



Community Needs Assessment



**NORC
Innovation
Centre**
at **UHN**

October 2024

Community Needs Assessment

Developing a comprehensive understanding of the interests, needs, and strengths that exist within your community is the first step in developing a connected, active, and vibrant community.

Developing your group's approach to your needs assessment is a four step process:

1. Defining your group's purpose – *what is your group hoping to achieve?*
2. Establishing communication channels – *how will you contact people?*
3. Choosing how to gather feedback – *how will you get input?*
4. Crafting your assessment – *what will you ask?*

In this document, we go through these four steps and provide you with some resources and tools to help.

1

Defining Your Group's Purpose

The goal of many aging-in-place groups is to create a supportive community. However, what this means may look different for every building and group

The first thing to do is discuss the goals and vision of your group. We suggest using the '*Vision Worksheet*' and '*Purpose Statement*' tools that are on the NORC Ambassador's website (<https://norcambassadors.ca/diy/define-your-why/>).

Each member of the group should complete the '*Vision Worksheet*' on their own and then you should come together to share responses and form the purpose statement of the group.

2

Establishing Communication Channels

Depending on the structure of your building or community, there may or may not be established communication channels that you can tap into to help spread your message. A good place to start is with the building management, who may be able to assist you in using existing communication channels such as community boards and email lists.

If there are no existing communication channels you can use, or if you want to use multiple channels, brainstorm ideas as a group. Some examples used by previous groups include a lobby intercept, slipping notes under doors, and a telephone tree.

Examples of Communication Channels

1. A lobby intercept (<https://norcambassadors.ca/idea/lobby-intercept/>) involves setting up a table in the lobby as a way to meet residents as they come and go and share information about your group.
2. Slipping notes under doors involves preparing something in writing to slide under the doors of everyone living in the building.
3. A telephone tree starts with members of the group calling their own contacts in the building and asking those that are called to call their contacts to spread the message.

3

Choosing How to Gather Feedback

Traditional approaches to gathering feedback start with a needs analysis, usually in the form of a survey. Surveys are a great first step in exploring who lives in your community, what their interests are, what they might need and want, or what they value most.

A survey might be preceded, followed or complemented with information sessions or listening circles to gain buy-in and inspiration for community activities and events.

Tip: This method may work well if you specifically invite people who may have difficulty with surveys.

Other methods grow out of **strength or asset-based approaches**, which aim to build on the local talents and strengths that exist in the community. This approach is rooted in community-led development and recognises that everyone in a community (including individuals, resident groups, businesses and organizations) has skills, interests and experiences that can help strengthen their community.

You can read more about the *Asset-Based Community Development (ABCD)* versus traditional approach here:

<https://sustainingcommunity.wordpress.com/2013/08/15/what-is-abcd/>

Choosing How to Gather Feedback

Regardless of whether you take a needs-based or asset-based approach, or hybrid of the two, there are many creative, activity-based engagements that can compliment surveys if they do not garner as many responses as desired. These also provide community members with other ways to contribute ideas, stimulate conversation and enlist the imagination. Some examples include:

- Posting an envelope on the public bulletin board where members could leave ideas anonymously
- Posting large pieces of paper on the walls of the common rooms with post-it notes and markers so members could identify needs and desires
- For larger groups, holding round table discussions with paper covered tables so members can discuss among small groups and leave feedback behind as they moved from table to table in a world café format

Creative Methods for Understanding Community Needs, Assets, & Desires

Conversation Boards

- Create a conversation board in the lobby or on individual floors (e.g., a whiteboard with markers or corkboard with pins / note cards).
- Put a 'starter' question on the board and invite community members to contribute either ideas, needs or questions of their own.

Community Mail

- Place a community 'mail' box either in the lobby or on each floor by the elevator with a direction to 'send a postcard' to your community, requesting something you need or wish for your community – or it could be a love letter "What I love about my community . . ."
- Share the results with everyone!

Making Projects Public

- Create a poster for new community ideas and invite residents to leave feedback.
- Write pertinent details on the poster and print a longer description for residents to learn more if interested. Most importantly, leave a notebook for residents to write down their thoughts. This method is perhaps most useful at the stage where some ideas are bubbling to the surface.
- Publicly displaying the feedback and ideas provided by residents in the common spaces provides the opportunity for residents to build on each other's ideas and give feedback on the ideas that they also prefer.

Key takeaways:

1. The importance of keeping it fun as a way to engage everyone involved.
2. The importance of building engagements that strengthen relationships between community members.

4

Crafting Your Assessment

What you ask in your needs assessment will depend on the goals of your group, who you want to connect with and how you plan to gather feedback. However, regardless of your particular plans, there are four general categories that you will want to touch on:

1. Introducing your group to the building
2. Understanding who lives in the building
3. Understanding interests and needs
4. Timing and accessibility considerations

The examples in the next pages are for you to pull from while crafting your own assessment. As a general rule, try to limit the number of questions so that it is not overwhelming.

Introducing Your Group to the Building

The first step in getting input towards your planning is introducing yourself to the people living in the building and explaining what you are hoping to achieve. This can be done in person, in writing, or over the phone. It can also be attached to a survey or an invitation to join a conversation. Note that talking to people in person can help with managing expectation. See below for a sample introduction.

Hello Neighbours,

We would like to introduce ourselves. We are [*insert your names*], and we are the new [*insert your aging-in-place group name*]. We have come together because we are very interested in remaining in our homes as we age, and fostering the community in our building at [*insert address*].

We would like to be part of a community where neighbours support each other, and where there is an opportunity to stay socially engaged and physically active. This could include many things, such as building a network for practical help, events, outings, and speakers, that could support our aging at home. These are just some ideas. We are writing to see how many residents of our building are interested and what might inspire you to join us?

Perhaps, like us, you are over [*insert age*] too and have some more specific ideas about how our building could become more richly engaging for you? Perhaps you are in your 50's or 60's and are just starting to think about the future. Perhaps you have young children and are interested in becoming part of an active multi-generational community. We want to hear from you.

Understand Who Lives in the Building

You may want to consider learning about who lives in the building. These demographic questions are optional questions that can easily be added to surveys or asked in person. If you are considering planning programs related to health, there may be other questions you want to add. Tailor the questions to meet the goals of your group. It is best practice to ask the demographic questions at the very end of the survey.

In addition to demographic questions, consider adding the option to provide contact information if people are interested in volunteering or becoming a member of the group. For example:

If you are interested in volunteering with our group, provide your name and contact information here:

.....

.....

.....

.....

Understand Interests & Needs

These questions are to determine what the residents are interested in or need, to give your group input on what to start with. Let the residents know that this is an ongoing process that will continue to develop over time. Also include information on how to share their responses.

It is a good idea to present categories and realistic examples within each category. Try and match the options listed to the goals of your group. You can find a bank of ideas at: <https://norcambassadors.ca/ideas/>

If you collect ideas through conversations, you can consider sending out a survey with the ideas and have people vote on their favorites.

Sample open ended questions:

1. What about this community makes you feel most at home? Tell us what you like most about the building?
2. If you could live here for the rest of your life, what would make it possible? What would make it exceptional?

Sample categories for presenting ideas or getting a sense of interests:

We recommend choosing 3 to 5 categories or ideas. After the presented ideas, add an option for people to suggest their own ideas.

- Safety (e.g. buddy system)
- Celebrations (e.g. multi-cultural holidays)
- Civic engagement (e.g. clothing drive)
- Communications (e.g. floor captains)
- Health and wellness (e.g. walking group)
- Information and navigation (e.g. translation buddies)
- Art and creativity (e.g. entertainment)
- Lifelong learning (e.g. educational speakers)
- Maintenance and repairs (e.g. neighbours helping neighbours)
- Food (e.g. shared meals)

Timing & Accessibility Considerations

Include questions about timing and support needed to participate. Consider who lives in your building and what accommodations may be needed to get their input. For example, if there are a lot of people who speak a specific language, you can consider including younger residents who can help translate or pre-translating some materials. For accessibility, consider dropping by to help people fill out your survey and using large, clear font. See next page for sample questions.

Timing & Accessibility Considerations

Sample question related to timing:

What is your preferred timing for attending events or activities in the building? [Select all that apply]

Day: Monday | Tuesday | Wednesday | Thursday | Friday | Saturday | Sunday

Time: Morning | Afternoon | Evening

Sample question related to supports needed:

What support(s) or accommodations do you need to be able to participate in building activities? [Choose all that apply]

- Someone to assist me in getting to the activity.
Describe:
- Someone to assist me during the activity.
Describe:
- Communication support.
Describe:
- Other.
Describe:

Sample question related to access to technology:

If there are virtual programs accessed on the computer, would you be interested in participating?

- No
- Yes
- Yes, but I would need a device because I do not have one
- Yes, but I would need help getting my device set up
- Yes, but I would need other support in order to attend. Please describe: