Conducting an Environmental Scan

The desire to develop a charitable clinic can be inspired by a variety of values, experiences, or conditions impacting the clinic visionary and/or founders. While this initial vision alone can be inspiring to others, it is important for the Planning Team to understand and to document the need for such a clinic in the community. In the current climate of competition for nonprofit funding, outcome-based programming, and uncertainty around health care reform, it is imperative that the Planning Teams invest in sound business practices to demonstrate the value of the proposed clinic to audiences, who will not be swayed by the vision alone.

The two elements that Church Health finds essential in this process are the Environmental Scan and the subsequent Business Plan, both of which may be supported.It is important to note that the design and infrastructure of the clinic will be dependent upon the information gathered during these two processes; "skipping ahead" to design the clinic prematurely can lead to substantial challenges to clinic sustainability later.

Determining and Documenting Community Need

The importance of the Environmental Scan cannot be overstated. The dedication of a few individuals willing to serve on a committee designed for this purpose will be a gift to the larger Planning Team, as the vision for a clinic emerges in your local safety net community.

Becoming well informed about community health needs and resources will ensure the Planning Team's strategic thinking in decisions about its mission, scope of service, target population, community partners and potential community impact. Members of the Environmental Scan committee will acquire, review, analyze, interpret, and synthesize data and information from key stakeholders regarding community health needs, and the local impact of the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act. The analysis of gaps in service, in current resources, and in the

reaction to the vision of the development of a charitable clinic, will serve to create the outline of an organization that the community will be willing to invest in.

With community health data in hand, a clinic will also be equipped to complete grant applications and proposals that require a "statement of need" or information that signifies to a funder that the clinic has done its homework, and understands the specific community needs and issues for which funding is being sought. Statistics on specific community needs being addressed by the clinic will also help to substantiate the clinic's case for support, useful in other marketing and public relations campaigns. Current and potential donors and supporters will appreciate being assured that the clinic is delivering services to populations of patients that would likely not be able to receive them were it not for the clinic.

Where to obtain content:

A whole industry has arisen around the field of community health needs assessment, including scholarly research, vendors who will contract to perform assessments, manuals and tools for a community to purchase for the purposes of self-assessment, to name a few. The staff at Church Health has seen great value in clinics gathering and analyzing this information first hand, using, existing local studies and data as resources.

One often overlooked resource for this work is the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act mandate for nonprofit hospitals to conduct community health needs assessments every three years and to address the unmet needs that are surfaced in these assessments. Having an understanding of how your local nonprofit hospital(s) view the underserved, and their response to the need, will be crucial in establishing a collaborative relationship with them and with the additional members of the local safety net group in your community.If a needs assessment process is underway, volunteering as a participant may bring multiple advantages to a new clinic initiative.

Resources for Obtaining Data

- County Health Rankings: www.countyhealthrankings.org
    - A project of the University of Wisconsin Population Health Institute provides access to 50 state reports, ranking each county within the 50

states according to its health outcomes and the multiple health factors that determine a county's health.

- The UDS Mapper: www.udsmapper.org/about.cfm
  - A great resource with many layers of data by zip code area. Designed to help inform users about the current geographic extent of U.S. federally (Section 330)-funded health centers. The information available includes estimates of the collective service area of these health centers by ZCTA, including the ratio of Section 330-funded health center patients reported in the Uniform Data System (UDS) to the target population, the change in the number of those reported patients over time, and an estimate of those in the target population that remain unserved by Section 330-funded health centers reporting data to the UDS.
- State Departments of Health
- County Health Departments
- Local United Way, Community Foundations, Universities or other organizations that collect and analyze data regarding community need.
- US Census Bureau: www.census.gov
  - Tracks hundreds of data points important to your community: income, health insurance status, housing and employment data.
- State Free and Charitable Clinic Associations
- National Association of Free and Charitable Clinics: www.nafcclinics.org

In addition to collecting data, it is important to seek out, identify, and communicate with as many safety-net healthcare providers as you can find operating in your community. These interviews will be valuable in establishing a relationship with those who may be potential partners, in gathering information about community healthcare needs from those whose work puts them in daily contact with these patients, and in discerning why a charitable clinic might be well received or perceived as a threat by those same individuals or entities. Some of these will include administrators, program managers, or staff from:

- Local hospital and emergency departments
- Local Federally Qualified Health Centers
- Other safety net clinics
- County Health Departments

- State Department of Health

- Parish nurse groups

- Food banks

- Social Service providers

- Healthcare access advocates

The manner in which these personal contacts are made, the way in which the potential clinic will be portrayed and the impression left with these community partners all deserve thoughtful, intentional planning by the Environmental Scan committee.

Environmental Scan Check List

Environmental Scan

- Assessment of Need:
  - Local, county, state and national data regarding state of health, health disparities. Specific local data that will relate to your clinic vision.
  - Demographic data for local/surrounding area: employment, income, federal poverty level, undocumented, uninsured, especially as it relates to your intended population.
  - Local data from hospital emergency departments, health departments, Project Access groups, etc. Nonprofit hospital community needs assessments should be referenced.
  - Impact of Affordable Care Act: your state's response to Medicaid expansion, local impact on access to care, local stories and data on "underinsured"

- Assessment of Current Local Non Profit Landscape and Safety Net Resources
  - Health of local nonprofits: ability to attract board members, funders, remain sustainable. Interview with local United Way director.
  - Presence of a local health care safety net group that meets on regular basis
  - Current services available to the local uninsured via FQHC, free or charitable clinics, parish nursing, homeless shelters or other resources
  - Services identified as most needed by those entities currently serving the uninsured
  - Assessment of gaps in healthcare to the local uninsured
  - Affordable Care Act: who is currently providing primary care to the Medicaid population and are the demands of increased enrollment being met?

- Assessment of Support:
  - Local medical, social service, faith community, volunteer resources, etc., who have pledged specific support for new clinic for the uninsured: dollars, in kind support (rent, equipment, loan of staff), specific plans to enter into agreement for partnership
  - Local/state support available to free or charitable clinics
  - Individuals pledging time/skills in clinic development or operations, to include how many providers, how many hours per month

- Assessment of Challenges:
  - Scarcity (real or perceived)of resources for a new nonprofit and for the needs of a clinic
  - Lack of communication, lack of coordinated safety net
  - Local issues: rural, transportation, remote, provider shortage, etc.
  - Negative response to development of local free or charitable clinic
  - Perception that the Affordable Care Act has negated need for safety net clinics

How to put it all together:

Once the Environmental Scan committee feels the relevant data has been collected, the analysis of this information is crucial. If, for example, your community's uninsured are served by one or more Federally Qualified Health Centers (FQHCs), understanding how the proposed new clinic would work in conjunction with, rather than in opposition to, the FQHC would be essential. If your local health care providers already see a number of uninsured patients in their practices (their own commitment to charity care), how might they view a request to now serve more uninsured by volunteering in a clinic setting? Have any providers, in fact, made a commitment to volunteer in the clinic? If the needs of chronic disease patients seem largely unmet in your community, but the clinic's original vision was for acute care only, how will the information gathered in the scan reflect an unbiased recommendation for the scope of services that would help fill the gap in your community? So it is not just the data, but the recommendations based on the gathered information that conveys an important need.

Review of the Environmental Scan:

The review of this body of work and resulting recommendations will inform the Planning Team of the challenges that may exist in clinic development, the strengths that exist in the Planning Team and the community to address those challenges, and the resources that will be needed in order to successfully develop, launch, and sustain a clinic in your community. This juncture will serve to act as a time of mutual consideration of next steps in the replication process (this is a go/no go point where a formal decision to proceed is made).

To contact consultants to help you through this, please contact John Mills at jmills@echoclinics.org