



Determining Prevention Priorities and Problem Statements

Determining Prevention Priorities

In order to make effective data-driven decisions, those involved in the county-wide prevention planning process need to interpret the information and determine criteria for determining prevention priorities.

The following is a list of questions for consideration when determining how to identify priorities for the county:

- 1. Address the agent or its consequences:** *How important are indications of harmful consequences as distinct from indications of substance use itself? This is a fundamental decision that has important implications for the kinds of prevention strategies that will be emphasized, (e.g., will the emphasis be on reducing use itself, or on abuse and specific consequences such as alcohol-related automobile crashes?)*
- 2. Scope and degree:** *How important is the prevalence of the problem or the use of substances – what is the portion of sub-populations or community groups that are involved or impacted by the substance?*
- 3. Upward/Downward trends:** *How important is the trend in the behavior or harmful outcome? Does the fact that a problem is getting worse or better influence whether it should be a priority?*
- 4. Comparison trends:** *How important is the relative rate or trend as compared between communities or population groups? To what extent does the group want to focus on problems that are greater in their community as compared to others? To what extent does the group want to focus on problems that are worse in specific demographic sub-populations than others (e.g., age groups, genders, racial/ ethnic/ cultural groups)?*
- 5. Community attention:** *How does the community view the problem? Do community members see it as a priority? Is the issue so deeply and widely felt that there is a groundswell of support for addressing this problem? How do you know?*
- 6. Can you measure change:** *Will you be able to actually measure change(s) in this particular problem area that will be meaningful to communities in your county?*
- 7. Impact and level of harm:** *How do you weigh problems with great current public interest, but low impact, versus issues that can create greater public health and safety harm, but are so common they are unseen, such as underage alcohol and tobacco use?*

The county planning group members may adopt additional criteria that are important, and it is likely members will want to balance several, or all, of the above criteria in making their ultimate decisions about prevention priorities. Most importantly, when community members establish criteria for priority-setting having an understanding of the advantages and disadvantages of datasets will enable them to set their own criteria for interpreting the data. The data discussion provides a foundation for building group consensus on the methods for prioritizing those problems, communities, and populations that will be the primary focus of prevention efforts over the next several years.

The following considerations may be useful in gaining further consensus on adopting specific prevention strategies and objectives:

- **Evidence-based Practices.** *Are there effective prevention services, strategies or policies that specifically address the problem area, or would it necessitate the development of new, unproven approaches?*
- **Availability of Resources.** *Does the community have access to sufficient resources to address this problem? Do the proposed efforts require additional funding and support or require partnerships with other organizations and agencies?*
- **Ability to Impact the Problem.** *Is the problem so pervasive that any community-based effort is unlikely to affect the outcomes? Can you build a dike in the river to stop the flow of water or will it be the equivalent of simply throwing stones in the water, of having no substantial impact on the flow?*
- **Anticipated Barriers and Resistance.** *Are there substantial interests that will resist necessary change in a specific area, or other challenges that must be considered in setting realistic priorities for action?*

Considerations for Developing Problem Statements

In addition, the following criteria are useful in determining which problems or issues are the most significant and feasible to pursue. The problem / issue should be:

- **Immediate.** “Immediacy” about the concern means people want to act on it. If something is immediate, it “hits” people in their “gut,” not their head. Immediate concerns hit many people because lots of people are affected by them.



- **Specific and measurable.** It can be specified because it is concrete, not abstract. Concerns must be explicitly identified to be acted on. Where is the problem located? Who is affected by it? How are they affected? Can you measure the problem now? Will you be able to measure that you have made a change?
- **Solvable in a reasonable amount of time.** The scope of the activity has to be of a scale that allows you to be effective. If you take on the problem of “alcohol abuse”, it is too big to address. If you take on the issue of specific problematic environments where alcohol is provided to minors and/or high-risk drinking that leads to alcohol-related crime & violence, you can achieve goals on this issue. This also means having the resources necessary to work on the specific identified problems. How long will it take to solve this issue? If the time is too long you may lose community members’ interest in the process. The time line needs to be reasonable and geared to the immediacy of the issue.
- **Able to result in real improvement in people’s lives.** Will the issue that you have chosen to address improve people’s lives? If yes, how? How do you know that it will help? Have the residents of the community told you? It is important that the results of the work meet the expectations of the community.
- **Widely and deeply felt.** How many people have expressed concern about the issue? Solving problems related to high-risk alcohol environments often requires a strong community coalition. Do residents feel passionate about this issue? The level of depth of feeling can frequently be measured by the willingness to work on the issue.

- **Non-divisive and consistent with the group’s values.** The work should not split the community or coalition into factions. Rather, the issue should unify the base of people with whom you are working. Values serve as a base to assess if the issue is consistent with what is important to the community. If the solution to a problem makes members of the community uncomfortable or if the means do not justify the ends, a new solution must be found.
- **Resonate Strongly.** Does the statement resonate strongly enough with the public and authorities needed to enact, operate and sustain the actions such that they can counter any interests benefiting from the current norms?

Adapted from the Community Anti-Drug Coalitions of America (CADCA) website <http://cadca.org/>

Checklist for Writing a Problem Statement



- Who?:** Which is the most at-risk population group? (e.g. age, gender, ethnicity, etc.)
- What?:** What is the drug related use or consequence issue?
- When?:** How long has this been a problem?
- Where?:** What is the geographic area where the problem occurs (or is to be addressed)?
- How Much?:** What is the scope or magnitude of the problem? How many of what % of the population is affected?

(Checklist items extracted from Developing Goals and Objectives Tip Sheet by Prevention By Design, 2006)

The Community Prevention Initiative (CPI) is administered by the Center for Applied Research Solutions (CARS) and funded and directed by the California Department of Alcohol and Drug Programs (ADP).



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