

Conducting a Community Assessment

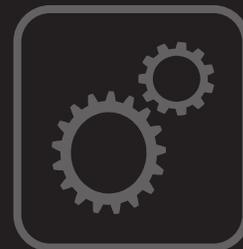
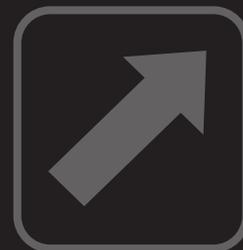
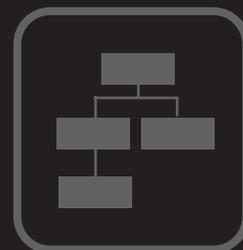


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INTRODUCTION

The Compassion Capital Fund (CCF), administered by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, provided capacity building grants to expand and strengthen the role of nonprofit organizations in their ability to provide social services to low-income individuals. Between 2002 and 2009, CCF awarded 1,277 grants, and the CCF National Resource Center provided training and technical assistance to all CCF grantees.

Strengthening Nonprofits: A Capacity Builder's Resource Library is born out of the expansive set of resources created by the National Resource Center during that time period, to be shared and to continue the legacy of CCF's capacity building work.

Strengthening Nonprofits: A Capacity Builder's Resource Library contains guidebooks and e-learnings on the following topics:

1. Conducting a Community Assessment
2. Delivering Training and Technical Assistance
3. Designing and Managing a Subaward Program
4. Going Virtual
5. Identifying and Promoting Effective Practices
6. Leading a Nonprofit Organization: Tips and Tools for Executive Directors and Team Leaders
7. Managing Crisis: Risk Management and Crisis Response Planning
8. Managing Public Grants
9. Measuring Outcomes
10. Partnerships: Frameworks for Working Together
11. Sustainability
12. Working with Consultants

Who is the audience for *Strengthening Nonprofits: A Capacity Builder's Resource Library*?

Anyone who is interested in expanding the capacity of nonprofit services in their community – from front-line service providers to executives in large intermediary organizations – will benefit from the information contained in this resource library. The National Resource Center originally developed many of these resources for intermediary organizations, organizations that were granted funds by CCF to build the capacity of the faith-based and community-based organizations (FBCOs) they served. As such, the majority of the resources in *Strengthening Nonprofits: A Capacity Builder's Resource Library* support intermediary organizations in their capacity building efforts. However, funders of capacity building programs (Federal program offices and foundations) and the nonprofit community (including FBCOs) at large will also find these resources helpful. In addition, individuals working to build capacity within a program or an organization will be able to use these resources to support their efforts to implement change and make improvements.

The ***Conducting a Community Assessment*** guidebook will be helpful to any organization or coalition of organizations that wants to know what assets and needs exist within its community.

Who developed the ***Conducting a Community Assessment*** guidebook?

The guidebook was originally developed for the CCF Communities Empowering Youth Program by the National Resource Center. It was updated in 2010 for the Department of Health and Human Services by the National Resource Center.

OVERVIEW

In order to effectively serve a community, it is important to understand the community. This understanding can be achieved through a community assessment. The findings from an assessment will define the extent of the needs that exist in a community and the depth of the assets available within the community to address those needs. This understanding of needs and assets can be used to strategically plan and deliver relevant, successful, and timely services.

Community Needs

The University of Kansas (KU) Work Group for Community Health and Development defines community needs as “the gap between what a situation is and what it should be.... Examining needs helps us discover what is lacking, and points us in the direction of future improvement.”¹

A goal of a community assessment is to develop an informed understanding of the gaps or needs that exist within a community and their impacts upon the community’s members. Low high school graduation rates indicate a need to find effective ways to keep kids in school. Senior citizens are living longer, but that may mean that many need more assistance to pay for medical bills or prescription drugs. In communities where pet owners want more park space but sports leagues want the same space for playing fields, there is a need to balance competing interests.

Community needs can affect a large or small number of a community’s members: families, individuals, youth, seniors, parents, businesses, community organizations, faith-based organizations, anyone who claims membership in the community. Of course, if community needs affect a large number of community members, there will be more support for addressing the needs.

Sometimes community needs are referred to as “community problems.” This reference should be avoided in community assessments. Framing a “need” as a “problem” immediately establishes an “us versus them” relationship that prevents collaboration and community building.

Community Assets

Community assets are defined as “those things that can be used to improve the quality of life.”²

Another goal of a community assessment is to develop a detailed analysis of community assets, or resources, that currently exist in the community and can be used to help meet community needs. Community assets include organizations, people, partnerships, facilities, funding, policies, regulations, and a community’s collective experience. Any positive aspect of the community is an asset that can be leveraged to develop effective solutions

Two approaches can be used to identify community assets. The first approach is to identify the assets that are already known for supporting community needs. This includes community organizations and individuals that currently provide services to community members or have provided financial support to address the needs. Organizations that provide after-school programs to help youth graduate on time would be included in a community assessment focused on keeping kids in school. Clinics that offer free medical services to low-income seniors should be identified in a community assessment of seniors who need medical financial assistance.

1 Catie Heaven, “Developing a Plan for Identifying Local Needs and Resources,” Community Tool Box (Lawrence, KS: KU Work Group for Community Health and Development, 2010), http://ctb.ku.edu/en/tablecontents/sub_section_main_1019.aspx.

2 Ibid.

A second approach to identifying community assets builds upon the experiences of other communities to highlight resources that may be available. The community assessment can identify communities with similar demographics that have successfully addressed similar needs, and can provide insight about the assets used in those communities. The community can then determine if similar assets can be found in its community.

Why Should You Conduct a Community Assessment?

There are many benefits to conducting a community assessment. Listed below are just a few. You can work with your community partners to identify additional benefits in your community as an exercise to build consensus and buy-in for the process.

- There is increased understanding within the community about its needs, why they exist, and why it is important for the needs to be addressed.
- Community members have the opportunity to share how the needs impact the quality of life for the larger community.
- Community engagement is increased because members from different parts of the community are included in discussions about needs, assets, and the community's response.
- The community's strengths and weaknesses are identified.
- There is an inventory of the resources currently available within the community that can be leveraged to improve the quality of life for its community members.
- Communities identify the asset gaps that exist in their communities.
- Community members have an increased awareness of how they can contribute to their community's assets.
- Community organizations can use the information about community needs to assess their service delivery priorities.
- There is data for making decisions about the actions that can be taken to address community needs and how to use the available assets.
- Data can be used to inform strategic planning, priority setting, program outcomes, and program improvements.

THE COMMUNITY ASSESSMENT PROCESS

This guidebook recommends a six-step process for planning and conducting a community assessment:

Step 1: Define the Scope

Step 2: Decide to Go Solo or Collaborate

Step 3: Collect Data

Step 4: Determine Key Findings

Step 5: Set Priorities and Create an Action Plan

Step 6: Share Your Findings

Steps one through three should be considered an iterative planning process. Each step should be discussed independently. But the information identified in one of the steps may change the approach to another step. For example, an organization may decide to collaborate with a key partner to complete the community assessment, but the key partner has to wait three months before it can start. The organization now has to decide if it wants to wait before beginning or decide to change the community assessment scope, look for a new partner, or move forward without a partner. Steps four through six focus on analyzing the community assessment data.

Step 1: Define the Scope

Community issues are complicated. One issue is often related to many others, and it is easy to keep expanding the range of issues to include in your community assessment. Let's look at the following example:

- High school dropout rates are related to homelessness.
- Homelessness is related to head-of-household unemployment.
- Unemployment can lead to gang involvement.
- Gang involvement is related to high school dropout rates.
- Gang involvement can be prevented if efforts are targeted at middle school youth.

All of these issues are important. A community assessment can address all of the issues and their interrelationships, or it can focus on just one issue. To define the scope of your community assessment, you must clearly identify the community issue to be assessed, the impacted community members, the geographic area to assess, the key questions you want answered, and the level of detail you want to include in the assessment. Here are some examples of key questions:

- What are the basic demographics of my community (income levels, races/ethnicities, number of youth)?
- Who are the faith- and community-based organizations serving people in my community? What services are they providing and to whom?
- What services are local public agencies providing, and to whom? (Include law enforcement, probation, courts, schools, and workforce development.)
- What organizations are funded by foundations and government agencies to address the community issues? What do local residents see as the primary needs for this community?
- What are the various intervention strategies being used in my community to address the issues? Are these practices demonstrating any clear outcomes?
- Who are the leaders in my community? What key players in local government are concerned with the issues we want to address?
- What local volunteer groups (e.g., Rotary Clubs) serve the community?
- Who are the people in my community who care about the issue?
- What community organizations focus on these issues? Are they delivering service in a meaningful way?
- Are there partnering opportunities with other nonprofits or faith-based and community organizations?
- What are the gaps in service to people in the community? What would a complete system look like?
- Are community members ready for a change in the issue we are trying to address?

Step 2: Decide to Go Solo or Collaborate

Deciding the scope will highlight the choices available to you for conducting your community assessment. You can decide to “go solo” and carry the entire responsibility for completing all of the community assessment activities; or, you can work with community partners as a collaborative project to complete the assessment. Potential community partners include corporations, nonprofit organizations, local community organizations, foundations that provide grants to your community, universities, and government entities.

One of the most important factors to consider is the level of resources you have to conduct a community assessment. Examine the time, effort, and human resources that are available from your various stakeholders, including staff, volunteers, consultants, and board members. Establishing collaborations will increase the resources available to conduct a quality and useful assessment.

Benefits of Collaboration:

- Engages more community members in the assessment planning and implementation.
- Increases access to more data sources to answer the key questions.
- More resources are available to conduct the assessment and cover expenses.
- Establishes relationships that will be important for leading actions identified in the community assessment findings.

If you decide to work collaboratively with partners to complete a community needs assessment, consider using a memorandum of understanding (MOU) between the involved parties to ensure that each organization fully understands and commits to the efforts involved. An MOU outlines key responsibilities of the involved organizations. See Appendix A for a sample MOU.

Step 3: Collect Data

This step will guide you through finding credible sources of information and, when necessary, developing your own data collection tools. In any data collection effort, it is essential that you first set limits on how much data you will collect and analyze. Consider the amount of time and resources you have available prior to selecting any specific method or combination of methods. Prioritize your data collection needs according to what is essential to complete your community assessment. Document your data collection efforts using the “Creating a Data Collection Plan Worksheet” (Appendix B). In using this tool, you will list the key questions that you identified in Step 1 and then identify probable sources of information.

Your community assessment will be based on two types of data sources: secondary and primary. Start your data collection with secondary sources—data that has already been collected by others. Other members of your community may have the information that you seek. Begin with local sources of information and then broaden your search as necessary. Focus on quality of data as opposed to quantity, so you can dedicate more time to other aspects of the community assessment. For a table of potential secondary sources, see “Locating Secondary Sources of Information” (Appendix C).

Primary data is data collected by the person or group conducting the assessment. Primary source data collection methods should be used to address questions that cannot be answered by secondary sources or to gain a better understanding of a particular issue. There are several methods for collecting primary sources of data for your community assessment, including questionnaires, observation, focus groups, interviews, and case studies. For a description of these methods, including the advantages, disadvantages, resources, and amount of time required for each one, refer to the online tools listed on the following page.

Your timeline should reflect the level of detail you want in your community assessment. A community assessment can be a “snapshot” of a community need based on local secondary sources and few primary sources; or it can be comprehensive, based on an extensive review of secondary sources and many sources of primary data. Clarify who will be responsible for carrying out different parts of the data collection plan. Set data collection deadlines and stick to them. It is easy to spend too much time in the data collection phase.

Online Tools for Further Reading

Suzanne Bouffard and Priscilla M. D. Little, “Detangling Data Collection: Methods for Gathering Data,” *Out-of-School Time Evaluation Snapshot* no. 5 (August 2004), Harvard Family Research Project, Harvard Graduate School of Education.

Nobuko Mizoguchi, Mia Luluquisen, Sandra Witt, and Liz Maker, “Choosing Your Data Collection Methods,” in *A Handbook for Participatory Community Assessments: Experiences from Alameda County* (Oakland, CA: Alameda County Public Health Department, 2004), 33-39.

Tips for Steps 1–3

- Take time to set a clearly defined scope.
- Develop a work plan to assign roles, responsibilities, and time frames for major activities involved in conducting the assessment.
- Prioritize your needs by collecting data that addresses your key questions.
- You may not be able to answer all of your key questions. Focus on what is essential to know versus what is good to know.
- If you decide to create a data collection instrument, understand your resources and do what is manageable.

Step 4: Determine Key Findings

The data collection step will result in a lot of data and information about your community needs and assets. You can analyze the data to identify the assessment’s key findings. Key findings serve several purposes:

- They validate anecdotal evidence of community needs and assets.
- They highlight significant trends found in the data collection process.
- They reveal differences across segments of the community.
- They help clarify answers to the community assessment’s key questions.

The key findings can be organized into categories to help summarize the data. When you separate your key findings from one another, you can use them more effectively when planning your response. Common key findings categories used in community assessments include strengths, gaps, opportunities, and challenges. For examples, see the “Determining Key Findings Worksheet” (Appendix D).

Step 5: Set Priorities and Create an Action Plan

The completion of a community assessment process should allow you to make informed decisions about your goals and objectives. You are able to identify specific needs that came up in your assessment that you want to address. Step five of the community assessment process is to set priorities based on your findings and create an action plan to guide your post-assessment planning. For each part of your plan, determine how you will measure the effectiveness of your actions. Adopt measures that help define your strategy and that you will be able to track over time.

Priority setting is difficult. It requires developing consensus among community members with different opinions and views on how community issues should be addressed. Cornell University Cooperative Extension identifies four barriers to priority setting and offers suggestions for minimizing these barriers:³

1. ***The Human Problem*** — the difficulty of getting people to focus on key issues, decisions, and conflicts
 - Start by striving for consensus on what you are trying to accomplish by priority setting. Why are we doing this and what are the stakes?
 - Actively recognize that there is strength in differing viewpoints and don't place viewpoints in value order.
 - Build in time to allow people to reflect on information presented, digest it, and modify decisions.
2. ***The Process Problem*** — the challenge of managing information and ideas during a priority-setting process
 - Be very specific in defining priorities to minimize multiple interpretations.
 - Make key information available prior to decision meetings.
 - Beware of taking too much time to analyze information (“analysis paralysis”) and/or rushing to meet deadlines.
3. ***The Structural Problem*** — the difficulty of priority setting across different issue areas
 - Cultivate open communication.
 - Carefully nurture relationships throughout the planning process.
 - Keep focus on current priorities, not precedent.
4. ***The Institutional Problem*** — the challenge of translating priorities into action
 - Build on existing strengths in implementation.
 - Ensure that you have a well-defined implementation plan.
 - Make sure that individuals responsible for carrying out key tasks are committed to implementing changes.

3 Michael W. Duttweiler, Priority Setting Resources: Selected Background Information and Techniques (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Cooperative Extension, 2008), 3-5. Available online at http://staff.cce.cornell.edu/administration/program/documents/priority_setting_tools.pdf

An action plan template is provided in Appendix E. Your action plan should be based on the priorities set during this phase and include specific actions and deadlines, as well as identify a person responsible for each action. The action plan is an excellent tool to use in setting agendas for future meetings.

Step 6: Share Your Findings

The last step of your community assessment is to share what you have learned with others and to disseminate your plan. Now that you have taken the time to find out information about your community, you should allow the community to benefit from your findings. Community members are more likely to support your efforts when they have a clear understanding of the work you have done and of what their community needs.

You can hold community meetings to share your report with community members or issue press releases to increase dissemination in different media outlets. In addition to the full report, consider publishing a one-page brochure to summarize key findings and actions from the community assessment. The full report should be available on your website. If you collaborated with community partners, the report should be available on their websites as well.

Tips for Steps 4–6

- Remember that key findings should point to an asset or need of the population of your community.
- Key findings may be related to more than one summary category.
- Use information from your community assessment to document your priorities.
- Use charts and graphs to illustrate the finding for non-technical people.
- Continue to work with community members to identify your implementation team.
- Give community members that were not involved in the assessment an opportunity to participate in the implementation.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Community Development - Data Information and Analysis Laboratory (CD-DIAL), Iowa State University Extension, "Preparing for a Collaborative Community Assessment" (Ames, IA: ISU, 2001), www.extension.iastate.edu/Publications/CRD334.pdf.

Rotary International, *Community Assessment Tools: A Companion Piece to Communities in Action — A Guide to Effective Service Projects* (Evanston, IL: Rotary International, 2008), www.rotary.org/RIdocuments/en_pdf/605c_en.pdf.

Underage Drinking Enforcement Training Center, "Community-based Programs: Survey and Community Assessment Tools," <http://www.udetc.org/surveyandcommunity.asp>.

U.S. Department of Education and the Regional Educational Laboratory Network, "Conducting a Community Assessment," in *Putting the Pieces Together: Comprehensive School-linked Strategies for Children and Families* (Washington, DC: Department of Education, 1996), <http://www.ncrel.org/sdrs/areas/issues/envrnmnt/css/ppt/putting.htm>.

University of Kansas Work Group for Community Health and Development, "Community Assessment, Agenda Setting, and Choice of Broad Strategies," in *Community Tool Box* (Lawrence KS: KU Work Group for Community Health and Development, 2010), <http://ctb.ku.edu/en/tablecontents/index.aspx>.

APPENDICES

APPENDIX A

Sample Memorandum of Understanding

**Partnership Agreement
Memorandum of Understanding**

ORGANIZATION 1 AND ORGANIZATION 2

This Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) describes the responsibilities and expectations between Organization 1 (Org1) and Organization 2 (Org2), for the partnership to complete a community needs assessment for [name of community]. The purpose of this assessment is to discover the unique needs of this community as it relates to [at-risk youth, elders in need, other social service areas].

RESPONSIBILITIES AND EXPECTATIONS

For the assessment, Org1 serves as the “lead” organization. As the lead organization, Org1 is responsible for the following:

- [List the specific responsibilities of the lead agency]
- [List specific resources being contributed by the lead agency, including: staff time—list names and the amount of time to be contributed; space; materials; or money]

Under this Agreement, Org2 agrees to:

- [List the specific responsibilities of the assisting agency]
- [List specific resources being contributed by the lead agency, including: staff time—list names and the amount of time to be contributed; space; materials; or money]

TIME PERIOD

The community assessment is expected to be completed within [three months, six month, etc.]

TERMINATION

Org1 may terminate this Agreement, in whole or in part, with or without cause, with a seven (7) day written notice of termination. Such notice shall be given in writing to Org2 and shall be sent via certified or registered mail with return receipt requested.

Signatures of Authorized Representatives

Org 1 Representative [Type name, title]

Date

Org 2 Representative [Type name, title]

Date

APPENDIX B

Worksheet: Creating a Data Collection Plan

Use this document to plan your data collection efforts. List your key questions and decide whether the data for each question can be found by using a secondary or primary source. Identify the potential method(s) you will use.

Note:

- A **secondary source** provides information you can glean from a website (such as Census.gov) or a conversation (talking with a reporter or professor).
- A **primary source** provides information you produce yourself by creating a survey, holding a focus group, etc.
- Secondary sources are listed first because that is where your research will begin.

COMMUNITY QUESTIONS		KEY QUESTION	SECONDARY?	PRIMARY?	POTENTIAL METHOD
		<i>Example: What are the basic demographics of my community? (income levels, races/ethnicities, number of youth)</i>	Yes	No	Secondary: Online resources
		<i>Example: What age group in our community is most at risk for becoming involved in gangs?</i>	Yes	Yes	Secondary: Online resources and informal interviews for data on gang activity in my community Primary: Interviews with former gang-involved youth to add personal testimony to the raw data

APPENDIX C

Locating Secondary Sources of Information

Here are national and local resources for finding information based on topic. This is not an exhaustive list of data sources.

Tips on calling:

1. Consider yourself a private investigator. Your goal is to find out what is really happening in your community, on both the macro and micro levels.
2. It may feel awkward at first, but keep in mind that most people will be happy to speak with you about their work or their organization.
3. Have a list of questions prepared before any phone call.
4. When introducing yourself, focus on what your nonprofit is doing (who you are trying to help), rather than your own personal credentials.

POTENTIAL TOPICS	POTENTIAL SOURCES OF INFORMATION	DESCRIPTION OF SOURCE
Basic Demographic: <i>Income levels, races/ethnicities, attainment</i>	Census data	The U.S. Census Bureau's American FactFinder is an online search engine of the most recent census data, with the option to search by county or city/town. This tool will provide basic and reliable data on how many people are in your area, as well as how certain issues in your area compare with national averages. Don't hesitate to contact the Bureau directly if you need help navigating the site: pop@census.gov .
	State Department of Public Health (DPH)	Your state DPH usually provides data on its website on the overall health of your community, including issues such as poverty and disease.
	United Way	Check with your local United Way to see whether they have published a community report card or assessment report. You need not use their assessment as a model (as it may be too complex), but it may include information and resources helpful to you.
Conditions Shaping your Community: <i>Social, political, and economic</i>	Local newspaper	Consider calling an established journalist from your local paper who can provide inside information regarding the local government, economic trends, and rising social issues. A journalist can provide a valuable overview at the beginning of your research process and may point you toward numerous data resources.
	University faculty and graduate students	If there are universities in your area, chances are there is a significant amount of research being conducted by faculty and graduate students on various issues in your community. Visit university websites to search for faculty with an expert understanding of any social service issue you want to research.
	Local faith-based and community organizations (FBCOs)	Local FBCOs often have keen insight into the issues facing your community. Many have been working in the community for years and may have collected data on issues that are important to your nonprofit. If you are unsure how to find local organizations, a good start would be GuideStar or Idealist.

POTENTIAL TOPICS	POTENTIAL SOURCES OF INFORMATION	DESCRIPTION OF SOURCE
<p>Conditions Shaping your Community: <i>Social, political, and economic (continued)</i></p>	<p>Local government task force/reports</p> <p>Foundation reports</p>	<p>Local governments often solicit groups to research particular community issues. Contact your county or city government and request copies of any relevant reports or materials that could inform your research.</p> <p>Local foundations often conduct research on community issues to inform their grant programs. Contact your local community foundation or other private and family foundations in your area and inquire about any research they may have done on issues related to your nonprofit. To locate foundations in your area, visit the Foundation Center.</p>
<p>Crime: <i>Violent offenses, drug offenses, drug use</i></p>	<p>Bureau of <u>Justice Statistics</u> (BJS)</p>	<p>For a broad look at crime, the BJS provides a wealth of data on both national, state, and city trends. It also allows you to create your own breakdowns (providing data on race, age, type of crime, and so on) for your local area or state.</p>
<p>Resources/Assets for Nonprofits: <i>Funding, technical assistance, volunteers</i></p>	<p>Membership associations For nonprofits</p> <p><u>Foundation Center</u></p>	<p>Many states have membership organizations for nonprofits that provide training and technical assistance to organizations that may or may not be a member. These associations often conduct research on nonprofits in the state as well. Visit the <u>National Council of Nonprofit Associations</u> to find out if there is a membership organization for nonprofits in your state.</p> <p>The Foundation Center is the nation's leading authority on philanthropy. The Center maintains a comprehensive database on U.S. grantmakers and their grants. Visit the Foundation Center website to search for foundations serving your local area.</p>
	<p><u>Alliance for Nonprofit Management (ANM)</u></p>	<p>ANM has a searchable database for local consultants and trainers that may be providing services to nonprofits in your target area.</p>

Note that published data change regularly; check publication dates and ask for updates if necessary.

APPENDIX D

Worksheet: Determining Key Findings

This document provides examples of key findings. You can empty and copy this table to help document your discussion of key findings from your community assessment.

KEY FINDINGS	STRENGTHS	GAPS	OPPORTUNITIES	CHALLENGES
1. There are not enough collaborative efforts among organizations serving the homeless. Previous efforts were non-sustainable.		X		
2. Community youth programs have a difficult time retaining youth in their programs.				X
3. People are aware of services and positive development opportunities in the community.	X			
4. The elderly are disinterested in current programs and services.			X	

APPENDIX E

Action Plan Template

This document provides a template for planning a response to the findings in your community assessment.

KEY FINDING	ACTIVITY OR RESPONSE	DEADLINE	PERSON RESPONSIBLE	INDICATORS OF SUCCESS
Lack of collaboration	Convene monthly service provider meetings	First Tuesday of each month	Rotating hosts among signers of MOU	Percent of MOU signers attending each meeting
Lack of collaboration	Apply for funding to establish a shared referral network	Fall 2011	XYZ, ABC Organizations	Award of grant to establish referral systems policies and procedures

This work was created by the Compassion Capital Fund National Resource Center, operated by Dare Mighty Things, Inc., in the performance of Health and Human Services Contract Number HHSP23320082912YC.