

NEW ASSESSMENT TOOL

BY JULIE TROCCHIO, M.S. and INDU SPUGNARDI

The practice of assessing community health needs and developing plans to meet those needs is as old as our ministries. After all, Catholic health care organizations have a long tradition of responding to community need and working to improve community health.

However, the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act sets new requirements for tax-exempt hospitals to conduct community health needs assessments every three years and to adopt strategies to meet the identified needs. The assessment must take into account input from people who represent the broad interests of the community that the hospital facility serves, including people with special knowledge or expertise in public health. The assessment's findings must be made widely available to the public.

NEW RESOURCE

CHA, working with VHA Inc., a national network of not-for-profit health care organizations, and the Healthy Communities Institute, is developing a new resource on community needs assessment and planning. We expect this document to be available in spring 2011.

Our guiding principles include:

The overall goal of assessment and planning is to improve community health.

- Assessment results and the implementation strategy are not ends to themselves. They must be put into action, and these actions should be evaluated and refined as needed.

- Target resources to where they are most needed and most likely to be effective. Systematic assessment and planning will help communities and organizations coordinate their efforts and resources.

- The implementation strategy should include a plan to evaluate the quality and effectiveness of programs

to address community health needs.

- Community benefit plans should build upon — not erode or duplicate — such important community assets as schools, police departments and not-for-profit organizations.

- The community health needs assessment results should be integrated into both communitywide health plans and the hospital organization's strategic plan.

Consider the needs of the broader community and vulnerable groups.

- The assessment and the plan to address community health needs should identify the overall needs of the community, but it also should pay special attention to vulnerable populations (uninsured/underinsured, low-income groups that suffer from health disparities).

- In particular, the assessment should identify systemic barriers to access to care and reasons for poor health.

Collaboration expands community capacity to address health needs.

- Collaborating with other health care organizations and community partners offers many benefits, including access to shared resources and skills, cost savings, a foundation for long-term collaboration and programming, community focus on a shared vision and alignment of community resources with problem areas.

- Collaboration can take various forms — from formal partnerships that define roles and responsibilities of members and contribution of resources to more informal relation-

ships in which organizations involve community partners in various steps of the assessment and planning process.

Understand how to use data effectively.

- Existing information, including current community health assessments and public health data, should be used whenever possible

- This information should be interpreted by those with expertise in community health and public health data and validated by health care providers, community members and organizations and others who represent interests of the community

- Hospitals and their assessment partners should become expert at finding and using community health data collected by public health agencies or organizations with expertise in this area, but not necessarily at collecting new quantitative information (e.g. smoking rates, teen pregnancy rates)

- Hospital organizations and their partners should concentrate on collecting qualitative information, such as the observations and views of community members and leaders

EXAMPLES NEEDED

Please note: The new resource on community health need assessment and planning will include examples of a wide range of assessments and plans. Please contact CHA (jtrocchio@chausa.org) if you have a summary of a recent assessment or community benefit that could be included.

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JOURNAL OF THE CATHOLIC HEALTH ASSOCIATION OF THE UNITED STATES

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Reprinted from *Health Progress*, January-February 2011
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