerge may surprise you. You may see, for example, that certain locations have different numbers or types of associations. Those areas where few associations exist may be good targets for community development later on.

This type of mapping can also be done by computer. Software programs are available to help you do this. These programs are more flexible and sophisticated than paper-and-pushpin mapping, for with them you can create "overlays," visually placing one category of map over another, and changing these visual patterns with the push of a button.

It's also possible to diagram your resources on a non-literal map, but one which can more clearly show the linkages among different categories of assets.

> There are a number of ways of making a non-literal map. One common one is to start with an inner circle that lists physical spaces - buildings, parks, lakes, plazas - that can be used by the community or provide community services and functions. The next circle out lists community institutions - hospitals, schools and universities, libraries, etc. A circle around that second circle might include organizations connected to those institutions or doing related work. (An adult literacy program might be formally or informally tied to educational institutions, to the library, or to major employers, for example.) The next circle out might list services, the next informal groups, and the last individuals (either specific people or the types of skills and interests you are fairly sure you'll find in the community.) Lines might be drawn between these assets to show how they're connected, or to show how they're connected to the group or individuals making the map.
>
> Other non-literal map methods might involve pictures, a photographic record, even small models of buildings and public spaces. The method really doesn't matter as much as the goal of plotting the community's assets in a way that makes it clear how they might interconnect, and how they can be combined to meet needs or enhance community life.

USING THE COMMUNITY ASSETS YOU HAVE IDENTIFIED

Whether or not you map your assets, the next and most important step is to make sure the assets you have identified get used. There is value just in expanding your own personal awareness of what exists in your community, but by sharing your results, you can also expand the awareness of others.

The real value and payoff of identifying assets is in *actions that will improve your community*. You want to put your assets to work for you. If you have personal assets, such as savings, you probably don't want to hide them under a mattress. The same applies to the assets in your community. How can we maximize their return?

We'll itemize just a few possibilities below. Think about which might fit best for you, and what your own next steps might be:

- Community assets can be the basis for asset-based planning. Planning for community development and interventions can be based on what the community has to work with, and can include strengthening current assets and developing new ones as well as addressing problems. (John

McKnight and John "Jody" Kretzmann, known as the founders of the asset-based planning movement, are also the founders and co-Directors of the Asset-Based Community Development Institute at Northwestern University, one of the Chicago area's community assets.)

- You can publish the assets identified - on a town or separate website, in a community newsletter, in a community service section in the local newspaper, to name just three possibilities - and make them available to all community members. In doing so, you will stimulate public asset knowledge and use.
- You can target a particular neighborhood or other area for development, on the basis of the asset patterns you have found.
- You can use your knowledge of assets to tackle a new community project -- because now you may have more resources to work on that project than you originally thought.
- You can find new ways to bring groups and organizations together, to learn about each other's assets -- and perhaps to work collaboratively on projects such as the one above.
- You can publicize these assets, and attract new businesses and other opportunities to your community. In both this example and the ones just above, you are using existing assets to create new ones. (This is what makes community work exciting!)
- You can create a school curriculum to teach local students about these assets, thus enriching their knowledge of the community and building community pride.
- You can consider creating a "community coordinator," (or some other title), someone who would deal with assets every day. The coordinator's new job would be to find the right assets in the community to respond to any request or community concern. Would this position pay for itself?
- You (or the new coordinator) can keep records how assets are used in the community, and use those records to generate ideas for improving asset exchange.
- You can set up structured programs for asset exchange, which can range from individual skill swaps to institutional cost-sharing.
- Community assets keep getting reviewed, perhaps on a regular basis. New assets are always coming on the scene; it's good to keep up to date on them. By so doing, the whole asset-identification process can become a regular part of community life.

Community assets should be reviewed on a regular basis. Asset identification should be a regular part of community life, so that community assets can be taken advantage of when they're needed.

Contributor

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Online Resources

PowerPoint presentation by S. Rengasamy: **Adopting Asset Mapping in an Urban Ward in Madurai City** (http://ctb.ku.eduhttp://www.slideshare.net/srengasamy/introduction-to-community-asset-mapping-presentation) . (Tamil Nadu, India).

Assets-Oriented Community Assessment (http://ctb.ku.eduhttp://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC1308712/pdf/pubhealthrep00022-0103.pdf) . Patricia A. Sharpe, Mary R. Greaney, Peter L. Lee, Sherer W. Royce. *Public Health Reports*, March/April and May/June, 2000; vol. 115.

The Asset-Based Community Development Institute (http://ctb.ku.eduhttp://www.abcdinstitute.org/) . John McKnight and Jody Kretzmann's base at Northwestern University's School of Education and Social Policy. The wellspring of asset-based community development.

Community Asset Mapping and Mobilizing Communities (http://ctb.ku.eduhttps://wrdc.usu.edu/files-ou/publications/pub__2880457.pdf) (for The Idaho Governor's 6th Annual Roundtable Coeur d'Alene, Idaho June 6, 2005) includes many good examples of actual community skills and assets inventories.

Creating Collaborative Solutions With Communities Using 'Gifts Explosion' and 'See It My Way' (http://ctb.ku.eduhttps://ssir.org/articles/entry/creating_collaborative_solutions_with_communities_using_gifts_explosion_and_see_it_my_way) from Stanford Social Intervention Review. Here are two techniques for using a person-centered model that offers a better way to craft truly collaborative solutions.

Essential Tools: Improving Secondary Education and Transition for Youth with Disabilities (http://ctb.ku.eduhttp://www.ncset.org/publications/essentialtools/mapping/NCSET_EssentialTools_ResourceMapping.pdf) , prepared by Kelli Crane and Marianne Mooney. Another excellent resource that makes use of community resource mapping, devoting much attention to the process of asset identification, as well as to technique.

Identifying, Mapping and Mobilizing Our Assets

(http://ctb.ku.eduhttp://partnerships.ucsf.edu/sites/partnerships.ucsf.edu/files/images/Identifying%20Mapping%20and%20Mobilizing%20Assets.pdf) . (Prepared by Boyd Rossing, Professor, Interdisciplinary Studies, School of Human Ecology, University of Wisconsin-Madison, 2000. An outline for community mapping from University Community Partnerships, U. of California, San Francisco.

The Neighborhood Movement (http://ctb.ku.eduhttps://neighboringmovement.org/) from SoCe Neighborhood in Wichita, Kansas, nurtures authentic, gifts-focused connections to foster neighbor-centered leadership.

Trabian Shorters — A Cognitive Skill to Magnify Humanity (http://ctb.ku.eduhttps://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/on-being-with-krista-tippett/id150892556?i=1000549985678) is an Apple Podcast episode of "On Being with Krista Tippett." Trabian Shorters discusses Asset Framing in this episode.

Print Resources

McKnight, J. (1992). *"Building community."* AHEC Community Partners Annual Conference, Keynote address. Northwestern University: Center for Urban Affairs and Policy Research.

McKnight, J. (1992). *Mapping community capacity.* Chicago, IL: Northwestern University: Center for Urban Affairs and Policy Research.

Moore, M. (1994). *Community capacity assessment: A guide for developing an inventory of community-level assets and resources.* Santa Fe, NM: New Mexico Children, Youth and Families Department.

The Community Tool Box is a service of the Center for Community Health and Development (http://ctb.ku.eduhttps://communityhealth.ku.edu/) at the University of Kansas (http://ctb.ku.eduhttps://ku.edu/) .

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