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 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.

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<th>Consideration</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<td><strong>Address the agent or its consequences:</strong></td>
<td>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?)</td>
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<td><strong>Scope and degree:</strong></td>
<td>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?</td>
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<td><strong>Upward/Downward trends:</strong></td>
<td>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?</td>
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<td><strong>Comparison trends:</strong></td>
<td>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)?</td>
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<td><strong>Community attention:</strong></td>
<td>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?</td>
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<td><strong>Can you measure change:</strong></td>
<td>Will you be able to actually measure change(s) in this particular problem area that will be meaningful to communities in your county?</td>
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<td><strong>Impact and level of harm:</strong></td>
<td>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?</td>
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**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)