

Committee: CSTE Executive Committee

Title: Research to study and disseminate evidence of effective community health assessments

Statement of the Problem:

The Future of Public Health, the landmark 1988 Institute of Medicine (IOM) report identified assessment as one of three core public health functions that every public health agency should perform.¹ While this statement has been widely accepted in the public health community, there is little published literature on evaluations of community health assessments.²

Statement of the desired action(s) to be taken:

1. The CDC should identify an office within the organization that can oversee research on, and evaluation of community health assessments and health impact assessment.
2. CSTE encourages the allocation of sufficient financial and human resources at federal, state and local levels to set up a workgroup in collaboration with professional organizations including, but not limited to, APHA, Association of State and Territorial Health Officials (ASTHO), Council of State and Territorial Epidemiologists (CSTE), National Association of County and City Health Officials (NACCHO) to develop a plan and recommendations for developing an evidence-base of effective community health assessment practices. Among the questions this workgroup should study are:
 - What are the criteria for good research to identify what makes a community health assessment lead to public health action?
 - What factors influence effectiveness of community health assessments?
 - What measures can be used to track effectiveness of community health assessments?
 - What are factors that need to be in place to evaluate community health assessment practice consistent with standards used by the Task Force on Community Preventive Services³ in the health sector and the Campbell Collaboration⁴ in the educational, social and behavioral sectors?
 - What changes in policy will make it feasible to study community health assessment practice?
 - What aspect of community health assessment practice (e.g. methods of data dissemination, community involvement frameworks) should take priority?
 - What methodologies and evaluation frameworks can be used to study community health assessment practice?
 - What are the specific roles of assessment practitioners at the federal, state and local levels in community health assessment practice research?
 - What are the technical, training and resource needs for evaluating community health assessment practice?
3. The CDC should organize an Action Learning Lab in partnership with selected states to study evaluation of community health assessments, for example, as is done in the maternal child health field.⁵

Public Health Impact:

Communities conduct health assessments to inform a community health improvement process and justify or advocate for services and programs. Hence, the performance of a community health assessment and its effectiveness is measured by changes in public health planning and policy decisions, and their impact on health outcomes. Community Health Assessment (CHA) is a core public health function. A CHA is the first step in planning and policy development, or in assessing the impact of a changed policy. It occurs across all programs including chronic disease, environmental health, social, educational, public health preparedness, and health care access.

A Governmental Accountability Office (GAO) Report⁶ of 29 comprehensive key indicator systems showed evidence of positive effects in four areas. The comprehensive key indicator systems enhanced collaboration to address public issues, provided tools to encourage progress, helped

inform decision-making and improve research, and increased public knowledge about key economic, environmental, social and cultural issues. The GAO report acknowledges that the various community influences on decision-making made it difficult to attribute all the positive change only to the indicator system. While the GAO report focused on larger systems, it provides lessons and directions for CHA research.

There are also a number of tools such as the National Public Health Performance Standards Survey⁷, and the Turning Point Performance Management Model⁸ that assist with measuring the performance of the public health system including assessment. A number of published studies point towards collaboration, leadership, how the CHA is developed and presented, and available resources as influencing the quality and ability of communities to conduct CHAs.^{9,10,11}

How a CHA is conducted and implemented impacts policy and health status outcomes. While logic models support the use of CHA for data-based decision-making with community involvement, it would be very helpful to have concrete evidence of effectiveness. If crosscutting research into evaluation of community health is not conducted, communities will continue to use the different frameworks recommended, but not know of components with proven results or that are critical for public health action. If there are mistakes, or missed opportunities, learning occurs only within program silos, rather than across systems. CHA research is basic public health science. As in any basic science, understanding how to achieve optimal effectiveness, and developing a feedback loop will have far-reaching implications on areas such as chronic disease, public health preparedness, health care access, and reducing disparities.

References:

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