



RFP Writing: Problem Statements & Goals

Module 3: RFP Writing - Problem Statements & Goals

In this module, you will:

- Understand how to communicate the problem you want to solve to potential bidders and clearly articulate what a successful outcome looks like, especially as it connects to your jurisdiction's overall goals.
- Draft a problem statement and at least three key goals for your RFP, to help your proposers understand what you view as a successful outcome from the resulting contract.

3.1 Best Practices

Now that you have put together a project plan, built your team, and done sufficient research to understand the needs of your service recipients and how you might improve service delivery, it is time to start drafting your RFP!

Problem Statements

Beginning your RFP with a problem statement that effectively communicates the challenge you are facing is the first step in designing a procurement focused on results. By painting a clear picture of the problem that the vendor will help you solve, you begin to ground the procurement in a real issue and invite a more creative, problem-focused range of solutions. Furthermore, by opening with a problem statement, you can specify your jurisdiction's goals to solve that problem (more on that later!).

For example, if a contract for homeless services defines the problem as lack of shelter bed capacity, the range of possible solutions is narrowed to only those that increase the number of shelter beds, and likely limits possible respondents to only shelter providers. If the problem is instead framed more broadly as one of "housing instability," this invites more wide-ranging, creative, and potentially cost-effective solutions.

KEY CONCEPT: CHARACTERISTICS OF GOOD PROBLEM STATEMENTS

1	<p>Connects the department's priorities to a clear and specific outcome goal.</p> <p>Problem statements contain the seeds of your definition of success. Tying the problem to a specific set of goals clarifies departmental priorities for the vendor community and provides a standard against which you will judge services. If you are making major changes to service delivery or programmatic changes, you might find that the RFP's problem statement is the place to expand on why those changes are being made and how changing the service model connects to your outcome goal(s).</p>
2	<p>Clearly explains how where you are today differs from where you want to be.</p> <p>Illustrating the difference between the present state and your desired end state offers a clear sense of what progress would look like and invites vendors to think about how they can help get you there. Good problem statements often use a "from - to" description to signal to vendors key priorities or expectations for <i>changing</i> the current state.</p>
3	<p>Quantifies key variables related to where you are today and where you want to be.</p> <p>What are the data or statistics that help illustrate the gap between your desired future state and the status quo? Quantifying the different aspects of your problem, where possible, and sharing that information with vendors can help indicate the scale of the problem and how you would assess success in solving the problem.</p>
4	<p>Includes description of end-users or the target population to receive services and clarifies their needs.</p> <p>Good problem statements will clearly describe the intended recipients or end-users of the service or product. For social service RFPs, we encourage you to revisit Module 2 to learn about assessing the needs and demographics of your target population.</p>
5	<p>Sufficiently focused to be actionable.</p> <p>A problem statement that is too broad may not allow vendors to propose sufficiently detailed solutions. Specifying a target population, describing current services, and sharing past program data can help narrow the definition of the problem while also allowing providers flexibility to propose innovative solutions.</p>
6	<p>As neutral as possible about possible problem diagnosis or solutions.</p> <p>Good problem statements assume little about why the problem exists or what solutions could be appropriate. By avoiding specific solutions in the problem statement, you leave space for vendors to draw on their own expertise and offer solutions you may not have considered.</p>

Goals

While the problem statement grounds the RFP in a well-defined challenge, articulating clear goals allows you to define for vendors what success looks like – what it looks like when the problems are addressed. A clear definition of success is a critical input for all other results-driven contracting strategies. It informs how you will select vendors, what metrics you track over the course of the contract, how you structure the contract, and how you design your next procurement.

KEY CONCEPT: CHARACTERISTICS OF STRONG GOAL STATEMENTS

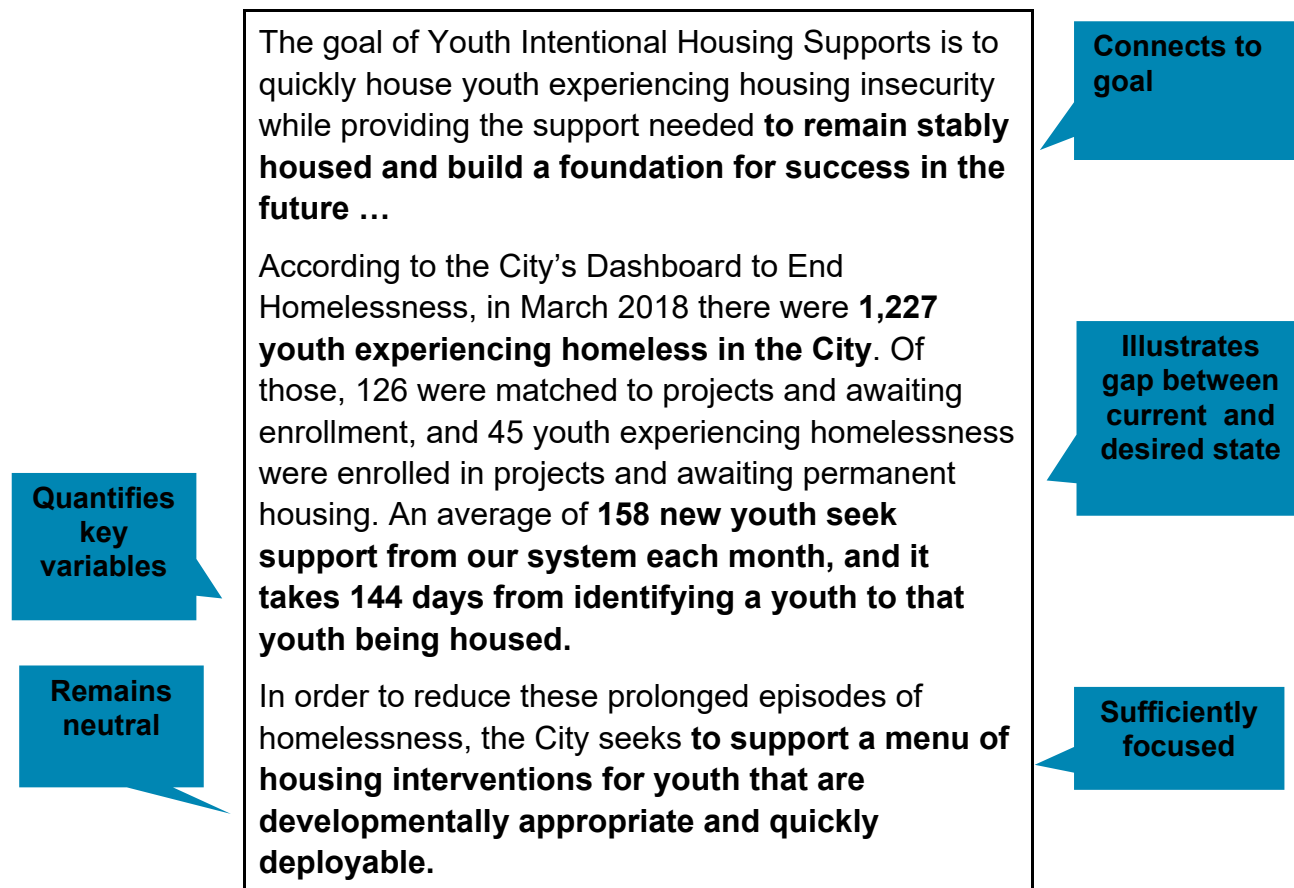
1	Relate to outcomes rather than inputs, outputs, or processes Inputs are the ingredients that go into the activities provided under the contract, like dollars spent, number of staff, materials used, etc. Outputs measure the completion of the activities themselves, like clients served, miles paved, number of software subscriptions, etc. Outcomes are the intended results or measurable effects of the contracted activities, like % of clients retaining employment for 90 days, number of citizen complaints about street conditions, etc. Inputs and outputs are important for monitoring vendor progress, but outcome goals should be the overarching focus of the contract.
2	Lend themselves to quantification The benefits of quantifying your problem also apply to your goals. Quantifiable goals define success in a way that you can use to guide and assess the vendor's work. However, not every goal will be easily quantifiable. If that is the case, you could write the goal as a qualitative statement and use creative performance metrics to measure whether the goal has been achieved through survey data or "proxy" measures. Goals differ from performance metrics (see Module 5) in that performance metrics help you measure progress toward the outcome goal.
3	Focused enough to narrow the range of possible responses or interventions to address the problem, i.e., are actionable and realistic Defining your goal precisely can offer useful guidance to vendors. Offering data, critical information, or illustrative examples could provide helpful additional information about your goal. Be careful! The more specific your goal, the more narrow the range of possible solutions.
4	Broad enough to encompass the impact you want to have on residents/beneficiaries and allow room for operational innovation by focusing on the "what" instead of the "how" Goals should be specific enough to be actionable, but not so specific that vendors focus only on those activities and not on bringing their best ideas and approaches to bear on the larger problem.

3.2 Examples

Problem Statement

This example is an excerpt from a city's RFP for youth intentional housing supports. In the callout boxes, we show how this example connects to the characteristics of problem statements.

Youth Intentional Housing Supports RFP



Goals

What do good goals look like in practice? On the left, we show what a typical goal might look like, and on the right, we indicate what an improved version of the goal might look like.

<i>Instead of...</i>	<i>Try</i>
"Provide supportive services run by certified nursing assistants for elderly individuals three times per week."	"Enable elderly individuals to safely live at home by providing services that can decrease placements into long-term nursing care by 30%."
"Provide after-school and summer programs to youth."	"Increase access to, enrollment in, and sustained participation in after-school and summer programs targeted to youth in grades 4-8."

MODULE 3: WORKBOOK

3.3 DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Gather your RFP drafting team and discuss the questions below. Brainstorming around your problem statement and goals ahead of time will help your team when it comes time to write the solicitation.

Problem Statements

1. Imagine that a friend of yours, who lives in but does not work for your jurisdiction, asks you what problem you are trying to solve with this procurement. In your own words, how would you describe the problem to them?

2. What do you know about this problem (including any statistics or data points)? What are the features of this problem that somebody would need to know to solve it?

3. How have you tried to solve this problem in the past? What do you believe were the main obstacles in the path of past efforts?

Goals

1. While it may not always be obvious, this RFP and the resulting contract are opportunities to advance your department’s (or citywide) priorities. Become grounded in those priorities by creating a list of your department’s goals and how this RFP might contribute to achieving those goals, using the table below.

Departmental (or jurisdiction-wide goal)	How this RFP contributes to achieving the goal
<i>Example: Reduce homelessness city-wide</i>	<i>Example: Provides solutions to more quickly house youth experiencing housing insecurity and reduces prolonged episodes of homelessness</i>

2. Imagine that this contract has reached a successful conclusion. How would you describe the success of the project to your boss and what evidence or data would you point to as evidence of success?

3.4 DRAFTING PROMPTS

1. Drawing on your responses from the above set of questions, write a problem statement that reflects the “characteristics of good problem statements”, which you will include in the introduction or background section of your RFP (aim for 200-300 words).

2. Drawing on your responses from the warm up questions, write up to three well-defined goals that you will include in the introduction or background section of your RFP. Depending on the service or product you are procuring for, one overall outcome goal may effectively synthesize what you want to achieve, which is perfectly okay! Make sure your goal(s) correspond with the “characteristics of good goals.”