



National Assessment Center Association

Assessment Center Planning and Implementation Guide

What you will learn

This guide is designed to provide communities considering adopting the Assessment Center Framework with a comprehensive overview of Assessment Centers and outlines essential planning and implementation steps. It covers key topics such as securing cross-system and community buy-in, evaluating model fit to community needs, and considering community initiatives and context. The guide also offers practical advice on matters such as creating a representative planning team, setting S.M.A.R.T. goals, and defining the target population. Additionally, it addresses the operational aspects of Assessment Centers, including creating a mission and vision statement, establishing an operating entity, staffing, funding, and utilizing NAC technical support.





Assessment Center Planning and Implementation Guide

About the Planning and Implementation Guide

The National Assessment Center Association (NAC) has prepared this planning and implementation guide to support communities in developing an Assessment Center responsive to their local needs and processes. This guide is designed to promote discussions on best practices as well as help your local planning team navigate essential decisions and anticipate potential challenges in implementation. It will aid in identifying key partners and stakeholders, determining the target population for the Assessment Center, establishing a referral process, and address critical considerations.

To learn if there is already an Assessment Center in your area, check our listings of member Assessment Centers [\[here\]](#).

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How to Use this Guide

This guide is designed to support you through the planning and implementation process for establishing an Assessment Center. Whether you are just beginning to organize your efforts or are in the midst of executing a plan, this guide provides the tools, insights, and practical steps needed to ensure success.

The planning and implementation process outlined in this guide is not strictly linear but should be viewed as iterative. Planning groups may need to revisit and refine previous sections at each step to ensure key decisions are well-informed and effective. While the guide provides a structured approach, every project and community is unique. Feel free to adapt the steps, tools, and recommendations to better fit your specific context and goals.

Underlying Assumptions

This guide makes several assumptions regarding work that has already occurred in the community prior to engaging in the Assessment Center planning and implementation process.

Before engaging in the planning and implementation process outlined in the rest of this guide, ensure that all underlying assumptions hold true. If any of these assumptions are not met, we recommend contacting the NAC for training and/or technical assistance related to achieving community readiness. Refer to page 18 for more resources and National Assessment Center Association contact information.

Assumption #1: There is consensus that the community is not effectively serving youth and families' needs.

The planning process assumes there is consensus from both system and community stakeholders that youth and families experiencing struggles are not effectively served by existing community and system processes. Many communities exploring the possibility of utilizing Assessment Centers have reached a consensus among community and system stakeholders that (1) youth and families could be better served through diversion and prevention efforts rather than the legal or child welfare systems and/or (2) youth and families are not able to access services and support in a timely manner or without the involvement of the system.

Assumption #2: There is capacity and resources to engage in planning and implementation.

This process assumes that communities have the capacity and sufficient resources—such as dedicated personnel, time, and expertise—available to carry out the planning and implementation activities.

Assumption #3: Change is feasible and sustainable.

The process assumes that the community can implement and sustain the changes proposed through the planning process. This requires a focus on building local capacity, ensuring long-term support, and creating systems that can maintain and adapt the changes over time.

Assumption #4: Existing power dynamics and the political climate can be mitigated or managed.

The process assumes that existing power dynamics within the community can be navigated and managed to avoid conflicts that could derail the process. It assumes that power dynamics and politics will not significantly disrupt the planning and implementation process. Those engaged in the planning process must be adaptable to changing circumstances.

Assumption #5: Stakeholders have foundational knowledge of Assessment Centers and the Framework.

The process assumes that those involved in the planning process, including community and system stakeholders, have foundational knowledge of what an Assessment Center is and of the Assessment Center Framework. To access foundational information, see the resources in the next section.



Understanding Assessment Centers and the Assessment Center Framework

What is an Assessment Center?

Assessment Centers aim to prevent and divert youth from juvenile justice and child welfare systems through a neutral, single point of contact which identifies underlying issues contributing to concerning behavior and partners with youth and families to access individualized services and/or resources. This occurs by means of intervention in schools, at the point of or after arrest, at the request of parents/caregivers, or through partnerships with other community stakeholders. Through in-depth interviews and validated screening and assessment tools, centers work to understand the barriers youth and families are experiencing at home, school, or in the community. Following assessment, Centers partner with the youth and family to access individualized resources and services to help overcome barriers and, ultimately, work towards creating a stable environment where they can thrive. When appropriate, Centers coordinate with educational, social service, and justice agencies to provide a holistic view of the family's and youth's strengths and needs. Assessment Centers are based on their local community needs and work in one or more of the following domains: Juvenile Justice, Child Welfare, and Prevention.

Juvenile Justice

When youth come into contact with law enforcement either through an arrest, summons/citation, or status offense, Assessment Centers become the first point of contact. Assessment Centers either serve as the “diverter,” having the authority to divert specific offenses or youth from the justice system or are the neutral hub where youth are “diverted to.” In communities where youth are diverted to an Assessment Center, agreements with specific partners (i.e., district attorney, law enforcement, or courts) allow for youth to be diverted to the Assessment Center in lieu of system involvement. Centers conduct in-depth interviews and utilize validated screening and assessment tools to help identify needs, strengths, safety concerns, and other underlying issues. These underlying issues can include but are not limited to trauma, mental health, family issues, substance use, lack of basic needs, and human trafficking. Centers help youth and families connect to individualized services and supports.

Child Welfare

Concerning behavior can stem from trauma within the home. Assessment Centers partner with child welfare organizations both preventatively and as an intervention to identify the underlying issues affecting the youth and family. Centers conduct an in-depth assessment and utilize evidence-based screening tools to determine risk factors, trauma, safety needs, mental health, family issues, substance use, lack of basic needs, human trafficking, etc. Information gathered through the assessments help centers create opportunities to strengthen families and support individuals by focusing on intervention, and prevention efforts, coupled with delivering enhanced services and building stronger connections for youth and families with community partners. The primary focus is on youth and families to ensure they receive the care and resources that will best serve the child's well-being, recognizing the child's relationship with their family as an integral part of this process.

Prevention

Usually, concerning behavior has been identified before a youth comes into contact with law enforcement either by parents/caregivers, school staff, or others in the community. Assessment Centers partner with parents/caregivers to provide in-depth assessments and connection to services and resources when they may be struggling with behaviors at home. They partner with schools by providing an alternative or in conjunction with disciplinary actions (referrals, expulsions, suspensions), as a response to truancy, or simply when school personnel may have concerns. Finally, other community stakeholders or partners may refer a youth or family to an Assessment Center. Examples of other stakeholders are youth-serving organizations, faith-based communities, or coaches. The early intervention provided by Assessment Centers helps prevent the need for law enforcement and/or child welfare involvement.

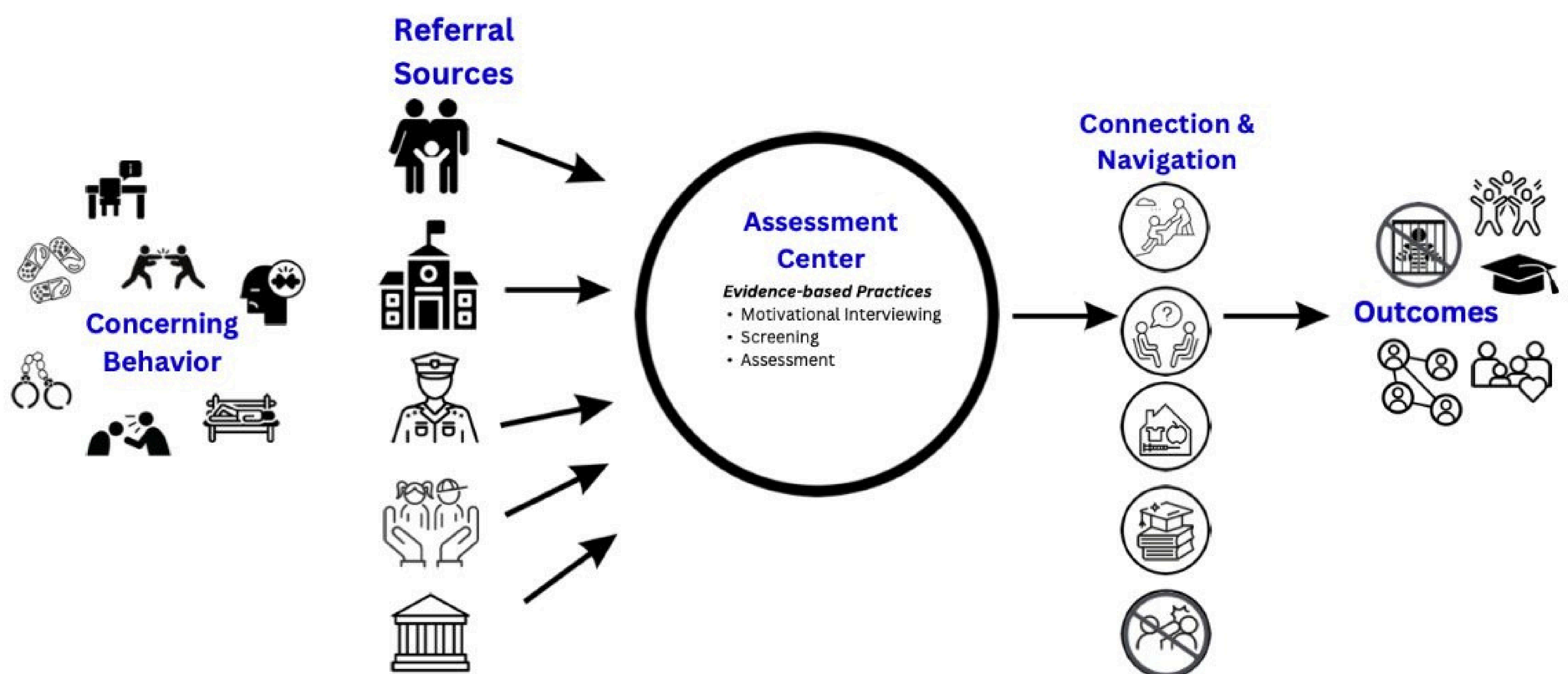
Understanding the Assessment Center Framework

What is the Assessment Center Framework?

The Assessment Center Framework identifies core components, standards, and best practices that guide the operations of Assessment Centers. The Framework is grounded in research and best practices and allows Centers nationwide to operate under a set of core components that facilitate consistent measuring of key data and collective impact. The Framework includes standards, criteria, outputs, and suggested quality assurance measures. It also identifies short, medium, and long-term outcomes. The Assessment Center Framework was developed by a diverse Advisory Committee, using [guiding principles](#).

To support a foundational understanding of the Assessment Center Framework, the planning team should participate in an Assessment Center 101 training at the onset of planning within a community. This can come in the form of individualized community training by NAC staff or by watching our pre-recorded [Assessment Center 101 training](#). Both training methods provide a thorough overview of the Assessment Center Framework, share examples of centers from around the country, and facilitate discussions on assessing readiness for developing a new center or expanding a current center.

The Assessment Center Framework



Planning

Cross-System and Community Buy-In and Participation

Cross-system and community collaboration is crucial. It enables a more effective, comprehensive, and equitable approach to addressing the complex needs of youth. Youth often face a range of challenges beyond legal issues, including mental health problems, substance abuse, educational gaps, and family instability. Collaboration between different community and system stakeholders (i.e., youth and families, law enforcement, courts, education, child welfare, and service providers) allows for more efficient use of resources, promotes equity in access, reduces duplication of efforts, and ensures that services are delivered more effectively. The involvement of community members and key stakeholders will be crucial to the success of the Assessment Center.

In order to assess stakeholder buy-in and participation, communities should engage in rich conversation with community and system stakeholders on their needs, challenges, and strengths. It is important in those conversations to explore how stakeholders' individual needs and interests intersect with the work of Assessment Centers. This allows the planning process to articulate a shared vision that guides planning and implementation.

To the right are examples of how specific stakeholder groups can benefit from an Assessment Center.

Youth, Families, and Community

Assessment Centers can benefit youth, families, and communities by:

- Creating streamlined and coordinated pathways to access community-based supports that align with their needs and preferences.
- Providing youth and families choice in services and support.
- Help to prevent service fatigue.
- Provides earlier opportunities for diversion from the juvenile justice and child welfare system.
- Provides support with both service and system navigation.

Law Enforcement

Assessment Centers can benefit law enforcement by:

- Providing them with a tool to support youth and families in lieu of citation or arrest.
- Optimize law enforcement time and processes by utilizing the Assessment Center to coordinate release back to the community or a co-response.
- Provides expertise in youth and family development and engagement when youth are in crisis and require additional interventions aside from a direct law enforcement intervention

Courts

Assessment Centers can benefit courts by:

- Diverting youth and families from court intake processes; allowing courts to maximize their resources by focusing court caseloads on the small number of youth who are a public safety risk.
- Utilization of the Assessment Center to identify alternatives to detention.
- Support probation with community-based program opportunities that match a variety of youth needs.

Schools

Assessment Centers can benefit schools by:

- Create alternatives to school disciplinary processes such as suspensions and expulsions;
- Maximize school resources by allowing staff (i.e., counselors, principals, etc.) to utilize the Assessment Center to make intentional connections based on strengths and needs for youth and families.

Service Providers

Assessment Centers can benefit the service provider community by:

- Ensuring youth and family needs align with eligibility and the population their programs are intended to serve; maximizing their impact on youth and families.
- Streamlining referrals.

Defining Population of Need:

Assuming communities have reached a consensus that they are not effectively serving youth and families (see Assumption #1 on page 2), defining the population of need is the next crucial step in the planning and implementation process. This is particularly important when multiple stakeholders are involved. Communities should start by broadly defining the affected populations. Below are some questions to consider to help broadly define the population of need.

- Is there consensus that there are youth and families in the community that are struggling to access services and therefore end up in contact with systems?
- Which service system is most impacted by lack of access and support for youth and families?
- Who are the youth and families struggling to find adequate services and support?

Community Consensus Example: Youth and families would be better served through diversion and prevention efforts rather than contact with the legal or child welfare systems.

Population of Need Example: Youth and families coming into contact with law enforcement and the courts.

During implementation, a more detailed needs statement should be developed as well as a clearer identification of the target population the Assessment Center will serve. In the planning phase, the consensus on need and the population of need should be kept broad.

Community Consensus:

Population of Need:

Identify Existing Community Initiatives

Conducting a scan of existing community initiatives is an essential step in understanding the current landscape and avoiding duplication of efforts. How has the community worked together in the recent past to implement a collaborative effort? Mapping existing or past initiatives related to youth justice, behavioral health, or continuums of care can help to identify partnership opportunities or, if initiatives are no longer active, helps to understand lessons learned and anticipate potential barriers.

Identifying Enablers and Challenges for Existing Community and System Stakeholders

Identifying and understanding the enablers and challenges facing community and system stakeholders is essential for optimizing the effectiveness, collaboration, resource allocation, decision-making, sustainability, and engagement of those stakeholders. It helps to build on each other's strengths, fostering collaboration that can lead to more comprehensive and cohesive approaches to addressing community needs. It can also help mitigate potential conflicts between stakeholders, ensuring smoother collaboration and better alignment of goals. To facilitate this, communities are encouraged to take inventory of and understand the following elements:

- Existing state and local law and policy for system stakeholders
- Individual system directives (i.e., law enforcement directives and policy for making arrests or child welfare and justice system directives for accepting and approving cases)
- Federal, state, local priorities and initiatives related to youth justice and youth behavioral health.

Implementation

All assumptions listed above apply to the implementation portion of this guide. It also assumes that communities have undergone the above planning activities.

Creating a Diverse Planning Team

The success of an Assessment Center depends on the active participation and ownership of key stakeholders. It is critical for communities to engage these stakeholders in the creation of a planning team made up of between 7-10 members. It may be that there are existing community groups that meet regularly that can be expanded to serve as the Assessment Center planning team. While the exact identity of stakeholders may vary depending on the target population of the Assessment Center, critical stakeholders of Assessment Centers may include:

- Youth and families with lived experience in the justice system or navigating systems processes
- Law enforcement
- Courts (judge, probation, prosecutors, juvenile defenders)
- Schools and educational partners
- Child welfare
- Community advocates
- Behavioral health system stakeholders

Whether utilizing an existing group or forming a new one, involving those most affected by the problem (see below on creating a problem statement) in the planning team is crucial. Social or community issues inherently impact many people. Typically, individuals with social and economic power, such as public officials, define these problems and their solutions. While everyone might be indirectly affected, those directly experiencing the problem are often excluded from processes aimed at understanding the challenges and identifying potential solutions. Involving those most impacted ensures that the Assessment Center process utilizes community strengths and addresses challenges as defined by community members themselves.

Defining roles within the planning group ensures a structured and efficient process. Clear role definitions can help distribute responsibilities effectively. It also fosters accountability, and encourages active participation and collaboration. Example roles include:

- Project Manager
- Facilitator
- Stakeholder Liaison
- Subject Matter Expert
- Data Analyst

Members should be expected to contribute their expertise and focus on assigned tasks. The planning group can work more cohesively towards a common goal by delineating clear roles. This can also help streamline decision-making and address challenges promptly and efficiently. The planning group should establish a decision-making structure or process which can designate an ultimate decision maker or pursue group consensus. This is crucial for maintaining clarity and efficiency in the planning process. A decision-making structure prevents confusion and conflicts, and provides a clear point of accountability for the planning team's actions and outcomes.

See next page for a planning group chart.



Assessment Center Planning Team

<u>Name</u>	<u>Title</u>	<u>Organization (if applicable)</u>	<u>Group Role (If Designated)</u>



Statement of the Need

Statement of Need:

A clearly defined statement of need is essential for guiding the planning process. It helps ensure that all planning team members have a shared understanding of the issue at hand while focusing their efforts and resources. Additionally, a well-articulated statement of need can help engage stakeholders by clearly communicating the issue's significance and the planning initiative's intended goals.

An effective statement of need does three things:

- 1.) It uses supportive evidence to clearly describe the nature and extent of the need or problem facing those you plan to serve.
- 2.) It illuminates the factors contributing to the problem or the circumstances creating the need.
- 3.) It identifies current gaps in services or programs.

While communities should define their own statements of need, common issues facing communities exploring the Assessment Center Framework are listed below. Please note: this should not be considered an exhaustive list.

- Increase in youth crime
- System involvement is currently the primary method of connecting youth and families to services
- Lack of community coordination and collaboration
- Lengthy case processing and lack of immediate response in providing youth and families with supportive services
- Disproportionate rates of justice involvement for specific populations (youth of color, gender, etc.)
- Detention overcrowding or inappropriate use (i.e., status offenses, mental health issues, etc.)
- Ineffective use of law enforcement officer time and resources
- Overall need for more prevention services and services for at-risk youth
- Inequities in how youth and families access community resources

What is the problem you intend to solve by establishing an Assessment Center? Writing a statement of need involves several key steps:

- 1.) *Identify the Problem:* Clearly articulate the issue that needs to be addressed in a specific and concise manner.
- 2.) *Describe the Impact:* Explain how the problem affects the community or organization. Include data or evidence if available.
- 3.) *Specify the Need for Action:* Emphasize why it is important to address the problem now. Highlight any urgent aspects or opportunities for positive change.

Statement of Need:

Understanding Current Practice: State and Local Policy

An Assessment Center brings together critical system and community stakeholders in order to divert youth from systems and streamline local processes. Understanding local and statewide policies is necessary to identify the constraints and abilities of other system stakeholders. It also informs the Assessment Center policies and procedures and how they work with various stakeholders. This, in turn, helps to guide staff on their own roles and responsibilities. The following local and state policies should be explored and considered in the implementation process:

- State Juvenile Justice Act
- Local decision-makers and the decision-making structure of the following:
 - County commissioners
 - Mayor
 - Police/Sheriff
 - Courts
 - Prosecutors & Defenders
 - Child welfare
- Police directive
- Transfer of custody for dependency issues
- How, when, and what screening and assessment tools (i.e., risk-need-responsivity (RNR), mental health, trauma, etc.) are implemented within the following sectors and how results of those tools are used:
 - Diversion
 - Probation
 - Child welfare
- Detention screening
 - Who does it?
 - When?
 - How does it happen?
 - How is the information from the tool used?

Identifying Target Population and Referral Processes

Assessment Centers provide an opportunity for communities to screen, assess, and understand underlying issues contributing to behaviors. This is necessary to provide meaningful connections to services and other types of support.

To serve as a single point of contact in any community requires community consensus and cross-system collaboration in developing the domain(s), referral sources, and target populations to be served by the Assessment Center. The graphic below provides examples of referral sources and reasons that allow Assessment Centers to serve as off-ramps to system involvement. You can find specific examples of Assessment Centers, including who they serve, and their referral processes on the [Spotlight](#) page of the NAC website.



The above provides examples of how Assessment Centers can facilitate prevention and diversion. However, communities undergoing planning and implementation should caution against “cutting and pasting” how other Assessment Centers serve their community. Below are critical steps to understanding current practice, identifying target populations, and establishing referral pathways.

Step 1: Critical Intervention Mapping to Identify Target Population

Assessment Center Intervention Mapping is an iterative process that assists communities with deepening their understanding of why and how youth encounter and move through systems processes with the objective to support identification of areas for an Assessment Center to intervene, prevent, and divert.

Understanding these processes and who is moving through them will allow for communities to understand opportunities for an Assessment Center to divert youth and create a more streamlined approach to connect to community-based supports. Ultimately, critical intervention mapping allows for communities to select a target population in a data- and process-informed manner. Communities should identify reports and data available for the youth population within the community of focus that help describe demographics, data around key decision points, and existing programs for the following:



- Community data (United States Census)
- School districts
- Law enforcement agencies
- Juvenile court and/or probation
- Detention
- Child welfare

Step 2: Identify Target Population

It is recommended that the planning group and community stakeholders convene to answer the following questions:

- Based on local data and processes gathered during critical intervention mapping, who is connecting with system processes that would be better served by community resources?
- Where are the opportunities to make systems processes more efficient by replacing current practices with a single point of contact?
- How will the focus on this target population mitigate any disparities reflected in the data?

Step 3: Identify Referral Pathways and Processes

It is recommended that the planning group and community stakeholders convene to answer the following questions:

Referral Processes:

- Who will make the referral and at what point(s) will referral decisions be made? Examples include:
 - Concerning behavior (caregiver or community)
 - Chronic absenteeism (school)
 - Behavior infraction, suspension, expulsion (school)
 - At citation, arrest, or apprehension (law enforcement)
 - Prosecutorial review (prosecutors)
 - Court intake (intake or probation staff)
- What is the anticipated timeframe from referral source interaction (i.e., community, school, law enforcement, court) to referral to the Assessment Center?
 - Will youth be transported to the Assessment Center by law enforcement? If so, for what?
 - Will the space be nonsecure, secure, or both?
 - If youth will be transported, what are local requirements for transfer of custody?
 - If youth will be transported, consult with local child welfare and other regulating agencies on allowable time spent and policies and procedures when youth cannot be returned home within allowable time. Are there respite or emergency shelter facilities in lieu of detention or child welfare placements?
- What MOUs are required to facilitate the referral process? Who needs to be engaged in order for those MOUs to be approved?
- What data sharing agreements will be required to facilitate the Assessment Center process (referral, screening/assessment process, case management) in order to reduce duplication? Who needs to be engaged in order for those data sharing agreements to be approved?

S.M.A.R.T. Goals

S.M.A.R.T. Goals

The acronym S.M.A.R.T. stands for Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, and Time-bound. S.M.A.R.T. goals are crucial for effective planning and implementation because they provide a clear, structured, and measurable framework for achieving objectives.

Linking S.M.A.R.T. goals to a statement of need and the target population identified in the critical intervention mapping process ensures the planning process is focused, effective, and results-oriented. Assessment Center planning groups should identify three to five S.M.A.R.T goals that articulate how the work of the planning team will work to solve the statement of need (page 9) and the target population and referral pathways identified in critical intervention mapping..

	S	M	A	R	T
S.M.A.R.T. GOALS	Specific	Measurable	Attainable	Relevant	Time Based
	Be specific and narrow for effective planning	Identify what defines success and how progress will be tracked	Make sure the goal statement is both ambitious and achievable	Create alignment between this effort, community values, and long-term objectives	Set an end-date for this phase of the work.
	EXAMPLE:	Reduce the number of youth referred to the juvenile justice system for non-violent offenses by 25% within the first year of an operational Assessment Center.	A 25% reduction of violent offenses entering the juvenile justice System. Track the number of youth diverted and compare it to baseline data from previous year	Work with law enforcement, schools, and community organizations to identify and refer eligible youth to the Assessment Center	Diverting youth from the justice system addresses the issue of criminalizing specific offenses and reduces the long-term negative impact on youth
S.M.A.R.T GOAL #1					
S.M.A.R.T GOAL #2					
S.M.A.R.T GOAL #3					
S.M.A.R.T GOAL #4					
S.M.A.R.T GOAL #5					

Assessment Center Operations

When developing the operations, staffing, and policies and procedures of an Assessment Center, local communities should use the Assessment Center Framework as their guide. The Framework offers a comprehensive blueprint that ensures consistency and quality across centers. It helps communities establish a solid operational foundation by providing clearly defined standards and the criteria necessary to meet those standards. The Framework also outlines suggested quality assurance measures to monitor and improve performance over time.

By following the Framework, local communities can align their Assessment Centers with best practices, ensuring that they are equipped to meet the evolving needs of the populations they serve. This alignment also facilitates the ability to measure progress systematically and make data-driven adjustments, ultimately leading to more effective and sustainable outcomes.

This section of the guide provides some essential steps and considerations for developing your Assessment Center. It can be helpful in conjunction with the Assessment Center Framework.

Create a Mission and Vision Statement for the Assessment Center

Mission and vision statements are critical to communicating the purpose of the Assessment center and the long-term impact it seeks to achieve.

Mission statements provide a brief, clear description of an organization's fundamental purpose and the primary goals it seeks to achieve. It focuses on the present, defining the organization's role and guiding its daily operations. It answers the following questions:

- Why does the organization exist?
- What does the organization do?
- Who does it serve?

Example Mission Statement

"To provide a coordinated site which contributes to the safety of youth, families, and the community through early intervention, comprehensive assessment and improved access to appropriate services."

18th Juvenile Assessment Center, Colorado

Mission Statement:

A **vision statement** is an aspirational description of what the organization hopes to achieve in the future. It is forward-looking and inspirational, outlining the desired long-term impact the organization aims to create. It serves as a guiding star for the organization's strategic direction and decision-making. It answers the question:

What does the organization aspire to become?

Example Vision Statement:

"For all young people to reach their full potential through the support of strong families and communities."

St. Charles CARE Center, Louisiana

Vision Statement:



Establishing the Operating Entity

Assessment Centers can be operated by various types of organizations including governmental organizations such as counties, judicial districts, and municipalities as well as community-based nonprofit organizations. **An assessment center should not be operated by a service provider, especially of therapeutic services.** This is due to the real or perceived conflicts of interest regarding youth and family referrals.

Essential Considerations For Determining Operating Entity

- Will the Assessment Center have the “authority” to make diversion decisions either from court or detention intake? Does this authority require a specific entity to operate the Assessment Center?
- If an entity outside of the judicial system runs the Assessment Center, is there a willingness to share authority with that organization? What MOUs and data sharing agreements will be needed?
- What operational structure will allow for trust and engagement with youth, families, and community? Consider existing relationships and trust of the community.
- What operational structure will allow for engagement of the essential system stakeholders required for a successful assessment center (law enforcement, courts, child welfare, education, etc.)?

Community Asset Mapping

Assessment Centers play a crucial role as **connectors**, bridging the gap between stakeholders and community resources. To provide this connecting function, Assessment Centers must thoroughly understand the various services and supports available in the community. When connecting youth and families, an Assessment Center’s “toolbox” must include services and supports that address basic, prosocial, therapeutic, and recreational needs. Knowledge of what resource are available helps support the important role of working with the family to identify the right supports for them and help access those supports. Read more about the connector role of Assessment Centers [HERE](#).

Asset mapping, or mapping community connections, is grounded in the public health approach. It requires Assessment Centers and community stakeholders to thoroughly review the available community services and support, and map who they serve, how referrals are made, and what services are provided. It allows for community consensus on the availability of services and the decision points, or flow, of services offered within a community. This process also allows Assessment Centers to identify their referral - or connection - network.

Communities should identify the array of supports to which Assessment Centers can refer youth and families. In addition to the better known organizations, consider mechanisms that support a greater reach to unidentified or underutilized assets. The following list of community service and support categories are worth examining:

- | | | |
|---------------------------------------|--|---|
| • Mental health- youth, family | • Job training and placement services | • Life skills training programs |
| • Substance use – youth, family | • Recreational programs (e.g., arts, sports) | • Mentoring programs |
| • Trauma – youth, family | • Housing | • Respite and support services for caregivers |
| • Peer support | • Benefits and basic needs (i.e., food, utilities, health insurance) | • Restorative justice programs |
| • Healthcare – hospitals, clinics | | • Parent support |
| • Educational assistance and advocacy | | • Other |



Staffing Assessment Centers

Assessment Centers implement various staffing models to serve youth and families in their community. Community-based, nonprofit Assessment Centers may staff their center with navigators and credible messengers. Centers operating under their court or county may have reassigned staff who were working with youth on probation to be more “front end.” Assessment Centers may also have clinical staff, which allows for more in-depth, specialized assessment. No matter the types of positions, Assessment Centers are more effective when the workforce is reflective of the populations being served.

Essential Considerations For Staffing Assessment Centers

- Will your Assessment Center be operational 24/7?
- What are educational and experiential requirements for the screening and assessment tool(s) your Assessment Center will be using?
- Will the Assessment Center be a Tier II requiring more specialized staff to conduct Assessments?
- A critical component of Assessment Centers is building rapport with youth and families and providing linkages (case management) to community supports and services. Think about how you can employ those living in or familiar with the community you serve (i.e., community navigator or credible messengers) to carry out this function?
- How many youth does the Assessment Center plan to serve annually based on the target population? What will be the expected caseload of staff at any given time?

Funding Assessment Centers

The revenue streams of Assessment Centers vary from community to community. However, one common thread is that most Assessment Centers are funded collaboratively. Collaborative funding allows multiple stakeholders to pool their resources and brings a variety of perspectives, expertise, and innovative ideas. It fosters a sense of ownership and commitment, leading to stronger community engagement and support as well as increased sustainability. With Assessment Centers providing benefits and cost savings to a variety of stakeholders (listed on page 5), these same stakeholders often provide funds to sustain Assessment Center operations.

The most common source of funding is from local counties either through existing system budgets (court, juvenile justice, child welfare) or through the county general funds. Ideally, Centers should not rely on one funding source to operate and should operate through a diversified funding model. For each Center, relationship management, communication, and showing impact is critical to sustainability. Below are a few examples of how Assessment Centers are funded:

- **Assessment Center Funding Example #1** | A nonprofit operated Assessment Center serving an urban, suburban, and rural region. Operations are 24/7 employing 28 staff. Funding makeup includes: State legislation 26%, Law Enforcement 31%, Child Welfare 10%, Medicaid 1%, SBIRT 10%, Foundations 9%.
- **Assessment Center Funding Example #2** | A government operated Assessment Center serving a rural area. Operations are 24/7 employing 18 staff. Funding make-up includes 5% county general funds and 95% state Department of Youth Service (State) funds.

Assessment Center Collaborative Funding Sources

- County
- Juvenile Justice
- Child Welfare
- Law Enforcement
- Schools
- Philanthropic
- Targeted Case Management
- Medicaid Reimbursement
- SBIRT
- State Legislation
- Federal Funding

National Assessment Center Association (NAC) Technical Support

The various sections of the planning guide, while not exhaustive, are intended to prepare communities for essential decisions and circumvent challenges that likely would occur if not for detailed planning. Communities are encouraged to develop their Assessment Center in a way that is responsive and customized to local needs and processes and built in cooperation with the community.

Technical Assistance and Support Offered by the National Assessment Center Association

The National Assessment Center Association has provided technical assistance to over 20 communities in the development of their Assessment Centers. Technical assistance supports communities in forming their planning teams, conducting intervention and asset mapping, and operationalizing the Assessment Center Framework. Technical assistance is also offered to both developing and established Assessment Centers to enhance data capacity and craft individualized continuous quality improvement plans that align seamlessly with the Assessment Center Framework. Training and technical assistance can be customized to meet an individual jurisdiction's needs.

To learn about specific technical assistance offerings visit our [website](#) or email us at molli@nacassociation.org.



nacassociation.org



molli@nacassociation.org



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Other Resources:

- **NAC Membership:** Communities developing Assessment Centers are encouraged to become members of the NAC. Membership allows access to specific resources like the monthly directors circle, the resource library, and training. It also provides opportunities to network with Assessment Center colleagues from around the country.
- **Assessment Center Framework & Self-Assessment Tool:** In 2021, with support from the Annie E. Casey Foundation and State Justice Institute, the NAC engaged a diverse advisory committee to create the Assessment Center Framework. The Framework is grounded in research and best practice and allows Assessment Centers to operate under a set of core components and standards. The Framework supports the Assessment Center network and it allows consistency in measuring impact. In conjunction with the Framework, the NAC created a self-assessment tool. The tool was developed to provide Assessment Centers with the opportunity to examine, review, and reflect on their current operations and to what extent those operations align with the Assessment Center Framework. Both the Framework and the self-assessment tool can be used to guide the planning and developing of an Assessment Center.
- **NAC Publications:** The NAC is constantly releasing new publications and resources for communities. Examples of publications include The Journey of Establishing an Assessment Center and The Connector Role of Assessment Centers. We also publish Assessment Center Spotlights highlighting specific jurisdictions doing the work!