

Phase I The Survey

Assessing the Need for the Program

In order to survey land before building a structure, one must be able to delineate the physical characteristics and the history of the land through research and measurement. Surveyors research legal records, look for evidence of previous boundaries, and analyze the data to determine the location of boundary lines. In the field, known survey reference points are selected to determine the precise location of important features in the survey area. Results of surveys are recorded and verified to prepare plots and maps. The process involves investigating factors such as soil condition, drainage, zoning, and building codes in the region to determine if the climate is suitable for building.

Similarly, it is important to conduct a thorough assessment to determine if the conditions are suitable for “building” an alternative-to-suspension program. A comprehensive needs assessment is the first step and the centerpiece of the planning process. Results derived from the needs assessment steer program planning and program goal development. The assessment identifies evidence of need, highlights issues that are unique to the community, identifies potential barriers, and provides baseline information for evaluation.

An important step in collecting data for the assessment of program development is not to collect new data, but to review existing data that has already been collected by others. Many local agencies collect data and maintain records to document and evaluate services and programs. State and federal departments also routinely conduct assessments. Past and current efforts must be examined, as well as strengths and challenges within the community, to create an effective program plan.

Proper identification of a problem is necessary to develop effective solutions. In a previous research project, DJJDP – Center introduced a self-assessment tool developed by the Community Oriented Policing Services Office entitled S.A.R.A. (Scanning; Analysis; Response; and Assessment). S.A.R.A. is a systematic process for understanding the dynamics of a “priority problem” and developing effective strategies.

A Lesson Learned from the DisMISS Project S.A.R.A. Process: Applying the Problem-Solving Approach

Schools attempting to solve problems associated with suspensions and expulsions can use a systematic approach entitled S.A.R.A. (Scanning; Analysis; Response; and Assessment). S.A.R.A. offers a process that can be applied as schools put forth efforts to improve the school climate and address trends in suspension and expulsion.

Scanning involves identifying a “priority problem” and verifying its existence. In this phase, potential problems are identified by the school community and other related stakeholders, such as law enforcement. The entire school community discusses problems that exist and a “priority problem” may be identified. A survey of students and staff is also conducted to verify the problem’s existence. Survey results become the focus of the next step in the S.A.R.A. process.

Analysis involves examining information and data gathered about the “priority problem” and determining the reasons why the problem exists. For example if a school chooses to examine suspensions and expulsions as their priority problem, then looking at types of behavior, the time of day, and locations can paint a clearer picture of what is causing these disciplinary actions. Results from surveying students and staff are crucial in determining the response and actions taken.

Response involves taking the information from the analysis phase and formulating a response or solution to the “priority problem.” Brainstorming on alternative strategies should be pursued in this phase. The entire school community needs to become involved in taking responsibility for the solving of the “priority problem.”

Assessment involves determining if the solution implemented helped solve the problem. The impact and effectiveness of the solution can be determined by a post-survey of students and staff as well as examining suspension/expulsion data.

Key stakeholders from the school and community are important to empower in any attempt to impact change. These stakeholders are critical to the success of a project and one of the first steps involves acknowledging key individuals or agencies that can assist with suspension and expulsion reduction. Key stakeholders need to not only be acknowledged, but also engaged in the assessment process. One way to engage key stakeholders and build community consensus is through a town hall meeting.

A Lesson Learned from the DisMISS Project Building Community Consensus through Town Hall Meetings

Engaging the community and key stakeholders can be accomplished in various manners. One school DJJDP – Center assisted decided to involve the community by working with local law enforcement, health and human services, and juvenile justice professionals to facilitate town hall meetings to discuss the “state of the child” within the county.

The first step taken by the school administrators was to communicate to each participating agency that they were dealing with the “same youth.” Although each agency understood this to be true, they were not operating as a seamless entity.

Next, each agency was asked to promote and advertise the town hall meetings from their various capacities. The school decided to develop a newsletter for parents and other community members to discuss school topics and upcoming forums. Administrators indicated that the newsletters were successful in sharing information and decided to continue using this as a mechanism for effective communication.

Each agency assisted in the various components of planning for this event and had an opportunity to share information at the meeting from their perspective. The town hall meeting had good attendance. This event was deemed successful because the community had an opportunity to share their opinions and local officials were able to answer questions to bring everyone up to speed. This strategy, if well planned, can be a useful tool to build community connections for the success of youth.

As planning continues, a work group to guide program development, implementation, and continuation will need to be established. However, the assessment phase is a good time to identify stakeholders and audience members that may become necessary participants of the working group. The following two guiding questions may help identify primary stakeholders. Who may experience a potential change in future programming services as a result of the findings? Who is responsible for operational and policy decisions related to student suspensions and program implementation?

The following tools are included to assist the assessment phase:

Tool 1 – Questions to Consider

- Questions that may be asked in the needs assessment process

Tool 2 – Where To Find Existing Data

- A list of local and state agencies that provides useful data