

Community Concern Assessment Tool

When an environmental contamination issue affects a community, it's not surprising that community members are concerned. Before a health assessment is conducted, it may be unclear how that contamination will affect the long-term health and well-being of community members. However, there is great variation between and within communities in terms of the level of concern due to a wide range of factors, including whether a community has a history of environmental issues and socioeconomic factors. Understanding the level of concern and the nature of that concern is necessary to ensure that communication strategies, messages, and materials are appropriately tailored and that community members feel they are being heard.

Sometimes there is a mismatch between the level of concern and the actual risk that the environmental hazard poses to the community. For example, community members may be very upset about a hazard because they perceive that it is making children in the community ill, even though the risk the contaminant poses to the children is very low, and it is not likely the source of the illness. It is also important to remember that chemical exposures have different effects on the body depending on one's age, sex, preexisting health conditions, disability, chemical sensitivities, and so forth, and those differences can trigger higher levels of concern for some individuals and subgroups. These sorts of situations are particularly sensitive, so it is important to fully understand the nature of community member concerns from the outset.

Determining the Level of Concern in a Community

There is no scientific tool that can determine the absolute level of concern in a community, as concerns change over time and may vary across community segments. However, this tool provides some guidance on how to take the immediate pulse of your community. This tool is best used after you have conducted interviews with community members and stakeholders, as it requires you to have a clear understanding of the environmental situation and how community members and stakeholders perceive the risk(s) posed by the environmental situation. Conducting a media analysis (see the Media Analysis Guide) can also provide some information that can be used in conjunction with this tool. The severity of the issue ("low" vs. "high") should be determined by ATSDR's site team, based on what they know about the situation when they first enter the site. This initial determination may change, of course, as a result of the public health assessment.

Factors Affecting the Level of Community Concern

To the best of your knowledge, try to answer the following questions about the community in which you are working. If you have several "I don't know" answers, you may want to conduct additional interviews or conduct a media analysis (if you haven't already done so) to get to know the community better. Here is how to judge the level of concern:

- If the majority of your answers are "yes," you likely have a high level of concern in the community.
- If the majority of your answers are "no," you likely have a low level of concern in the community.

- If you have nearly the same number of responses, it is better to address the higher level of concern to ensure that you do not minimize the concerns of the community.

It is recommended that more than one member of the site assessment team and/or local staff complete this assessment so you can compare answers and discuss whether your assessments are in sync.

This tool is only intended to provide you with an approximate feel for the level of concern in the community. Once you have determined the level of concern (Table 1) you believe currently exists, see Table 2 for recommendations on how to adjust your communication strategies to address the level of concern.

Table 1: Assessment of Community Concern Level

Question	Yes	No	Don't Know
1. Is exposure to the chemical involuntary, as opposed to voluntary (e.g., an accidental chemical spill vs. a workplace exposure)?			
2. Is exposure to the chemical perceived to be controlled by others, as opposed to under an individual's control (e.g., in the water supply for a town vs. a place that can be easily avoided)?			
3. Is the exposure perceived to be unfairly distributed (e.g., affecting a certain part of town or a certain population vs. the whole town equally or randomly)?			
4. Is the exposure manmade and/or deliberate (e.g., act of terrorism or vandalism)?			
5. Does the exposure have dramatic, long-lasting effects on the community (e.g., people can no longer live in a certain neighborhood or property was destroyed vs. something that can be cleaned up)?			
6. Is the source of exposure perceived to be an untrusted source vs. a trusted source (e.g., an industrial plant with a history of problems)?			
7. Does the exposure appear to affect children more than adults?			
8. Have there been deaths or serious illnesses that are perceived to be directly attributable to the chemical exposure or are deaths or serious illnesses anticipated?			
9. Does the media and/or the public perceive the event as the "first," "worst," or "biggest" of its type?			
10. Does the community perceive that the response of public officials and others in authority to date has been inadequate or slow?			
11. Is a criminal investigation involved?			

Table 2: Communication Strategies for Different Levels of Community Concern

Segment	High Concern, High Risk	High Concern, Low Risk	Low Concern, High Risk
Description	In this case, you will likely need to guide people through serious hazards when they are appropriately upset. Acknowledge people's level of concern and provide clear information and expectations.	The high level of concern may originate from any number of factors. But the concern is real and needs to be addressed, even if the risk is low.	In this case, you will need to alert people to serious hazards when they are seemingly unconcerned.
Tone	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Express empathy and compassion. ▪ Express your understanding that the community feels threatened. ▪ Messages that might evoke fear should describe the situation in a moderate way. They should also provide the community with ideas and methods for how to control or remove the risk or danger. ▪ Express the following qualities in person and in messages: listening, caring, empathy, honesty, openness, competence, and expertise. ▪ Move quickly to a dialogue instead of a one-way communication strategy. Dialogue gives communities a chance to be and feel heard. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Be patient, listen, and be attentive to people's concerns. ▪ Messages that might evoke fear should describe the situation in a moderate way. They should also provide the community with ideas and methods for how to control or remove the risk or danger. ▪ Express the following qualities in person and in messages: listening, caring, empathy, honesty, openness, competence, and expertise. ▪ Move quickly to a dialogue instead of a one-way communication strategy. Dialogue gives communities a chance to be and feel heard. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Messages that might evoke fear should describe the situation in a moderate way. They should provide the community with ideas and methods for how to control or remove the risk or danger. ▪ A slightly more concerned tone than with the other two segments may help to increase involvement and interest.

Segment	High Concern, High Risk	High Concern, Low Risk	Low Concern, High Risk
Strategies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Avoid over-reassurance. ▪ Acknowledge uncertainty or current problems that you face. ▪ Share the dilemma of the situation—ask for feedback. ▪ Plan to share control and be accountable to the community. ▪ Pay attention to unvoiced concerns or hidden agendas. Unvoiced concerns can cause considerable trouble when left unvoiced. Ask questions like, “I wonder if anyone is worried about...” to give them permission to voice their concerns. ▪ Offer ways for communities to provide feedback to communicate openness to ideas and solutions. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Apologize for any current problems, poor performance, or poor communication, if applicable. ▪ Ask how you can help to improve communication and how you can put in place reasonable ideas. ▪ Offer ways for communities to provide feedback to communicate openness to ideas and solutions. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Ensure you have adequately assessed why the community is underplaying the risk (e.g., apathy, misinformation). ▪ To mobilize citizens, you might have to raise concerns about the topic among policymakers and community leaders. Approach this strategically; before you contact any community leaders, have your communication strategy in place.

Sources

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