

PFS protocol: Needs Assessment Prioritization

Background

The first step in this needs assessment is to fill in the *Needs Assessment Workbook* created by Wilder and EpiMachine. After the workbook is complete, you will prioritize the data in the Workbook to determine which variables are the most important to address in your community.

The main purposes of the overall needs assessment are to:

1. Identify the intervening variables that contribute to underage alcohol use and marijuana use on your campus.
2. Determine which strategies are needed to address the local intervening variables.
3. Build the coalition's capacity in collecting, compiling, and using data for planning.
4. Establish a system for making data-driven decisions as a coalition.

You will be required to update the *Need Assessment Workbook* annually, but the most significant data collection, compilation, and prioritization will occur during the first year of the grant.

Overview of prioritization process

Intervening variables are factors that have been identified through research as influencing substance use patterns in a community. These factors can alter how much alcohol is consumed in a community (NH Risk and Protective Factor Toolbox, 2008).

In order to identify which intervening variables are most important for your coalition to address, it is essential that 1) your decisions are driven by the data in the *Needs Assessment Workbook* and any other relevant data or information your coalition has access to and 2) your coalition is actively involved in making these decisions.

Prioritization criteria

There are four main criteria you will use to prioritize the intervening variables included in the *Needs Assessment Workbook*:

1. **Magnitude** is addressed by the question “**How meaningful is the SIZE of this issue in your community?**” and it refers to how big or small the value is in your community data. It can be measured by considering the following questions: What percent of the community is impacted? Is the rate or percent high or low compared to other intervening variables in your community? Is the rate or percent high or low compared to the state average? If data are available for multiple points in time, has the rate or percent changed over time? To assess magnitude, use the data for each intervening variable included in your *Needs Assessment Workbook*.
2. **Political will** or “**How much do community leaders/members care about this issue?**” encompasses readiness, concern, and willingness to take action. For example, political will might include community willingness to raise taxes on alcohol, or readiness to take on the hospitality or alcohol industries. Readiness may include a number of dimensions, such as the community’s recognition of substance use/abuse problems, the availability of needed resources, a plan for addressing substance use/abuse concerns, and leaders positioned to take action. To assess political will, use information from the *Coalition Member Conversations*, *Community Leader Key Informant Interviews*, and any other information you have about the perspectives of community members and leaders.
3. **Capacity** or “**What level of resources do you have available to address this issue?**” refers to your coalition or community’s ability to implement programs, policies, and other changes designed to reduce the likelihood of substance abuse. Elements include: staff time, skills, experience, and expertise; training and technical assistance; organizational systems; communication systems; technology; fiscal resources; etc. To assess capacity and resources, use information from the *Coalition Member Conversations*, *Community Leader Key Informant Interviews*, and any other information you have about the resources in your coalition and community.
4. **Changeability** or “**How easy is it to change the value of the variable over the course of the grant?**” encompasses time frame, readiness, and capacity. Can your community make a change in a given intervening variable by the end of the project? To assess changeability, use data from the *Coalition Member Conversations*, *Community Leader Key Informant Interviews*, and any other information you have about the resources in your coalition and community.

Your coalition members will rate each intervening variable based on each of these criteria. The variables will be rated relative to each other. For example, based on your local data, which variables are more or less concerning than the other variables on the list? While your local Epi Workgroup will be leading the rating, it is important that all coalition members understand these criteria so they can make consistent, informed decisions about the intervening variables.

Guidelines for selection

There are some general guidelines that you should consider as you prioritize your intervening variables. These include:

- It is recommended that your community select five to seven intervening variables to address with programs, policies, and practices. The process of selecting priorities to address should be data driven—not based on a required number. However, keep in mind that too few intervening variables will not provide your community with a comprehensive prevention approach while too many variables may not be feasible given the budget and timeline.
- You need to make sure that you have at least two alcohol and two marijuana indicators represented in your final list of intervening variables. Both substances need to be represented because your prevention efforts need to be comprehensive and have the greatest possibility of affecting both priority areas on your campus. Some indicators affect both alcohol and marijuana, and those would count toward this requirement for each substance.
- Make sure that you have at least two categories of variables represented in your final list of intervening variables. As a reminder, these categories include: access/availability, perceived enforcement, community norms, individual/family factors, and pricing/promotion. At least two categories need to be represented in order to ensure a comprehensive prevention approach. You can aim to have more than two categories represented, but the determination should be driven by the data.

Prioritization process

The overall prioritization process will include your local Epi Workgroup working together to rate all of the intervening variables based on the four criteria. The Workgroup will present the results to the larger coalition to guide a decision about which variables are most important to focus on for your campus. Step by step instructions for this process are included below.

- **Train coalition members (Coordinator).** Even though only the Epi Workgroup is responsible for doing most of the rating, it is important that the full coalition understand the process and prioritization criteria. This will allow them to make an informed decision about their level of interest in joining the Workgroup for this task and it will ensure that members have a common understanding when they ultimately select the intervening variables to focus on. The Coordinator is responsible for training coalition members. Wilder Research has created a training PowerPoint and an accompanying handout that can be used by the Coordinator.
- **Share materials (Coordinator).** In order for Epi Workgroup members to rate each of the intervening variables using each of the four criteria, they will need access to the fully

completed *Needs Assessment Workbook* and any other supplemental information that will be used, including results from the *Coalition Member Conversation* and *Key Informant Interviews with Community Leaders*. You may wish to distribute these materials in a packet so everything is easily accessible to Workgroup members.

- **Review materials (Epi Workgroup members).** Before beginning the prioritization process, Workgroup members should review all of the data they received. This will ensure that they are familiar with the information and they are able to rate the intervening variables relative to one another.
- **Rate variables (Epi Workgroup members).** The Epi Workgroup members will be asked to rate all of the intervening variables on all four criteria. The group should come up with one set of ratings for each variable and each criterion, rather than having each member of the group come up with their own ratings. It may work well to have the subcommittee use the Excel spreadsheet developed by Wilder Research to rate the variables because it will automatically score the variables based on the four criteria.
- **Share results (Epi Workgroup members).** Once the Epi Workgroup has had time to rate the intervening variables, they will present the top 20 scoring variables overall (from across all categories) to the full coalition. If the subcommittee used the Excel spreadsheet to score their variables, a list of the top variables will automatically be generated. The group should plan to provide a brief justification for how they reached the conclusions they did in their ratings, including any relevant data that supported their scores. These ratings will serve as the basis for subsequent decision-making.
- **Select intervening variables (Coordinator/coalition members).** At the meeting with coalition members, Coordinators will be responsible for facilitating a discussion to select the variables that are most important to the coalition. The Epi Workgroup ratings should guide this selection, but coalition members can help to interpret the rankings and make the final decisions. The Coordinator is encouraged to create a list of the current strategies being implemented under the grant to help focus the discussion. The Coordinator should arrange for someone (such as an assistant or colleague) to help take detailed notes during this process to help document how the decisions were made. The Coordinator may also wish to record the discussion to help their fill in notes afterward.
- **Summarize the process and results (Coordinator).** The Coordinator will be responsible for summarizing the prioritization process results in their strategic plan. *The Strategic Plan Guidance Document: Part A* has detailed instructions and guiding questions for how to summarize this information.