

## Community Readiness: Compatibility of Theory, Policy and Practice

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### Introduction

There is a high level of interest in the concepts of community capacity, community strength, social capital and community engagement at a strategic, policy and funding level (both government and non-government) within Australia and around the world. Consistent with this interest, there has been a diverse range of theoretical and methodological development around these related concepts. While a number of indicators have been developed, there is a need for a tool that is methodologically sound and strategically relevant, but also useful for practitioners, and for evaluators. This paper presents a particular approach that has been used under the cluster evaluation of the Department of Health and Ageing funded, National Suicide Prevention Strategy Community Initiative Projects in Victoria.

Community Readiness (Edwards et al. 2000) is a similar construct to community capacity and social capital. Whereas the latter are expressed as generic qualities or characteristics of communities, community readiness is conceptualised as issue-specific, and is seen as a model that can guide community change. As such, it is promoting a method of working in communities, and is presented as a practical way to identify what kinds of strategies might be effective given a particular community's level of readiness.

The theory of community readiness has grown from two conceptual frameworks, those of Psychological Readiness and Community Development. The Community Readiness Interview is the tool developed by the Tri-Ethnic Center for Prevention Research at the University of Colorado, US, which assesses the characteristics of a community, its population, community leaders and prevention service systems that can influence the success of prevention or change strategies.

The evaluation of the National Suicide Prevention Strategy Community Initiatives Programs in Victoria, Australia offers an example of the strategic application of the Community Readiness model within national government objectives. The Community Readiness model has provided a practical framework for guiding the selection of activities appropriate to a community's level of readiness, and for reviewing the appropriateness of planned activities, including making strategic adaptations in light of evidence provided. The model has also been used as a tool for monitoring change in readiness, and through this evaluating the impacts of funded activities.

### Community Readiness Model

Community readiness assessment measures the characteristics of a community, its population, community leaders and prevention service systems. Assessment has two purposes: 1) it provides a

basis for understanding how community dynamics relate to prevention; and 2) it has direct implications for effectively intervening to move communities to higher stages of readiness. The model provides a measurement tool (an interview schedule) to assess community readiness across community sectors as well as over time. Although it was developed to assess drug and alcohol prevention readiness, it has been widely used over the past ten years for a range of health, social and environmental issues.

The survey instrument consists of 32 open-ended questions with six dimensions: community effort, community knowledge of the efforts, leadership, community climate, community knowledge about the issue and resources related to the issue. Responses are analysed and scored to indicate where the community fits on nine stages of readiness. The nine Stages of Community Readiness are: no awareness, denial/resistance, vague awareness, preplanning, preparation, initiation, stabilisation, confirmation/expansion and high level of community ownership. The community readiness approach makes use of the concept of readiness to then recommend the kind of activities that may suit the different stages of readiness. In each case, the aim for activities or strategies reflects the stage.

### **Practice**

Engaging Communities for Life is a suicide prevention project funded to work with two communities (Wangaratta and Myrtleford) in the North East of Victoria. The project has facilitated a variety of strategies designed specifically for each community. Community Readiness interviews were conducted with both communities as a major contributor to the evaluation of the project but also to inform the design. Follow-up interviews were conducted with small groups of people in both communities. These were made up of original interviewees and or community members who represented the same group or position in the community as those participating in the previous interviews. Results for both communities demonstrated an increase in the preparedness of the community to take action.

### **Summary**

The Community Readiness Interview provides a strong framework for understanding, monitoring and developing community capacity that is consistent with needs across academic, political, and practical domains.

To find out more about the Community Readiness approach, see <http://triethniccenter.colostate.edu/>.