Ready, Fire, Aim!
Planning Effective Policy Research

RACSS Professional Development Seminar 2011
October 3, 2011 – Portland, OR

Pepper Sturm, Chief Deputy Research Dir., Legislative Counsel Bureau, NV
Bryant Howe, Asst. Dir., Office of Legislative Research & General Counsel, UT
Annie Pennucci, Sr. Research Associate, WA State Institute for Public Policy
Today’s Topics

- Research requests
- Defining the problem
- Getting started
What do members want?

- Information
- Someone with whom to think out loud
Research Requests

What is your role in the policy process?

- Guide and inform (not drive) the discussion
- Consult and advise
- Help define the problem
Three key questions:

1. What is the real question? (wants vs. needs)
2. What does the person want you to do?
3. What is the intended use of the information?
Taking requests—interactions

- Listening skills—silence!
- Encouraging statements (nudges)
- Move from general to specific
- Restatement/reflection
- Questions/clarifications
Research Requests

Taking requests—interactions (cont’d)

- Time frame
- Agree on what is to be done
- Form of response
- Note limitations
BONK
LUCY, YOU'RE THE WORST PLAYER IN THE HISTORY OF THE GAME!
YOU CAN'T PROVE THAT! YOU SHOULD NEVER SAY THINGS THAT YOU CAN'T PROVE!
IN ALL PROBABILITY, YOU ARE THE WORST PLAYER IN THE HISTORY OF THE GAME!
I CAN ACCEPT THAT...
What is the problem you are trying to solve?
A Problem Exists When There Is A Substantial Difference Between Expectations And The Perception Of Reality
Legislators will sometimes quickly accept “canned” root causes of a problem:
- General ills of society
- Time to address the problem is limited
- Demands exceed resources

Legislators may want to propose solution before the problem is clearly defined

Need to find the “real” problem
- Keep probing and asking
- Peel away the layers
- Keep asking “why”
Ask the Dumb Question

“I have watched talented people – people with much higher IQ than mine – who have failed as leaders. They can talk brilliantly, with a great breadth of knowledge, but they’re not very good at ask questions. Sometimes they are afraid of asking dumb questions, but what they don’t realize is that the dumbest questions can be very powerful. They can unlock a conversation.” (Mike Palmer, CEO, Dow Inc.)

“I ask dumb questions which are the questions I think that we should ask.” (Director, Fortune 100 Company)
Some potential pitfalls

- Do you “dig beyond” the legislator’s perception of the problem or accept and build on what the legislator thinks?
  - What if your analysis conflicts with the legislator’s “pet” pre-determined solution?

- How do you deal with incomplete information?
  - Some dimensions of a problem may remain unknown
Some potential pitfalls (cont’d)

- The problem is nearly always stated in terms of “people are being harmed”
  - Clearly describe “how are people being hurt?”

- Who is asking the question?
  - We all view problems differently
Defining the Problem

Why write a problem statement?

- “Frame” a problem – facts come later
- Structure your thinking
- It allows you to tackle your problem in structured manner
- Bring order out of chaos
- Make sense of ambiguity
- Estimate time and resources needed for analysis
Defining the Problem

Outline for a problem statement: “what appears to be wrong and why”

- What is the problem you are trying to solve?
- Why is this a problem? (so what?)
- Who is affected by this problem? (owners)
- Can you quantify this problem?
- Is this problem ripe for solution?

Then ask:

- “What aspects of this problem have I overlooked?”
Defining the Problem

What’s included in a good problem statement?

- Addresses each of the major points in the outline
- Does not presume a particular solution
- It is clear about what is based on fact vs. speculation
- Helps identify information uncertainties
- Specific rather than global – focuses attention and “puts a fence” around an issue
- Highlights differences in how different interest groups perceive the problem – not meant to be a consensus statement
Is the problem ripe for solution?

- What’s the level of political will that is available to solve the problem?
- Are a lot of influential people agreeing on a solution?
  - Is there a “critical mass” of support?
- Are other states acting in a uniform way to address this problem?
Defining the Problem

Is the problem ripe for solution?
(cont’d)

- Does the public demand a solution?

- Will the problem solve itself if we leave it alone?
  - May get worse, but will it eventually get better?
  - Role of the policy analyst is not to “convince” others that it is or is not solvable, but to inform the debate
Getting Started

What has already been done by others?

- Research literature
- Other states
- Key agencies or organizations
- Other staff
Getting Started

Identify and evaluate data sources

- What are you trying to measure?
- Snapshot or trends over time?
- Be clear on what the data represent (and what they do not)
- Watch for bias
Getting Started

What is the expected product?

- Verbal presentation
- Data analysis (tables, graphs)
- Brief written summary
- Detailed report—in chunks or comprehensive
Getting Started

Create a timeline

- When is the product(s) expected?
- Set internal deadlines
- Anticipate roadblocks
- Stay focused; do the best you can within the allotted time
Getting Started

Manage expectations

- What conclusions can we expect to be drawn?
- Be careful about overstating findings
- Consider what it would take to answer questions that research does not currently address
Final Thoughts

- Pause
- Think
- Persevere
- Keep it simple!
Final Thoughts

“Simplicity is the ultimate sophistication” – Leonardo da Vinci
Final Thoughts

- Re-read the original request
- Do the best work in the available time
- Add value
Thank you!