

Statement of Problem or Need

Why should grantmakers support your request for funding? Developing a powerful problem or need statement is critical if you want your proposal to remain in the selection process, round after round, as others are eliminated.

The problem or need statement describes specific, often negative conditions of a community or a situation. This statement leads into the project narrative, which tells the potential funder what the organization intends to do to address the identified problem or need.

The problem or need statement should:

- paint a picture of the overall issue, focusing on the global, national, regional, or local scale, as appropriate;
- describe the problem in terms of clients or the community, using statistics or other documentation;
- refer to the organization's internal needs if the request is for capacity building grants or operating support; and,
- establish a clear link between the problem or need presented and the grant maker's funding priorities.

Painting the Picture

The problem or need statement should engage the reviewers, capturing their attention so they want to continue to read your proposal. One effective method you can use is to begin with an individual case history or vignette. Often a real-life story helps the reader understand the full impact of a specific problem or need. Opening with a story will demonstrate the motivating, human dimensions of the problem or need and quickly draw the reader into the proposal.

For example, let's say you are writing a request to secure grant support so your organization can provide hospice care to several remote, rural areas with a strong indigenous culture. You might begin your problem or need statement with something as simple as a list of the elders who have passed:

In Alaska today, Athabascan culture dies one elder at a time.

<i>Jerry Smith</i>	<i>89 yrs</i>	<i>1927 – 2016</i>
<i>Marie Childers</i>	<i>75 yrs</i>	<i>1941 – 2016</i>
<i>Jamie Silver</i>	<i>91 yrs</i>	<i>1925 – 2016</i>
<i>Carl Salmon</i>	<i>77 yrs</i>	<i>1939 – 2016</i>
<i>Jeremiah Sullivan</i>	<i>71 yrs</i>	<i>1945 - 2016</i>
<i>Claudine Sanders</i>	<i>88 yrs</i>	<i>1928 – 2016</i>

Fairbanks Daily News Miner December 2015 – June 2016

Each of these elders grew up in rural Alaska but was forced to move into Fairbanks once their illnesses no longer allowed them to live at home.

Each of these people knew traditional ways to hunt, tell stories, settle disputes, dance, honor leaders, and bear grief.

Each grew old and died without traditional contact with family and friends.

As you can see, this straightforward yet moving opening begins to paint the picture for the reader. These are now real people. This is now a real problem or need that should be addressed.

Once you've developed an effective way to begin a problem or need statement, the next step is to support the picture you've painted with substantive information.

Using Statistics and Other Documentation

As you move into documenting the problem or need, clearly describe the current situation. At this point it is important to demonstrate that there is an urgent need to close the gap between "what is" and "what should be."

To establish "what is" you can cite relevant statistics or quote from reports or studies. Keep this section concise and focused. Be selective in your use of data. Use one or two clear facts or statistics, rather than many examples. For example, if you are describing the current state of homelessness in your community, you do not want to cite statistics for the county, state, or nation. Avoid quoting information that is only marginally relevant to your problem or need.

You can establish "what should be" by using experts' statements or examples of successful projects in other places.

State the facts. Let your readers come to their own conclusions. When your facts are well chosen and your logic is tight, understatement is a powerful tool.

Leave the reader asking the question, "I understand the extent of the problem or need, but what can this organization do to alleviate it?"

At this point, one option is to quote from your mission statement to demonstrate why your organization is tackling this problem. This is a compelling way to close the problem or need statement, creating a smooth transition into the next section, which is usually the project narrative.

Be Specific and Establish a Link to the Funder

Even though you may feel the pressure of space constraints, you do not want to use generalities when specific information is available. Specifics are what help your proposal rise above the competition.

For example, if a request for proposals states that the funder wants to support organizations with expertise in a certain field, you don't want to simply write, "We have much experience with these types of programs." Be specific: "We have run five similar programs over the last decade."

One way to assess if a word or sentence is concrete or specific enough is to decide if you can physically demonstrate the idea. I can't look around my office and point to "experience," but I can count to five on my fingers. Similarly, I can't point to "success," but if my office were bigger, I could add up sixteen children who were placed with mentors or ninety people who shared a holiday meal.

If you feel that your experience lags behind other grantseekers, then focus on the specific success of one of your programs: "Our previous program reached self-sustainability in six months, a full year ahead of projections."

Even in brief letters of inquiry, specifics are necessary to help your organization stand out in the crowd and move on to the next stage of consideration. For example, rather than claiming that you possess "leadership skills," provide specific examples of those skills.

By eliminating redundancies, simplifying language choices, and using specific details in your problem or need statement, you can effectively demonstrate to the funder why your program deserves their attention, and how it connects to their own goals and objectives.