

# Tips for Writing Outcome Objectives

## What is an Outcome Objective?

An outcome objective states the results one hopes to attain by intervention activities.

Example: *By June 30, 2002 reduce the number of billboards with tobacco advertising by 50 percent in two cities exposed to the intervention.*

CDHS/TCS outcomes focus on community-level social norm change, such as shown in the above example, rather than on individual-level change strategies. Effective community norm change objectives work to reduce ETS, eliminate youth access to tobacco, and counter pro-tobacco influences (the TCS three top priority areas.)

A goal is usually the broader desired result of achieving multiple outcome objectives.

Example: *Reducing tobacco-related deaths in California.*

For local programs evaluation, the Tobacco Control Section needs to have outcome objectives defined prior to project start-up. Specific, measurable objectives allow staff and volunteers to focus on their responsibilities and clarify the relationship between intervention activities and desired outcomes.

## How to Write an Outcome Objective

Developing specific, measurable outcome objectives requires time, systematic thinking, and an understanding of the expected effect of a program. Well-written outcome objectives provide important guidance for the implementation and evaluation of an intervention.

Example: *By January 1, 2000 the percentage of tobacco retailers in Riverview who are in compliance with the existing local sign law will increase by 50% (from a 60% rate of compliance found in May, 1998) to a 90% rate of compliance.*

Key questions to consider when writing an outcome objective:

### 1. Is it specific?

◆ **Who or what is expected to change or benefit?**

Example: *Percentage of tobacco retailers in compliance (measure: sidewalk signs outside their establishment).*

◆ **What/how much change or benefit is expected?**

Example: *50% increase in the percentage of retailers in compliance*

◆ **Where** will the change occur?

Example: *In Riverside*

◆ **When** will the change occur or is a completion date specified?

Example: *By January 1, 2000*

### 2. Is it observable and measurable?

The outcome must be something you can measure from self-reports or see, count, hear, smell, etc. In the above example, the project will observe whether tobacco retail establishments have any sidewalk signs outside their establishment. The percentage of establishments that do not have any signs outside is a measure of the percentage of retailers in compliance with the law.

### 3. Is it achievable / reachable?

Write outcome objectives that are likely to be achieved. A baseline measure will assist you in estimating the level of success you might expect to achieve. Decide whether your intervention is realistic by considering baseline measurements as well as using your knowledge and experience in this area. Be realistic. Don't overestimate the probable outcome. For example, an outcome objective of 90% merchant compliance with sidewalk tobacco sign removal may be unrealistic if, at the start of the intervention, only 30% of the retailers are in compliance. An outcome objective of 50% or 60% is more realistic, and is therefore an achievable outcome objective.

If you don't know the baseline or current level of a proposed factor or outcome, you may not be able to estimate how much change is achievable. You can gather such information before you finalize your outcome objective, or you can write your objective but end it with a note stating, for example, "percent change is an estimate and may change following the assessment of baseline/current levels."

### 4. Is it meaningful and important?

Even if achievable, an outcome may not be sufficiently meaningful and important to be justified. In the above-cited example, if, at the beginning of your intervention, 85% of the retailers are already in compliance, then an intensive merchant education and enforcement intervention that will at best yield only a modest compliance increase from 85% to 90% may not be worth the effort. One way to test whether the outcome of your objective is worthwhile is to give it the "who cares" test. For example, achieving one thousand pledges to establish smoke free homes is meaningless if smokers continue to smoke in homes. A more meaningful outcome would be to have people report on whether they have actually established and maintained a smoke-free home. There are no hard and fast rules. Consider the required financial and human resources and the cost-benefit of the intervention.

In summary, outcome objectives specify who or what is expected to change, what and how much change or benefit is expected, where the change will occur, and when.

Example: *The Riverview city council will pass a city policy prohibiting smoking on city playgrounds by April 1, 1999.*

♦ **What is expected to change?**

*City policy*

♦ **What/how much** change or benefit is expected?

*Passage of a city policy prohibiting smoking on city playgrounds*

♦ **Where** will the change occur?

*On Riverview city playgrounds*

♦ **When** will the change occur or is a completion date specified?

*By April 1, 1999.*

Passing a city policy is a measurable event. Again, you must decide about the achievable/reachable rule. If four of your seven council members are avid smokers' rights advocates you may need another objective. If, on the other hand, you have a supportive council, this may be doable. Also, if a baseline survey shows that only 5 percent of the persons visiting playgrounds smoke, your resources might be better placed elsewhere as you may be solving a problem that does not exist or would have minimal impact on the overall community climate.

Writing a good outcome objective takes skill and judgment. The time and effort spent in writing objectives will put you far ahead in program planning and evaluation.

## **Outcome Objective Checklist**

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Use this checklist to judge whether your outcome objective meets the following criteria.

Does your outcome objective specify:

- Who or what is expected to change or benefit?
- What change or benefit is expected? Does it specify how much change or benefit is expected?
- Where will the change occur?
- When will the change occur or is a completion date specified?

Is your outcome objective:

- Observable and measurable?
- Achievable /reachable?
- Important or meaningful?

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## **TIPS FOR WRITING OUTCOME OBJECTIVES**

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