

Community Asset Mapping – Getting Started

The following are questions to ask yourselves. Your responses to these questions will help you determine how ready your community is to engage in a collaborative process of community asset mapping. You may find you are ready to start right now, or there may be a few pieces you want to work to put into place first. Assuring a solid foundation of readiness is key to the success of community asset mapping.

1. Do you have one or more community champions who are willing and able to serve as mobilizers for the CAM process?

A community champion is someone who is passionate about the cause you wish to address in your community. Ideally this is someone who has the time, and possibly employer approval, to devote to organizing and preparing for a meeting that brings various community partners together for shared dialogue. It may be one person, or it may be a couple of people working together. It is difficult to quantify how much time a community champion may need to spend planning and preparing for a community meeting. It is likely to take several hours a week, and likely over some period of time.

2. What is our community – how do we define the parameters of the community to be considered for asset mapping?

It is important to define your community. It may be your county, a particular region or set of communities within your county, or a school district. Identifying the geographic parameters of your community will help define who the important stakeholders are.

3. What are your community needs? What are some of the outcomes you hope to work toward?

If possible try to name one or two needs that your community wants to tackle. For example, you may want to improve communication between community partners around systems for developmental screening and referral, improve systems for timely screening and diagnosis of autism spectrum disorder, or identify resources and systems improvements for children with special needs transitioning into adolescents. The need does not have to be well defined, but rather a general category can be identified. You want to have enough of a definition of the need to call together a core group of community stakeholders for a shared dialogue. As you begin to articulate the category of focus for a community asset mapping process, you may also be able to identify a dream for a possible outcome. Keep in mind the shape of desired outcomes may shift and be further clarified during the process of asset mapping.

4. Who are your community partners? Do they represent a breadth of backgrounds?

Creating opportunity for change and the process of making change takes time and deliberate attention. Change can come about when there is a collective group of individuals, programs, and/or agencies committed to investing themselves and are willing to share their individual gifts, knowledge, resources, and time.

For the first community asset mapping meeting you will want to bring together community stakeholders who share your passion and desire for change relative to the broad need the asset mapping will focus on. You want to assure that there is a representative breadth of backgrounds and perspectives within the group of stakeholders you invite to the asset mapping discussion. Some parameters to consider are: 1) who are the individual leaders you want at the table (parent, professional, and lay leaders), 2) what citizen networks or organizations should be present (i.e., parent support groups, early intervention programs, medical clinic physicians and support staff, etc.), and 3) what institutions do you want represented (i.e. school systems, medicine, mental health, early child education, child care, etc.). As you develop a list of community partners within these categories consider identifying the lead agencies, institutions, and individuals.

Community asset mapping is a very interactive process and consideration should be given to the total number of people you bring together for at least the initial asset mapping discussion. The goal is to facilitate and foster interactive dialogue and brainstorming.. Sometimes this is difficult to achieve with a very large group people. Our experience suggests that an initial group of no more than 25-30 individuals is ideal.

5. If we bring community partners together what are the opportunities for scheduling a meeting?

Your goal is to bring together a broad-based group of community stakeholders on the same day and time. Perhaps some will join the discussion virtually, but you want all of the individuals available at the same day and time. This is not always easy to achieve. In your preliminary planning consider if there are some already established meetings or opportunities that naturally bring many of these people together. Capitalize on these types of natural occurrences if possible. You may also wish to consider if there are certain times of year, time of day, and/or location within your community, that will enhance the success of an asset mapping meeting.

6. Will some kind of outside facilitation and guidance be helpful?

You may want to enlist the support of facilitators to assist with planning and leading the asset mapping meeting. Consider if it would be helpful to enlist facilitators from outside of the community. There may also be individuals within your community who could serve as facilitators for the asset mapping process. You will ultimately want to develop a clear plan and process to guide the discussion and work for the first asset mapping meeting. Faculty and staff at the Washington State Department of Health – Children with Special Health Care Needs Program and the University of Washington, LEND Program are examples of programs who may be available to assist you and your community. Keep in mind that ultimately the community asset mapping process belongs to the community and the individuals in your community. It is your work and process. You own this opportunity for change. Facilitators offer support to ignite and guide the process and the discussions during the first asset mapping meeting. An ongoing technical assistance relationship with the facilitators may also help sustain community efforts to affect system changes over time.