



Telling your story...in 25 words or less?

Have you ever attended a community event and had someone turn to you and say, "Hi, I've seen you at these things before – who are you with?" Or gone to a coalition meeting and had a major funder say, "I've seen your project's name, what do you folks do exactly?"

These opportunities underline the importance of having a concise 20-25 word organization description. **The single most important communications tool for your organization is a simple statement that tells who you are and what you do.**

Miles for Smiles is a mobile dental program for children of working poor families in rural Colorado. (17 words)

Whether you are in a receiving line or a check-out line, you must be ready with a clear definition of your project. It should be made up of everyday words that can be used by everyone involved: the board chair, the fundraiser, the case manager, the receptionist—even the client and the local policy-maker. And it needs to be simple enough that they can remember it and, when asked, be able to pass it on to others.

The organization description is not your mission statement. It is not your values statement. It is not a list of your key donors or supporters. It is not your IRS tax status. It does not convey your founding date and the history of your organization. It is not a slogan.

An organization description addresses two basic facts: who you are and what you do. And it invites people to ask for more information such as "How do you do that?" and most importantly, "What can I do

to help you in your work?"

The C.A.T.S. program provides compassionate treatment to children who have been traumatized by physical and/or sexual abuse. (17 words)

A good organization description takes a lot of work. To help you fine-tune your statement, here are tips from Sally Patterson, President of Radiant Communications:

Simple everyday language

Most health-related nonprofit organizations do not realize how much jargon clutters up their daily speech. Beware of acronyms such as FAS (fetal alcohol syndrome) or STD (sexually transmitted disease) and avoid medical and governmental lingo.

Watch out for words that are not well understood by the general public. Among these are safety net, access, primary care, health services, undocumented, disadvantaged and underserved. The language you use must be clear to funders, reporters and the community at large.

Draw a Breath/ Providence School Partnership provides families and children with the knowledge and tools to control asthma. (17 words)

Connect with your audience

Listen to your words from the perspective of your audience. Do the teens outside the door call themselves "young people?" Do the neighbors call your office asking for "comprehensive health services?" Do your clients describe themselves as "underserved minorities?"

Consider the viewpoint of new Americans in your area. Sometimes concepts such as disease or mental illness do not translate easily when speaking with people from other cultures. The language you use must be sensitive to these distinctions, so that everyone in your community will support your program.

Franklin Health Access Project links low-income, uninsured residents of rural Maine with a network of health care providers and other community health resources. (23 words)

Put a human face on your work

Regardless of whether you are talking to public officials, health care professionals, other nonprofit organizations or potential funders, focus on the compassionate component of your work. A good organization description moves listeners to appreciate what you do and motivates them to care about the people you serve.

Safe and Sound makes sure that homeless and runaway youth get the help they need to be healthy and safe. (20 words)

One soundbite at a time

You cannot tell your whole story in the organization description. There are additional communications tools to help you add the details. Start by succinctly answering the two basic questions: Who are you? What do you do?

Hopefully you will open a dialogue, prompting people to express their interest with follow-up questions. Then you can respond with infor-

mation about your partners, your location, or your range of services.

Higher Ground uses physical challenges and counseling to help low-income teens resist and recover from substance abuse. (17 words)

Sing the same song

Educate everyone—especially your volunteers, staff, board, and funders—to define your organization in the same way, emphasizing the same aspects. By projecting a clear, consistent message you will more likely succeed in getting the word out to the community; both to those whose help you need and to those whom you work to help.

Creating an effective organization description is challenging. But spoken with a smile and a handshake, it can be the first step towards building new collaborations in your community.

Local Initiative Funding Partners supports innovation in health and health care through funding partnerships. (14 words)

LIFP Project Directors: TAKE THE CHALLENGE

Visit the LIFP website (www.lifp.org) and go to "Current Projects." Look at the organization description posted for your project. Does it answer the basic questions: who are you and what do you do? Is it clear and compelling? Does it successfully promote your project to a worldwide audience?

To revise your organizational description on the LIFP website e-mail Debbi Dunn Solomon, LIFP communications director, dsolomon@lifp.org.