



Resources for Rural Community Health Needs Assessments and Community Health Improvement Plans

The National Organization of State Offices of Rural Health (NOSORH), with support from the Federal Office of Rural Health Policy (FORHP)*, developed this fact sheet for rural health stakeholders interested in systematically improving population health and health equity in rural communities through a community health improvement process. A [community health improvement process](#) supports rural planning based on identified needs, engages the community and lays out a framework to ensure high impact planning for community need. This compilation of resources provides clarification on the differences between a Community Health Needs Assessment (CHNA) and a Community Health Improvement Plan (CHIP) as components of the community health improvement process. Though not an exhaustive list, it is intended to provide basic information and links to additional information for greater detail. This information can be used by rural stakeholders to develop and begin implementing a CHNA or CHIP.

What is a Community Health Needs Assessment?

A CHNA is an evidence-based collaborative approach to identifying key health issues through the systematic collection and analysis of data. Since 2011, the US Department of Treasury has encouraged CHNAs as a method of completing community benefit requirements. Additionally, the Public Health Accreditation Board (PHAB) has required CHNAs as a component of their accreditation process. A complete historical perspective can be found in [Community-Based Health Needs Assessment Activities: Opportunities for collaboration between public health departments and rural hospitals](#).

Public health researchers have developed rural-specific models for completing a CHNA that recognize the unique challenges and opportunities of rural areas. These models assist in developing a plan to bring public health needs to the attention of stakeholders and policymakers and to serve as a baseline for future program planning.

Resources for Rural CHNAs

- [Conducting Community Health Needs Assessments: A Ten-Step Process](#)
- [Community Health Needs Assessment Toolkit](#)
- [Community Toolbox: Assessing Community Needs and Resources](#)

For rural nonprofit hospitals and accredited health departments, both must implement strategies to prioritize and address areas of need. For rural nonprofit hospitals, the implementation of strategies culminates in a report to the IRS on the hospital's financial investment — often referred to as a “community health improvement plan”. This financial investment reporting is often mistaken for an official CHIP, creating communication barriers with rural public health partners seeking or maintaining PHAB accreditation.

What is a Community Health Improvement Plan?

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention ([CDC](#)), a Community Health Improvement Plan (CHIP) is a systematic, long-term set of activities designed to address the public health issues identified through the health needs assessment process.

One common misconception is that a CHIP is a specific format or framework to which an organization plugs in their information. However, the CHIP can be conducted in a variety of formats as long as it maintains the key elements below:

Key Elements

Goals, objectives and performance indicators: When adapting from previous examples, recognize that performance indicators may look different between rural and urban communities.

Strategies: Consider adapting existing evidence-based strategies from other rural communities. Many examples are available in [RHlhub's Evidence-Based Toolkits](#).

Lead organization: Recognizing the lead organization for the identified strategies early in the process ensures consensus and equitable distribution of effort.

How a CHIP Differs from a CHNA

In the community health improvement *process*, the identification and prioritization of community health needs are less than half the required effort. Organizations must then take action through a CHIP to systematically develop and implement long-term strategies to address the identified needs.

How Can You Get Started?

The systematic and evidence-based method of addressing unmet health and wellness needs provides a strong foundation for improving the rural health

Resources for Rural CHIP

- [Community and State Health Improvement Plans](#)
- [Developing Goals, Objectives, and Performance Indicators for CHIPs](#)
- [Identifying Effective Strategies to Address Social Determinants of Health](#)

landscape. To get your rural organization started, take one of these first steps:

1. Determine your organization's requirements and priorities (IRS, PHAB, etc.).
2. Learn about what is going on locally and if partners are already doing this work.
3. Educate yourself on CHNA/CHIP models and strategies that work for rural.
4. Plan to invest human and financial resources to accomplish your goals — add it to your budget now!

Need More Help Getting Started?

Check out the [Mobilizing for Action through Planning and Partnerships \(MAPP\)](#) framework – a six-phase, community-driven strategic planning process that assists communities in applying strategic thinking to prioritize health issues and identify resources for addressing them. The [MAPP Handbook**](#) offers a step-by-step guide on the process, though some rural stakeholders have indicated the need for modification in rural and frontier communities. Issues regarding the identification and prioritization of health needs can be addressed by using a rural-focused CHNA model; while concerns of limited philanthropic and nonprofit organization availability in rural can be addressed by identifying the lead organization.

Additional Resources

- [The Community Tool Box: Center for Community Health and Development at the University of Kansas](#)
- [Association for Community Health Improvement](#)
- [The Practical Playbook: Building Multisector Partnerships that Work](#)
- [Institute of Medicine's Community Health Improvement Process](#)
- [A Guide to SAMHSA's Strategic Prevention Framework](#)
- [NOSORH's Vulnerable Hospital Roadmap](#)
- [NASHP's State Reporting Templates for Tax-Exempt Hospitals: Community Benefit Expenditures and Progra Outcomes](#)

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