Children's Hospital of Philadelphia
PolicyLab

How to Use the PA Family Support Needs Assessment to Help Your Community

Family & Community Health

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Editor's Note: *This post is a part of our Family Support Needs Assessment blog post series, in which PolicyLab's home visiting team discusses multiple aspects of the collaborative report, including how to utilize its components, share with networks and more.*

In October, PolicyLab released the Pennsylvania 2020 Family Support Needs Assessment (FSNA). This statewide community health needs assessment was the result of a multi-year collaboration to provide a comprehensive understanding of the social, environmental, and health factors impacting the well-being of children, families and communities in Pennsylvania. The report provides a robust examination of county-level needs across six domains: maternal and child health, socioeconomic status, substance use, child safety and maltreatment, community environment and child care. You can access the full report and summary document through the Pennsylvania Department of Human Services' website.

Throughout the project, our team prioritized community engagement and accountability to develop shared ownership and maximum transparency in the process. We listened to stakeholders across the state who wanted an assessment individualized to each community and useful for practice. This report is responsive to these stakeholder-expressed needs, uniting diverse groups in a shared long-term vision for creating collective and meaningful impact on maternal and child health.

Now that the work is completed, how can so many different stakeholders use the report? At over 90 pages plus five appendices, the FSNA offers plenty to digest. Here, we break down the document by highlighting key parts

of the report that may be particularly useful for policymakers, advocates, program administrators and service providers, and community members:

The FSNA for Policymakers

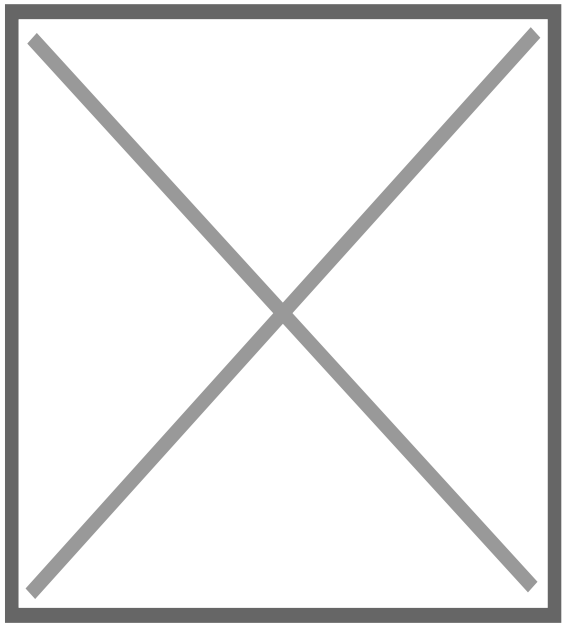
As the cost to provide services increases, advocates and policymakers need support in accurately identifying and prioritizing community needs. The FSNA provides a systematic way of identifying community needs that can inform programmatic and resource allocation. Using the "**Indicators by County**" tables, policymakers can review where different counties fall across the spectrum of need in six domains and over 60 data points.

By understanding both the uniqueness of each county and the statewide landscape of strengths and opportunities, policymakers can more appropriately prioritize funding and resource distribution. For example, policymakers could use the report to identify counties with high rates of postpartum substance use and few services to meet this need to prioritize for further investment in mental health or substance use treatment facilities.

Policymakers also appreciate being informed of what is working well in their communities that offer opportunity for further investment. The FSNA includes a series of "**Community Spotlights**" that were locally nominated and highlight promising on-the-ground activities of organizations addressing needs that range from providing child health services to underserved communities, to kinship care, to supporting new moms with substance use disorders to transitional housing. For example, the Healthy MOMs Community Spotlight showcases a community partnership to support new moms struggling with opioid use disorder in Lackawanna and Susquehanna counties. While only able to highlight a handful of innovative programs, the report also offers an appendix listing additional programs that were nominated.

The FSNA for Advocates

Funding streams require evidence of how funds will address community needs, yet data demonstrating these needs can be difficult to assemble. The FSNA offers several useful tools for advocacy, including full data transparency through a "**Raw Data Summary**." Advocates can download the raw data in the report and use them to write grant applications, advocate for budget allocations and influence funding decisions. In addition, advocates can quickly pull out information about individual counties via the "**County Profiles,**" which provide fast facts about each county.



The FSNA for Family Support Program Administrators and Service Providers

Through the "**Community Survey**," the FSNA examines how state residents feel their community is able to meet the needs of families. For example, results from the community survey indicate that 58% of respondents consider pregnancy and parenting support services to be widely available in their community.

Additionally, maternal and child home visiting program administrators and service providers can access program data from the "**Quality and Capacity of Existing Services**" section of the assessment. For example, program administrators can quickly locate their county and see the percent of eligible families served by home visiting programs, or how program slots in their county receive funding. Results from the "**Administrative Survey**" can help administrators and early childhood service providers understand their service capacity and room for growth.

Local service providers can be some of the field's biggest advocates, but already have so much on their plates. To help providers share information from the assessment, we created a **partner toolkit** that offers sample messaging and examples of how to share FSNA results with media and the broader community.

The FSNA for Communities

At the local level, needs assessments offer the opportunity to bring together stakeholders with shared interests to build strong partnerships. By providing access to timely and accurate information, the FSNA can help objectively inform community goals and directions. The collation of publicly available data, county-level summary tables, and assessment of need provides communities with readily accessible data without having to collect and analyze it themselves. Community members can use this information to inform grant submissions, host community conversations, advocate for local cooperation and speak with media.

Community members may find that the county-level analysis makes it challenging to tell the whole story of the variety of needs within their county. To assist in providing a more nuanced story of community conditions, the FSNA includes an additional "**Sub-County Analysis**" that breaks down twelve indicators from the assessment, like preterm birth rates and child poverty, to the Zip code level for twelve select counties. These communities can use this information alongside other resources to develop and implement strategies addressing their unique needs.

The Value of Needs Assessments

Needs assessments are most effective when they include high-quality data that provide a true picture of the population's health at a given point in time. While we aimed to create a comprehensive needs assessment, we collected these data retrospectively and there are factors beyond what we could include here that contribute to community strengths and needs. Unfortunately, the data included in this report only represent community needs spanning the years of 2012-2019, prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. Acute and long-term effects of this pandemic will likely exacerbate or alter needs within families and communities. Early childhood stakeholders across Pennsylvania, both at the state and local levels, should use this report as a resource to monitor and incorporate emerging data into programmatic and policy decisions impacting children and families at the local, county and state levels.

Community and public health needs assessments have utility across many stakeholder groups. Whether you are a stakeholder trying to respond to the needs of an entire state or a small city, needs assessments like the FSNA will support you with evidence to accurately identify the needs of your population and build meaningful response strategies.

Jennifer Whittaker
Jennifer Whittaker
PhD, MUP
Research Scientist

Tara Dechert
Tara Dechert
MS
Senior Program Manager