FOUR KEY STRATEGIES
FOR SUCCESSFUL

COMMUNITY NEEDS ASSESSMENT SURVEYS

A public engagement
practitioner resource guide

PublicInput

WHY WE CREATED THIS GUIDE

According to the US Council on Environmental Quality, around one-third of the United States population is considered to be in "distress." With unprecedented attention and federal funding focused on addressing historic inequities, PublicInput is supporting governments and public engagement practitioners who are doing the important work of advancing equity in their home communities.

Successful community decision-making often requires a localized evaluation, or Community Needs Assessment Survey, that works to systematically identify and confirm the needs of those most impacted. To facilitate this assessment process, we have assembled this straightforward Community Needs Assessment Guide for engagement practitioners seeking to survey and better understand their community.

SUCCESSFUL COMMUNITY NEEDS ASSESSMENT SURVEYS

Community Needs Assessments have grown in popularity for their listen-first approach to improving community services. They are a thoughtful, systematic approach of identifying and confirming the needs of the people you serve.

As community needs assessments are taken on by more public agencies, some key patterns have emerged for successful efforts. We've seen these patterns hold true, and keep them at the core of our work as a community engagement software provider.

The Center for Urban Transportation Research describes these community profiles as essential in establishing "a summary of baseline conditions and trends in a community and study area..." by establishing a context for impact assessment and project-based decision-making.

Image: Kiosks and in-person interviews are a great supplement to traditional surveys.

1. Meet People Where They Are

When people hear the word 'survey', we're apt to think of a paper form or an online survey. But these formats alone almost always miss key portions of your community. Start with asking "who do I want to reach", then develop your specific outreach tactics to engage and ask questions where your audience already is.

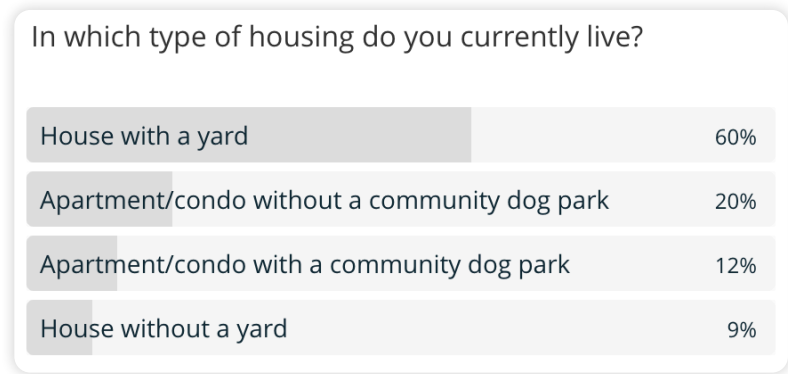**Successful strategies we've seen have engaged people creatively:**

- Taking tablets to local farmers markets and conducting in-person talks
- Social media advertising to the areas and people you want to reach
- Interactive text message surveys
- Physical signs with short URLs or text message short codes
- Sending embedded email surveys to key community stakeholders

Your tactics will depend on your audience, so start with a thoughtful consideration of their routines and needs to nail the right approach.

2. Keep Things Simple

When crafting a survey, it's important to remember the goal is not to conduct academic research — but rather to understand people. With that in mind, and our increasingly-shortened attention spans, do your best to eliminate unnecessary questions and ask for feedback on things that you can change.

Although 'Matrix' or Likert scale questions can be used to quantify sentiment across different topics, new qualitative analysis tools can often yield comparable insights from a handful of open-ended questions.

In which type of housing do you currently live?

House with a yard	60%
Apartment/condo without a community dog park	20%
Apartment/condo with a community dog park	12%
House without a yard	9%

Screenshot above: Resist the urge to go more complex, and your engagement rates will thank you.

Screenshots above: If you free yourself from assumptions about your participants, they might surprise you with real insight.

☐ **3. Leave Room for the Unexpected**

Across thousands of public engagement surveys, the questions that have consistently yielded powerful insights are the ones that have created space for participants to surprise us.
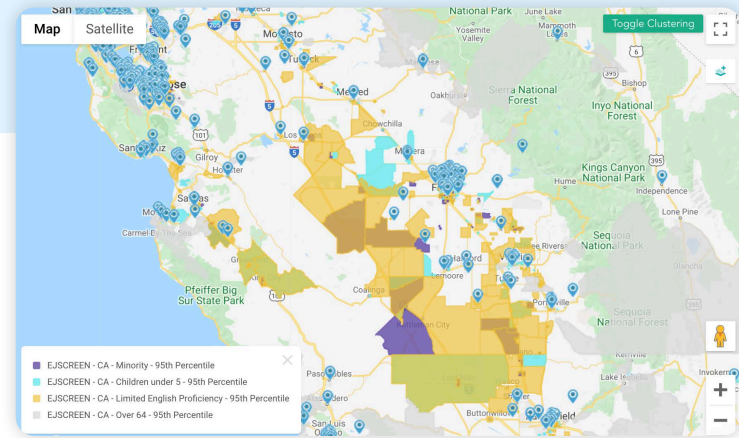
The insights you gather from a question like "Would you like to see longer service hours?" will pale in comparison to "What, if anything, prevents you from accessing services?" The latter question differs in providing an opportunity to understand, while still checking an assumption about service hours.

4. ABC — Always Be Capturing

A community needs assessment is just one interaction in many that define your relationship with the people you serve. It's of particular importance to use that opportunity to create pathways for follow-up communication.

If you're not already managing your email, phone, and mailing contacts in a traditional CRM, needs assessment surveys are a great time to start.

When residents are asked why they don't engage more often, not knowing what will happen to my feedback is consistently ranked as a big detractor. By capturing contact info and closing the loop, you'll lay the groundwork for increased engagement and community trust.

Screenshots above: Capturing contact information and location makes it easier to follow up and do future outreach.

THE PUBLICINPUT COMMUNITY OF ENGAGEMENT PRACTITIONERS

Having worked with dozens of communities at various stages of their engagement process, we are committed to help local government be successful.

Whether it's sharing surveys we've seen work well, connecting you with other agencies on the PublicInput platform, or to act as a sounding board on your outreach efforts … we are here to help.

Initiating a community needs assessment process is the perfect time for local governments to integrate online and in-person outreach efforts.

PUBLICINPUT IS TRUSTED BY PUBLIC AGENCIES IN 37 STATES
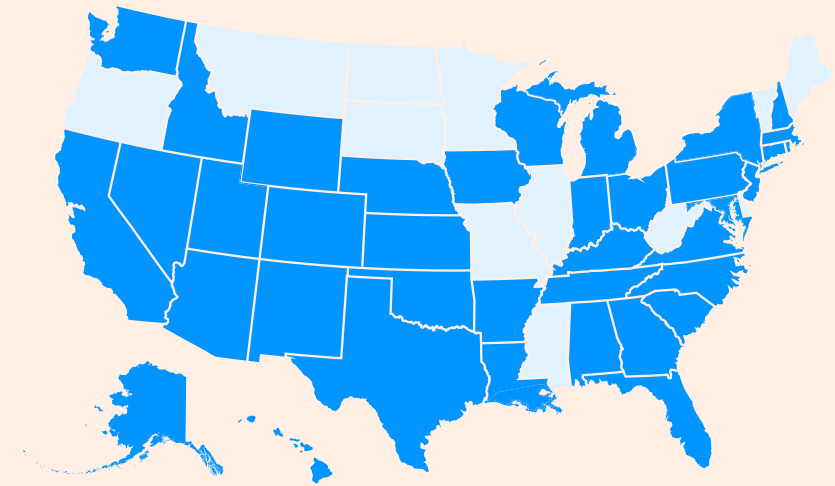
COLLABORATIVE DEMOCRACY SUCCEEDS THROUGH TECHNOLOGY

The mission of PublicInput is to create a more collaborative democracy through technology. To do this, we enable local governments to manage the broader public engagement process, not just a singular aspect. That's why we've focused our efforts on creating an all-in-one platform that streamlines projects from beginning to end and builds public trust over time.

Want to learn more about how PublicInput can help increase agility and efficiency on your team while advancing equity and maximizing reach?

- Visit our website at publicinput.com

- Email us at engagement@publicinput.com

- Check out a case study at publicinput.com/wp/resource-library

- Schedule a demo or project discovery chat below:

BOOK A CALL

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