

# Community Needs Assessment: 2005 PROJECT SUMMARY



*Overall summary  
of activities  
conducted by the  
North Dakota  
State Data Center  
for the Otter Tail  
County Needs  
Assessment  
Committee*



## **Prepared by**

North Dakota State Data Center at North Dakota State  
University, an Equal Opportunity Institution

## **Contributors**

Dr. Richard Rathge, Director  
Ramona Danielson  
Kay Schwarzwalter  
Sarah Jenson

## **Issued**

November 2005

*Available online at [www.ndsu.edu/sdc/publications.htm](http://www.ndsu.edu/sdc/publications.htm)*

# ***Otter Tail County, Minnesota*** **Community Needs Assessment:** **2005 Project Summary**

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## **INTRODUCTION**

The Otter Tail Needs Assessment Committee contacted the North Dakota State Data Center in December of 2003 about serving as a consultant in a process of conducting a needs assessment for the entire Otter Tail County in west-central Minnesota. The committee, consisting of members representing a variety of community organizations and agencies from across the county, was facilitated by United Way of Otter Tail County. Since July of 2004, staff from the North Dakota State Data Center provided overall facilitation of the assessment, focus group facilitation and analysis, and implementation and analysis of a generalizable survey.

This summary provides an overview of the needs assessment process that has occurred. It includes: 1) an introduction covering discussion of major activities, the timeline, the general philosophy, the proposed six-phase process, and constituency groups; 2) focus groups results, 3) prioritizing issues, 4) community asset mapping, including guidelines for asset mapping and themes derived from asset mapping, and 5) generalizable needs assessment survey.

Results of the needs assessment include this report, *Otter Tail County, Minnesota, Community Needs Assessment: 2005 Project Summary*, as well as the *Otter Tail County, Minnesota, Community Needs Assessment: 2004 Focus Group Results* and the *Otter Tail County, Minnesota, Community Needs Assessment: 2005 Survey Results*. All three components of the needs assessment can be found online at [www.ndsu.edu/sdc/publications.htm](http://www.ndsu.edu/sdc/publications.htm).

## **Major activities**

1. Overall facilitation
  - a) six committee/North Dakota State Data Center meetings in Otter Tail County between July 2004 and April 2005
2. Organizational planning
  - b) selection of leadership group
  - c) identification of key clientele groups and assignment of representation of stakeholders
  - d) strategy for public relations and stakeholders feedback
3. Assessment of community challenges
  - a) web-survey of community to identify key concerns
  - b) focus group sessions of key stakeholders to identify needs
  - c) analysis of themes regarding community challenges and selection of themes to target
  - d) implementation of tools to keep community informed and obtain feedback through website
  - e) generalizable phone survey of community to identify priorities
4. Community asset inventory
  - a) initial start to community asset mapping
  - b) initial conversation regarding ways to build formal and on-going community asset mapping

## Timeline

September 2004 – Web survey

November 2004 – Focus groups

March 2005 – Community asset mapping meeting

June 2005 – Generalizable county-wide needs assessment survey

## General Philosophy

We at the North Dakota State Data Center believe an effective county-wide needs assessment is best accomplished as a “community” effort; therefore, we encourage members of the county to play a very active role. This approach both empowers members of the county to take responsibility for their own planning and leverages limited resources while maximizing the amount of information that can be gained. The needs assessment can serve as a tool to accomplish strategic planning for various organizations and agencies under one umbrella. We view this approach as consistent with our hope that the community takes an active role in the project. The key guiding principles using this tool are:

1. Focus on specific actions and measurable outcomes.
2. Consider the need for long-term sustainability.
3. Keep in mind the process can be evolutionary, thus organized in phases.
4. Build on strengths of the community (assets).
5. Design the program to engage the inclusive community; thus one should consider marketing and continuous feedback as key elements
6. Plan ahead to determine what decision-making structure will be used; the greater the community “ownership” of the process, the more likely the community will buy into the process
7. Promote interdependence not independence; bridge-building is an essential element

## Seven-Phased Process

The North Dakota State Data Center proposed a six-phased process that included organizational planning, assessment of challenges and concerns, development of goals and objectives, an asset inventory, development and then implementation of an action plan, and evaluation of program efforts.

- Phase I. Organizational planning
  - Task 1. Organize leadership group (this group)
  - Task 2. Develop list of constituency groups in county and assign each member responsibility for segment of clientele
- Phase II: Assessment of County Challenges and Areas of Concern
  - Task 3. Establish list of specific needs that should be identified in this phase
- Phase III: Development of Project Goals and Objectives
  - Task 4. Develop goals
- Phase IV: County Asset Inventory
  - Task 5. Asset mapping
  - Task 6. Develop objectives
- Phase V: Development of Action Plan
- Phase VI: Implementation of Action Plan
- Phase VII: Monitoring of Progress and Evaluation of Program Efforts

## Constituency Groups

Input from people representing a variety of segments across the county needs to be incorporated in order for the work of the needs assessment committee to be embraced by the overall community. Individual members of the committee were assigned to a list of constituency groups in order to provide a regular point of contact for feedback from these groups. The major constituency groups in Otter Tail County include:

- Business and professional groups
- City, county government and other policy makers
- Non-profits and advocacy groups
- Civic organizations and service clubs
- Faith community
- Public schools/education
- Non-public schools
- Healthcare, including substance abuse
- Arts and culture
- Law enforcement
- Child care
- Seniors
- Legal community
- Recreation
- Economic development
- Job training and youth development
- Libraries and cultural diversity

## **FOCUS GROUP RESULTS**

The North Dakota State Data Center conducted three focus groups in November of 2004 with “key leaders” from across the county to determine the issues that these individuals felt were most important for their communities. An informal web survey was conducted by committee members prior to the focus groups. Approximately 60 people across the county provided input. Results of this web survey indicated four primary themes or areas of concern, which were used to guide the focus group discussions: 1) family, 2) jobs and employment, 3) health and health care, and 4) alcohol and drugs. The focus groups were organized according to constituency groups within Otter Tail County, Minnesota. There were a total of 19 participants.

- Group 1: non-profits, advocacy groups, civic organizations, service clubs, faith communities, seniors, health care
  - Monday, November 15, 2004; Perham, Minnesota; 9 participants
- Group 2: professionals, business leaders, government, legal community, law enforcement, job training, economic development
  - Thursday, November 18, 2004; Fergus Falls, Minnesota; 6 participants
- Group 3: public schools, non-public schools, child care, libraries, recreation, arts
  - Monday, November 22, 2004; Pelican Rapids, Minnesota; 4 participants

Detailed notes were taken during the focus groups for later analysis. During analysis, the responses were grouped in themes according to the six main questions asked during the focus group. Results are presented in a brief report entitled, *Otter Tail County, Minnesota, Community Needs Assessment: 2004 Focus Group Results*, released in January of 2005, which may be accessed online at [www.ndsu.edu/sdc/publications.htm](http://www.ndsu.edu/sdc/publications.htm). A brief summary of the results is presented here.

Participants were first asked questions about “main” issues and concerns, and then discussed each of the four themes: 1) family, 2) jobs and employment, 3) health and health care, and 4) alcohol and drugs. Participants were aware of the four themes from their initial invitation. Participants seemed very interested in the process; it was not difficult to get feedback and each group went for nearly the full two hours because there was so much input. There were some divergent opinions, but participants remained very considerate. There were many points of common agreement, but feedback did not simply become a reiteration of what the last person said. The key leaders seemed forthcoming and energized, and the committee can feel very good about the information that was shared.

- What do you see as the main issues and concerns for your communities?
  - Child care, economic disparity, low number of jobs available
  - Cultural diversity and transportation were discussed and do not fit closely into one particular theme; transportation was discussed in detail
  - Some discussion of how to address issues and concerns took place; answers included consolidation of transportation, diversity and sexuality education, collaboration, maintaining programs, activities for children, elderly as mentors, home ownership
- What family issues and concerns do you see in your communities?
  - Taking back family time, under-parented children, disconnect between parents and teachers, maintaining programs that help families and children, affordable housing
- What jobs and employment issues and concerns do you see in your communities?
  - Benefits, student employment, retaining youth, high cost of child care, worker shortages, changing expectations of young employees, lack of space, volunteerism, higher education costs, poverty, too few local banks
- What health and health care issues and concerns do you see in your communities?
  - High cost of health insurance, high cost of prescription drugs, programs for seniors, seniors living in their own homes, mental health, domestic violence, AIDS education, long-term care insurance, nursing home funding cut-backs, medical staffing, deteriorating buildings
- What issues and concerns do you see in your communities regarding alcohol and drugs?
  - Meth issues, education regarding meth production and other issues, alcohol as a default drug for kids and adults, cut-backs in resources for drug and alcohol education and treatment
- How would you prioritize which issues and concerns are most important for your communities?
  - When prioritizing the issues and concerns at the conclusion of the focus groups, each of the four themes was included.
  - Family (family time, home ownership, Early Childhood education, welcome wagon, domestic violence, seniors)
  - Job issues, health and health care, literacy rate, greater availability of “decent” jobs, coordinating services, government funding, diversity

Because groups were organized according to a broad relationship between constituency groups, there were slight differences in the focus of the discussions within each group. However, there were many similarities between the groups as well. For example, transportation, supporting family success, program cut-backs, and meth issues came up in all of the groups. Collaboration, affordable housing, youth activities, looming shortage of workers, decrease of employment benefits and increasing costs of health insurance also came up frequently. Cultural diversity was strongly emphasized in Group 1, but was not discussed in the other two groups.

Overall, there was an emphasis on collaboration and pooling/maximizing resources. Participants expressed concern regarding funding continuity and program continuity. They also shared the idea that certain things are easier to address at a local level, while others are broader and more difficult and may be policy issues. In the end, the analysis of the focus groups offers overall insight into what seemed to be the most important issues, which can help guide the needs assessment.

## **PRIORITIZING ISSUES**

Once the focus group results were finalized, the needs assessment committee took on the difficult task of prioritizing issues. The North Dakota State Data Center first provided committee members a detailed outline of the main themes. These were the four themes presented to the focus group participants for discussion, plus a fifth theme regarding transportation, because that issue was raised several times by focus group participants. The outline included subthemes and was organized according to whether the topic could be categorized as individual-directed, or micro, or structural issues/barriers, or macro. Committee members then accomplished the difficult task of prioritizing issues. They selected “promoting family success.”

Five themes:

1. Promoting family success
2. Jobs and employment
3. Transportation
4. Meth issues
5. Health care

### 1. Subthemes Within “Promoting Family Success”

*Individual-directed = micro*

- Parenting skills (what makes a better parent)
- Underparented children
- Disconnect between parents and teachers
- Family-friendly work policies
- Meaningful, exciting activities for families and children
- Taking back family time

*Structural issues/barriers = macro*

- Child care/early education (quality, availability, affordability)
- Funding continuity for programs
- Affordable housing (promoting home ownership)
- Domestic violence
- Poverty

### 2. Subthemes Within “Jobs and Employment”

*Employer-oriented*

- Job benefits (e.g., health insurance)
- Employers promoting volunteerism
- Student employment:
  - 1) training regarding workplace expectations
  - 2) the need for businesses to recognize that school should be the priority for students
- Child care issues (flexibility, cost)

*Community-oriented*

- Need more “good” jobs (e.g., pay)
- Pending worker shortage (e.g., due to retirements)
- Education of skilled workers
- Attracting and keeping workers (e.g., community environment; housing, schools)
- Outmigration
- Child care
- Supporting business start-ups/entrepreneurship
- Addressing economic disparity (“haves” and “have-nots”)
- Issues of financing (e.g., venture capital, home ownership; mentioned as an issue of “fewer local banks”)

3. Subthemes Within "Transportation"
  - Collaboration among entities already providing transportation
  - Insurance/liability issues
  - Rural versus within a community
  - For workers, families, seniors, youth
  
4. Subthemes Within "Meth Issues"
  - Bigger problem than alcohol (less prevalent than alcohol, but growing at a faster rate; more addictive; more dangerous to the community; more expensive to treat)
  - Need for prevention (important role of education efforts; having enough officers and programs to provide education; negative consequences of cut-backs in funding to prevention efforts)
  - Treatment (need for, cost of, shortage of facilities)
  - Danger and cost burden of clean-up
  - Educating farmers, business owners, etc. regarding meth production
  - Law enforcement stretched in face of increasing meth problem
  
5. Subthemes Within "Health Care"
  - Employer benefits (increasing costs transferred to employees; reducing benefits by reducing employee hours)
  - Access to assistance (e.g., programs for seniors where income restrictions are too rigid)
  - High cost of insurance
  - High cost of prescriptions (e.g., seniors choosing between their prescriptions and eating)
  - Long-term care insurance
  - Nursing homes (funding cut-backs; decreasing beds at a time when need is only going to grow; shortages of nurses; issues of quality of care)
  - Mental health (not talked about enough; issues of funding and availability)
  - Treatment facilities (issues of funding and availability; increasing demand)
  - Deteriorating buildings

## **COMMUNITY ASSET MAPPING**

After the committee prioritized the themes, and chose issues relating to "Promoting Family Success," a meeting with the Planning and Evaluation Work Group of the Otter Tail Family Services Collaborative was held to begin the process of asset mapping. After discussing guidelines for asset mapping, participants were asked to do asset mapping for the topic of family success. They were provided a resources worksheet where they identified an organization and then listed associated personnel, facilities, equipment, programs or services provided, and relationships with other organizations.

### Guidelines for Asset Mapping

Source: <http://www.synergos.org/globalphilanthropy/02/abcdoverview.htm>

Mapping is more than gathering data. It is very important that citizens and their associations do the asset mapping themselves so that they themselves build new relationships, learn more about the contributions and talents of community members, and identify potential linkages between different assets.

- *Identifying associations*
  - The starting point is to identify associations in the community. These relationships are the engines of community action, and are therefore essential (and often unrecognized) as assets. One way to do this is to start with the core group and ask them what associations and informal groups they belong to. Once these have been listed, ask the core group to expand the list to include associations they know about. This longer list of associations can then be clustered by type and those associations most likely to participate in working together for a common purpose can be identified. In the process of identifying associations, the list of leaders in the community also expands.

- *Identifying individual gifts, skills, and capacities*
  - There are many ways of trying to elicit individual gifts, skills and capacities. The important thing is to ensure that this is not just a data gathering exercise, but a way in which people feel that their abilities and contributions are appreciated. Eventually a "capacity inventory" is developed, listing these capacities in categories such as "community-building skills," "enterprise skills," "teaching skills," and "artistic skills." A simpler approach might be to divide them into skills of the heart, head, and hand.
- *Identifying the assets of local institutions*
  - This would include government agencies, non-government agencies and private sector businesses. The assets of these institutions could be the services and programs they provide, the meeting places they offer, the equipment and other supplies they may have, or the communications links they may have. They also have paid or unpaid staff who may be important links in the community.
- *Identifying physical assets and natural resources*
  - Assets such as land, water, mineral or other resources can be listed here, identifying those which are communally owned and managed and those which are individually owned and managed.
- *Mapping the local economy*
  - This exercise helps people in the community understand how the local economy works, showing how well local resources are maximized for local economic benefit. Are products and services imported that could be produced locally?

#### Themes Derived From Asset Mapping

A point that came out of the asset mapping meeting was the definition of family should be expanded to include the continuum of family types from units with children to elderly care. Also, the goal to keep in mind is to continue asset mapping and develop a formal process to both collect and disseminate information (e.g., via a website).

1. Service Integration
  - Consider organizing services in a strategic way to improve access, efficiency, and use
  - Topics to address:
    - a) effectiveness of services (quality)
    - b) use of services
    - c) availability of services
    - d) issues with service delivery
    - e) barriers/opportunities for service integration
2. Family Friendly Work Environment
  - Properly balance work and family obligations
  - Create integrated work, family and community relationships
  - Topics to address:
    - a) effective ways to communicate with employers
    - b) incentives that motivate employers
    - c) best approaches to messaging
    - d) issues related to diversity of employers...size, location
3. School-Family-Community Partnership
  - Create social networks that link family, school and community
  - Expand education model to family lifelong learning
  - Focus on successful models (e.g., ECFE)
  - Topics to address:
    - a) effective ways to communicate with educational outlets
    - b) diversity of educational outlets
    - c) issues related to educational use (who, where, how)
    - d) barriers/opportunities to educational partnerships



4. Basic Needs
  - o Health, food, housing, protection, transportation, etc.
  - o Maintain awareness of issues related to basic needs including access, quality, cost, etc.

### **GENERALIZEABLE NEEDS ASSESSMENT SURVEY**

A generalizeable needs assessment survey of residents in Otter Tail County, Minnesota, was conducted in June 2005 by staff at the North Dakota State Data Center. A total of 408 respondents completed the survey. Results are presented in a report entitled, *Otter Tail County, Minnesota, Community Needs Assessment: 2005 Survey Results*, released in November of 2005, which may be accessed online at [www.ndsu.edu/sdc/publications.htm](http://www.ndsu.edu/sdc/publications.htm). A brief summary of the results is presented here.

Survey questions were grouped into seven categories consisting of 1) community concerns, 2) housing issues, 3) healthcare issues, 4) educational issues, 5) childcare issues, 6) public transportation issues, and 7) other program services. Respondents were asked to rate the level of priority (i.e., not a priority, low priority, medium priority, or high priority) for each topic within the seven categories. A majority of respondents placed a high priority rating on issues and concerns within the categories of community concerns, healthcare issues, childcare issues, and educational issues. None of the public transportation issues received a majority high rating. A summary of each of the seven themes is presented, followed by a table listing the issues or concerns where the majority of respondents gave ratings of high priority. A brief discussion of how well the results of the survey results match the focus group results is also presented.

#### 1) Community Concerns:

- o A large majority of respondents said the abuse or domestic violence of children and adults was a high priority. A majority of respondents said crime and law enforcement and the overall needs of the elderly were high priorities. Respondents had mixed views with respect to whether promoting diversity was a high, medium, or low priority.

#### 2) Housing Issues:

- o A majority of respondents said shelter for victims of neglect, abuse, or domestic violence was a high priority. Respondents had mixed views with respect to whether elderly living facilities was a high or medium priority. Respondents also had mixed views with respect to whether affordability of housing repairs and access to shelter for the homeless were high, medium, or low priority issues. Regarding access to financing for buying houses, affordability of rents, availability of housing, and availability of rental assistance, respondents said the issues were high, medium, or low priorities, or they did not know. Respondents indicated that temporary housing was either a medium or low priority.

#### 3) Healthcare Issues:

- o A large majority of respondents said meth or other illegal drug use was a high priority; a majority of respondents said availability of health services and alcohol abuse were high priorities. Respondents had mixed views with respect to whether mental health was a high or medium priority, and whether tobacco and secondhand smoke, and transportation to and from health services were high, medium, or low priorities.

#### 4) Educational Issues:

- o A majority of respondents said threat of violence at school, literacy and reading programs, and parent-teacher communication were high priorities. Respondents had mixed views with respect to whether school preparedness, help for families of children with disciplinary problems, availability of parenting skills education, before and after school programs, and school drop out rate were high or medium priorities.

- 5) Childcare Issues:
  - A majority of respondents said childcare for children with special needs and adequate, safe childcare facilities were high priorities. Respondents had mixed views with respect to whether employer support of family childcare needs and availability of after-hours childcare services were high or medium priorities.
  
- 6) Public Transportation Issues:
  - Respondents had mixed views with respect to whether public transportation for people with special needs was a high or medium priority, and whether public transportation and after hours public transportation were medium or low priorities.
  
- 7) Other Program Services:
  - A majority of respondents said availability of jobs that match job skills was a high priority. Respondents had mixed views with respect to whether availability of skills training, disaster relief, promoting physical activity, access to respite care services for caregivers, promoting volunteerism, nutrition education, consumer protection programs, and money management programs were high or medium priorities. Respondents viewed cultural activities, and clothing and furniture assistance as medium or low priorities.

**Issues or concerns considered to be “high priority” by the majority of respondents**

Theme	Issues/concerns	Percentage of respondents
Healthcare	Meth or other illegal drug use	86.3
Community Concerns	Abuse or domestic violence of children and adults	74.3
Housing	Shelter for victims of neglect, abuse, or domestic violence	62.5
Community Concerns	Crime and law enforcement	60.8
Healthcare	Availability of health services	58.1
Educational	Threat of violence at school	55.9
Healthcare	Alcohol abuse	55.9
Community Concerns	Overall needs of the elderly	55.4
Educational	Literacy and reading programs	55.4
Other Program Services	Availability of jobs that match job skills	54.9
Educational	Parent-teacher communication	53.7
Childcare	Childcare for children with special needs	51.5
Childcare	Adequate, safe childcare services	51.5

Issues from each of the four themes discussed in the focus groups were among those deemed “high priority” by a majority of survey respondents. Overall results of the focus groups, therefore, are consistent with the generalizable survey results. In addition, the survey results also confirm the choice made by the needs assessment committee to focus on the focus group theme of “Promoting Family Success.” This is the category in which the greatest number of high priority items from the survey fall.

- Survey issues fitting focus group discussions on the theme of “family issues and concerns”:
  - Threat of violence at school
  - Literacy and reading programs
  - Parent-teacher communication
  - Childcare for children with special needs
  - Adequate, safe childcare services
  - Shelter for victims of neglect, abuse, or domestic violence
  - Overall needs of the elderly
  
- Survey issues fitting focus group discussions on the theme of “jobs and employment”:
  - Availability of jobs that match job skills

- Survey issues fitting focus group discussions on the theme of “health and health care”:
  - Availability of health services
- Survey issues fitting focus group discussions on the theme of “alcohol and drugs”:
  - Meth or other illegal drug use
  - Alcohol abuse
  - Crime and law enforcement

## **MOVING FORWARD**

- Establish consensus on direction (“process” for moving forward)
- Narrow the focus – can’t tackle all, so how will issues be chosen; decide on an overall theme and some subthemes (to make a large process manageable, break it down into pieces); determine how this focus can impact other areas as well
- Is there sufficient information on the subtheme to move forward? Is it universal so that existing literature can be used, or is this area unique and need special exploration? How can a subtheme be addressed – through *action* (a “new” program or initiative), *linkage* (linking “existing” resources), or *policy* (creating a mechanism for policy issues to be aired)? Do assets need to be known first? Can divisions be made along broad strokes of individual/structural, employer/community, etc.?
- Go back to constituency groups; asset mapping (helping county figure out where strengths are once the conversation can be focused; who presently does things?)
- Survey the community for input on attitudes and directions
- Then, strategize to achieve – defining goals and objectives with a mechanism for evaluation and feedback
- Create a public relations mechanism; community needs to embrace the process and feel a part of it; can even line up future activities so people will know what is coming (and how issues were prioritized) – need effective media communication to let community know this is a long-term strategy

### **Guideline for Prioritizing Issues**

The key is to focus on the issues that are most critical to achieving the community vision. Look at possible causes of the issues, and consider the possibility that several issues may share a common cause. Suggested criteria for prioritizing issues include:

- Extent to which the issue relates to the community vision.
- Number of people the issue affects.
- Extent to which the issue affects the most vulnerable people.
- Cost to the affected individuals, for example, loss of income, disability.
- Trends in the issue: is it getting better or worse?
- Cost to the community, for example, image, dollars, loss of industry.
- Likely ability of the community to have an impact on the issue.
- Extent to which citizens are concerned about the issue.
- Likely support from constituencies.
- Likelihood that the community can reach a consensus on a proposed solution.

Selection of issues should be kept to a manageable size (i.e., 3-7). Focusing on issues requiring major action should further reduce the number of priority items. Also, state issues in terms of 1) positive conditions for people (e.g., improve self-sufficiency), and 2) challenges (e.g., unsafe schools, lack of affordable housing).

To narrow the focus of the priority issues in order to develop measurable outcomes, the following critical questions will need to be addressed:

- What are the important components of this issue? Whom do they affect most often?
- Who would most benefit if this issue were addressed? How would they be better off?
- What are the major challenges that this population group faces? How would their lives change if the challenges were overcome?
- What are the most important opportunities available to this population? How would their lives be enhanced if these opportunities were seized?
- What do residents see as the major challenges in their communities? How would the quality of their life improve if the challenges were overcome?
- What do residents view as the major opportunities in their communities? How would their lives be enhanced if these opportunities were seized?