



Developing a problem statement

A problem statement is a succinct but thorough description of the problem your team hopes to address through continuous quality improvement (CQI). A clear statement of the problem can help ensure members of the team are all on the same page about what, specifically, they are trying to address through CQI. Developing this statement is an important step toward engaging a range of staff in brainstorming solutions to a problem they might have varying perspectives on or understand differently.

Grantees are asked to specify their problem statement in Table D1 of the [HMRF CQI template](#). Developing a strong problem statement, however, can be its own challenge. This tip sheet walks grantees through the process of developing a clear problem statement to guide CQI. A worksheet for developing a problem statement is included in the appendix. The worksheet can be used in companion with this guide.

Steps for crafting a problem statement

- 1. Identify a priority problem.** The first step in crafting a problem statement is to identify your highest priority challenge. You may identify a problem through your ongoing monitoring of performance measures or feedback you get from staff or clients. Your program might identify a few issues, but it's best to focus on one key problem at a time to improve your likelihood of success and to avoid overtaxing staff. If you have more than one pressing problem, prioritize one with your staff. If you have a large staff or are concerned about hearing everyone's voices, try a prioritization activity like the [Bullseye Diagram](#). You can document your high-level challenge in Question 1 in the worksheet in the appendix.
- 2. Use your data to drill down.** When you have narrowed in on one problem, drill down to get more specific about the root of the problem. For instance, instead of listing your challenge as "program completion," examine nFORM data to determine which factors are associated with dropping out. At what point during the program do people drop out? Do different locations or workshop facilitators have different rates of program completion? Document what you discover in Question 2 in the worksheet in the appendix.

Tip: If you need guidance on which nFORM data to examine to conduct these analyses, check out the [nFORM page](#) on the HMRF grant resources site, or contact the nFORM help desk at nform2helpdesk@mathematica-mpr.com.
- 3. Use what you learned to state your specific problem.** For instance, when you examined the data, you may have learned that program completion is a particular challenge for men. Instead of writing down "program completion," write "Men in our weekday session series struggle to complete the program after they find jobs." This helps narrow the focus for brainstorming a strategy. Ensure you have the data to support the selected challenge. Document your team's shared understanding of the specific problem in Question 3 in the worksheet in the appendix.
- 4. Identify the root causes.** You explored your data to pinpoint where, when, and with whom the challenge is occurring, but this doesn't necessarily explain why. For instance, to understand why men are struggling to complete the program, consider asking them directly and talking to your staff to learn more. You might hold a focus group with male clients. Even if you cannot get feedback from the clients who dropped out, you may be able to get insights about attendance struggles or experiences in the

Tip: Ask staff to share their insights about root causes. The HMRF CQI [strategy development tip sheet](#) suggests additional activities and methods for identifying root causes.
If you come up with several root causes, prioritize one to start with.

workshop from men who are still attending. During regular staff meetings, ask staff for their hunches or insights about why men are dropping out before completing the program.

5. **Be clear on the consequences of inaction.** An important part of a strong problem statement is to be clear on the consequences of letting the problem continue. This is the team's motivation for addressing a problem. Often, an obvious consequence of inaction is that your program will not meet performance targets. However, there may be other important consequences to consider. For instance, if men are dropping out of the program before they complete it, that could be influencing the dynamics of the workshop. Or maybe staff are being taxed in their efforts to reengage clients. Often, CQI efforts focus on complex, long-term challenges like program completion; it can be helpful to revisit why you are addressing this problem to reenergize the team.

Pulling it all together

Use what you know or have learned by exploring the data and collecting feedback to develop a comprehensive problem statement. If you are completing the [HMRF CQI template](#), write your problem statement in Table D1 of the template.

As you continue in an improvement cycle, you will probably uncover new, related challenges. This is an expected part of improvement work. It is still important to maintain focus on your priority challenge. Instead of getting diverted by other challenges that crop up or broadening the scope of your original effort, document what you're learning along the way to ensure that helpful insights or new challenges don't get lost and can be revisited.

Tip: Keep your problem statement focused on the challenge. Avoid suggesting solutions at this point in the process. If solutions come up in the discussion, document them on the CQI template or elsewhere and return to them during a strategy discussion.



Next steps: Using your problem statement to develop a strategy

After you state your challenge, the next step in the CQI cycle is to develop improvement strategies. Your problem statement is a strong foundation for strategy brainstorming. To set up a brainstorming session, turn your problem statement into a How Might We ... question.

A How Might We ... question reframes a problem into an opportunity for improvement. For example, imagine you learn that men in the class tend to drop out because their schedule changes when they get a job. Your question could be:

How might we make it possible for clients whose schedule changes to keep participating in the workshop?

For more on developing a strategy, see the [strategy development tip sheet](#) on HMRF Resources. The tip sheet also offers suggestions for learning about challenges, which may be useful for developing your problem statement.

Appendix: Worksheet for developing a problem statement

1. What is the priority problem?

What program challenges or trends are you noticing (for example, by monitoring your performance measures, getting feedback from staff or clients, or learning from other sources)? Note them and prioritize one.

Example response: Halfway through the grant period, we're not on track to meet our target for the number of clients completing at least 90 percent of primary workshop hours.

2. Who is the problem affecting? When does it happen? Where does it happen?

Use data to begin adding specifics to the problem. For example, is the problem experienced by all clients in your program or a subset of individuals? Does the problem come up at a particular point in time in your program workflow?

Example response: Completion seems to be more of a problem with young fathers (ages 18–24) than older ones.

3. Now, rewrite your priority problem to make it more specific.

Using the insights you developed from drilling down in Step 2, get more specific about the problem you wrote down in the first step.

Example response: We have a problem getting young fathers to complete our program, which is making the program fall behind in reaching our 90 percent completion target.

4. What are some of the root causes of your problem? Why is it happening?

What do staff and/or clients believe are the key drivers of the problem? Which cause is most important and/or feasible to address?

Example response:

- Most of the young fathers come into the program unemployed and then get jobs during the course of the program. That's one of our goals, but we also want them to complete the program.
- Staff shared that younger fathers, in particular, seem uninterested in the curriculum, or decide the program is not for them after attending the first few workshops,

5. What effects is the problem having?

What will happen if this problem persists? Think beyond not meeting programmatic targets. How does it affect staff and/or clients? What is the motivation for addressing this problem?

- Example response:**
- It negatively affects the dynamic of the class when fathers drop out.
 - Staff spend a lot of time trying to reengage fathers who drop out.
 - Young fathers, a priority population for the program, aren't receiving services they can benefit from.

6. Craft your problem statement.

Pull together the answers above to develop your comprehensive statement of the problem. Start with your specific problem, note the root cause you will tackle first, and share what the effects of making no progress on this challenge would be.

- Example response:** We have a problem getting young fathers to complete our program, which is making the program fall behind in reaching our 90 percent completion target. Only 55 percent of young men have reached the 90 percent target so far this year, compared with 80 percent of older fathers. A key driver of this challenge is that younger fathers are actively looking for work when they start the program and need to drop out when they get hired. Our program identified a need for services in the community for young fathers; we are not fully reaching these fathers due to the challenges for them of balancing work and program attendance.

This tip sheet was prepared by Annie Buonaspina, Allon Kalisher, and Scott Richman of Mathematica, Washington, DC, (2021) under contract with Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHSP233201500035/75P00120F37054). OPRE project officers: Katie Pahigiannis, Pooja Gupta Curtin, Harmanpreet Bhatti, and Rebecca Hjelm. Mathematica project director: Grace Roemer.