ACCREDITATION TIPS

ENGAGING STAKEHOLDERS IN YOUR AGENCY'S
COMMUNITY RISK ASSESSMENT/STANDARD OF COVER PROCESS

The development of a Community Risk Assessment and Standards of Cover (CRA/SOC) document is an exercise in data analysis, technical knowledge, and communication. This handout focuses on the last of those three elements, as it is frequently overlooked or not given the attention it deserves; this can affect the effectiveness of the CRA/SOC process.

Communication starts with your stakeholders who are in two generalized groups: internal and external. Collectively, they have an interest or investment in the agency but frequently have a different set of priorities and expectations that can impact the outcome of the CRA/SOC process.

> *Stakeholder*:
> "A person or group that have an interest or concern in an organization." *Business Dictionary*

Gathering Input – External Stakeholders

First and foremost, the process used to develop a Community-Driven Strategic Plan is a great opportunity for an agency to solicit input from those who work or live in the service area . The input gathered for the strategic plan can be very relevant to the development of a CRA/SOC by considering program priorities, service levels, and response times. While some agencies use mail-in or online surveys, the Commission on Fire Accreditation International strongly encourages the use of face-to-face meetings with the external stakeholders because of the opportunities they provide.

As a rule, you will want to select external stakeholders who will provide clear and direct feedback. The selection process need not be random; it can be focused by soliciting volunteers from specific areas of the community. The goal is to gather as varied a cross-section of the community as you can.

Who to Invite?

- Parents with school-age children
- Local small business-owners
- Community or neighborhood groups
- Homeowner associations
- Retired residents
- Individuals who are active in the community
- Representatives from local schools, industry, and units of government

Agency members estimate they annually interact with less than 15 percent of their community. That means that most external stakeholders will base their responses not on their experience but on their *PERCEPTION* of the department. The strategic planning process can help identify gaps between how the agency *believes* it is viewed by the community versus how it is *really* viewed by the community. It also provides an opportunity to meet your community stakeholders, learn about their needs and develop relationships. Doing so at the beginning of the strategic planning session will help them to learn and accept you in your role with the agency as well as the information you provide.

Meeting Tips

Be prepared and on time

Ask the stakeholders open-ended questions that cannot be answered with a yes or no

Keep the meeting to an hour

Ensure that all participants can ask questions

Record all comments, observations, and suggestions

Stick to the agenda

Gathering Input & Buy-In from Internal Stakeholders

The development of the CRA/SOC is a foundational element of the risk-based accreditation process. It is based on facts and numbers that support data-informed decisions rather than emotion. Once completed, it can become the "guidance system" that provides the data to drive the decisions necessary to be an effective agency.

The internal stakeholders involved in the development of the CRA/SOC should ideally come from all levels and areas of the organization and have a desire to participate. This also helps to create buy-in and support from all agency members. This process is most effective when treated as a "team sport" that invites collaboration and contributions.

Be aware that some internal stakeholders may seek to use the process to drive support of historical deployment practices. For the CRA/SOC process to be effective, those practices need to be set aside to allow consideration of the <u>fire and non-fire risk</u> in the community and the critical tasking needed to <u>safely mitigate those risks</u>. Doing so allows agencies to increase or decrease the type and number of resources deployed to an incident to match the identified risks.

Steps to Consider

Planning Zones
Risk Assessment
Critical Tasking
Resource Deployment
Performance Measurement

- Be transparent in the methodology used to assess the topics in the box to the left
- Share the results of the data analysis
- Ask for input; do not disregard the members institutional knowledge of The community
- Listen to what is said and follow up on questions
- Help the members understand how topics affect them and what they do
- Provide regular progress updates as milestones are reached

Data-Driven Decision Making

Collect Data → Store Data → Analyze Data → Predict Outcomes → Make Decisions
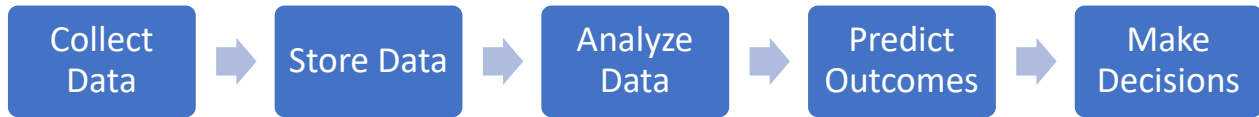
## Gaining AHJ Approval and Reporting Gaps in Performance

The process of setting the response measures for current and future performance is a mix of data analysis, technical expertise, and political judgment. Elected officials collectively decide policy issues for the agency and the staff is responsible for implementing that policy direction. The challenge for the agency is to frame the discussion with the AHJ as one concerning risk-versus-benefit. The CRA/SOC process is based in part on the concept that the AHJ accepts the level of fire and non-fire risk in the community and, just as importantly, is responsible to decide how it will protect the community from those risks. Expressed differently, how much will/can the AHJ pay to protect the community from those risks?

To do this, the agency needs to consider how to present the information in the CRA/SOC in a way the AHJ members can digest, discuss, and decide priorities. Consider these communications basics:

Communications 101

a) Exercise patience, listen more than you talk
b) Understand they are people, keep your cool and do not overreact
c) Understand how they prefer to communicate and shape the message accordingly

Probably the most effective way to depict large amounts of data is using visuals, particularly those created by Geographic Information Systems (GIS). Such visuals can convey data in context and can support an informed and productive conversation. It can help to focus the group's attention on not only the existence of risks and service demands in the community, but also show WHERE those risks and demands are located.
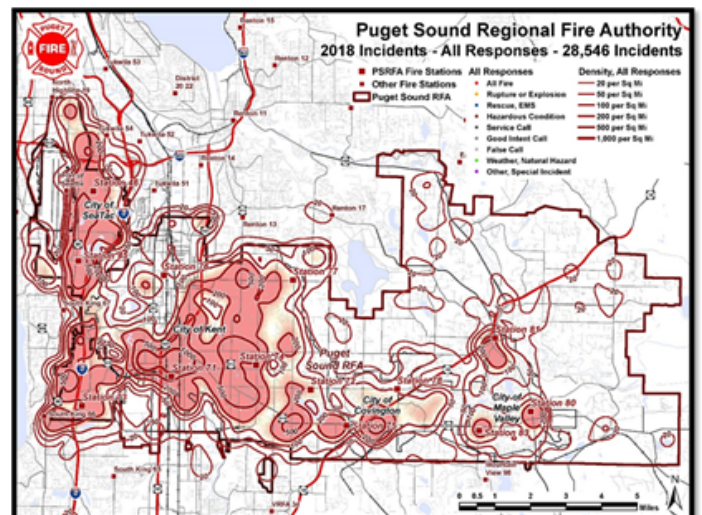
Reporting The GAP

An integral part of the CRA/SOC document is the ongoing assessment of the agency's performance, especially its ability to reach the approved benchmark (target) measures. The difference between current (baseline) and desired (benchmark performance) is called the GAP. It is critical that the department develop an internal

For a strong impact, it is often very effective to show your data graphically to put it into context. Courtesy of the Clovis (CA) Fire Department

methodology that regularly and consistently assesses its performance and that the assessment is shared with the AHJ and the community. Doing so creates a communications loop between the agency and the external stakeholders. It supports future policy decisions, strengthens communications and just as importantly, builds the credibility of the agency.

Read More About It

"*Public Participation Guide: Tools*" U.S. EPA. www.epa.gov/international-cooperation/public-participation-guide-tools
"*The Beginners Guide to Working with Elected Officials*", ICMA. www.icma.org/blog-posts/beginners-guide-working-elected-officials
"*Communicating Effectively with Elected Officials*", ICMA, www.icma.org/articles/pm-magazine/communicating-effectively-elected-officials