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WRITING THE NEEDS OR PROBLEM STATEMENT

Chapter topics:

- Definitions
- The purpose of the needs statement
- A guide to writing the needs statement

The *needs statement* or *problem statement* provides the rationale for the request for funding and uses data and other objective resources that substantiate the need for finding a solution to the concern. This chapter will guide you through the process for crafting a need/problem statement.

DEFINITIONS

The term *needs statement* is generally used in seeking funding for programs or services, while *problem statement* usually applies to social or community concerns or research-oriented proposals. Oftentimes, the terms are used interchangeably; for our purposes, we will use both terms in this chapter. Our primary focus is on proposals written to improve conditions or address a problem existing within your community.

As outlined in Chapter 4, you begin the proposal development process with an understanding of the need or problem as the basis for conceptualizing your proposed program or intervention. Likewise, when you begin writing the proposal, the needs/problem statement is typically the first section completed. It provides a convincing case regarding the extent and

magnitude of the need or problem in your community, and it is written within the context of those who experience the problem directly or indirectly.

THE PURPOSE OF THE NEEDS/PROBLEM STATEMENT

The purpose of the needs/problem statement is to identify the compelling conditions, problems, or issues that are leading you to propose a plan of action. This section of your proposal does *not* describe your approach to address the need or problem; rather it provides a strong rationale for why support should be provided. The needs/problem statement is rooted in factual information. The conceptualization of your proposal is guided by an understanding of the needs or problems, not only at the level at which you provide services but also within the larger context of the community, state, or nation.

An effective needs/problem statement does four things:

1. Uses supportive evidence to describe clearly the nature and extent of the need/problem facing those you plan to serve.
2. Illuminates the factors contributing to the problem or the circumstances creating the need.
3. Identifies current gaps in services or programs.
4. Where applicable, provides a rationale for the transferability of “promising approaches” or “best practices” to the population you seek to serve.

The needs/problem statement makes clear what requires prompt attention before conditions worsen, provides an explanation as to why the problem or need exists, and identifies some of the strategies used in other settings that could potentially address the problem or need in your area. You must thoroughly understand the significance of the needs/problem section, as it provides the very underpinnings of the remainder of the proposal. As stated before, the needs section is not the place to propose your particular solution or project. Rather, it lays the foundation for your particular solution to emerge as one that is responsive to the need.

The needs/problem statement provides an understanding of the impact of the problem not only on those directly affected but also on others, including the community as a whole. A compelling case should be made as to what effect continued *nonintervention* may have on individuals, families, and the community at large. One way to make this case is to contrast the costs of prevention or timely intervention to the ongoing costs of not

addressing the problem. In addition, there are emotional and psychological costs to consider related to quality of life issues for the program participants and for the community.

Ideally, the statement is comprehensive but not boring. Be judicious in your selection of data and use that which most pointedly tells the story of those you intend to serve. Through the use of data, you want to

- Demonstrate that you have a thorough understanding of the problem and those you seek to serve.
- Demonstrate that you are knowledgeable of the types of interventions that are successful in addressing this problem for your client base.
- Indicate that you are aware of barriers that may hamper the provision of service to this population.
- Demonstrate that yours is the same issue that the funder wants to address.
- Lay the groundwork to lead the funder to the conclusion that your approach is participant/client-centered and clearly one of the best possible choices to address this problem.

A GUIDE TO WRITING THE NEEDS/PROBLEM STATEMENT

Obviously, you cannot use all of the data you find. Scrutinize it carefully to make the best possible case for your proposal. At this point in the process, many grant writers face the mounds of data in front of them with increasing anxiety. The problem now becomes one of condensing and editing the data to make a powerful statement within a limited number of pages.

Drawing upon the conceptual framework presented in Chapter 4, this guide now helps you organize the information to begin writing and breaks the needs/problem statement into sections. This is only a template to help you organize and is not meant to be your final version of the document. The examples we are using are based on hypothetical data—in other words, the data we use are made up for illustrative purposes only.

Section One: The Nature and Extent of the Need/Problem

This section could be subtitled: “What is the need/problem, and who is experiencing it?” In this section, you will try to provide a clear picture of the incidence of the problem (e.g., the number of people per thousand in the population who experience the problem and the rates by ethnicity, gender, age, and educational level).

In this example, we begin with a factual opening sentence that states the topic and captures the attention of the reader. We begin to define the problem and give a percentage of the total population who experiences homelessness in the geographical area to be served:

The majority of families are only one paycheck away from homelessness, and for [number of people] in [your local geographic area], this fact is all too real. The majority of homeless [defined as those without semipermanent or permanent shelter] in [your county] are single mothers with children, representing the fastest-growing segment of the homeless population. These circumstances lead to poor school attendance and childhood health problems.

The next step is to compare the local-level data to the state and national data. If the incidence of the problem is greater than the state or national rates, your job is easy, and your next sentence might sound like this:

In fact, in [year] the homelessness rate in [your county] was _____, which exceeded the state rate of _____ and the national rate of _____ in the same year [source of data].

If your rate is lower than the state and national rates, study the data and see if your county has experienced a significant change in the rate. You may be able to say something like this:

Although lower than the state and national rates of _____ and _____, respectively, [your county] has seen a significant increase in homelessness over the past 5 years and, without intervention, will meet and exceed national rates within the next 5 years [source of data].

If your rate is so low as to make your application noncompetitive, you may need to find some other distinctive reason as to why your community's problem is significant. For example, you may have higher crime rates as a result of homelessness or more health problems within the homeless population. Contrast the high incidence of the problem to the low incidence of homelessness to make a stronger case. In this next paragraph, we address the issues of ethnicity, education, and length of time of homelessness:

In (your county), the rate of homelessness by ethnicity is ___ % White, ___ % Latino, _____ % African-American, and _____ % Asian. The rate for [ethnic group] is disproportionately higher than all others. The average educational level for homeless people is _____ years of schooling; however, it is possible

that individuals with college degrees are, at some point in time, homeless. The average length of time that individuals are homeless is _____ months.

You will notice that we have not made a highly emotional appeal to the funder but have already put a face on the client in the first paragraph. We feel that the funder, as well as the human service provider, is all too aware of the personal toll these problems bring. Overdramatizing the problem can work to your disadvantage.

In the above example, the data are effectively presented within the context of the community. When you place data in relationship to other data (e.g., state or national level) or other associated problems, you strengthen your request and increase the sense of urgency. (Note below how effective the word *only* is when using comparative data.) For example, compare the following two statements:

Fifty percent of the young people in the county do not graduate from high school.

Fifty percent of the young people in the county do not graduate from high school, while the dropout rate is only 10% in the state and 27% nationally.

Section Two: Factors Contributing to the Problem or Conditions

In this section of the proposal you will address the causes of the problem and the needs of the clients. These may stem from a variety of factors, such as

- A lack of skill, knowledge, or awareness
- Debilitating attitudes or harmful values
- Physical or mental challenges and limitations
- Dysfunctional or problem behavior
- Limited resources or access to services
- Institutional and systemic barriers including fragmented services
- Policies, practices, or laws that have negative consequences (either intended or unintended)

In this section, you want to account for each of the factors that cause the problem. The following paragraphs are a beginning to that end:

A variety of conditions may ultimately lead to homelessness. Of the homeless population, _____% have severe and persistent mental illness, _____% have experienced the loss of a job, _____% have recently divorced, and _____% are _____ [source of data, year].

The top reason for job loss in the past year was personal health problems, including depression, followed by poor work performance, a lack of job-related skills, absenteeism, and health problems with other family members. In most cases, homelessness does not happen all at once. The family utilizes all available resources to maintain housing and often have one to three months of financial struggle before ending up on the streets.

A discussion of barriers to addressing this problem likely will be included in this section as well. For example, the stigma associated with homelessness may be so great as to cause people to delay seeking assistance, or the clients themselves may have attitudes or beliefs that prevent them from benefiting from assistance.

Each of these causes of the problem as stated in the above example is significant to program planning with different and/or complementary approaches and can be further developed along socioeconomic and cultural lines, if need be. The second paragraph, which indicates that homelessness is a process, is laying some of the groundwork necessary to support our project—early intervention to help shore up individuals to prevent impending homelessness—but, of course, we won't say anything about this in this section.

Finally, we want to warn you about one of the most common mistakes we see in this section of the proposal, which is known as “circular reasoning” (Kiritz, 1980). Circular reasoning occurs when one argues that the problem is a lack of the service that one is proposing. For example, you may write in the needs statement: “The problem facing many teens is that they do not have access to a teen peer support group.”

After writing this, you may proceed merrily on your way to proposing teen support groups as a solution to the problem. The above statement, however, has failed to identify the needs teens have that can be met through a peer support group (e.g., loneliness, isolation, depression, and so on) and, in fact, gives the idea that the absence of a teen support group is the problem! Consider the way in which the following example might better address the needs:

An adolescent spends an average of ___ hours per day in contact with other teens in school and after-school activities. Research indicates that teens obtain approximately ___% of their information on drugs, sexuality, and health-related topics from their peers [source of data, year]. From a developmental perspective, teens are moving away from parental and other adult authority and into the development of their own personal authority. In this process, teens begin to attach to and relate to their peers.

Section Three: Impact of the Need/Problem

In this section, you want to look at the impact the problem has on the client, the client's family, and the community at large and the benefits to be derived through intervention, treatment, or prevention of the problem. The following paragraphs begin this process:

The problem of homelessness exacts a significant toll on the homeless person and family. Children who are homeless are often uprooted from their schools and their friends, suffer from poor nutrition, and lack even the most basic of preventive care services (e.g., immunizations). If one is a homeless adult, one has no address or phone number to use to obtain employment.

Once an individual is homeless, the demands on community resources are great. The Government Accounting Office has estimated that it costs taxpayers approximately \$35,000 per homeless family per year to provide for the family's basic needs. In a study by _____, it was shown that timely intervention targeted at a family in crisis costs approximately \$15,000 per year, a savings of over half of the cost of delayed intervention. In addition to the significant financial savings, homeless children suffered less days lost from school and improved health outcomes.

As you might have guessed, we continue to lay the groundwork for our early intervention project in response to the problem of homelessness. We want to show that our proposed project is cost effective and reduces the negative consequences associated with homelessness. But we won't say *anything* about the proposed project in this section, either.

Section Four: Promising Approaches for Improved Results

In this section, you can discuss the theoretical perspectives that have proven useful in designing interventions and successful approaches used in other geographic areas, and more than likely, you will discuss the barriers to improving the problem.

Several promising strategies have been developed to address the problem of homelessness. The first is the Homeless Project based in Seattle, Washington. This project targeted a subset of homeless, drug-abusing adults using the psychosocial rehabilitation approach, treatment incentives, and comprehensive services. The program helped over 67% of its participants kick the drug habit, and after a year, 87% of those were employed and paying for their own housing.

Other projects have been extremely successful in helping individuals in crisis avoid homelessness altogether. One project, in Michigan, opened a

one-stop service center for struggling families. Through a combination of debt counseling, psychological services, educational remediation, job training, and health services, a full 90% of clients maintained their homes. In addition, this approach has the advantage of avoiding public resistance to a homeless shelter in the community.

In this section of the need/problem statement, you are referencing the particular theoretical and practical program components that will be effective in addressing the need/problem. For example, psychosocial rehabilitation is named as a theoretical orientation and service component. It would be useful to describe this approach briefly, giving the success rate, treatment advantages, and cost effectiveness. Discuss the pros and cons of particular strategies and consider the unique needs of your participants. If a collaborative approach is planned, identify the advantages of this strategy over a single organizational approach. The methods section of the proposal, which we'll discuss in Chapter 6, builds on the rationale provided in the need/problem statement.