

## LESSON 7

# IDENTIFYING AND DOCUMENTING THE NEED: WHAT PROBLEM WILL A GRANT FIX?

### OPENING REMARKS

A group of three well-dressed women, looking perplexed, asked if they could speak with me after a meeting. They explained that they had to give up their health club memberships because they could no longer afford them. Their companies had downsized, their salaries had been slashed, and their positions were in jeopardy. "I know this might sound farfetched," one of the women said, "but would it be possible for us to get a grant for our local YMCA so it can put in a state-of-the-art gym? Then we can work out just like we used to. We can't do this now because the facilities at the Y are decrepit and the equipment is ancient."

"Well," I pointed out, "you're identifying a compelling problem that affects you, but you aren't framing the problem in a manner that would be likely to entice a foundation that is dealing with one major problem or need after another. But maybe you could...with a little thought and by thinking of others as well as yourselves." —EK

### Why Would a Grantmaker Give Money to My Organization?

Most foundations and government funders prefer to give grants to address problems where the need is greatest. So how could a dilapidated YMCA make the case that it needed funding for a state-of-the-art gym in what is presumably a middle-class neighborhood? In this example, the organization would have to think about a broader issue than the few women who want to keep fit.

If you were the Y, some questions you might want to raise and answer in a proposal could involve the relationship of exercise to health, the alarming increase in obesity and diabetes nationally, and the lack of exercise facilities in the community—not just for adults, but for children, teenagers, and older people as well. Information could be presented showing how many children are sedentary and overweight or how many older people in a cold or rainy climate fail to get regular exercise. Data that support a need for exercise could be just as relevant to a senior center that wants to get funding for an exercise program for its participants or to an evening teen program that currently offers only boys' basketball and wants to engage young women (and young men who may not be great basketball players but do want to be in shape!).

Although the Y may be located in a community that appears to be affluent, that can be deceptive. Forest Hills, a community in New York City once famed for its annual tennis tournament, is perceived as a wealthy suburban area and has its share of affluent residents. But it also has a significant number of lower-income residents with needs that can be documented, and a community-based organization in that area has won many grants to address these needs. Whatever the community's demographics, you must know them in detail, and you must use facts to demonstrate the need or problem you have identified.

funding to serve immigrants! And keep records of individuals who want to participate in your program but have to be turned away. From Meals on Wheels to sixth-grade karate, if your program can't meet the demand, you can show a need.

**Anecdotal information.** Many proposal writers shy away from anecdotal information, fearing that it is too casual. But anecdotal information can be very powerful when used in the right way. It can put a human face on otherwise cold statistical reports. And sometimes there just isn't any hard "proof" that a problem really exists—although "everyone knows" that it does. There may not be actual data on whether the residents of a senior center are bored, but formal or informal interviews with senior center staff, participants, and family members may indicate universal agreement. People may be willing to say things in response to oral questions that they wouldn't say in a written questionnaire.

When using anecdotal information in a grant proposal, be careful not to insert it haphazardly so it seems fabricated. A good approach is to cite the individuals you've spoken to—if not by name, then by title or relationship to the community. For example:

The director of the Starview Teen Center has tried for the last two years to get teenagers to join clubs such as chess and current events, and take trips to places like museums and sporting events. But he has found that they are apathetic and unwilling to do anything but play basketball. Two mothers of teenagers here say that their sons seem lethargic; another mother says...

Although these data are "soft," the problem is very real. It is hard (although possible) to measure "tried to get teenagers to join the chess club," but efforts to get the teenagers involved can be described. Interviewing the Teen Center director is a good way to glean poignant stories that add human interest to a proposal.

**Focus groups.** Information gathered from focus groups reflects the participants' dialogue, interaction, and safety-in-numbers venting

local education agency, or state department of education. If you don't already know which standardized tests are used in your community, or at what grade levels they're given, you should. Show that your target school (or schools) has a greater proportion of children scoring below grade level on these tests than other schools in the district; show that the school (or schools) has a higher dropout rate or more incidents of violence than others in the community. You also may be able to demonstrate from school records that your school has a higher proportion of children in poverty (e.g., a greater percentage of children eligible for free or reduced-cost meals) than elsewhere.

**Hospital and health department statistics.** If your program is intended to address domestic violence; teen pregnancy prevention; alcohol, tobacco, and other drug use; children's asthma; gunshot wounds; or any other health-related issue, your local hospital and state and local health departments will be good places to start. If the particular institution does not keep data on a particular problem, staff there will be able to refer you to appropriate sources.

**"The literature."** Yes, relevant and up-to-date research, trends, and literature are the types of information included in college and graduate-school research papers, but you are generally not expected to scour every esoteric journal or conduct far-flung searches for your proposal. But it helps your cause if you know what the trends and issues are in your area of interest. And why wouldn't you want to know this?

Let's say, for instance, that the literature on nurturing is controversial (some may think there is a subtle "family values" message that encourages parents to stay at home). It would be important to know this and cite it. Suppose that recent trends in the attitudes toward latchkey children indicated that, rather than being disenfranchised and at risk, these children developed strength, character, and resiliency. You would acknowledge this in the proposal, and offer other reasons why it's still important to run a program for these children.

Most important, being familiar with the literature—which is another way of saying the prevailing or conventional wisdom, the accepted thinking—will help you design, refine, and enrich your

program. It will afford you the opportunity to study best practices and see what kinds of program elements have been more or less successful. This component of your needs section leads you into describing your program idea. What, if anything, has been tried in your community to address the problem that you have identified? Why do you think these efforts have failed? Why will your program not repeat past mistakes? Why do you expect the "stakeholders" to "buy in"? Even a brief review of the literature can help you address these questions in your program and proposal.

Here again, a search engine such as Google can help you get this information. Thanks to the Internet, there is no longer any good excuse for ignoring trends and research on a full range of issues.

### **Stop for a Minute: Do I Have to Identify a Need or a Problem If I'm Looking for a Grant to Study Abroad or to Make a Movie?**

No. Individual grants are different. They may be research, study, or travel grants connected to a foundation or a university. Research grants certainly will require you to be familiar with the literature and best practices in your field, but "need" may not be relevant. And, as we discussed earlier, other grantmaking decisions may rely on your portfolio of work, your experience, and other documentation.

### **What If the Grantmaker Has Identified the Problems for Me?**

Although foundations tend to provide funding in certain topic areas (such as youth, parks and open spaces, animal rights, the arts) that are spelled out in their annual reports, they generally don't tell you how to identify or solve problems within the areas that they fund. You could apply either to a "youth" or an "aging" funder with your intergenerational program for fifth graders and senior citizens. You know the types of projects the funder supports because you have read the annual report. You know the topic areas the funder supports. It's up to you to describe the problem and explain why the program

in your community, the people who read and score federal applications may be from anywhere in the country, and those who read for national foundations may be consultants hired to develop and judge specific grant programs. Although they are experts in their own fields, they are likely to be unfamiliar with the physical, political, and social conditions in your area. They know nothing about your experience and qualifications in the field (although a separate section of the proposal will document this), and usually they are giving very substantial grants for which they expect clear results. So for these proposals it is doubly important to include:

- Proof that the target population in the community is in fact eligible to receive services under the federal or foundation guidelines
- Data that demonstrate the existence and extent of the problem in the community, including specific gaps in service that the proposal will address
- Full understanding of the theories and practices that have been put forward to attempt to solve the problem in your community and elsewhere
- Knowledge of relevant solutions that have worked in your community and elsewhere, especially when some elements of these efforts are incorporated into the proposed program plan
- Explanation of why there is still a need for a new program if successful solutions already exist

**Example.** Here's one way of moving from a sweeping national perspective to a local one. (The problem, context, and references are pure fiction, by the way.)

Many researchers have identified a lack of parental nurturing as a problem for children in today's economic and social environment. The absence of nurturing is, according to Ames (2019), Reese (2018), Bolger (2018), Uncles (2016), and others, the primary

## Does Every Grant Application Include a Question About Need?

Certain funders, such as the National Endowment for the Arts, do not require an applicant to demonstrate need. Instead, the funder assesses the artist's portfolio and track record. Some fellowships are awarded because of educational achievement. Certain award programs (MacArthur Foundation "Genius Awards," for example) do not select grantees based on need but rather on creativity, talent, and brilliance.

Many foundations' grant applications and guidelines don't say a word about a need or problem. They simply ask you to describe your proposed program in no more than five pages. But it doesn't matter. Whether the funder uses the word "need" or the application package stipulates that a problem must be solved, it is smart to address the need even if you have to condense it into a couple of paragraphs. In fact, if the foundation grantmakers are local, they may already know the demographics and problems but want to hear, briefly, which issues have a specific impact on your community or program—and to be sure that you know about them.

## What Are the Components of a Strong Needs Section or Problem Statement?

If you're like many other proposal writers—especially if you work for a small grassroots or even medium-size organization—you wear many hats. You have a lot of duties besides looking for grants. The idea of developing a high-quality proposal that everyone is counting on to receive funding is difficult enough; finding data for the need or problem section may send you into panic mode. But it doesn't have to.

First, for more reasons than we've yet described, it is important to put yourself in the grantmaker's place. Instead of seeing the program officer of a foundation or government agency as a nasty professor assigning a research paper to an overworked student, look at the officer as someone who has to make an informed decision and persuade

The needs assessment can be as formal as a major research project using validated survey instruments to collect information from a random sample of community residents or target populations; such an approach generally requires consulting assistance—at least—from a university research program and can be very costly. Before you plunge into such a study, check with your city or county planning office, mayor's or city manager's office, state or local elected officials, or other community organizations to see if this has been done already.

On the other hand, a needs assessment can be as informal as your own staff members collecting questionnaire responses from your current program participants. The important thing to remember here is what you need the information for: systematic documentation of a gap in services. If you find a community needs assessment that gives you information on all services and needs except health but you are considering developing a women's health clinic, then it is worthless to you and you had better find a way to conduct your own.

**Newspaper reports.** Newspapers are convenient sources for all kinds of powerful material that can be included in the needs section of a grant proposal, either alone or supplementing other statistics. Newspapers from all over the world can be read online, either free or for a fee, so if you want to know whether the problems you are addressing are more than local, you can see what's happening in other cities or countries. Online newspaper sites also give you easy access to archived articles that could come in handy.

If you want to provide seniors in your community with information about and help in applying for government assistance to heat their homes in winter, an article in the local paper about the problem, with photographs of elderly people wearing coats, scarves, and gloves indoors, will be as compelling as health department statistics about illnesses and deaths attributable to the cold (use *both* for the most compelling argument). When other data are unavailable (e.g., if your health department doesn't keep such statistics), newspaper articles still can serve as support for your position. If you have the time or staff (or interns or volunteers), review the local papers daily

state as well. The table that follows (with invented numbers for an invented housing project, city, and state) shows how you might analyze this information. You may decide not to include a chart like this in the proposal, but organizing the data will help you explain clearly how your target population differs from the rest of your city, town, or state.

### Sample Population Statistics

Indicator	Wishbone	Rosemont	Statewide
Average family income	\$16,000	\$32,000	\$36,000
Percentage of single-parent households	67%	25%	22%
School dropout rates	44%	22%	18%

**Context.** The best way to approach the need section is to put your particular problem in a context. If it's relevant, you may want to start with a national context. The teacher who is concerned that her students don't get enough nurturing would probably find a great deal written on the topic, and the information should not necessarily be disregarded because it reflects a research study that was done in California when her school is in Maine. What are the national trends? What kinds of research have been done and with what findings? Once a national perspective has been addressed, move in closer to your own city, town, or neighborhood. Often a simple search online will bring you a wealth of relevant information.

### Are Need Statements Different for the Federal Government and National Foundations?

The need or problem statement for a proposal to a federal agency or a national foundation usually requires some extra work. Just like other grantmakers, these funders look for a detailed description of the population to be served and strong justification of the need for the proposed project (the funding agency may call this a *needs assessment*, a *problem statement*, or something similar). Unlike private funders in your state, however, who probably are fully aware of conditions

girls and their harried parents, that addresses both technology and drug prevention? So what will persuade a grantmaker that your cover-all-bases intergenerational program—or the Y's new gym—fills a critical need or addresses a compelling problem?

Too many proposal writers assume that the existence of the problem (and, for that matter, the wisdom of the solution) is obvious. Who could dispute that parents of rambunctious children are harried? Who would argue that drug-abuse prevention programs are not needed for middle-school girls? Who could imagine that an intergenerational program for fifth graders and nearby seniors is not a great idea? But common sense doesn't always persuade. You can be certain that, no matter how much or how little money you are requesting from a grantmaker, you'll be competing with organizations that have carefully documented their need by using (formally or informally) one or more of the following:

- A variety of economic and demographic statistics about the community, including the latest census data
- Relevant and up-to-date research, trends, and literature
- Anecdotal information from participants, staff, and community residents
- Waiting lists for their programs (or for those of other community organizations)
- Focus group results
- Assessments of needs and evaluations of past programs
- Newspaper reports
- Police precinct data
- Health department data
- School report cards, test scores, attendance figures, demographic data, and incident reports

A few websites listed in Appendix 5 tell you where you can get statistical information that can help in formulating your statement of need. Examples include the National Center for Education Statistics and the US Census Bureau.

that they may neglect organizing the material to make their case for the need. But this portion of the proposal is not too different from a research paper. The variable is how much research—and what kinds—makes the most sense for a specific grant proposal. You almost certainly wouldn't do the kind of work involved in the example above for a \$5,000 grant. But even if you are requesting only \$5,000 and the proposal is only three pages long, it is a good policy to show you are informed about the problem and include some documentation, even if only in a footnote or parentheses. Again, put yourself in the program officer's shoes. Wouldn't a presentation of pertinent information encourage you to think highly of an applicant's seriousness—and appreciate her respect for you as a grantmaker?

### But I'm a Nonprofit Staffer, Not a Doctoral Candidate at Harvard...

Stay calm. A closer look at the components will reassure you that the grant proposal is not the equivalent of a doctoral dissertation—well, not exactly. The information you need should be readily available if you've done the prep work we described in Lesson 4. Much of this information can be pulled from your files and just updated. Let's talk about these other kinds of information, and then go back to "the literature."

**Community demographics.** Most government grants (and many foundation grants) are targeted to communities with predominantly low-income populations. Many are targeted to specific members of a low-income community, such as children, AIDS patients, unemployed or underemployed individuals, a particular immigrant group, and so on. Your first stop for this kind of information is the website of the municipal or county agency that deals with the population of interest to you—a child welfare agency, a housing agency, the health department, a board of education or school district office (the local education agency), a department of employment, and so on. Localities maintain a gold mine of statistics on issues like homelessness, poverty, income, race/ethnicity, public assistance, foster care,

about a problem. A focus group is just a gathering of people with opinions on or a vested interest in a particular issue who respond to a set of questions prepared by a neutral facilitator to collect those opinions. The discussion can be recorded on audio or videotape, by a cell-phone app, or, more formally, by a stenographer; the object is to have a usable record of what is said for inclusion in a proposal, report, or advocacy document (or all of these). A single focus group can include a few individuals; a more elaborate effort can include hundreds of people who represent one side or many sides of an issue, randomly assigned to discussion groups. Focus groups can help you clarify the problem and craft a solution that is likely to work. Because of the importance of "community buy-in" or "stakeholder buy-in" to the success of any program, focus groups are becoming more and more common. This is especially true for large-scale government or foundation grants.

Grant seekers sometimes make the mistake of expecting the community—the stakeholders—to come to focus group meetings at locations convenient for everyone except the stakeholders. Don't hold such meetings at the university or a hall outside the community, even if someone gives you the space for free. It is crucial to have the meetings in the communities where the problem exists and where the solution will be implemented. To get the maximum amount of information from the greatest number of participants, you should expect to hold more than one focus group meeting, scheduled at different times of the day, on different days of the week, translated into different languages depending on the target population, and to offer the services of a sign language interpreter.

**Needs assessments.** Needs assessments generally are used to document conditions in a community or population that show gaps in service that you intend to fill. Normally, a community needs assessment is a fairly major project that will be used for many purposes for several years. Ideally, a needs assessment report will include statistical data, anecdotal information, and results of interviews and focus groups (as well as any of the other sources described here).

## DISCUSSION

Because grants generally are earmarked for specific purposes, almost anything (notice we said *almost* anything) a grant will fund is a *solution to a problem* or a *strategy for addressing a need* that you've identified. If you're a fifth-grade teacher and you want to start an intergenerational program with a neighborhood senior center, it's probably because you've identified a problem that you are anxious to solve. Something is bothering you. Maybe you're concerned that your students aren't getting enough nurturing because their parents are working long hours, or they're from single-parent households. Maybe you've seen some of the school's elderly neighbors sitting on their porches or in front of the senior center looking very bored. Maybe you feel your students are too self-involved and uninterested in the community. Whatever the problem is that you've noticed and that concerns you, the idea for developing a program with the senior center is your way of addressing it. It's your idea for solving a demonstrable, compelling problem.

Even if you're not always sure where in the world your ideas come from, you can be certain that, most of the time, ideas for grant programs don't come out of the blue. You can bet that they're creative, thoughtful responses to identified and compelling problems that are worrying you. But the funder is going to want something concrete to go on, and here's where research—a little or a lot—comes in.

### **How Do I Prove There's a Compelling Problem That Deserves a Grant?**

First, don't think that submitting a fabulous program idea to the grantmaker will be enough to win the money. Think about all the fabulous ideas there are. Soothing programs for rambunctious children. Helpful services for harried parents. Technology centers for the whole family in inner-city neighborhoods. Drug-abuse prevention programs for middle-school girls. Or how about a comprehensive (understatement!) program for children, including middle-school

others to come to the same conclusion. Foundation program officers must justify grants to a board of directors or trustees. Government agencies are responsible to legislators, who in turn must account to the taxpayers who are footing the bills. So if you were the grant-maker, how important would need be to you?

With a finite amount of money to spend and two delightful arts programs requesting that money, would you give it to the applicant who writes, "All children need exposure to artists and the opportunity to paint on weekends to keep them out of trouble," or the one that says,

Children in the Wishbone Housing Project have the highest school-dropout rate in the city of Rosemont. Their family income is the lowest of any Rosemont housing project. According to their parents and teachers, as well as police officers, clergy, and local business owners, children who will participate in this weekend arts project have no other activities to occupy them. The proposed arts program has been shown in other cities (e.g., Memphis and Sacramento) to provide children with an outlet that increases reading scores, reduces their participation in vandalism, and encourages them to stay in school.

If you have space, you might insert a chart here, documenting the facts you are presenting. No contest, right?

**Target population.** As the example above indicates, you need to describe a target population, the group that has the need and to whom your program will be directed. In this case, the population is low-income children living in public housing in Rosemont, but it could be elderly immigrants in Milwaukee or incarcerated mothers in Poughkeepsie. You need to show that those living in the target area are needier than those in other areas, using key indicators such as income, age, education, employment status, crime, and many other statistics that we will describe later in this lesson. You would collect data for the target area, for the city as a whole, and perhaps for the

cause of student alienation and disenfranchisement, which can lead to violence, suicide, and other dangerous behaviors.<sup>6</sup>

In studies in Texas (Jones, 2016) and California (Smith, 2018), researchers have found that 75 percent of teachers report that their students “practically seem to be raising themselves.” Piazza (2019) indicates that 56 percent of fourth graders in his Pennsylvania research study don’t see their parents until after dinner, and Wilson (2016), in Wisconsin, suggests that more than half of the state’s seven-year-olds go to day-care centers for at least three hours after school.

The lack of nurturing is both a national and a local problem in Indiana. For example, in Metropolis, Richardson (2018) found that more than 60 percent of elementary school children studied in a citywide project were “latchkey children” at least three days a week. In North Metropolis, the problem is even greater. A citywide study indicated that more than 80 percent either go to crowded day-care centers or sit in front of their television sets watching programs in an unsupervised manner. And in the target neighborhood of Meridian Mews, Johnson found the situation even worse. Ninety percent of the children under 16 who live in the neighborhood served by the Meridian Mews Elementary School do not see their parents until after 9:00 P.M.

**Warning.** There is a temptation to throw research data, statistics, and other documentation of need into a grant proposal haphazardly. Proposal writers can be so ecstatic over finding usable information

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<sup>6</sup> The form of documenting sources used here—just authors’ names and publication date in parentheses—is from the American Psychological Association, and we use it because it doesn’t clutter the text or take up room for footnotes at the bottom of the page. We would put an alphabetized reference list at the end of the grant proposal, giving the authors’ names, title of book or journal and article, date of publication, city of publication, publisher’s name, and page of a quotation, if any. But any other reference system can be used (e.g., putting all of the reference information into a footnote) as long as it is consistent throughout the proposal.

and save articles that may become relevant to your proposals and your reports to the funders. Sometimes you can use these in an appendix too.

One (very topical) caveat about newspapers: You should be aware of the point of view of the newspaper's publisher if the published data can be, for any reason, controversial, open to interpretation, or possibly taken out of context. It used to be that we didn't question anything we read in a newspaper. Times have changed!

**Police precinct data.** If your program is intended to serve youth at risk of substance use, vandalism, gang participation, or crime; if you want to show the need for an alternative sentencing program for youth or adults; if your focus is on neighborhood crime prevention efforts; or if you want to show a need for any similar crime prevention or intervention program, your first stop is the local police department or precinct. All police departments are required to maintain data on a variety of types of crime, and they usually compile it by geographic area and age of the offender. How it is summarized or released to the public may differ by state or locality. You should find out whether you must apply to the local police station, the central police department offices, or some other department to obtain statistics. You may be required to submit a formal written request, stating how you will use the information, or you may be encouraged to visit the officer in charge of maintaining the data. You may be allowed to photocopy the police statistics or summaries, or you may have to sit in the office and take notes.

Be sure you know what the requirements are well in advance of your need for information—and be sure you leave plenty of time for the precinct (or yourself) to collect and organize the information.

**School reading and math scores, attendance figures, dropout rates, and violent-incident reports.** Similarly, if you plan to run a program meant to help children or teenagers improve their academic achievement, stay in school, go on to college, or any other education-related initiative, you should be able to show the need through data from the school in question, the school district, the

you've developed will more than likely solve it. It's also up to you to describe the need for your program in a way that clearly shows how it fits the funder's priorities.

Unlike most foundations, federal and other government agencies and large national foundations spend a good deal of time spelling out a problem in the application package, usually citing research on a problem of national importance that they expect the grant seeker to solve locally. Such compelling problems might include the increase in school shootings, opioid addiction among people of all ages, elder abuse, and many others. You may be expected to allude to the data in the RFP or provide additional information relevant to your particular community or problem.

### IN CLOSING

As you can see, there are plenty of ways to describe and support the need for your program. You just need to select the best approach to convince the prospective funder that you're fully aware of the need and that your program can address it. Your next step will be to show that you have indeed set out the goals, objectives, and action plan to address it.

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## POP QUIZ

### Multiple Choice

Select the best conclusion to each of the following statements:

1. Grants are usually given to organizations that can demonstrate:
  - a. Longevity of five years or more
  - b. Continuity of leadership (same leader for no less than two years)
  - c. Creativity in juggling their mission statements
  - d. Compelling need

substance use, schools, recreational facilities, hospital admissions, vital statistics, vandalism—you name it.

Another excellent place to start is the local census office, if there is one, or your city or county planning department (which probably has staff who work with census data). This should be easily accessed online, but it may be worthwhile to get to know your local planning officials and call on them for advice when you get bogged down in data.

You often will find important data in city or county management reports, and at municipal, state, and federal government websites. Local United Ways and other large not-for-profit organizations collect all sorts of statistical information and may publish it online or make it available at their offices. Get on every mailing and emailing list, and send for free newsletters and other documents that may be useful. The school district or central board of education will have information on students on its website as well as the names of contact people or division heads, if you are working on grants that will help youngsters. The department of health's website should have useful information for health-related proposals. Of course, if you are a non-profit developing a grant proposal that includes schoolchildren, you should be working closely with the schools and school district on program planning. The same principle holds true for proposals that affect the health department or any other local government agencies.

**Organization records.** Remember that your own organization's records also provide important data. Whenever possible, your programs should have an entry or registration form that summarizes as much information as the participant will stand for—and as much as your ability to protect the participant's privacy will support. Sometimes this isn't feasible, of course; a jumpy out-of-school youth population, for example, may resist providing you with any information, and in order to retain their trust you may not want to try.

**Participant surveys.** Surveys of participants can help too. A survey of parents of the children in one after-school program we know showed that 92 percent of the parents were born outside the United States. Talk about a gold nugget of support for an agency that seeks