

County Advisory Committee

The county advisory committee is a group of county residents selected to represent the variety of backgrounds found in the county population. This group is asked to meet and identify the concerns, needs and assets of the residents of the county that provides direction for the Extension program. Typically the group consists of 20-25 members, including both Extension and non-Extension users.

Description of Process

1. The county oversight committee selects a core planning group that, in turn, facilitates the advisory committee process. The core planning group typically consists of five to seven people and is appointed by the county board chairperson.
2. The core planning group identifies individuals from throughout the county who are invited to serve on the county advisory committee. Individuals are selected who represent the make-up of the county, who are both Extension clientele and non-Extension users, and who are leaders in both the public and private sector. Members should also possess a concern and dedication to improve and strengthen the county, be open-minded and futuristic thinkers, and have the ability to analyze needs, concerns and assets of the county. The Matrix (Appendix 1) can be used to insure a diverse representation.
3. A member of the core planning committee (usually the Extension county department head) and a member of the county oversight committee contacts each individual seeking their involvement as county advisory committee members. (A model letter follows.) The purpose of the county advisory committee is clearly explained and the expectations of the committee described. Members of this committee analyze and review the trends analyses provided by the Extension work teams, other county assessments that have been conducted recently, and provide their own perspectives of county concerns and assets. A meeting time and place are designated.
4. A member of the core planning committee or an Extension staff member facilitates the advisory committee group meeting(s). A nominal group process may be used to identify the county's needs, assets and concerns (the nominal group process and other tools are explained in Appendix 3). The group discusses and clarifies all ideas, notes commonalities and agrees upon a master list of county concerns. At a later date, the advisory committee may meet again to prioritize the concerns and provide recommendations for the direction of the Extension program.

Involvement of Oversight Committee

The oversight committee selects the core planning group which, in turn, selects the members of the advisory committee and facilitates the advisory committee process. Results of the county advisory committee meetings are shared with the oversight committee.

Plan for Addressing County Issues

The county Extension office team, along with the oversight committee, determines the appropriate Extension educational response to the prioritized concerns.

Areas for Consideration

The county Extension office team works with the core planning group to provide support and guidance for the advisory committee. The county office makes the UW-Extension trends analysis documents and other sources of data available to the committee. A member of the Extension team may serve as facilitator of the advisory committee.

NOTE: The number of times the advisory committee meets may vary. In the past, program priority setting was often done at the same time as issue identification. Before setting program priorities, however, it is important to assess resource availability and feasibility of impact. Therefore, it may be important to allow some time to elapse between situational analysis—identifying concerns, needs, assets—and priority setting.

Model letter to County Advisory Committee Members

Date

Dear _____;

We are pleased to invite you to be a member of the _____ County University of Wisconsin-Extension's Planning Advisory Committee. This committee is charged with identifying concerns facing the residents of _____ County and will be involved in advising the University of Wisconsin-Extension staff concerning the direction of the Extension educational program. Your volunteer commitment to this committee will add greatly to the identification of relevant concerns and assets and will help direct the future of Extension educational programming in _____ County.

As a member of this important committee, you will have the opportunity to assess _____ County needs and assets, review local and state data and discuss issues and concerns facing _____ County with other key county residents. Your involvement in this advisory committee not only benefits _____ County and the direction of Extension's educational programs but you will also benefit by learning about the concerns of our citizens and what can be done in addressing those concerns.

The county advisory committee will hold its first meeting on _____, at _____ in the _____. A second meeting is scheduled for (month, day of week, time). Each meeting will last no more than two hours. At the first meeting, we will engage in a process to identify the concerns and assets of _____ County. At the second meeting, we will prioritize the concerns and suggest direction for the Extension educational response.

We look forward to your participation and thank you, in advance, for your commitment to this important endeavor.

Sincerely,

County Office Department Head and/or Chairperson of Oversight Committee and/or
County Board Chairperson

Identifying Advisory Committee Members

The advisory committee is typically composed of 20 to 30 people—key decision-makers, influential, Extension clientele, non-users of Extension, volunteers, other organizations and other agencies. Larger counties may want a larger group to insure representation from all citizens: geographical areas, program areas, income levels, family status, ages and cultural diversity.

A variety of approaches exist for identifying committee members. The important thing is to ensure that the final group of members represents the diversity of the county including various interests and groups that exist in the county. Refer to the Diversity Matrix in Appendix 1.

1. Reputational Approach

This approach is a way to identify local leaders—the power actors who do not necessarily hold formal positions. It is based on the assumption that knowledgeable know community leaders by their reputations. Power is intangible so the opinions and estimations of knowledgeable can be a measure of the amount of influence local leaders possess. Just observing who holds formal offices or participates in public meetings, board meetings, etc. cannot identify leaders. Some community leaders work behind the scenes to affect local actions and decisions. This procedure involves selecting knowledgeable community members who provide a list of influential individuals who are then ranked according to their reputation for social power in local affairs.

Consider the following guidelines when using the reputational approach:

a. Define the geographical area (in this case, the county).

This is the area in which the leaders are identified.

b. Identify the knowledgeable.

Identify a number of knowledgeable to be interviewed. To get a list of knowledgeable, contact someone very familiar with each community, or geographic sub-area, within the county. The number of knowledgeable to be interviewed varies with the size of the community/sub-area. Suggested numbers follow:

Number of knowledgeable needed	Community/area population
5	250-1000
7	1001-2,500
8	2,501-5,000
10	5,000-10,000

c. Interview knowledgeable.

Once the knowledgeable have been identified, they are invited to determine the local leaders. A simple interview questionnaire is developed.

- (1) Introduce yourself to the knowledgeable
- (2) Explain why you wish to locate the local influential leaders
- (3) Ask an opening question such as:

“In many communities, a few people are able to affect the outcomes of issues, sometimes because they are in a position to make key decisions or because they have the ability to persuade others to follow their leadership. Please tell me the names of the five most important and influential leaders in this community who may or may not hold a public office.”

OR

“Who are the five people in this community you believe to be the most influential. That is, who can make a project go, or if opposed, probably will stop it?”

- (4) Record their responses:

Community leader	Occupation	Place of business/address
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d. Determine leaders.

Summarize the names by counting the number of times each person was mentioned. Individuals named the greatest number of times form the pool of community leaders for the advisory committee.

This approach identifies a broad scope of community leaders, both those who are visible and not so visible. The interview process can be done in a fairly short period of time.

[Reference: *Community Needs Assessment Training and Development Handbook*. Kathryn Reinhard, Daniel Murphy, Donald Johnson, Larry Meiller. UWEX-CNRED and UW-Madison, Department of Rural Sociology, nd.]

2. Formal Position Approach

List the many formal leadership positions within the county and the various communities. People in the positions can be approached as potential advisory committee people. The groups for which there are leaders might be:

- County board membership and officers
- Town boards membership and officers
- Village and city council membership and officers
- School boards and president
- Heads of voluntary organizations
- School superintendent
- Agency heads such as SCS, ASCS, district or local DNR representatives
- Vocational school superintendents or directors

From the this list, draw a representative group of 20-30 advisory committee members.

3. Concerns and Events Analysis

Prepare a list of significant community and county events that have occurred over the past two to five years.

Use newspapers and other documents, records or logs to identify the people who were involved in these various community events and activities.

Prepare the list of names.

Select 20-30 persons representative of the various community events and activities.

This approach serves to identify people who are involved in the various spheres and interests in the community. It assumes that different people get involved in different concerns and that leadership and potential advisory committee members are not a part of a single power group.

NOTE: These three approaches are meant to identify local influential leaders and individuals that are involved in county affairs. They may not identify representatives of the "voiceless" or marginal groups in the county population. Refer to the Diversity Matrix (Appendix 1) to ensure that all voices in the county are heard.

County Advisory Committee Job Description

The purpose and role of the county advisory committee is to:

- Identify concerns, needs and assets of residents of the county
- Analyze trend data and other community assessments
- Order the importance of the many concerns that are identified

Support and Guidance

Support and guidance for the advisory committee work comes from the county Extension office staff and members of the oversight committee of the county board of supervisors.

Time Commitment and Timetable

- Advisory committee members are expected to attend two meetings.
- Each meeting will not exceed two hours.
- It is expected that the work of the advisory committee will be completed by _____.

Qualifications

Members should possess the following qualities:

- A concern and dedication to improve/strengthen the county
- An open mind
- Futuristic thinking
- The ability to analyze needs, concerns and assets; integrate data from state trends analyses and rank the importance of identified concerns for the residents of the county

Benefits

Committee members will benefit:

- Through increased awareness of the social, economic and environmental trends affecting local citizens
- By sharing their expertise on how educational programs and efforts strengthen the county
- By sharing information learned with others
- By developing an understanding of the mission of the Cooperative Extension Service and its educational role in the county
- By being involved in collaborative efforts that have the potential of producing major impact