INTRODUCTION

The City of Saskatoon, Leisure Services Department, developed a needs assessment pilot project as a result of a re-organization of the Parks and Recreation Department in 1988. The Department recognized that it had to become more creative and more accountable in adapting leisure services to changing public leisure needs. The needs assessment project was a pro-active strategy aimed at identifying public needs and priorities and matching priorities with existing and potential community resources. To date, the information gathered through the needs assessment process has helped the Leisure Services Department and other leisure service delivery agencies to make critical decisions on the most efficient and effective use of our limited community resources.

This article provides an overview of the needs assessment process chosen by our Department and outlines some of the successes experienced to date.

WHY NEEDS ASSESSMENT?

As part of a 1988 re-organization, a management plan for the '90s was developed. This management plan provided direction for the Leisure Services Department to move from being one of several providers of direct services within the community delivery system, to being a principal advocate and primary facilitator. The intent was not to demote other leisure service providers to a less important role, but to proactively assist them to better focus their strengths from an overall community perspective, and to more efficiently use the limited resources available in the community. In essence, the Department would be working closer with other groups, organizations and agencies to see which provider(s) could best serve the public leisure needs, in the most efficient manner. The City wanted to reaffirm that its role was to ensure optimum delivery of services to the public, whether or not the Department performed the service. The Department would begin to intensify its efforts to stimulate collaborative research, information exchange, program planning, and evaluation. This effort would result in a clearer justification for program and infrastructure development.

In moving to become the primary facilitator in the community, the Department has adopted a marketing orientation for service development and delivery. The marketing orientation differs from a direct service product orientation in that it recognizes people do not buy programs or services, but they do buy (or desire to experience) the expectation of benefits from participation (Murphy, Nieporth, Jamieson, Williams, 1991).

Contemporary community life is characterized by identification with others who share values, interests and lifestyles. Participation based on shared interests and leisure lifestyle is voluntary and exists as long as individuals are motivated to participate, identify, and relate to others who are similarly involved. It is therefore crucial that the needs assessment process adopted by our Department provides detailed information about the various leisure participation patterns and interests of the many interest groups in our community. Leisure service delivery agencies must be able to clearly articulate who they are providing services for, what they are trying to accomplish, and to what extent they have been able to meet these goals.

Another factor that has supported the need for this kind of detailed information is the alarming rate of volunteer burnout in the community. The Leisure Services Department is being told that Community Associations need to know what kinds of leisure activities interest the general public. The volunteers have been utilizing a number of public input tools for some time. Public meetings are held in response to specific issues; each neighbourhood has a direct link to the Department through their volunteer Community Association; and many of the city-wide special interest groups provide direct feedback to Department staff on an on-going basis. The one area where the Department has lacked information was in relation to public participation and interest in specific leisure activities.

After much deliberation, the Department decided to establish a needs assessment process that uses a base survey instrument to consistently collect data in each of the five suburban areas in the city (approximately 35,000 people per suburban area). One suburban area each year is surveyed until all five are completed, and the process begins again in the sixth year (the Confederation suburban area). The Department would begin to compile the suburban data each year and provide a city-wide perspective.

The Confederation suburban area was chosen to begin the pilot project for a number of reasons. The Department had recently closed a small indoor aquatic facility due to lack of use, the suburban
leisure complex was not being used anywhere near capacity, there was a high percentage of aboriginal residents, and the Department knew little about their leisure participation habits and interests.

To begin the pilot project, leisure services staff met with volunteers from the neighbourhood Community Associations, and staff from interested leisure service delivery agencies (e.g., Boys & Girls Club, Indian and Metis Friendship Centre, etc.) to discuss the concept. Based on the feedback from initial meetings, a call for proposals was developed that outlined the kind of data the Department wished to collect and how they planned to use the information gathered from the surveys. The Leisure Services Department had little expertise or experience in market research, so the Department went to the market to secure these services.

Anderson/Fast Market Research from Saskatoon was successful in developing a proposal that most closely matched the requirements for developing a system that could collect reliable data at a reasonable cost. They were also chosen because of their expertise and previous experiences in similar market research projects. Anderson/Fast are responsible for survey design and testing, training and supervision of interviewers, data input and testing, and producing initial summary reports for the suburban area.

A base survey was designed to collect detailed information about respondents' present participation patterns, and future participation interests. After pre-testing the base survey, minor changes were made and the process for collecting data began.

In order to provide respondents with a frame of reference for completing the survey, many definitions have been developed. Nine leisure categories are used to group activities identified by participants. These groupings are applied to present participation and interest. The categories include: health & fitness, heritage, lifeskills, literary arts, multicultural, outdoor recreation, performing arts, sports and games, visual arts.

To develop profiles of significant interest groups, many demographic characteristics are captured in the survey.

Leisure service delivery agencies must be able to clearly articulate who they are providing services for, what they are trying to accomplish, and to what extent they have been able to meet these goals.

Participants are asked about their age, ethnographic background, whether or not they have a disability, the type of family structure they live in, their employment status, household income, gender, and geographic location.

It is very important for the data to be reliable and proportionately representative of people living in the suburban area. To ensure this, a multi-stage sample is established and the demographic information of the completed surveys is checked daily against the suburban profile to ensure there is no over, or under representation of the various interest groups.

Door-to-door interviews are used because they are the most effective method of capturing the detailed type of information the Department wants to gather. The interviewers are able to set the frame of reference for the respondent and answer any questions they may have about their participation or interest in any of the nine leisure categories. Previous experience has shown us that aboriginal respondents are more comfortable completing a survey if another aboriginal person is asking the questions, so the Saskatchewan Indian Federated College is used to provide names of potential interviewers. The Saskatoon Open Door Society is also used to ensure we have interviewers who can speak languages other than English, in the case that someone prefers to complete the survey in another language. On average, each interview takes approximately a half hour to forty-five minutes to complete, and to date, we have averaged a forty percent response rate from households approached for interviews. We are very pleased with this high response rate as it indicates people are interested in providing information that will help develop leisure activities for the community.

The neighbourhood Community Associations are very supportive of the needs assessment process. In an effort to
ensure there are sufficient interviewers for the suburban area, the communities recruit interested individuals who receive training and are paid for the time they spend interviewing. The Community Associations also play a key role in letting the general public know about the upcoming survey in their neighborhood. Advertisements are circulated to all neighbourhoods in the suburban area through the Community Association and school newsletters. The public seems to be more willing to complete the surveys when they know the Community Association has endorsed the process.

INFORMATION ANALYSIS AND PROGRAM DESIGN

Once the data and initial summary reports have been turned over to the Leisure Services Department, a great deal of time and energy is spent by staff analyzing the information for use in developing new leisure activities and modifying or dropping existing ones.

The data is stored on a single user personal computer and a relational database program (Paradox 4.0) is used to produce a vast number of reports and graphs for each of the nine leisure need categories. Paradox is used because it is user-friendly and has a relatively short learning curve for staff producing reports and graphs.

Once the reports and graphs are produced from the data collected in the suburban area, a workgroup of Leisure Services Department staff is formed. The workgroup is responsible for sifting through the information reports and graphs and producing the following documents for each of the nine leisure need categories. When these documents are completed, they provide the focus for program design at the suburban area and neighbourhood levels.

PROGRAM DESIGN GUIDELINES

A set of Program Design Guidelines are developed for each suburban area of the city after it is surveyed. The guidelines have a section for each of the nine leisure need categories.

An overview is provided of the market and direction is given for developing specific leisure activities. The guidelines provide the following demographic profiles for both the existing and potential markets:

- Age group
- Household income
- Ethnic background
- Disabilities
- Family structure
- Employment status
- Gender

The Program Design Guidelines provide specific information for the existing market (existing participants who are satisfied with their present participation and don't want to become more active):

- Reasons for participation
- Where participants live (neighbourhood)
- Frequency of participation
- Satisfaction with participation
- Preferred participation frequency
- Treatment by staff and/or volunteers
- Satisfaction with facilities
- Satisfaction with money/time spent participating
- General satisfaction with participation
- Barriers to participation

The following information is provided for the potential market (existing participants who want to increase their participation, and non-participants who would like to become active) broken down into two categories 1) general respondents interested in participating and; 2) significant interest groups from the demographic profiles:

- Reasons for interest in participation
- Where participants live
- Satisfaction with present participation
- Barriers to participating
- Preferred format (structured/unstructured), time of year, days of the week, and time of day
- Preferred location (neighbourhood, suburban area, city wide)
- Agency general expectations for a delivery agency interested in meeting the needs and barriers expressed
- Pricing considerations
- Performance indicators to measure to what extent needs were met and barriers were addressed

The Program Design Guidelines are...
then used to develop Activity Plans which provide direction on delivering specific leisure activities.

**ACTIVITY PLANS (produced for each type of activity e.g. aerobics - beginner)**

Activity Plans contain information for easy retrieval by any agency interested in targeting the delivery of specific leisure activities:

- Need category (e.g. Health and Fitness)
- Program category (i.e. Physical Fitness or Emotional Wellbeing)
- Opportunity area (i.e. awareness, skill development, self directed, competitive, excellence)
- Interest group (e.g. specific age groups, ethnic group, income group, family type, etc.)

The following information is provided to assist delivery agencies in developing their lesson plans, workshop outlines, event schedules, etc.:

- Leadership expectations (direction for developing the activity)
- Activity components (objectives and components that must be covered in delivering this activity)
- Methods of delivery (suggestions for format, time of year, days of week, time of day, length of activity, location and potential delivery agencies)
- Resources required to deliver the activity (materials, equipment, facility, personnel)
- Performance indicators and evaluation methods to measure the quality of the activity design and the quality of delivery

The following four examples give you some idea of how the information collected through the suburban area needs assessment is being used:

1) Sometimes the information from the needs assessment database doesn’t provide us with the exact answer we are looking for, in fact, sometimes it causes us to ask more questions. A good example is the evaluation our department did on use and subsidy for childcare/babysitting services at a leisure centre. When we checked the needs assessment database to see who was expressing the lack of childcare/babysitting as a barrier to participation, it showed one of highest interest groups expressing the barrier was senior citizens. My first response was to run the query on the database again, and guess what, same answer. We started to ask the question “why would senior citizens need childcare/babysitting services?” One of the staff responded, “it’s obvious to me, my parents take care of our children often, especially after work, and when they have the kids with them, they obviously need childcare/babysitting services to take part in an activity that interests them.” So the answers are not always as straightforward as many of us would like!

2) The Saskatoon Public Library came to our Department and asked if the needs assessment could provide them with information that would be helpful in applying for a federal grant. The grant is to purchase a computer system that scans books and newspapers, and reads the information out loud to people with visual impairments. The needs assessment database shows that while the general population has a forty percent interest in participating in literary arts activities, ninety percent of respondents with a disability are interested in literary arts activities. This information helps the Public Library to present a grant application that clearly supports the need to purchase the scanner/reader system.

3) The Saskatoon Public Health Department recently vacated a large office space in one of our leisure centres and Leisure Services Department staff were investigating potential uses for this open space. The needs assessment information indicates that health and fitness activities are the second highest need being expressed in this suburban area and respondents are willing to pay for the entire cost to participate. While there are already a number of health and fitness activities being offered by our Department in this facility, the needs assessment information indicates there is still substantial demand for these types of activities. A call for proposals was advertised to solicit private health and fitness opportunities in this vacant space. As a result 01 of the proposals submitted to our Department, a private health and fitness club has been successfully oper-

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Need Category</th>
<th>Presently Participating &amp; Satisfied</th>
<th>Presently Participating &amp; Would More Often</th>
<th>Not Participating But Are Interested</th>
<th>Total Market</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Health/Fitness</td>
<td>44%</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>62%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Heritage</td>
<td>32%</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>72%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Life skill</td>
<td>26%</td>
<td>1%</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>21%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Literacy Arts</td>
<td>49%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>51%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Multicultural</td>
<td>55%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>62%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Outdoor Recreation</td>
<td>68%</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>76%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Performing Arts</td>
<td>40%</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sports Games</td>
<td>47%</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>62%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Visual Arts</td>
<td>35%</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>55%</td>
</tr>
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ating out of this space for over a year. This service helps to meet the public need being expressed for health and fitness activities without the Leisure Services Department becoming directly involved in service delivery. The service also exposes participants to the existing programs in the leisure centre being offered by the Public Library and the Leisure Services Department.

WHERE TO FROM HERE?

The needs assessment project is enabling our Department and other leisure services delivery agencies to become more creative and more accountable in adapting services to changing public leisure needs. The sharing of this information is also helpful in forming numerous partnerships between agencies.

This year our Department will be surveying the last of five suburban areas in the city. During this year we will also be evaluating the base survey and the door-to-door survey process to see if there are any modifications that will provide us with more useful information or a more streamlined process.

We will also be starting to pay more attention to the evaluation of programs and services this year. Like most municipal leisure services departments, we have not done a very good job of justifying the leisure activities we offer. With leisure activities being developed based on statistically reliable information from the suburban area needs assessments, we now have a basis to improve evaluation.

We feel this project is a practical application of research that can help leisure service delivery agencies and organizations in our community. Our city council must be given a great deal of credit for having the vision to support this needs assessment concept, and allocating the resources required to implement the surveys and analyze the information. The staff of the Leisure Services Department also must be given a great deal of credit for the hard work they have contributed to developing this needs assessment process and exhibiting a willingness to adapt to our changing times. We hope other municipalities can benefit from our experience with this form of needs assessment. If you are interested in more information, please don't hesitate to get in touch with us.

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REFERENCES


City of Saskatoon, Parks and Recreation Department (1988). Discretionary Statement For The 90’s – Ten Year Management Plan.