

# Writing Mission Statements for Community Foundations

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## What is a mission statement?

Mission statements provide a kind of compass, or wider vision, to an organization's board members and employees while informing people outside the community foundation about your visions and goals. But writing a good mission statement can be challenging. This article is designed to help.

A mission statement is best developed by board members and staff in a cooperative effort. Ensuring that everyone's voice is heard will make it more likely that everyone will be enthusiastic about the final product. Working together to write a mission statement can be a great team-building exercise.

A good mission statement should be reflective of your values, it should be a source of inspiration to employees and board members, it should sound reasonable and plausible to people outside the organization, and it should explain specifically what your organization aims to do. Try to focus on a single theme encompassing all these factors. Strike a balance between who you really are, and your ideals.

Keep in mind that mission statements may be short, but writing a mission statement requires time and careful consideration, be sure to put aside sufficient time for vetting and considering different options.

## Guiding Questions

Your mission statement exists to provide an immediate, concise answer to the questions around which you want conversations of your foundation to revolve. What inspires you? Why do you think your foundation is so important to the community? What does your organization do? What values guide your work and define your goals?

## Trim Things Down

According to Top Nonprofits, the 50 best non-profit mission statements are only about 15 words long. The top 20 are even shorter—between 9 and 10. Brief mission statements are easier for board members and staff to remember. The same is true for people outside your community foundation.

Unfortunately, community foundation mission statements are rarely pithy — tending instead to fall into a number of common traps. The first thing to avoid is community foundation jargon. Most people won't know what it means and it will only obfuscate your message. Second, avoid redundancies within the *text* and the *context* of the mission statement. Avoiding redundancies within the context of your mission statement means keeping in mind that your listeners already know they are hearing the mission statement of a non-profit organization. The words "mission statement" and "non-profit" are unnecessary. Third, focus on strong, active verbs--avoid adverbs. Qualifying terminology dampens impact. Finally, keep in mind that that a mission statement exists to define your vision for the organization—not to tell us what a community foundation does.

## Reworking Your Mission Statement

You can use the tips mentioned above to improve the mission statement you already have. Here are some examples:

**The Nebraska Community Foundation, Inc.** is a non-profit, 501©(3) charitable organization that provides Nebraskans and former Nebraskans an easy way to give back to the state and the communities they love. (31 words)

Using what we've just learned, this mission statement could be improved in a few easy steps. First, eliminate the term 501(c)3— besides being obscure jargon few beyond the non-profit sector would know, it's also a mouthful. Second, cut the terms "non-profit" and "charitable organization"; these terms are near synonyms to each other and what they indicate is already presumed. Third, cut the term "former Nebraskans"; it delineates unnecessarily among those with an affinity for their state. The final result:

**The Nebraska Community Foundation** provides Nebraskans an easy way to give back to the state and the communities they love. (20 words)

Here's another example:

**Parkersburg Community Foundation:** Our mission is to build a permanent pool of funds for the broad charitable needs of our community, to manage these funds efficiently, and to use them effectively in responding to the area's changing needs and opportunities. (37 words)

First, there is no need for the phrase "our mission is" —we already know we're looking at a mission statement. Second, eliminate the explanation of community foundation mechanics; a mission statement is more about values and results than process. Finally, focus on active verbs and don't qualify them with adverbs. The result:

**Parkersburg Community Foundation:** Responding to the needs and opportunities of the Parkersburg area. (10)

Some community foundations' mission statements already include slogan like phrases which could serve as mission statements on their own. While a community foundation might choose to have a longer mission statement, volunteers can be trained to identify and repeat the pithier portion of it that will engage and intrigue community members. For example:

**The Community Foundation of Crawford County** is committed to helping donors realize their charitable goals and inspire lasting legacies through the establishment of professionally managed permanently endowed funds; designed to provide on-going charitable support to address the ever-changing needs of Crawford County by "Making Generosity Last Forever." TM

In this example, the sentence “Making generosity last forever” would make a great mission statement on its own, and would certainly tend to stick with volunteers and community members better than the whole of the statement.

Writing a good mission statement can be challenging, but it is worth the effort. Just remember to keep things brief and focus on the values and goals of your organization.

## Resource:

*While you want your own mission statement to be unique, it never hurts to see what other non-profits are doing. Here are the top ten best mission statements according to Top Nonprofit found at <http://topnonprofits.com/examples/nonprofit-mission-statements/>:*

- **Smithsonian:** *The increase and diffusion of knowledge. (6 words)*
- **USO** *lifts the spirits of America’s troops and their families. (9 words)*
- **Livestrong:** *To inspire and empower people affected by cancer. (8)*
- **Invisible Children:** *To bring a permanent end to LRA atrocities. (8)*
- **The Humane Society:** *Celebrating Animals, Confronting Cruelty. (4)*
- **Wounded Warrior Project:** *To honor and empower wounded warriors. (6)*
- **Oxfam:** *To create lasting solutions to poverty, hunger, and social injustice. (10)*
- **Best Friends Animal Society:** *A better world through kindness to animals. (7)*
- **CARE:** *To serve individuals and families in the poorest communities in the world. (12)*
- **The Nature Conservancy:** *To conserve the lands and waters on which all life depends. (11)*