



Characteristics of a Quality Problem Statement

1. A good problem statement will meet each of the following criteria:

- a. Identify one issue or problem at a time.
- b. Avoid blame. (e.g. the problem is “young people in our neighborhood do not have enough positive activities” rather than “the kids here have nothing to do and are trouble makers.”)
- c. Avoid naming specific solutions. (e.g. the problem is not “we don’t have a youth center”—the problem may be “young people in our neighborhood are getting into trouble during after school hours” for which a youth center may be one element of an overall solution.)
- d. Define the problem by the behaviors and conditions that affect it. Good problem statements frame the issue as either not enough good conditions/behaviors or too many bad conditions/behaviors (e.g., “Too many young adults are using methamphetamine drugs.”).
- e. Are specific enough to be measurable.
- f. Reflect community concerns as heard during the assessment process.

2. Problem Statement Criteria

- a. Does this statement cover only one issue/problem?
- b. Does the statement frame the issue/problem by measurable behaviors/conditions?
- c. Is the need substantiated in the assessment or other data?
- d. Is the issue solvable?
- e. Would addressing this issue/problem result in real improvement?
- f. Is the issue widely and deeply felt? (Would people pay to solve it or have it solved?)
- g. Would the issue resonate strongly with key stakeholders?

Considerations & Tips for Problem Statements

These characteristics are designed to generate a problem statement that will provide the reader with sufficient information to understand the problem in detail. Done well the reader will know how big it is; if it is getting worse; who suffers because of it; where and when it occurs; how dangerous it is; and what we have tried to do in the past. It should set the frame of reference for identifying the intervening variables and moving the team forward in addressing it.

- **Magnitude** – How big is it? How many of the problem/behavior occurred in the last year, and what is the rate of occurrence per 1000 or 100,000 population (e.g. # of alcohol related car crashes); or what percentage of the populations suffers from the problem/behavior(e.g. % of students using drugs in lifetime)
- **Rate of Change** – Is it getting worse, getting better, or staying the same? How has the occurrence of the problem changed over time? Compare the same measures over time, and try to have at least three different points in time if possible, the more



data points the more secure you can be that the trend is real and not random.

- **Persons Affected** – Who is impacted by the problem/behavior? Who is involved in the behavior and who else is impacted by it? Depending on the problem/behavior people other than the user may be impacted. (e.g. alcohol related car crashes, children of meth users, family members of alcohol abusers, etc.)
- **Spatial/Geographic** – Where does the behavior/problem occur? Depending on the problem, the answer will vary, but knowing where the behavior happens is an important piece of data for identifying intervening variables and ultimately programs, policies and practices. Does the problem/behavior happen in homes, in bars, in cars, out in the countryside, at school, at your neighbors, in abandoned buildings, etc?
- **Temporal/Time** – When does the behavior occur? Depending on the problem, the answer will vary, but knowing where the behavior happens is an important piece of data for identifying intervening variables and ultimately programs, policies, and practices. Does it happen after school, before school, afternoons, during the week, weekends only, late at night, or early in the morning, etc.?
- **Seriousness** – How dangerous is the problem or behavior? Inhalant abuse is a relatively rare event compared to Marijuana use, but it causes very severe long term irreparable damage to the users health whereas Marijuana is clearly unhealthy for the user, the long term physical affects are not nearly so dire.
- **System Response** – How has the system responded to the problem previously? What programs, practices and solutions are currently in place to deal with the problem/behavior? Describe the existing system's response to the problem/behavior. This information will be useful in identifying gaps in system services and responses to the issue.