Assessing Community Assets

Podcast Transcript

Guest: Tracy Metcalfe MPA, CHES, *Community Health Improvement Coordinator, Saginaw County Health Department*

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Storee Harris-Stubblefield (SH): Welcome to Prepare Set Go. A podcast of Public Health Prepared. Public Health Prepared is the workforce development branch of the Michigan Center for Infectious Disease Threats and Pandemic Preparedness, or MCIDT Initiative, which is held at and funded by the University of Michigan. We hope this podcast will better equip the public health workforce to handle ongoing and future crises. Thank you for tuning into our episode. Today, we'll be talking about assessing community assets for community health improvement plans or CHIP. I'm your host Storee Harris-Stubblefield.

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SH: In this episode on assessing community assets or CHIP, we'll be hearing from Tracy Metcalfe. Tracy Metcalfe is the Community Health Improvement Coordinator for the Saginaw County Health Department. She has over 20 years in public health, 12 of those specifically in community assessment and improvement planning. She has worked in a few different roles, including substance use prevention as well as diabetes prevention. But it wasn't until she started her work in community health assessment and improvement planning that she found her niche. She loves working with people, empowering them to be active participants, and improving not only their health, but the health of their communities. Welcome to the podcast. I'm excited to speak with you today.

Tracy Metcalfe (TM): Hi. Thank you for having me.

SH: Okay, so let's go ahead and get started on the questions. Before we get started, can you talk about your role at the Saginaw County Health Department as a community health improvement coordinator?

TM: Sure. So every three years, the Saginaw County Health Department in collaboration with other local health systems and community health organizations assess the health of the community and we develop a community health improvement plan to address identified health priorities. And it's my job to coordinate and facilitate this process throughout the county.

SH: Thank you. So I would love to talk more about the CHIPs. So what exactly are community health improvement plans or CHIPs?

TM: So, community health improvement plan is a long-term systemic effort to address public health problems. So it provides direction to improve health outcomes through the development of goals, objectives, strategies, actions, and then performance measures. Once the health assessment is completed, we host an event to present the findings and determine what the top three health priorities are for Saginaw County. We invite both community organizations as well as the public to attend the event. And then following the presentation of the assessment findings, attendees have time to view poster boards that go into a little bit more detail about the top 10 health priorities identified by the assessment. And at that time, the attendees then vote on what they think are their top three most important health priorities for Saginaw County to focus on in the next three years. The health improvement plan is then formulated around making improvement in those three areas.

SH: Thank you for that concise overview of CHIPs. So can you talk a little bit more about how they are created?

TM: Sure. In Saginaw, we work with a community partnership called BWell Saginaw. The BWell Saginaw structure includes the BWell Saginaw Partner Coalition, which is made up of 14 community organizations, including our health systems. And then we have the Saginaw County Health Equity Council and work groups for each of the health priority areas. The BWell Partner Coalition reviews all the information and creates the goals and strategies for the health priority areas that were identified. And then each strategy has organizations with expertise in those areas identified, and that have committed to working on those strategies. So the organizations identify specific staff in their organization to participate on the work groups and help create those action plans to make improvements in those areas.

SH: Yeah, that's good. So CHIP seem like very coordinated, very thorough projects. So how exactly are they used?

TM: So each community has multiple organizations that provide specific services to the public. So health improvement plans are used to help coordinate those efforts amongst all those organizations to improve the overall health of our community. So it brings those organizations together in an effort to better serve the community, and it supports the development of shared community goals for health improvement. So instead of each organization just doing their own thing and sometimes maybe duplicating efforts, we bring everybody together under a shared vision and shared goals. And they're very critical for developing policies and defining actions to target efforts that promote health throughout community or through community collaboration.

SH: Okay. So I wanna focus in on community and particularly the community assets. How do you identify, assess, and utilize them?

TM: Well, community assets are anything that can be used to improve the quality of life of your residents. So they can be people, they can be places like churches, schools, community organizations like Big Brothers Big Sisters, things like that. Food kitchens, recreation centers, or they can be services like public transportation, different cultural organizations, early childhood centers. So just anything that can improve the quality of life of the people you serve of your residents. There's many ways that you can identify and assess community assets. The Saginaw County Health Department does have a resource guide that is updated periodically, although it hasn't been updated, I think since 2020. However, we do try to keep that updated as best that we can. The guide provides the community with all of the known organizations in the community that provides services and programs to the public.

It provides a brief description and contact information of how to get ahold of those organizations. We also work very closely with a group called Alignment Saginaw, and this is a group of over 75 organizations, community service organizations that work together to coordinate these services, connect people to the resources and promote opportunities that impact the quality of life of our Saginaw residents. One way that we can assess community assets is through a local public health systems assessment. This assessment allows us to survey local organizations that provide services to the public to identify what activities they provide, what competencies and capacities are of the local public health system. So public health organizations or community service organizations provide a service to our public.

So they in turn our public health. And so we do a survey that assesses or looks at the service that they provide, how they provide them, and that helps us to identify any areas that there could be improvements in or areas maybe where they're doing a really great job.

TM: We also look at community themes and strengths, and this helps us to determine what the strengths of the community are and where improvements can be made within the community itself. And so this looks at the community's perception of the quality of life in our community. And so we do this through surveys, through focus groups, community org, sorry, not community organizations, community conversations. And we really work hard to get information from the community to see how our services are being portrayed in the community, how they're being used, and if there's any areas that can be strengthened.

SH: Well, thank you for telling us how to identify and assess community assets. But from there, how do you utilize them since there's so many different types?

TM: Yeah, so as I mentioned earlier, community assets do come in various forms including people, organizations and public services. And representatives from community and health organizations and community members are all invited to be part of both the health assessment and the improvement planning process. And so these groups of people, the organizations and the community members are able to provide knowledge and expertise in their target area of focus. They can tell us what is happening currently within their organization, the services that they're providing. They can also share with us any kind of barriers or gaps that they see in the services that they're providing and the ability for the public to be able to utilize those services. The community members provide us with expertise as well. They're also providing us with personal lived experience of utilizing these services. And so it allows a unique perspective on how organizations can make improvements on services that they're providing. So they help to facilitate a plan that builds on existing community strengths, while also determining what additional resources, programs and initiatives can be implemented to help close those gaps, reduce barriers, and improve health.

SH: Thank you for that thorough overview. I wanna delve a little bit deeper and talk about DEI as it relates to this. What opportunities are there to incorporate diversity, equity, and inclusion in community asset assessment?

TM: Yeah, so there's lots of opportunities to include diversity, equity and inclusion in this process, in both the health assessment and improvement planning process. And so it is at the forefront of the process that we use to conduct our health assessment and improvement plan.

TM: When we do our health assessment, we utilize a community advisory committee, and that is established to help inform the whole health assessment process, including survey questions, marketing the survey, connecting us with places to conduct focus groups and community conversations, ensuring that we're hitting our whole population and not just going into certain places, but we're making sure that we're hitting our whole population and getting a valuable feedback from everybody. And so this group of people includes, we put like a press release or a call to action out to the community and invite community members to kind of submit a little application process to be part of this group and help inform the health assessment.

Saginaw does now have a newly formed health equity council, which we just formed last year, whose main purpose is to help eliminate disparities and seek improvement of the delivery of health services to Saginaw County residents. And they will be an integral part of the health the... I'm sorry, the health improvement planning process as well as the health assessment process going forward. As we're developing our health improvement plan, at least one member of the Health Equities Council will be represented on each one of our work groups to help ensure that the voice of the community is being represented as well as the diversity of our community. And so the HEC will also help to inform the questions and methods for assessing our community assets in the future. Again, to ensure we're reaching all of Saginaw County and we have a well-rounded assessment.

SH: It looks like you've been very intentional about placing DEI at each stage of this process, so we are very encouraged to hear that. Going further, have you worked at different health departments and how has CHIPs varied from county to county?

TM: Yes, I have worked at a couple other health departments, and there are many different processes and methods that can be used to assess the community, the health of your community, the community assets, and developing a health improvement plan. And so in Saginaw, we use what is called the MAPP process, which stands for mobilizing for action through community, or, I'm sorry, Mobilizing for Action through Planning and Partnerships. And so this process includes six phases, partnership development, visioning.

There's the four assessments that we do, which include health status, looking at the overall health of our community by information that's already being reported to like the state of Michigan or the CDC, the census, things like that. And we do our community themes and strengths assessment. We do the local public health systems assessment, and then we do a forces of change assessment, which looks at trying to think ahead of what might be coming down the line that could affect the health of our community.

TM: And so one of the best examples now for that is the COVID pandemic, right? That was something that came and totally disrupted the way we did services. It disrupted the health of our community, and we had to really make a lot of changes, and we saw where we do have a lot of gaps, right? So that's kind of what the forces of change assessment is all about. And then we identify strategic issues, we formulate the goals and objectives, and then we create those action plans. And this involves a lot of collaboration and partnership for our partners, including monthly meetings, subcommittee meetings. We assist with the implementation of the four assessments, drafting goals and strategies, making recommendations to the work groups, and most communities implement a version of this process.

Sometimes the health departments don't go through the full MAPP process. They might implement certain pieces of that process, which is fine. A lot of it has to do with what your capacity is within your health department and within your community. But we tend to go through the whole process, which when you already have your group together, the next time you do it makes it easier because you already have that standing core group of people that are going to be part of the process again. Our health improvement plans can look different from community to community, but they all have one commonality, and that is, they all have goals and objectives centered around identifying health priorities.

SH: Well, Tracy, thank you so much. I've learned so much about CHIPs today. I've heard of them before in my work in public health, but I've learned a lot. And that was very concise and easy to understand, so I wanna thank you for that. You mentioned other things that Saginaw County Health Department had been doing to engage and serve the community. Can you talk about the community conversations with the general public a bit more?

TM: Sure. So that was something that was unique to our health assessment and improvement planning process this year. And so community conversations, we utilized our homeless shelters a lot and the soup kitchen when we had our community conversations. And so basically what those are just like a conversation around a kitchen table. And so you bring these groups of individuals together.

Again, they're the ones that have lived experience with utilizing the services that we're trying to assess and make sure that we're providing what the community needs in a way that the community can take advantage of those services, and have access to those services. And so we did community conversations with each one of our homeless shelters in Saginaw County which we had, I think five that we did. All with unique stories, right?

TM: All unique stories and experiences that were had. But you also find within those community conversations, some commonalities and some things, some common themes throughout whether you're looking at healthcare, working with insurances, and the difficulty in navigating that for individuals and just knowing what services you can get with, with the type of health plan that you have. Transportation is a common theme amongst many of our groups of people that we spoke with. We also did a conversation, community conversation with the general public and just invited anybody from our communities to come and talk about what they felt were the issues in their community. And it's really, like I said, a kitchen table conversation that we have with them where there's no nothing that's off limits. We help guide them with some questions and then they just kind of tell us what's going on and what they see happening in the community, and we use that information to help inform our improvement plans.

SH: That is a very thoughtful thing to include in that as well, 'cause I know that sometimes those populations get left out of surveys and things because of not having mailing addresses or they're hard to get in contact with. And so, I think it's always important to not forget about populations that we don't always think about when we think about these type of processes, so thank you for that. Thank you so much for joining us today to share from your experiences and provide some insight on this topic. To our listeners, we hope you have learn learned more about assessing community assets or CHIP, and we encourage you to check out the transcript and resources in the podcast notes. With that, we'll end here for today. Stay safe and just stay prepared.