

Arkansas Assessment Initiative

Background

Assessment is the systematic collection, assembly, analysis, and dissemination of information about the health of a community, and is one of the core functions of public health. To strengthen the nation's assessment capabilities, CDC began the **Assessment Initiative (AI)** in 1992 in partnership with various state health departments. The AI supported the development of innovative systems and methods that improve access to health data and the way data are used to inform and guide leaders involved in planning, developing, and evaluating policies and interventions to improve the health of communities. The AI supports two focus areas:

Community health assessment practices: States develop and implement tools, strategies, and approaches to improve assessment practices at local public health agencies.

Data dissemination systems: States implement interactive Web-based data query systems for user-friendly analysis and dissemination of public health data.

Arkansas — Community Health Assessment Practices

Arkansas is one of the nine states currently receiving 5-year federal funding since 2007. The Arkansas Assessment Initiative (AR-AI) aims to better capture the health status and burden of disease of Arkansas' diverse population through the following goals:

Goal 1: Improve processes and outcomes of activities involved in assessing community health.

Process evaluation: For over 10 years, Hometown Health Improvement (HHI) has conducted county-specific community health assessments using the County Adult Health Survey and the County Youth Health Survey. Both surveys are based on CDC's Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System and Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance System. The HHI network of coalitions consists of consumers, business leaders, health care providers, and other partners who work together to identify health problems at the community level and develop solutions. Since 1999, 66 baseline adult surveys and 10 follow-up surveys have been completed.

Increasing staff awareness and training: Data training seminars have been held in the "train the trainer" format to educate local health department staff on basic statistics and how to operate the electronic data query system to access and use different data sources. An annual conference has also been established in collaboration with HHI, which allows community coalition attendees to network and exchange information with other health units and coalitions.

Goal 2: Develop tools and strategies to conduct community health assessments in diverse communities with disparate populations.

The AR-AI recognizes the need to adapt its processes to better obtain health information of Arkansas' growing Hispanic/Latino and Marshallese populations. Community health assessment surveys must be culturally and linguistically appropriate. Survey research centers have already begun employing Spanish-speaking interviewers.

Who are the Marshallese?

Northwest Arkansas is estimated to hold about 6,000 Marshallese, the largest Marshallese population outside the Marshall Islands. Marshallese are allowed to immigrate to the United States with relative ease in reparation for U.S. nuclear bomb testing on two Marshallese islands during the 1940s and 1950s.

The AR-AI has partnered with the Jones Center for Families to aid in identifying gaps in services to the Marshallese population, employing methodology to overcome cultural and language barriers, and hiring outreach workers to access this population through education and health programs.

Goal 3: Disseminate community health assessment tools and protocols to other state and local health organizations.

Through the annual CDC AI conference and other conferences, presentations, and panel discussions, the AR-AI staff has been able to share outcomes of their work with other states. Lessons learned in Arkansas' efforts to conduct community health assessments with minority and hard-to-reach populations are particularly useful to the broader community. Training and information materials, such as the Community Health Assessment Guide, are in the process of being posted on the AR-AI website for easy access.

On the Horizon

Arkansas's unique challenge lies in its poor and rural areas and its growing Hispanic and Marshallese populations. The AR-AI is addressing these increasing cultural and linguistic challenges in conducting community health assessments. Improving community health assessment processes in Arkansas's communities can help inform public health program and policy decisions, and maximize resource allocation in a challenging fiscal climate. The initiative can help improve the state's ability to share information gained concerning process improvement for community health assessments with other state and local health departments.

Web Resources

Arkansas' Hometown Health Improvement website contains information about the AR-AI, conferences, county data links, and other resources:

<http://www.healthy.arkansas.gov/programsServices/hometownHealth/Pages/HHI.aspx>