Community Needs Assessment

A prayerful planning tool for churches, leaders, volunteers, and ministry teams serving men, women, families, and neighbors in need

Listen carefully. Learn humbly. Serve wisely.

Purpose of This Resource

This assessment is designed to help you understand the real needs in your community before you begin or expand a compassion ministry. It can be used for many kinds of ministry, including food ministry, resource closets, recovery support, jail or prison reentry, mentoring, job readiness, education, senior adult care, homeless outreach, grief care, family support, foster care support, ESL, life skills, and other ministries of mercy and practical help.

The purpose is not to create a complicated research project. The purpose is to slow down long enough to pray, listen, observe, and make wise decisions. Strong compassion ministry begins with both a soft heart and a clear understanding of the need.

Scripture Foundation

Philippians 2:4
"Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others."

How to Use This Assessment

Use this tool with a pastor, ministry team, advisory group, nonprofit board, or small group of people who share the same burden. Work through one section at a time. Write what you know, identify what you still need to learn, and use the final pages to choose the most realistic first ministry focus.

Keep the assessment respectful and confidential.
Record community patterns, needs, resources, and observations—not private case details or sensitive personal information about individuals.

1. Name the Burden

Begin by naming the concern God has placed on your heart. Try to write it clearly without deciding too quickly what the ministry should become.

What need or group of people has God placed on our hearts?

Examples: men in recovery, women rebuilding after crisis, families facing food insecurity, senior adults, people reentering from jail, single parents, students, immigrants, people experiencing homelessness, caregivers, grieving families.

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Why does this need matter to us?

Consider what you have seen, heard, experienced, prayed about, or been burdened by.

What do we believe God may be asking us to do first?

Keep this simple. You are not writing the whole plan yet.

2. Identify the People You Hope to Serve

A clear ministry focus helps you serve people with dignity and wisdom. Check all groups that may be connected to the burden, then mark the one group you believe should be your first focus.

☐ Men in need of support or mentoring
☐ Women in need of support or mentoring
☐ Families facing crisis or instability
☐ Children or youth needing support
☐ Senior adults or isolated adults
☐ People in recovery from addiction
☐ People reentering after jail or prison
☐ People experiencing homelessness or housing instability
☐ People facing food insecurity
☐ People needing job readiness or education support
☐ People needing ESL, literacy, or digital skills
☐ Caregivers, foster families, or kinship families
☐ People grieving or walking through loss
☐ Other: _____

Our first-focus group is:

_____

_____

3. Listen to the Community

Before launching a ministry, listen to people who understand the need. This helps you avoid assumptions, duplication, or starting something that does not match the real barriers people face.

Use more than one kind of voice.
When possible, listen both to people who work with the need and to people who have lived experience with it. One professional perspective or one personal story should not carry the whole assessment.

Who have we already talked with?

List pastors, school leaders, nonprofit leaders, social workers, law enforcement chaplains, recovery leaders, community members, or people with lived experience.

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Who do we still need to listen to?

Consider people who work directly with the population you hope to serve.

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What repeated needs or concerns are we hearing?

Look for patterns rather than one isolated story.

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What might people be hesitant to tell us?

Consider shame, fear, distrust, literacy barriers, immigration concerns, trauma, pride, or past negative experiences with churches or agencies.

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Community Listening Record

Use this optional table to keep a simple record of conversations that inform the assessment. Do not record confidential participant information.

Person / Organization	What We Heard	Follow-Up Needed

4. Existing Resources and Possible Partners

Compassion ministry is stronger when you know who is already serving. Some needs may call for partnership rather than a new ministry. List organizations, churches, agencies, schools, or community groups that may already be addressing the need.

Organization or Church	What They Offer	Contact / Notes

5. Look for Gaps

A gap is an unmet need, an underserved group, or a barrier that keeps people from accessing help that technically exists.

What help already exists in our community?

Examples: food pantry, job center, high school equivalency classes, recovery groups, shelters, counseling, transportation help, church benevolence, mentoring, senior care.

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What gaps still remain?

What is missing, hard to access, not offered often enough, too far away, too expensive, or not known by the people who need it?

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Who seems to be overlooked or underserved?

Think about people who may fall between services or who are difficult for existing ministries or agencies to reach.

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What do we still need to verify before we call this a real gap?

List any assumptions, unanswered questions, or information that needs a second source.

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6. Identify Barriers

People may want help and still be unable to access it. Barriers can affect participation, follow-through, trust, and long-term progress. Check the barriers that may affect the people you hope to serve.

☐ Transportation
☐ Work schedule
☐ Fear or shame
☐ Limited digital skills
☐ Food insecurity
☐ Addiction or recovery needs
☐ Lack of identification or paperwork
☐ Language barriers
☐ Family conflict
☐ Other: _____
☐ Childcare
☐ Lack of trust
☐ Low literacy
☐ Unstable housing
☐ Mental health concerns
☐ Legal issues
☐ Disability or health limitations
☐ Financial crisis
☐ Safety concerns

The top three barriers we need to plan around are:

_____

_____

_____

7. Consider Ministry Readiness

A need may be real, but your church or team may need time to prepare before responding. This section helps you think honestly about capacity, safety, leadership, and timing.

What strengths do we already have?

Examples: prayer support, volunteers, facility, experience, teaching skills, community relationships, financial support, compassion, leadership, church support.

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What resources do we still need?

Examples: volunteers, training, policies, funding, curriculum, background checks, facility space, transportation plan, partner referrals.

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What risks or safety concerns should we prepare for?

Examples: crisis situations, confidentiality, transportation, children, vulnerable adults, home visits, money requests, emergencies, conflict, burnout.

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Readiness Check

Status	Readiness Statement
☐ Yes ☐ Not yet	We have identified a real need through more than one source.
☐ Yes ☐ Not yet	The need fits our church or team's calling and capacity.
☐ Yes ☐ Not yet	We have appropriate leadership and oversight.
☐ Yes ☐ Not yet	We know what we can offer and what is beyond our role.
☐ Yes ☐ Not yet	Basic safety, confidentiality, and referral needs can be addressed.
☐ Yes ☐ Not yet	We can begin small without making promises we cannot sustain.

8. Choose a Realistic First Focus

Do not try to meet every need at once. Choose one first focus that matches the need, your calling, and your current capacity. "Not yet" can be a wise answer when preparation or partnership is still needed.

Possible Ministry Focus	Need It Addresses	Realistic Now?
Food or basic needs support		☐ Yes ☐ Not yet
Mentoring or encouragement		☐ Yes ☐ Not yet
Life skills or job readiness class		☐ Yes ☐ Not yet
Recovery or reentry support		☐ Yes ☐ Not yet
Prayer and care team		☐ Yes ☐ Not yet
Resource closet or care bags		☐ Yes ☐ Not yet
Other: _____		☐ Yes ☐ Not yet

A Simple Decision Filter

Before choosing the first ministry focus, ask whether the idea meets these five tests. A strong "yes" in every area is not required on day one, but several "not yet" answers usually mean more listening or preparation is needed.

Test	Question	Status
Need	Is this need supported by what we have heard and observed?	☐ Yes ☐ Not yet
Fit	Does this response fit our calling, gifts, and available resources?	☐ Yes ☐ Not yet
Access	Can the people we hope to serve realistically participate?	☐ Yes ☐ Not yet
Safety	Can we serve responsibly with appropriate boundaries and referrals?	☐ Yes ☐ Not yet
Sustainability	Can we do this faithfully for more than a few weeks?	☐ Yes ☐ Not yet

9. Summary of What We Learned

The people we feel most called to serve first are:

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The main need we believe we can address first is:

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The barriers we must plan around are:

_____

_____

The partners or people we should contact are:

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The first simple ministry step we should consider is:

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10. Next Questions Before We Begin

☐ Have we prayed and sought wise counsel before moving forward?
☐ Have we listened to people who understand this need—including people directly affected by it when appropriate?
☐ Have we talked with church or ministry leadership?
☐ Do we know what we are able to offer and what we cannot offer?
☐ Do we need policies, background checks, forms, or safety procedures before beginning?
☐ Do we have a plan for referral when needs are beyond our role?
☐ Can we begin small without overpromising?
☐ Have we identified what we still need to learn before finalizing the ministry plan?

Remember

A compassion ministry does not have to begin with a large program. It can begin with one clear need, one faithful team, one safe place, and one step of obedience.

Closing Prayer

Lord, give us eyes to see our community clearly and hearts that are willing to serve humbly. Help us listen before we assume, learn before we launch, and plan with wisdom before we act. Show us the people You are calling us to serve, the partners we should walk with, and the first step we should take. May this ministry reflect Your compassion, truth, and love. Amen.

Next Step

After completing this assessment, compare what you learned with your Church and Ministry Inventory Assessment. When the community need and your available strengths begin to align, use the Compassion Ministry Planning Guide to develop the ministry structure, responsibilities, boundaries, partnerships, launch steps, and evaluation plan.

Assessment Completion Record

Item	Information
Date completed	
Assessment team / group	
Person responsible for follow-up	
Next meeting or review date	

Questions to Carry Into Planning

Use this space for questions that do not need to be solved during the assessment but should be addressed in the ministry planning process.

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Take this assessment with you.

Bring the completed assessment, the Church and Ministry Inventory Assessment, and any partner notes to the planning meeting so decisions are based on what you have learned—not simply on what you hope to do.