Grants 101: How to Develop a Convincing Problem Statement

The main purpose of grantwriting is to propose strategies that prevent or reduce a problem. These strategies take the form of innovative programs or services, which serve to attack the problem(s). Sound easy enough? Despite the simplicity, the Problem Statement tends to be the most difficult section to write yet it is a key element of any grant proposal.

Most often, the Problem Statement, sometimes referred to as the Project Need or Needs Assessment, counts for 25 percent of the total points a grant proposal can receive. Therefore, it is imperative that the grantwriter build a compelling case for the proposed project as well as describe the innovative nature or critical importance of the proposed strategies. Your mission is to convince the reviewer that your need is one of the most serious.

By definition, the Problem Statement is a description and documentation of the need for the proposed services and activities. You want to make a clear, concise and well-supported statement of the problem to be addressed, however it will take much more than a mere sentence to do this. So how do you develop a convincing Problem Statement? Here are some tips:

1. **Provide a brief description of the problem or set of problems that can be addressed through your proposed strategies.** The problem(s) may include the lack of a skilled workforce, not enough training resources exist for home care workers, high turnover rates in the home care industry, lack of awareness about home care, etc. Begin this section with a clear and concise statement of the problem and follow with two statements on the cause and long-term effects of the problem. Here is an example:

   "Home care agencies have been grappling with a persistent workforce shortage that will soon reach epidemic proportions. Primarily, this problem is caused by the inability of agencies to offer wages that are competitive with hospitals and nursing homes as well as an overall lack of awareness and misinformation about working in home care. Long term and without intervention, access to high quality home care services will be compromised and there will be an increase in costly institutionalization of patients."

2. **Document the severity of the problem by including baseline data that characterizes the target audience to be served by the project.** By doing so, you transition the reviewer into a discussion of the problem with facts and statistics. At a minimum, baseline data should be provided for the geographic location(s) of your proposed project. Providing data on the prevalence of the problem nationwide or comparing the degree to which it affects other communities (statewide, regional, others) however, will help reviewers place your project in a larger context. Examples of baseline data include the following:

   - Community demographics (age, language spoken, minority breakdown, others).
• Current workforce statistics (skill levels, specific jobs in demand, age, race, gender and vacancy rates).
• Aging demographics and statistics.
• Health professional shortage areas (HPSAs).
• Medically Underserved Areas (MUAs).
• Infant mortality rates.
• Substance abuse rates.
• Crime & Domestic Violence statistics.
• Incidence and prevalence rates of certain medical conditions.
• Geographic barriers (inclement weather, rural, others).
• Inpatient utilization rates.
• Poverty rates.
• Income levels.
• Unemployment rates.
• Turnover rates.

Here's a brief example: "The trend in home care utilization is complicated by a shortage of home care professionals (registered nurses (RNs) and licensed practical nurses (LPNs). In the U.S., more than one million nurses will be needed by 2010. In New York, more than 17,000 nurses will be needed by 2010. The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics projects a 55.8 percent rate of employment growth for the home care industry in the next few years. Currently, less than one-third of all RNs and LPNs work in the home care setting with approximately 9,800 RNs and 4,000 LPNs presently employed in home care across New York State."

3. Offer a solution based on the needs assessment you have performed in your community or target area. Quite often, we identify what we believe to be the solution to a problem without reaching out to others for their input. Such input is especially important for a grantwriter to be able to lend support for the solution (the strategies) in a proposal. It is also important to ensure that you propose something that has not been done already in your target location. As you can see, there are several methods one can use to assess a community's needs:

• Conduct surveys.
• Hold community meetings or focus groups.
• Solicit input from the target audience through interviews, focus groups or surveys.
• Meet with experts in the subject matter.
• Interview the business community and other community organizations.
• Brainstorm solutions with others within your organization.
• Review the literature and existing studies to see what has worked or been done in the past.

The complexity of your needs assessment will depend upon how much time you have before your proposal is due as well as the resources you can dedicate. The involvement of stakeholders at all stages of the proposal process will help ensure you are on the right track.

Here's an example: "Community Health Care Services Foundation, Inc. (CHC) proposes to develop a Home Health Care Specialty Certificate Program for RNs and LPNs via an Interactive Distance Learning Series. Home care agencies across New York State were surveyed by CHC about their interest in an Internship and Residency Program for RNs and LPNs. Survey respondents indicated a strong desire for and willingness to participate in a distance learning program. Additionally, respondents felt that such a program would: attract more RNs and LPNs to home care; improve retention; enhance the home care knowledge base and competencies by providing a better foundation; and be perceived positively by RNs and LPNs. CHC asked respondents to identify training topics that would be appropriate for a distance learning series. These topics form the general content for each module in the series."

A few helpful hints:

1. When you write the Problem Statement section, write for a person who knows nothing about your topic or organization. Avoid technical jargon and acronyms.
2. Add enough emotion so the reviewer understands your needs.
3. Offer an array of hope in the end by providing a wrap-up or closure statement ("We know there is a problem, but through our program we are going to make a difference").
4. Use statistics from a variety of sources, cite the sources and offer a minimum of four to five citations.
5. Do not mention your program activities in this section but prove your problem and need.
6. Use graphs and charts for data but limit them to one per page.
7. Use white space to reduce reader boredom.
8. Do not spell out numbers in this section of the proposal.