

CHAPTER 1:

Assessing Program Needs

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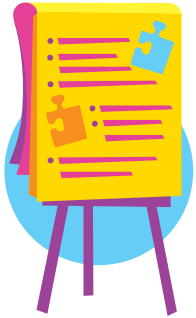


Introduction

You want to use volunteers—or, perhaps, use them more effectively—in your program, but you’re not certain where to begin. Planning is a wise place to start! Planning for volunteers takes into consideration your program’s needs. It is only through assessing your program’s needs that you can identify where and how volunteers will best fit into your program.

How your program determines its need for volunteers can be as complicated or as simple as you choose to make it. Completing a needs analysis is often part of a much larger and comprehensive strategic planning process, which may include developing a mission and vision for your organization and completing a situational or environmental analysis. This chapter, however, will present a simple process for completing a needs assessment for the purpose of examining how and where volunteers can be used to enhance program services for families.

The following story exemplifies how a family literacy program in Christian County, Kentucky, used a program needs assessment in evaluating the role volunteers play.



Program Description

Christian County’s Family Literacy Program is a part of the Christian County Adult Education Program (CCAEP). The family literacy program operates in two locations, serves 65-70 families per year, and employs three full-time equivalent staff. Funding for the family literacy program comes from private funding, federal Even Start monies, state grants, and additional monies via the local Housing Authority.

How the program uses volunteers

Christian County uses volunteers in a variety of ways. Volunteers provide direct instructional support, working one-on-one with learners most in need of individual assistance. In addition, 15 community leaders volunteer as advisory board members. The majority of the program’s volunteers are actually managed by other agencies, such as local churches, health departments, the Christian County Cooperative Extension Services, the local community college, Head Start, and the local Business and Professional Women’s Club, but they perform tasks for the benefit of and at no charge to the program.

Christian County’s needs assessment

In 2003, the program staff began a fruitful strategic planning process to assess their program’s needs. The Leadership Team met to consider two conditions of their program: “what is” and “what should be.” Any gaps between these two

conditions helped the team identify their top priorities for program improvement. At this point, the program was well-prepared to examine how and when volunteers could assist in helping the program address these priorities.

The team discovered several areas they thought needed improvement. It was clear that the program needed to improve attendance, increase participation in Parent and Child Together (PACT) Time* activities, and better capture grade level gains to satisfy the program's performance indicators. The team also recognized that both staff and volunteers needed a better understanding of how to emphasize the importance of PACT Time during new adult student orientation. Of particular concern was the program's inability to accurately track the overall program statistics.

Results of their planning

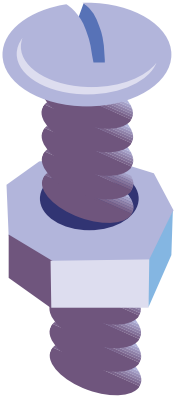
Two of the program's needs—converted into goals—were to improve the orientation process for new students and to make better use of other agencies' volunteer help. Several strategies were implemented to address these needs. A notebook was created for staff and volunteer use that includes parenting activities and tips for facilitating parent education. Student roster spreadsheets and goal setting worksheets were revised to prompt the capture of data so important to providing evidence of student progress. Conversation starter/vocabulary sheets with suggested parent/child activities and PACT Time Weekly Activity Journal sheets were developed for parents' use.

* Parent and Child Together (PACT) Time® is a term used by some family literacy programs to describe regularly scheduled interactive literacy activities between parents and children.

These new and improved forms assist the program in ensuring that family gains are captured and provide better documentation of these gains. Armed with a clearer understanding of the program's need to better deliver and document PACT Time activities as well as with a notebook containing clear directions and suggested activities, new staff and volunteers are better able to support the program in meeting PACT Time goals. Additionally, the program's strategic plan helped convince the superintendent to fund an adult education instructor at a family literacy site, the first time that such a position was funded by non-grant funds.

According to program coordinator Bev Thomson, "Now my staff know the big picture. Planning ahead and more carefully tracking our progress means that we no longer have surprising—and disappointing—results at the end of the program year." While acknowledging that long-term planning is difficult when a program is dependent on grant funding, Thomson supports the strategic planning process as it "helps to have an organized way of looking at things."

Sample A provides more details related to Christian County's process and their utilization of volunteers to meet the program's needs.



Nuts and Bolts of Needs Assessment

Planning to plan

Planning to plan... That may sound redundant, but it's actually crucial to any process. Preparation can streamline your planning and needs assessment process and eliminate wasted time. Before you begin, assemble the following information:

- Recent program statistics/annual reports/performance indicators
- Staff job descriptions
- Budget
- An organizational description or profile and an environmental or situational analysis, if you have them
- List of previously set program goals with explanations about if and how each has been met. Unmet program goals can serve as a foundation for examining the place of volunteers in your program. Could more and better trained volunteers have made a difference? A tool for examining your program's recent past is included as *Template A*.

Who should be involved in the needs assessment process?

Your planning group may expand or change during different steps of the needs assessment process. For example, your advisory board may have valuable contributions to make in the first few steps, while your program staff may be more involved during the later steps of implementation. Involving many minds in the process will result in a richer assessment and plan.

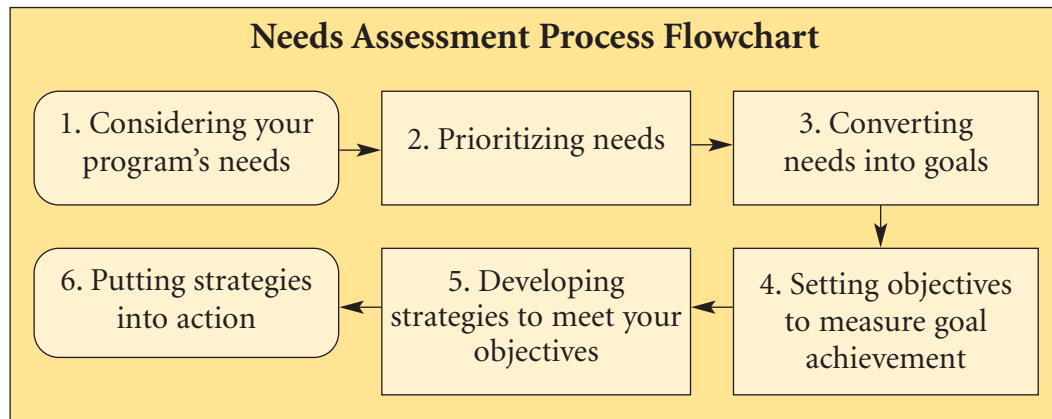
Although you will gather input and collect data from myriad sources, it is best to keep the team to a manageable size, especially if you plan on striving for consensus. Balance the need to move the planning process forward with the need for involving stakeholders, as input from many may result in greater acceptance of the final plan.

How long does it take to complete a needs assessment?

The length of time depends upon the experience within the team, the size of the team, and the team's level of knowledge of your program. Frankly, it can take as long as you allow. However, effective needs assessment can be done in a day. To minimize the time spent in a meeting, share pertinent information with team members in advance of the needs assessment meeting, encouraging team members to do some of the preparatory work outside of meeting time.

The Needs Assessment Process: Step by Step

Needs assessment is a process. There is a beginning, an end, and a defined sequence of steps in between. The flowchart below outlines the steps that will be covered in this chapter.



Considering your program's needs

What does your family literacy program need? The answer to this important question should be the driving force behind your use of volunteers. One way to tackle this fundamental question may be to look at the four components of a comprehensive family literacy program:

- Children's Education
- Adult Education
- Parent Time (Parenting Education)
- PACT Time (Parent-Child Interactive Literacy Activities)

The Christian County Family Literacy Program approached their needs assessment by identifying two conditions: “what is” and “what should be.” A variation on these conditions might be “what is” and “what *could* be”—that is, under ideal circumstances, how would your program operate? These conditions can be applied to the four educational components of family literacy listed above. When describing the current state of your program, the key is honesty. At the same time, this is an opportunity to list program strengths as well as weaknesses.

The “what could be” condition is a chance to dream. What impacts can your program have on the educational progress of adults and children? Remember to connect these dreams to the goals families bring with them to the program.

STEP 1

Here is an easy method for assessing your program's needs.

- a) Organize your thoughts by drawing four quadrants (one for each family literacy component) on two sheets of paper. Label one sheet "What Is" and the other sheet "What Could Be."

What is?		What could be?	
Adult Ed.	Children's Ed.	Adult Ed.	Children's Ed.
PACT Time	Parent Time	PACT Time	Parent Time

- b) When completing the "What Is" sheet, consider the previous year's program goals, particularly those that weren't met, and student achievement data. You also may want to consider any surveys completed by participants about their level of satisfaction with program services. If your program already engages volunteers, collect their opinions about their integration into the program and how they rate their experiences. And, of course, discuss any funder expectations and whether the program met those expectations.

The "What Could Be" page is your ticket to dream! If there were no barriers, what could the program achieve? In a perfect world (or program!), what would each component look like?

- c) Now, expand your thinking. On two new sheets of paper, draw a line to split the page in half. Label one half "Component Integration" and the other "Collaboration." Title one page "What Is" and the other "What Could Be" as you did before.

What is?	What could be?
Component Integration	Component Integration
Collaboration	Collaboration

Component integration is one of those key ingredients that makes comprehensive family literacy work. Component integration is more than following a theme throughout the four components. It reinforces the learning happening in each component through activities in the other three. Have you ensured that each component relates to the others? Is there a clear connection between all four components? Is this integration intentional and well-planned?



When considering collaboration, think about the organizations you partner with. Are there others in your region that may be able to support or enhance services to families? Keep in mind how volunteers might assist in helping to forge new partnerships. Do your current volunteers have personal connections that would be of value? Is this another opportunity for maximizing involvement by utilizing volunteers in your efforts to build links within the community?

- d) Look at any gaps between “what is” and “what could be.” A need is a gap in results, the difference between the current and ideal status (Kaufman & Herman, 1991). What needs might volunteers be able to help address?

Prioritizing needs

STEP 2

Remember, your program’s use of volunteers should stem from your program’s needs. So, the first question is not, does my program need (more) volunteers? Rather, it is, what does my program need? *Then* ask, can volunteers help meet this need? If so, *how* do volunteers help meet this need? The question of whether your program is ready for volunteers will be addressed in future chapters.

More than likely, your needs assessment will identify far more options and possibilities than your program can realistically tackle in a year. You will need to reduce your goals to a reasonable number to which your program can commit. Five key goals, maybe even fewer, might be plenty for your organization.

If you have a long list of needs, how do you choose which ones are most important? Let’s take a look at three methods that can help prioritize needs. The first two are relatively quick ways to shorten a list of choices.

- 10-4 Voting. Each person has 10 votes to allocate to all of the needs you’ve identified. No more than four of an individual’s 10 votes may be used on any one need. All 10 votes must be used. After everyone has allocated their votes, tally the votes given to each need. Set aside the needs that received the fewest votes, and repeat the process until your list is reduced to three to five needs.

- **N over 3 Voting.** Take the total number of needs on your list and divide by three. Assign this number of votes to each team member. For example, if you've identified a total of 18 needs, each person would have six votes ($18/3=6$). Each member then allocates one vote to one need, until all of that individual's votes are used up. Tally the votes to determine a consensus about which needs should be considered a priority.
- **The Prioritization Matrix.** A prioritization matrix is a decision-making tool that allows you to identify—in a simple and objective manner—those options that are most and least important to you. The method allows you to compare options systematically and record your comparisons, resulting in a prioritized list. *Template B* provides a simple matrix for your use.

STEP 3

Converting needs into goals

Once you have prioritized your program's needs, keeping in mind those that volunteers can help you address, it is time to convert those needs into goal statements. Goals address the potential of your literacy program. They are broadly defined results that establish direction and begin to close the gap between the current status and the desired future. Goals do not direct resources (that is, time, people, or money) and do not represent an activity or endeavor. They are for your program as a whole.

Think big... and creatively! Examples of volunteer-related goals might be:

- To provide more one-on-one tutoring for English language learners, the program will utilize volunteers in ELL classes.
- To retain volunteers longer and thus increase their impact on services, the program will develop and implement a system of volunteer recognition.
- To utilize volunteers more effectively, the program will complete a volunteer management plan.

STEP 4

Setting objectives to measure goal achievement

Goals provide the framework for setting objectives. Objectives address how you will know when you have reached your goal; they do not address how the goal

will be accomplished. Objectives explain (1) what must be done and (2) when it must be done in order to meet a goal. What results will indicate success? For many literacy programs, objectives may be closely related to, if not the same as, performance indicators from government funders.

Good objectives are **SMART...**

Specific and supportive of goals
Measurable
Action-oriented
Realistic and compatible with other objectives
Time-related

Using the first goal suggested above, a related objective might be:

Goal: To provide more one-on-one tutoring for English language learners, the program will utilize volunteers in ELL classes.

Objective: By November 15, we will have three trained volunteers working six hours per week serving as interpreters and assistants in ELL classes.

Developing strategies to meet your objectives

STEP 5

After you have identified objectives, you can begin to address solutions or strategies to meet your objectives. Strategies address the issue of how... How will you reach your objectives? Strategies are statements of how resources (time, money, and people) will be used to accomplish a specific objective. Remember that people are the key to a strategy's success.

While strategies are well-intended, and good strategies are carefully planned, there is no guarantee that they will be successful. According to Stephen J. Wall, head of the consulting firm Marius in Stamford, Connecticut, "Your strategy is what the organization consciously decides to do and then what you learn out of doing it" (Galagan, 1997, p. 6). Strategies are a series of tests (similar to action research, a popular direction in education). So, don't be discouraged by strategies that backfire; it happens! But be sure to evaluate what worked and what didn't, and adjust your strategies accordingly.

Working from the objective listed previously, related strategies might be:

Objective: By November 15, we will have three trained volunteers working six hours per week serving as interpreters and assistants in ELL classes.

Strategies:

- a) Recruit ELL class volunteers from the local high school and college (exploring ways to offer academic credit for their time)
- b) Move ELL class sessions, if necessary, to a day and time more attractive to potential volunteers

Putting strategies into action

STEP 6

Strategies provide the boundaries for developing action plans and help set them into motion. Action plans address the issue of whom. They describe the steps that must be taken to implement each strategy. Action plans identify the specific tasks and deadlines assigned to individuals or groups. Who will do what by when? See *Sample B* for an Action Plan developed by the Scott County Literacy Council, Inc.

Continuing with our ongoing example, an action plan item that addresses the strategies described above might include:

Strategy: Recruit ELL class volunteers from the local high school and college (exploring ways to offer academic credit for their time)

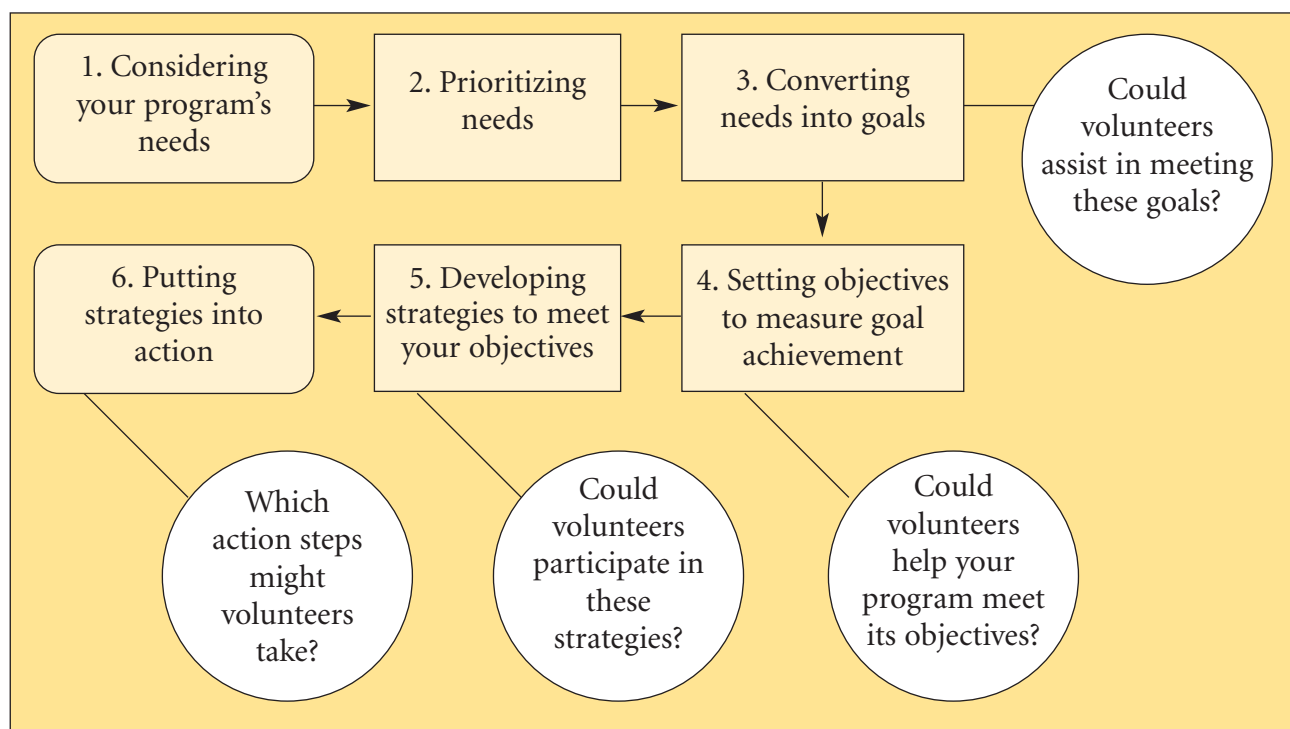
Action Plan Item: By October 1, program coordinator will call XYZ High School and Hometown Community College to discuss recruiting students to help in ELL classes.

The steps outlined in this needs assessment process can help you form a plan from which you can identify your program's needs and determine a course of action to address those needs through the effective use of volunteers. Take advantage of *Templates C* and *D* to complete your own needs assessment.

Where Do Volunteers Fit In?

The answer is: Everywhere! Certainly a program goal or objective might revolve around the use of volunteers. Many programs use volunteers heavily in the strategy and action planning stages. In what roles do you most need volunteers?

Let's take another look at the six-step process and consider where and how volunteers might help programs meet their needs.



The role of volunteers especially should be considered in the final four steps of the process. While volunteers can contribute during the earlier steps, creating an action plan is where volunteers can really dig in.

You may want to think of volunteers as helping in two broad areas, instructional support and administrative support. Don't limit your thinking to opportunities that involve volunteers being physically present at your center. Many volunteer roles can be completed at home or out in the community. *Template E* is a comprehensive checklist to assist you in evaluating the capacities in which you might need volunteers.

Putting It All Together

This chapter has introduced the definitions and the vocabulary of the needs assessment process. It is only with a completed needs assessment that you can realistically see how and where you might need volunteers.

Volunteers can “fit in” or contribute at any stage. Recruiting and training new volunteers might be a goal for your program for next year. Or, recruiting and training volunteers might be a strategy that you will implement in order to help you meet an objective of serving more families. Volunteers may show up in your action plan with important roles in implementing the strategies you have identified.

Following the six-step needs assessment process, you will have a clear picture of where your program is now, where it is headed and how volunteers can fit into your program's future. Take advantage of the templates and samples provided to help you assess the needs of your program for volunteers.

