

County Needs Assessment Workbook for New Mexico Extension Agents

Series 1 of 3

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INTRODUCTION

Effective Extension programming begins with understanding the needs, concerns, and opportunities within a community. New Mexico's communities are diverse and include Hispanic, Indigenous, agricultural, rural, and urban populations with unique strengths, cultures, languages, and challenges.¹ Because community needs vary across counties, a one-size-fits-all approach to Extension programming is often ineffective.

A needs assessment is a systematic process used to identify gaps between current and desired conditions to guide planning and decision-making.² Respondents emphasized community assessments, county Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats (SWOT) analyses, and data-driven program planning as essential components of effective Extension programming.³ Survey results also indicated that approximately half of responding county agents and county directors had five years or less of Extension experience, highlighting the importance of practical resources to support stakeholder engagement, needs assessment, and county plan-of-work development. New county agents are provided orientation and training resources through the NMSU Self-Study Guide for the New Extension Agent; however, practical tools focused specifically on community needs assessment and county program planning remain important for successful Extension programming.⁴

This publication is the first in a three-part series on Extension program development. Series 1 focuses on community needs assessment, Series 2 on program planning, and Series 3 on program implementation, evaluation, and impact reporting. Together, the series provides practical guidance for New Mexico Extension agents.

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The purpose of this workbook is designed to provide New Mexico Extension agents with practical guidance and tools for conducting county-level needs assessments. The workbook includes practical assessment and planning tools for Extension agents.⁵

COUNTY COMMUNITY PROFILE

Why Develop a County Community Profile?

A community profile provides a foundation for conducting a needs assessment. Before identifying community needs, Extension agents should understand the county's population, economy, agricultural industries, community resources, and demographic characteristics. A community profile helps agents recognize local strengths and challenges, identify underserved audiences, and interpret needs assessment results within the county's unique context. The county community profile should include a county snapshot, community assets, and a review of existing data sources. Developing a community profile helps Extension agents understand local conditions before conducting a needs assessment. Additional guidance is available in the Self-Study Guide for the New Extension Agent.⁴

County Snapshot: summarizes key demographic, economic, agricultural, and community characteristics. Understanding these characteristics helps agents identify trends, opportunities, and potential challenges that may influence Extension programming.

Community Assets: the people, organizations, institutions, facilities, and resources that contribute to a community's well-being. Identifying community assets helps agents recognize existing strengths, build partnerships, and leverage local resources to address community needs.

Existing Data Sources: provide valuable information about community conditions and trends before additional information is collected. Community profiles and secondary data sources are commonly recommended as the foundation for community needs assessments.⁵

STAKEHOLDER IDENTIFICATION

Identifying stakeholders is an important step in the needs assessment process. Stakeholders are individuals, groups, or organizations that are affected by community issues or have an interest in Extension programs.

Underserved audiences are individuals or groups who may have limited access to Extension programs or whose needs are not adequately represented in community decision-making processes. Identifying underserved audiences helps ensure that Extension programs are inclusive and responsive to the needs of all community members. Examples may include populations facing language, cultural, geographic, economic, educational, technological, or transportation barriers. Underserved audiences vary across counties and should be identified through local data collection and stakeholder engagement.

Community partners are organizations that can assist with identifying needs, delivering programs, and reaching target audiences. Potential partners may include school districts, New Mexico Department of Agriculture, Soil and Water Conservation Districts, acequia associations, tribal governments, county governments, producer organizations, 4-H leaders, and Future Farmers of America (FFA) advisors. Additional partners may include irrigation districts (e.g., Elephant Butte Irrigation District), county health councils, community colleges, pueblo and tribal Extension programs, local economic development organizations, and farmers market associations.

STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT

Stakeholder engagement is one of the most important components of a community needs assessment. New Mexico communities are diverse and often differ significantly in culture, language, geography, economic conditions, and access to resources.

Key stakeholder interviews are one-on-one conversations with individuals who possess knowledge of community issues and opportunities. Sample interview questions are provided in **Appendix 2**. In some cases or counties, being bilingual is important.

Community Meetings provide residents with opportunities to discuss local issues and identify priorities. Advisory Committees provide ongoing guidance throughout the needs assessment and program planning process.

COMMUNITY NEEDS ASSESSMENT

Community needs assessments involve collecting information from stakeholders to identify community priorities, concerns, and opportunities.

Surveys can be used to collect information from a broad range of stakeholders and identify community priorities, program needs, and emerging issues. A sample survey is provided in **Appendix 1**.

Focus Groups allow agents to gather detailed feedback from small groups of participants and gain a deeper understanding of community concerns and perspectives. Sample focus group questions are provided in **Appendix 3**.

Listening Sessions provide community members with an opportunity to discuss local issues, concerns, and opportunities in an open setting.

COMMUNITY NEEDS INVENTORY

After collecting information from surveys, interviews, community meetings, advisory committees, and existing county data, Extension agents should summarize the findings in a community needs inventory. The inventory helps organize assessment findings.

Identified Needs are issues that community members consistently recognize as important. These may include concerns related to drought preparedness, water management, acequia management, beginning farmer and rancher education, agricultural profitability, youth workforce development, housing affordability, and community health. Needs identified by multiple stakeholder groups often represent the highest priorities for Extension programming.

Emerging Issues are new concerns or opportunities that may affect the community in the future. Examples may include changing environmental conditions, workforce challenges, demographic shifts, the use of artificial intelligence and digital technologies, or alternative agricultural enterprises. Recognizing emerging issues helps agents prepare programs that address future needs and opportunities.

Unmet needs are issues for which there are currently limited educational programs, services, or resources. These needs may involve underserved audiences, participation barriers, or gaps in existing programs. Addressing unmet needs can help Extension expand its reach and increase program impact within the county. A sample community needs inventory worksheet is provided in **Appendix 4**.

COUNTY SWOT ANALYSIS

A Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats (SWOT) analysis is a planning tool used to evaluate a county's internal strengths and weaknesses and external opportunities and threats. Conducting a SWOT analysis helps Extension agents better understand local conditions, identify factors that may influence program success, and develop strategies that address community priorities.

Strengths are internal assets and advantages that support Extension programming and community development. Examples may include strong community partnerships, active advisory committees, agricultural resources, local leadership, volunteer support, and existing Extension programs.

Weaknesses are internal limitations that may affect program delivery or community development efforts. Examples may include limited staffing, budget constraints, low program participation, language barriers, or lack of volunteers.

Opportunities are external conditions that may create favorable circumstances for future programming and community growth. Examples may include value-added agriculture, local food systems, outdoor recreation, renewable energy development, and tribal economic development.

Threats are external factors that may negatively affect communities or Extension programs. Examples may include prolonged drought, declining rural populations, water shortages, workforce shortages, changing regulations, or reductions in public funding.

The SWOT analysis should be completed using information collected during the needs assessment process and used to support priority setting and program planning. A sample county SWOT analysis worksheet is provided in **Appendix 5**.

PRIORITIZING COMMUNITY NEEDS

Following the community needs inventory and SWOT analysis, Extension agents should prioritize identified needs to determine where limited time, funding, and resources can have the greatest impact. A prioritization process helps agents focus on the most important and feasible needs.

Importance Ranking evaluates the significance of each identified need based on information collected during surveys, interviews, focus groups, community meetings, advisory committees, and existing county data. Factors to consider may include the number of people affected, stakeholder interests, urgency of the issue, and potential benefits of addressing the need.

Feasibility Ranking evaluates the practicality of addressing a need based on information identified through the SWOT analysis. Factors may include available resources, staff expertise, community partnerships, funding opportunities, organizational capacity, and potential barriers to program implementation.

Priority Selection combines information from the community needs inventory, importance ranking, and feasibility ranking to identify the highest-priority needs for Extension programming. Selected priorities should reflect stakeholder input, local conditions, available resources, and the mission of Cooperative Extension.

The prioritization process provides a foundation for developing county plans of work and allocating resources to programs with the greatest potential impact. A sample community Needs Prioritization Worksheet is provided in **Appendix 6**.

PROGRAM PLANNING

The prioritized community needs identified through the assessment should guide county program planning. Agents should develop programs that address high-priority needs, target appropriate audiences, and support desired outcomes.

ANNUAL COUNTY NEEDS ASSESSMENT SUMMARY

The Annual County Needs Assessment Summary provides a concise overview of the assessment findings and serves as a reference for county program planning. The summary should be completed after the community needs inventory, SWOT analysis, and prioritization process have been finalized.

Top Community Needs are the highest priority issues identified through stakeholder input, data collection, and the prioritization process. These needs represent the most important concerns and opportunities within the county.

Priority Programs are the Extension programs and activities developed to address identified community needs. Programs should align with county priorities, available resources, and stakeholder interests.

Future Opportunities are emerging issues, partnerships, funding opportunities, or program areas that may warrant additional attention in future years. Identifying future opportunities helps agents remain responsive to changing community conditions and needs.

The Annual County Needs Assessment Summary can support county plans of work, advisory committee discussions, program reporting, and future planning efforts. There are several ways to conduct the annual County Needs Assessment including online survey tools and group facilitation meetings.

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APPENDIX

Appendix 1 – Sample Survey

1. What are the top three agriculture, family, youth, or community issues in your county?
2. Which topic would you most like Extension to provide education or training on?
 - ☐ Agriculture (please specify:)
 - ☐ Livestock (please specify:)
 - ☐ Gardening/Horticulture (please specify:)
 - ☐ Natural Resources (please specify:)
 - ☐ Family and Consumer Sciences (please specify:)
 - ☐ 4-H Youth Development (please specify:)
 - ☐ Natural Resources (please specify:)
 - ☐ Other: _____

If applicable, please describe the specific topic or issue you would like addressed:

3. Which population groups are underserved in your county?
 - ☐ Youth
 - ☐ Older adults
 - ☐ Tribal communities
 - ☐ Spanish-speaking residents
 - ☐ Beginning farmers and ranchers
 - ☐ Low-income households
 - ☐ Other _____
4. Have you attended an Extension program before?
 - ☐ Yes
 - ☐ No
5. What is the best way for Extension to reach you?
 - ☐ Workshops
 - ☐ Community meetings
 - ☐ Social media
 - ☐ Email
 - ☐ Printed materials
 - ☐ Other: _____
6. What suggestions do you have for improving Extension programs in your community?

Appendix 2 – Sample Interview Questions

1. What are the biggest needs in your community?
2. What agriculture, family, youth, or community issues concern you most?
3. What should Extension do more of in this county?
4. Are there groups or communities that Extension is not currently reaching?
5. What educational programs would be most helpful in this county?
6. What is working well in your community?
7. What new issues or challenges are emerging?
8. What prevents people from attending Extension programs?
9. What organizations, agencies, or community leaders should Extension work with?
10. What advice do you have for improving Extension programs?

Appendix 3 – Sample Focus Group Guide

Introduction

Thank you for participating today. We would like to learn about the needs, concerns, and opportunities in our community. Your feedback will help guide future Extension programs.

Facilitator Note (Optional)

The facilitator may use a Nominal Group Technique (NGT) to help participants identify, discuss, and prioritize community needs. This process allows all participants to contribute ideas and helps the group reach consensus on the most important issues.

Discussion Questions

1. What are the biggest needs in this community?
2. What concerns you the most?
3. What programs would help people in this community?
4. Who is not being reached by current programs?
5. What should Extension focus on in the future?
6. What barriers prevent people from participating in Extension programs?

Closing Question

7. Is there anything else you would like Extension to know?

Suggested Group Size: 6–10 participants

Suggested Length: 30–60 minutes

Appendix 4 – Community Needs Inventory Worksheet

Identified Need	Source of Information	Priority (High, Medium, Low)	Notes
Rising fertilizer and fuel costs	Producer survey, advisory committee	High	Increasing production costs for farmers and ranchers
Water shortages and drought conditions	Community meeting, producer interviews	High	Concerns about irrigation water and forage availability
Limited agricultural labor availability	Producer interviews, advisory committee	Medium	Difficulty hiring and retaining seasonal workers

Reflection Questions:

1. Which needs were identified most often?
2. Which needs affect the largest number of people?
3. Which needs are not being addressed by current programs?

Top Three County Priorities

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

Appendix 5 – County SWOT Analysis Worksheet

Strengths Strong community partnership	Weaknesses Limited staffing
Opportunities Value-added agriculture	Threats Drought and water shortages

Reflection Questions

1. Which strengths can help address community needs in Appendix 4?
2. Which weaknesses limit Extension programs?
3. Which opportunities should be pursued?
4. Which threats may affect the community?
5. What are the county's top priorities?

Appendix 6- Community Needs Prioritization Worksheet

<i>Step 1. Review of the Scoring Guide</i>		
Score	Importance	Extension Capacity
1	Low	Very Limited
2	Below Average	Limited
3	Moderate	Moderate
4	High	Strong
5	Very High	Very Strong

<i>Step 2. Complete the Prioritization Worksheet</i>				
Community Need	Importance (1–5)	Extension Capacity (1–5)	Total Score	Priority Rank
Water conservation education	5	4	9	1
Rising fertilizer and fuel costs	4	3	7	2
Total Score = Importance + Extension Capacity, Priority Rank should be assigned based on total score, with the highest score receiving Rank 1.				

<i>Step 3. Identify Priority Needs for Program Planning</i>	
Rank	Priority Need
1	_____
2	_____
3	_____