



Planting Gospel Seeds While Serving Human Needs

## The Community Agency Interview

### Local agencies - Allies and good sources of information

In a local congregation's search for the **most critical, unmet, or underserved needs in its community**, agencies that already serve the residents are not only excellent sources of information but potential allies and partners in serving identified needs.

Furthermore, in the human services network, it is both a professional courtesy and a wise step, especially for "new players" contemplating community-based, mercy initiatives, to "touch base" with already established service organizations.

The congregation's contact with a local social, health, or educational agency is the first step in building trust, goodwill, and avoiding needless competition and duplication of services.

### Collaborative efforts in the efficient assessment of needs

Contacting local agencies also lays the groundwork for future collaborative efforts between the respective church and community agency. The request by the pastor or another church leader for an interview also communicates to veteran agency leaders in the community:

"We respect your knowledge and experience. We want to learn from you. We're together in efforts to meet the needs of this community."

Furthermore, it ensures that the analysis of community needs as an entry point to planting gospel seed" will indeed yield **the most critical, unmet or underserved needs**. In avoiding duplication, greater traffic is possible, as well as more potential prospects, that is, opportunities to share the Gospel.

### Community agencies - surprisingly ready to welcome you!

Will busy community leaders and agency executives invest precious time talking with leaders of a local parish? Our experience in setting up interviews with human service vendors is short of phenomenal!

We have been enthusiastically welcomed by mayors, police chiefs, city council members, planning department heads, superintendents of schools, as well as by the owners of "the corner store" and "the local coffee shop" where people gather to exchange information.

They are both surprised and pleased that the church cares for more than just people's souls.

One of the most significant agencies in any neighborhood or community is the local public elementary, middle school, or high school. They not only serve educational needs, but in many cases serve other social or behavioral needs as part of their state-mandated portfolio of tasks. Few agencies know the students and their families as well as the leadership and teaching staff of the local public school. A good place to begin is the local public school nearest to the church. Again, our experience is that they are overjoyed that someone else in the neighborhood is interested in what they are assigned to do!

**Increasingly, funding sources encourage and even require community agencies to collaborate with faith-based organizations.**

The "welcome mat" is out. So pick up the phone and set up that appointment! It may take a bit of persistence because like many pastors, agency leaders are busy people.

## Developing a working relationship and a reliable database

The **long-term goal** of the community agency interview is to initiate a dialogue and potential relationship. The **immediate goal** is to secure their help in understanding the most critical unmet or underserved human care needs in the area.

These agencies are typically schools, community health centers, and social service centers, that is, public funded agencies. Other agencies include nonprofit organizations that may serve a specific need such as a multi-service childcare center, a community development corporation, an organization serving youth, other congregations active in serving community needs, etc.

**Any human services agency in your community that can share their understanding of the community, the people who live there and their pressing, critical needs are worth talking to.**

Don't discount a potential contact. In Bridgeport, Conn., the owner of a neighborhood store across the street from the church, where the regulars hung out for coffee and fresh rolls, gave me some of the most useful information I received about the community.

After the 8.8-magnitude earthquake in Chile in February 2010, pastors of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Chile, contacted city officials in various communities most affected and, with assistance from LCMS World Relief and Human Care, are partnering with them in rebuilding the homes of those victims most in need, especially seniors.

I cannot stress enough how willing the staff of these organizations are to sit down with pastors and congregational leaders to share their work and what they perceive are the needs of the community.

**Some of these organizations are even looking to make contact with churches in the community and are delighted to see us!**

## How to make contact with Community Agencies

What connections does your congregation have with community agencies that already serve the social, educational, health, or other human services? Do you have members employed by any of these agencies? Congregational members may already have contacts in the community and may be willing to set up the interviews. The person assigned to set up agency interview appointments might seek the assistance of the membership in identifying community agencies that are knowledgeable about the area around the church.

### What to say

Here is what you might say in making contact with a community service agency:

"I'm \_\_\_\_\_ from \_\_\_\_\_ Lutheran Church. We are right in your neighborhood and we're trying to **refocus and redesign our congregational services and programs to reflect the needs of the community.** We have found that organizations such as yours really know a lot about the community that you are serving. I would be most grateful if you would be willing to give us a little of your time, say 30-45 minutes, to share a bit of what you do and what you perceive are the pressing needs in this community, especially the needs that are not being met or are underserved."

### Suggested Interview Questions

Interviews with four to five of these organizations will give your congregation a pretty good idea of the community's most critical, unmet, or underserved needs. But remember, you are not just looking for information, but also to develop working, collaborative relationships as you 'root' into the community and become part of its intricate fabric.

You know you're identifying the most critical, unmet or underserved needs of the community when you keep hearing the same needs articulated again and again. Once the interview is scheduled and you are ready to dialogue, here are some suggested questions:

1. Tell us something about the services you render in this community? (Gather any materials, brochures, reports, etc. that describe and promote their services in the community)?
2. What do you feel are the most pressing and critical needs in this community?

3. Which of these are not being served or are underserved?

4. Which of these needs do you feel might be served by a faith-based organization like ours?

5. Is there any way that you think our congregation might relate or cooperate with what you are doing?

It is amazing how open these agencies are to partner with “faith-based” organizations!

For example, in the Lincoln-Lemington section of Pittsburgh, Pa., an interview with the principal of the school across the street from the church resulted in an almost immediate plan to develop a Head Start program at the church under the direction of the school. The school agreed to give the church full access to the families enrolled.

### **On-site “Planting Gospel Seeds While Serving Human Needs” Training**

Before LCMS World Relief and Human Care staff arrive in your community for “Planting Gospel Seeds While Serving Human Needs” training, it would be helpful to have ready a list of agencies to visit. Even better, schedule appointments with them before we arrive on-site.

We can begin training? Interviews? on Thursday morning and continue on Friday. We reserve both Thursday and Friday for these interviews. We can easily and comfortably handle about four-per-day, or a few more. The interviews usually last about a half hour to 45 minutes.

The Lord’s richest blessings as you make contact with the agencies in your neighborhood that can help you better understand the critical human care needs of God’s people in your midst. We at LCMS World Relief and Human Care are confident that as we help you develop programs to meet needs, meaningful relationships will be developed that will open doors for the proclamation of the saving Gospel of Jesus Christ.