# FOCUS ON WHAT'S IMPORTANT
## *Guidance and tools*

Once you've accounted for your community's needs and resources, you will decide which problem(s) to tackle. Without focus, all issues seem equally important. Taking time to set priorities will ensure that you direct your community's valuable and limited resources to the most important issues.

### *Purpose:*

Focus your community's efforts and resources on the most important issues to achieve the greatest impact on health.

### *Who to Involve:*

Multi-sector team of partners (including leaders and stakeholders from business, healthcare, education, government, public health, funders, and community organizations) as well as anyone who cares about or is affected by health issues in your community

### *Focus on What's Important: Start Guide*

We know we should set a limited number of priorities, but we're not sure how to start. Everything feels like a priority.

### *Focus on What's Important: Act Guide*

We are committed to setting priorities, but we are struggling with implementing the prioritization process.

# FOCUS ON WHAT'S IMPORTANT: START GUIDE

## Consider using a skilled, neutral facilitator

By design, your multi-sector team represents various perspectives from your community; while this makes your team stronger it can also make choosing a focus difficult. A skilled, neutral facilitator can help guide your team through a priority-setting process, ensuring all voices are heard and that opposite viewpoints don't negatively affect the process.

Effective facilitators are objective, but that doesn't mean they have to come from outside the organization or team. Instead, it means that for the purposes of the decision-making process, the facilitator will take a neutral stance and focus on the process.

As you've gathered your multi-sector team to work together, you've likely already been using many of the consensus-building and decision-making skills you'll need to Focus on What's Important. You may want to look back at the tools and other guidance related to facilitating and group decision-making.

**Suggested tools:**

- Developing Facilitating Skills (from the Community Tool Box) provides an overview of what facilitation skills are and why they're important. This section also covers three basic parts of facilitation: the process of the meeting, skills and tips for guiding the process, and preventing and dealing with disrupters. You may have seen this and other guidance related to facilitating skills in Work Together.
- The Role of a Facilitator: Guiding an event through to a successful conclusion (from MindTools.com) walks through the role of a facilitator and includes a Facilitators' Toolbox with ice breakers, group decision-making tools, and tips for avoiding common pitfalls. MindTools.com includes a variety of free and members-only tools and resources.

## Determine your guiding question

As you begin your priority-setting process, it may be helpful to focus your team on a guiding question. Reviewing your vision and mission statement can provide a helpful starting point. Key words or values in these statements will help you create your guiding question. For example, are you striving for the quickest improvement in health, the greatest impact on health, the greatest improvement for vulnerable populations, or the most efficient use of resources? Frame your guiding question to reflect the most important elements of your vision and mission.

**Suggested tools:**

- Your team's vision and mission statements
  *County Health Rankings & Roadmaps*—A Healthier Nation, County by County

## Determine the number of priority issues you will select

Choosing priorities is challenging. It's not uncommon to feel like everything is a priority, but it's important to recognize that your resources are limited and selecting a few issues to focus on will help you successfully make changes in your community. We recommend focusing on no more than five issues, but the number of priorities you select will depend on your resources and ongoing efforts in your community. Matching the number of priorities with your team's capacity to take action is most important. It is better to pick fewer priorities and succeed than to choose too many priorities and find you can't be effective in any of them.

## Set criteria for considering priorities

There are a variety of processes for selecting priorities, but before you dive into a process, it's helpful to agree on a set of criteria by which you will judge potential issues. Criteria express the values, standards, and basic ideas your team will consider when making choices and deciding priorities.(1) Keep your guiding question handy as you think about criteria.

You've gathered helpful information during your assessment. The criteria you select here will help you use the data to identify priorities. Following are some potential criteria to consider:

- Who is affected?
- How many people are affected?
- Are there groups that are affected more than others?
- Where are the greatest opportunities for improvement?
- How severe are the effects? Based on the *County Health Rankings* Model, how much does this issue contribute to health outcomes?
- What are the consequences of not intervening?
- Are there strategies that have been shown to effectively address this issue?
- What does the community think? Do they support this issue?
- What do policymakers think? Do they support this issue?
- What assets and resources can partners bring to address this issue?
- How long will it take to reach an outcome?
- What are the potential negative impacts of addressing the problem?
- What has been tried before? What were the barriers and successes of those attempts?

The criteria you use to Focus on What's Important may also be helpful to consider as you Choose Effective Policies & Programs and Act on What's Important. The data you use to identify priorities can also be used to help you set policy or programs goals and leverage resources as you implement you strategies. The criteria you select here will also help you shape your evaluation plan.

**Suggested tools:**

- Defining and Analyzing the Problem (from the Community Tool Box) includes guidance to help communities define a problem and determine whether an identified problem is a priority and a checklist to help decide on which problem(s) you want to focus.

- Strategic Issues Overview (from the National Association of County & City Health Officials) is an overview of the phase of the Mobilizing for Action through Planning and Partnerships (MAPP) process, during which participants develop an ordered list of the most important issues facing the community. This step-by-step overview will help users prepare for and begin distilling the data they've gathered into priorities.

## Determine the process you will use to select priorities

It's important to remember that no one priority-setting method is best all of the time. Your decision will depend on the size of the team you're working with, the amount of time you have, and how much participation you want to ensure. A good priority setting process will clearly define:

- The criteria on which you will compare options
- Processes to vote/score/rank options
- Roles and processes to make the final choices(2)

MindTools.com's The Role of a Facilitator suggests some factors and options to consider when deciding the process you will use to make group decisions.

- The number of participants. If you have a large group, you might consider using smaller "break-out" groups.
- The level of participation you want to ensure. If you're concerned about participation, giving participants time in the agenda to think about and write down their thoughts may be a good strategy.
- The background and positions of the participants.
- How well participants know the subject and each other.
- The time you have available.

The Prioritization section from APEXPH in Practice (PDF) and Priority Setting: Four Methods for Getting to What's Important describe several common priority-setting methods and the strengths and weaknesses of each. The Four Methods include:

**Dotmocracy** is a multivoting technique. In its simplest form, you provide participants with one to three dots (usually stickers) and invite them to place a dot beside their top one to three options.

**Paired comparisons** is a snapshot process to be used with small to mid-sized groups to help narrow options further after dotmocracy.

**Quadrant analysis** is useful if you have two clear criteria upon which to make a decision (for example, effort and impact), and those two criteria can be qualified in a dichotomous way (for example, high versus low). The use of specific criteria means it is a slightly more rigorous and time-consuming method than the two previously described methods.

**Grid analysis** is useful when you must or might have to defend your program decisions with ample evidence. Also known as a decision matrix analysis, it is a great process for when you have many criteria.(2)

In addition to a formal process, some communities will take their potential priority issues to the public for their input. There are a variety of ways to get input from the public such as holding community forums, making presentations to various community organizations, and conducting community surveys. Following is how one community took its potential priority issues to the public.

**Taking Action in Walla Walla County, Washington**

In Walla Walla County, Washington, their Mobilizing for Action through Planning and Partnerships (MAPP) Committee took their list of potential priority issues to the community for a vote. Over a period of three months, the committee solicited feedback at a variety of community venues including the airport, public libraries, and farmers markets. Community members were presented with 32 potential priorities and asked to vote for the five on which they felt the community health improvement plan should focus. The committee then combined that feedback with the Hanlon method, a data-driven priority-selection tool, to come up with priorities for Walla Walla County.

**Suggested tools:**

- [The Role of a Facilitator: Guiding an event through to a successful conclusion](#) (from MindTools.com) walks through the role of a facilitator and includes a Facilitators' Toolbox with ice breakers, group decision-making tools, and tips for avoiding common pitfalls. [MindTools.com](#) includes a variety of free and members-only tools and resources.
- [Priority Setting: Four Methods for Getting to What's Important](#) (from Ontario Health Promotion E-Bulletin) covers four methods for choosing between a number of priorities. The content builds on a one-hour [Setting Priorities webcast](#) (audio & slides).
- [Prioritization section from APEXPH in Practice](#) (PDF from NACCHO's APEXPH in Practice workbook) describes several common priority-setting methods, including their advantages and disadvantages, as well as process steps and examples.
- [Explanation of Walla Walla County's Community Vote](#) (PDF from Walla Walla County Public Health) explains where and when community feedback was gathered and shows an example voting poster.

## Review data collected during your assessment of needs and resources

As your team prepares to set priorities, it may help members to review what you learned during your assessment. You can prepare a summary or overview to present to your team or have members review the materials you developed to share your assessment results with your community (e.g., community presentations, fact sheets, reports, local media stories).

**Suggested tools:**

- Materials used to share assessment results with your community
- [Explanation of Walla Walla County's Community Vote](#) (PDF from Walla Walla County Public Health) shows an example of a voting poster with assessment data and background on the issue.

# FOCUS ON WHAT'S IMPORTANT: ACT GUIDE

## Review Focus on What's Important: Start Guide

Has your team:

- Considered using a skilled, neutral facilitator?
- Determined your guiding question and the number of priority issues you will select?
- Set criteria for considering priorities and determined the process you will use to select priorities?
- Reviewed the data you collected during Assess Needs & Resources?

If not, you may want to review the Focus on What's Important: Start Guide.

## Brainstorm potential priority issues

Start with your guiding question, and ask participants what they see as the top two or three issues based on that question and the data they've reviewed. Brainstorming is an effective and simple way to come up with ideas in a group.

Traditionally, brainstorming exercises start with a question or problem, and participants respond with whatever comes to mind. A recorder writes down the comments made on a large piece of paper or whiteboard, so everyone can see them. The Community Tool Box's Making Decisions Tool #1: Brainstorming Techniques provides a couple of variations on traditional brainstorming:

- Have participants brainstorm individually before the group activity. Each person generates his or her own ideas privately and later shares them with the group. You might give participants sticky pads to write down their ideas.
- Have participants review the data and consider the guiding question ahead of time and come prepared with their ideas of two to three issues on which to focus.(3)

Nominal group technique provides a slightly more structured method for group brainstorming that encourages participation and uses multivoting to move the discussion toward prioritization. Multivoting narrows a large list of possibilities to a smaller list of top priorities or to a final selection. This technique allows an item that is favored by all, but not the top choice of any, to rise to the top.(4)

**Suggested tools:**

- Brainstorming: Generating many radical, creative ideas (from MindTools.com) describes why and how to use brainstorming to generate ideas. MindTools.com includes a variety of free and members-only tools and resources.

*County Health Rankings & Roadmaps*—A Healthier Nation, County by County

- Making Decisions Tool #1: Brainstorming Techniques (from the Community Tool Box) provides helpful brainstorming steps and guidelines
- Mind Maps: A Powerful Approach to Note-Taking (from MindTools.com) describes a useful approach to note-taking that can be used during a brainstorming session to help you break large topics down into manageable chunks.
- Nominal Group Technique (from American Society for Quality) outlines specific directions for using nominal group technique and includes a link to further direction on multivoting.

## *Use your selected process and criteria to prioritize among the brainstormed list*

You can do this informally by using your criteria as a general guide and voting on the top issues or follow a more structured process of rating each potential priority issue. The tools listed below provide helpful examples of each approach to priority-setting and may be adapted to fit the process and criteria you've selected.

If your team is struggling to cull the list of potential priorities to a more manageable number, try ordering your options in different ways.

- Logical order — Present issues in the sequence in which they should be addressed. This is useful where the resolution of one issue is contingent on resolution of another.
- Impact order — How strategic is an issue? How important are its consequences? How complex is an issue? Resolving easier issues first can build the momentum, teamwork, and consensus that can lead to solutions for more complex, controversial issues.
- Temporal order — Resolve issues according to a timeline, using information such as coordination with upcoming events or a logical order for dealing with the issues. For example, an issue that seems to require a policy strategy may be timed to coincide with the state legislative cycle.(5)

Analyzing Root Causes of Problems: The "But Why?" Technique may help you identify the basic reasons behind a problem or issue you're seeing in your community and highlight where you need to start to most effectively address the issues. This technique is particularly useful for exploring social and economic factors such as employment issues or community safety.(6)

The *County Health Rankings* model is based on the idea that where we live, learn, work, and play influences our health with a special emphasis on social and economic factors. You can learn more learn more about how social and economic factors influence health at Robert Wood Johnson Foundation's Commission for a Healthier America.

**Suggested tools:**

- Prioritizing Issues Exercise (PDF from Healthy People 2020) is a two-page exercise designed to help the group decide on which issue(s) to focus.
- Priority Setting Exercise (PDF example adapted from Thurston County Public Health and Social Services, Washington) worksheet follows a customized version of the Criteria Weighting Method. It is a useful exercise to adapt after assessing community needs and resources.

- Analyzing Root Causes of Problems: The "But Why?" Technique (from the Community Tool Box) discusses what a root cause analysis is, why and when it's useful, and how it works.
- What Drives Health (from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation) discusses how social factors like education, income, work, and housing can affect health directly and indirectly.

## Discuss and finalize priority issues

As a team, review your resulting list of priorities. Does it make sense? Does it resonate with your multi-sector members? Will these priorities resonate with the community? If you haven't sought public input, this is the opportunity to do so. Hold final decisions until you have evidence of community support for your chosen priorities. This is also a good time to review your priority-setting process.

**Suggested tools:**

- Priority Setting Process Checklist (PDF from The Health Communication Unit) presents a priority-setting checklist that can be used as you prepare for a priority-setting process, or as a reflection tool, after you've determined your priorities. The checklist considers data gathering, meaningful stakeholder participation, time, resources, and decision making.

## Communicate your priorities

To ensure that your team and community can successfully act on the priorities you've selected, it's important to communicate your decisions with decision makers and those who influence them.[1] Consider the following questions when deciding how to communicate your priorities.

- Who must understand and support your plans to address priority issues? Be as specific as possible.
- Who should tell them?
- What media or methods should be used to tell them? (e.g., stories, reports, news media)

1.      Forest LB, McKenna C, Donovan J. Connections:  A "How To" Handbook for Developing Extension Long-Range Plans and Major Problems. Madison, WI; 1986 April 1986.
2.      van Boxmeer N, Thesenvitz J. Priority Setting – Four Methods for Getting to What's Important! In: Ontario Health Promotion E-Bulletin. Toronto, ON: Health Nexus and Public Health Ontario; 2010.
3.      KU Work Group for Community Health and Development. Chapter 14, Section 9, Tool #1 Brainstorming Techniques. In: The Community Tool Box. Lawrence, KS: University of Kansas; 2012.
4.      American Society for Quality. Evaluating and Decision-Making Tools: Multivoting In: Quality Tools. Milwaukee, WI; 2012.
5.      National Association of County & City Health Officials. Phase 4: Strategic Issues In-depth Guidance. In: Mobilizing Action through Planning and Partnerships (MAPP) Framework. Washington, DC: National Association of County & City Health Officials.
6.      KU Work Group for Community Health and Development. Chapter 17, Section 4: Analyzing Root Causes of Problems: The "But Why?" Technique. In: The Community Tool Box. Lawrence, KS: University of Kansas; 2012.