

## **A Needs Assessment Method for Extension Educators**

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### **Abstract:**

When a new Extension Educator begins work in a county, one of the first priorities is to conduct a needs assessment or situational analysis that will help the educator to set priorities for program focus. This paper offers an example of one methodology that utilized existing data and key informant interview responses to help identify the needs and issues facing families and children in a rural, Wisconsin county. Results of the interviews were put into a report that was shared with other individuals in the county who work with families and children. An evaluation of the usefulness of this report was conducted with those who received it. The entire needs assessment process discussed in this paper was designed with the University of Wisconsin Extension's definition of scholarship in mind.

### **Situation Statement:**

When a new Extension Educator begins work in a county, one of the first priorities is to conduct a needs assessment or situational analysis that will help the educator to set priorities for program focus. During a situation analysis, the educator tries to learn about the community. A thorough situational analysis provides the basis for priority setting and helps identify program focus (UW Extension Program Planning Web Site, 2003).

Educators have used a variety of methods to collect information about their local situations, including but not limited to: advisory committees, survey questionnaires, focus groups, interviews with key informants, or a combination of different processes. By its nature, Extension provides a great deal of autonomy to its educators in this process, allowing the freedom to create one's own methodology or use existing examples. Few hard and fast rules exist dictating how one might go about conducting a situational analysis. This paper describes one methodology for assessing the local situation for purposes of identifying areas for programming. In addition to identifying areas for programming, the process also helped the Family Living Educator to become aware of the different agencies and programs already in place to help families and children. Second, it helped identify potential partners for future educational programs. Finally, by evaluating the usefulness of the information to community agencies and individuals, and sharing one methodology with colleagues, this educator was able to demonstrate "scholarship" (see Table 1) as defined by the University of Wisconsin Extension (UWEX Articles of Faculty Governance Appendix II.A, 2001).

**Table 1**

UW-Extension definition of Scholarship:

- Creative, intellectual work
- Reviewed by the scholar's peers who affirm its value
- Added to our intellectual history through its communication
- Valued by those for whom it was intended

### **Objectives:**

The objectives of the methodology discussed in this paper were:

1. to learn about the needs of families and children living in Waushara County,

2. to use information gathered, to help identify programming areas for Family Living Education in Waushara County,
3. to develop a methodology which can be utilized by educators and/or professionals when conducting a situational analysis, and
4. to share information learned, with others in the community who work with and for families and children.

### **Methodology:**

To begin the situational analysis, the educator asked the office Department Head and other key community leaders for names and contact information for social services, the childcare resource and referral agency, CAP Services (a not-for-profit community action organization) and school district administrators. In addition to the Department Head, a CAP Services employee who previously worked in Waushara County, was also asked for contact information for staff working for the local community action agency in the county. A total of six individuals were contacted by phone. At this time, the Family Living Educator requested copies of recent, completed needs assessments and/or grant applications, which focused on services or programs for children and families. These assessments and grant applications were read and common issues and areas of significant need were identified.

After this, a fellow Extension colleague provided the Family Living Educator with a tour of specific parts of the county, as well as various facilities that housed social and human service organizations and programs. Additionally, the Family Living Educator was introduced to county department heads and staff at various meetings throughout the county. In turn, these meetings led to invitations for the Family Living Educator to attend other meetings focused on supporting families and children. These meetings were not only helpful in identifying local needs and issues and potential areas for programming, but also for meeting likely future, educational partners.

Next, state and county Census data were reviewed. County demographics were also compared to adjoining counties similar in size, composition and characteristics. Some of the categories researched included: income, poverty, housing, race/ethnicity, age group populations, commuting patterns, and language spoken at home.

Census findings from 1979, 1989, and 1999 as well as county and regional land use planning reports were then further analyzed for “trends” and indicators of future issues that may affect the county’s families and children. Specifically, Census data showed a significant, growing Hispanic and aging population, while land use planning data spoke to the need for affordable and accessible housing for low to moderate income families and individuals.

As beneficial as the numerical data was, most telling of the needs of families and children in Waushara County, came from the interviews with key informants. Specifically, the Family Living Educator conducted interviews with key informants within the community. These individuals were identified by using the county personnel phone directory, membership lists for a Safe and Stable Families Committee and a Prevention Council. The majority of interviews took place face to face with two conducted by phone. The face to face interviews were held at the key informant’s place of work. By holding the interviews in the informant’s place of work, the educator was able to become more familiar with the location of service providers within the community. This setting also seemed to make the informants most comfortable.

A total of 25 key informants from a variety of agencies/organizations, were interviewed (Table 2). One general, open-ended question was asked of all key informants; “In your opinion, what are some of the major needs/issues facing families and children in Waushara County?” For individuals who were known to work with the Hispanic/Latino population, a second question was asked; “Are there specific issues or needs you see confronting the Hispanic population?”

**Table 2**

**Key Informants Interviewed**

- Title I Migrant Program Director and ESL Teacher, Tri-County School District
- Nutrition Program Manager, Department of Aging and Disabilities
- Benefits Specialist, Department of Aging and Disabilities
- Sheriff, Waushara County
- Public Health Officer and Nursing Staff, Health Department, Waushara County
- Assistant Director of Family Development Services, CAP Services (a non-profit organization)
- Coordinator, Waushara Community Food Pantry
- Director, Waushara County Social Services
- Child Support Director, Waushara County
- Prevention Coordinator, Human Services
- Family Services Specialist, United Migrant Opportunity Services (UMOS), Spring Lake
- Director, Family Health/La Clinica
- Program Coordinator, CAP Services Family Literacy Program
- Migrant Labor Inspector, Department of Workforce Development
- Family Court Commissioner, Waushara County
- AODA Prevention Specialist, Human Services
- District Attorney, Waushara County
- Circuit Court Judge, Waushara County
- Advocate for Hispanic Families, St. Joseph's Catholic Church
- Zoning Administrator
- City Clerk
- County Administrator
- Owner of a local real estate and insurance business
- Director of CAPital Investment for CAP Services
- Coordinator, CAP Services Weatherization Program

**Primary Findings**

This educator reviewed the information gathered from past needs assessments, grant applications, Census data and key informant responses (See Table 3). Specific areas of needs facing families and children in Waushara County were repeated throughout the different forms of data.

Specifically, parents struggle to raise their children in changing family structures that are negatively impacted by hard economic times, and shrinking local and state programs. Resources are needed to strengthen and support parents, childcare providers and other adults raising children. Providing parent education that can promote physically and emotionally healthy children, is seen as key to the future economic and societal well-being of the county.

These issues are particularly intensified for the growing Hispanic/Latino population, where language barriers, prejudice, and stereotyping, have made accessing and meeting basic needs even more challenging. With parent education and support, cultural differences in family and child rearing practices need to be realized and respected.

**Table 3**

Categories of responses from Key Informant Interviews  
regarding the needs/issues facing Waushara County  
Families and Children

**Food Insecurity (2)**

- People are hungry
- \*I hear the Hispanic migrants say, “There will be beans and rice for the poor.”

**Youth (5)**

- \*Teen parents
- Underage drinking
- Youth don’t understand credit and wants vs needs
- Kids raising kids
- We need more activities for youth (2)

**Elderly (5)**

- Support of care givers
- Medical coverage for Seniors
- Seniors are isolated
- High cost of prescription drugs
- Cleaning and caring for one’s house

**Housing (6)**

- We have no homeless shelter
- People need help paying utility bills
- It’s hard to find families who can qualify for Habitat Homes (2)

**Misc. (6)**

- In-migration from cities
- Influx of affluent people
- People have no ambition
- AODA issues (2)
- Support for the food pantry

**Healthcare (11)**

- Healthcare (2)
- Mental Health
- Overweight
- Dental Care (3)
- Smoking
- Amish need medical and dental care
- Pregnant mothers who smoke
- Individuals without health insurance

**Employment/Economics (14)**

- Lots of seasonal jobs not enough year round work
- Our youth get educated and leave: Brain Drain (2)
- People need decent paying jobs
- We have high unemployment
- People just don’t have money (3)

**Parenting/Marriage (13)**

- There are no support groups for parents or families
- People need marriage and family counseling opportunities
- Available & affordable child care
- The child doesn’t seem to be the primary concern for the parent
- Parenting classes
- There are no family activities
- \*Teen parents (2)
- Unpaid child support

**Hispanic Population**

- Resources are not accessible to this population
- There needs to be education for landlords, the community and businesses regarding the Hispanic and migrant population
- Immunizations for Hispanic families
- Undocumented Aliens (3)
- Discrimination/Profiling
- Lack of understanding about migrant’s life
- Translation services (2)
- English as Second Language classes
- Language barriers
- Hispanic teen parents
- Basic Education for Hispanic Adults
- Migrants need food and clothes when they come

\*Represent theme categories that could fall under more than one category

Numbers in parenthesis represent the number of comments made for each response or theme category

## Secondary Findings

Once the interviews were completed, the responses were compiled into a report which was then shared with individuals in the county who the educator felt would find the information useful. Specifically, copies of the report were given to school district administrators, county department heads, as well as all of the individuals interviewed. Sent along with the report, was a survey evaluation (See Table 4) for each individual to complete and return anonymously. The entire needs assessment, survey questionnaire and this paper, were developed with the desire of meeting the criteria of scholarship as defined by UW Extension.

**Table 4**

1. What type of organization do you work for?			
<input type="checkbox"/> School	<input type="checkbox"/> Religious	<input type="checkbox"/> State agency	<input type="checkbox"/> Childcare provider
<input type="checkbox"/> CAP Agency	<input type="checkbox"/> For-profit business	<input type="checkbox"/> Other, please list? _____	
2. Did you find information in the "Key Informant Interviews Report," valuable?			
<input type="checkbox"/> Yes	<input type="checkbox"/> No	<input type="checkbox"/> Uncertain	
3. Do you intend to use this information to plan for programs, services or activities that your organization may provide for children and families, in the future?			
<input type="checkbox"/> Yes	<input type="checkbox"/> No	<input type="checkbox"/> Uncertain	
4. Do you plan on using this information to make changes in your organization's policies that will affect children and families in a positive way?			
<input type="checkbox"/> Yes	<input type="checkbox"/> No	<input type="checkbox"/> Uncertain	
If yes, what in particular do you expect to do or change?			
_____			
_____			
5. Do you plan on sharing this information with others who also work <i>with</i> or <i>for</i> children and families?			
<input type="checkbox"/> Yes	<input type="checkbox"/> No	<input type="checkbox"/> Uncertain	
Additional comments?			
_____			

Of the twenty-three individuals who received copies of the Key Informant Interviews Report, eighteen returned the survey questionnaire. The majority of the respondents (77%) stated that they found the information valuable. Sixty-one percent said that they intended to use this information to plan for programs, services or activities that their organization may provide for children and families in the future. Most respondents (61%) were uncertain as to whether they would plan on using this information to make changes in their organization's policies to affect children and families in a positive way. Finally, eighty-three percent stated that they planned on sharing the information from the Key Informant Interviews Report with others who also work with or for children and families.

## Implications to Profession

For new Extension Educators, the question of how to conduct a thorough needs assessment may be confusing. The methodology offered in this paper, uses both quantitative demographic data as well as qualitative subjective data to help the educator uncover unmet educational needs of all families and children. Extension Educators from all program areas can use the key informant methodology with slight modification to the types of

individuals interviewed and questions posed. Though this Family Living Educator used a county employee directory and membership lists of human service-type groups, other sources for identifying potential key informants may include the outgoing Extension Educator, a brainstorming session with Extension office staff or other county residents.

After completing a thorough needs assessment, the Educator can take additional questions (see Table 5) into consideration before choosing specific areas of programming.

**Table 5**

1. What resources/organizations/agencies already exist in the county, to address identified needs/issues?
2. What are the Mission and Vision statements of the Extension organization?
3. What university resources (ex. state specialists, curriculum, state project initiative teams) are available to the Educator?
4. In what ways could an Extension educational program address these issues?
5. What other indicators point to less obvious, but critical needs/issues facing the families and children in this county? *For instance, how many emergency food pantries exist and how easy are they to access? What level of eligible women and children are accessing WIC (Women, Infant and Children) supplemental food program?*

The methodology explained in this paper may be most useful to new Extension Educators within their first six months of employment. A needs assessment method like the one described in this paper, should be seen as the first effort in an ongoing situation analysis. Once the area of programming has been identified, clientele should be surveyed in order to better understand what specific types of educational information is needed and in what forms they would like it offered.

A well thought out and documented situation analysis is not only beneficial to the Extension Educator, but may also be valuable to others who work with or for the same clientele. Even more powerful, is when information gleaned from such an analysis is shared in a sort of chain reaction from original recipients of the knowledge, to others who may also use it for the good of the clientele.

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