

# Which Technique is Best?

## Assessing Community Opinion

*Moving to the Future: Nutrition & Physical Activity Program Planning* includes tips and tools on five different techniques for assessing community opinion. You may want to use one technique or a combination of techniques to find out what your community thinks about nutrition and physical activity issues. Below are some tips to help you think about how to assess community opinion using one, or more, of the techniques described in the *Moving to the Future* materials.

**Credibility and awareness.** Any of the techniques described in *Moving to the Future* will enhance credibility of your community assessment results because you have solicited and incorporated community input. Nearly all of the techniques will raise awareness in the community on the nutrition and physical activity issue you are interested in.

**Available information.** If a local agency has some information on the community's opinions and perceptions start with that information. You could either use the information as is or use it as a foundation for collecting additional opinions and perceptions.

**Diverse input.** Independent of the technique, try and collect information from a diverse group that is representative of the whole population. If you are able to gather information from only one segment of the population recognize this in your interpretation of the results.

Example: A state health department was developing some health messages for a statewide campaign. Early in the process, project staff developed and distributed a community opinion survey to local public health administrators. The response rate was high. The staff received surveys from administrators living in rural, urban, and suburban communities and from communities across the state. One of the questions asked the administrators to name a few state level community opinion makers. Nearly all the answers included an elected official or a political appointee. Based on the survey results, some campaign messages were developed, and the state's Governor had agreed to be the spokesperson for the campaign. Focus groups were conducted in several communities across the state to test the messages. An unexpected finding from the focus groups was that people didn't care what the governor said about personal health issues. The campaign ended up not using a spokesperson.

**Common sense.** Learning what your community thinks about health issues is not a complex undertaking. Use common sense and be logical and realistic given your real-world constraints.

**Limited resources.** If you are limited on time and other resources consider just doing some key informant interviews.

**Mix and match.** Over time build a database of information by collecting community opinion using different techniques each year.

Example: A Midwestern community collected community opinion information using different techniques over several years.

- The first year, one person conducted several key informant interviews.
- In year two a group of providers developed a lengthy community opinion survey based on the key informant interview results. This survey was completed by participants in a community wellness program.
- In year three a health agency developed a media tracking system to continuously track the local media coverage on nutrition, physical activity, and tobacco issues.
- In year four they developed a comprehensive strategic plan to reduce and prevent heart disease. This strategic planning process included a meeting with health agency administrators interpreting the previous years' data and prioritizing community concerns.
- In year 5 a short community opinion survey was distributed to every household in the community.

Every year as more was learned about the community, staff from many of the health agencies used the new community opinion information to modify existing programs and identify new programs to offer county residents.

## **Strengths and Cautions of Each Method**

Listed below are some pluses and minuses for each method of collecting community opinion that is reviewed in *Moving to the Future*.

### **Media Survey**

#### **Strengths**

- This is an easy task once the parameters (time, media outlets, and topics) are established.
- Conducting a media survey costs nearly nothing, especially if volunteers do the survey.

#### **Cautions**

- If this is the only way you are assessing community opinion, your community won't feel involved.

## **Community Opinion Survey**

### **Strengths**

- Provides you with numbers and percentages which can help build a case.
- You can collect information from several people relatively quickly.

### **Cautions**

- It's easy to ask too many, and probably unnecessary, questions making the survey too lengthy, which can affect response rate.
- The cost can be high.
- Results can be generalized only if the surveys were randomly distributed and completed by a statistically significant sample.

## **Key Informant Interviews**

### **Strengths**

- Because you seek people out to interview, key informant interviews are a good way to obtain information from many different people.
- You may discover minority viewpoints, or more importantly silent majority views.
- The cost is minimal.

### **Cautions**

- Results may be biased if only prominent leaders are interviewed.

## **Community Meetings**

### **Strengths**

- Community meetings tend to make residents feel more involved and heard.
- The cost is minimal.

### **Cautions**

- You may hear only from vocal people and those who are comfortable speaking in front of others and their opinions may only reflect what some of the community thinks.
- A meeting can turn into a gripe session or a pep rally to advocate for a cause or idea.
- Careful planning and outreach is needed to help you get a good turnout.

## **Focus Groups**

### **Strengths**

- Focus groups are best for deeper understanding of a perception, a program idea, a health education message, a handout, etc. For example, if a randomly-distributed community opinion survey indicated that people are opposed to collecting height and weight on grade-school children, then you could hold some focus group interviews to learn why parents of grade-school children are opposed, to learn what children think of the issue, or to test some messages for a possible campaign to change community opinion.

## **Cautions**

- High quality results from focus group interviews require a skilled facilitator/interviewer.
- If you have no community opinion information, then don't start with focus groups.
- Although the actual interview time is short, 30 minutes to two hours, focus group interviews require several days worth of time from conceptualization to completion of a final report.

Do not distribute