

# Problem statement proposal guidelines for federal agencies

## What is TOP?

The Opportunity Project (TOP) is a tech accelerator process run by Census Open Innovation Labs at the U.S. Census Bureau. Through TOP, we match high priority challenges identified by government agencies with talented tech teams from industry, universities, and nonprofits, and facilitate a collaborative sprint process through which teams prototype data-driven digital solutions.

## About this document

This proposal document is a template for federal agencies to submit ideas for 2019 sprint topics. Each year, our 14-week technology development sprints focus on key challenges such as the opioid crisis, disaster preparedness, STEM education, and more – we call these “problem statements.” View all our past problem statements and learn more about the sprint process on [The Opportunity Project website](#).

This year, we’re holding an open call for problem statements representing new or perennial challenges to tackle in this year’s sprints. Once we select the topics, companies and universities will sign on to prototype solutions to those challenges alongside our team and representatives from your agencies.

In past sprints, tech teams have included IBM, Cisco, Mapbox, Esri, Fitbit, Zillow, Redfin, Airbnb, LinkedIn, as well as small businesses, start-ups, universities and more. This process does not require an MOU or funding from your agency, but we do ask each agency to identify a lead POC, and commit to participating in the full sprint, joining weekly huddles and serving as a direct and accessible resource to sprint participants.

*NOTE: If you are not familiar with The Opportunity Project and how the process works, please visit [our website](#) for more information and/or contact us at [census.opportunityproject@census.gov](mailto:census.opportunityproject@census.gov)!*

## When do the sprints start?

We will review problem statements on a rolling basis between **March 25 - April 30**.

- In April and May, we will select and revise the problem statements as well as identify tech teams, user advocates, product experts, and additional data sources.
- Our first round of 2019 sprints will run from June-August (exact dates TBD).
- Our second round of 2019 sprints will run from August-October (exact dates TBD).
- End-of-year Demo Day 2019 will be held in Washington DC in December 2019.

## What makes agencies successful in TOP sprints?

The agencies who have the best experience and outcomes in this process have identified a senior executive champion, as well as at least one main staff-level agency POC who has support and bandwidth to work with us and participating teams on a weekly basis throughout the development and execution of the sprints. We do not require a specific hourly commitment.

## What makes a good problem statement?

A great problem statement focuses on a compelling problem that tells a human story, is reasonable enough in scope that digital tools could make a dent in it, but broad enough that there is room for tech teams to be creative and develop a diverse set of solutions. Agencies also have the most success when there is open data available to address the problem.

## What does NOT make a good problem statement?

TOP is not intended for topics that focus on federal agencies or employees as the target end users. All problems should focus on issues or topics facing members of the public – including families, communities, businesses, educators, as well as state and local governments. We also don't prescribe specific solutions. Instead, we frame general challenges, and leave the tech teams outside of government to develop their own ideas for tech solutions, as they apply their unique expertise and ultimately build and own the products. Finally, we only work with open data (i.e., no PII, private data, etc.), and any key federal data sets need to be public by the time the sprints begin.

## How can I submit a topic?

Please respond to the sections below completely, and **submit your responses to census. opportunityproject@census.gov with subject line “Problem Statement Proposal,”** no later than **April 30, 2019**. We will review topics on a rolling basis.

census.opportunityproject@census.gov

Thanks and we look forward to working with you!

- The Opportunity Project Team



# Part 1: The Problem Statement

1. **Challenge:** Provide a 1-2 sentence description of the key challenge that you're putting forward to tech teams and other stakeholders. Here's an example from the opioid crisis topic in 2018: "*Create digital tools and data sharing capabilities to support decisions across the broad range of stakeholders responding to the opioid crisis, such as public health, public safety, law enforcement, community groups, the private sector, and individuals.*" Remember not to prescribe what the solutions should be. For example:
  - ✗ "We'd like companies to build a mapping tool that shows our data with job listings"
  - ✓ "We envision tech tools that help communities to find quality jobs near resources that matter to them."
2. **Describe your problem statement in plain language, including the problem or challenge, why it is important, and your vision for the sprint outcomes (optional). View several excellent examples from 2018 [here](#).**

**Problem:** in no more than one paragraph, describe the problem you're trying to solve. This should be a problem facing the public, not federal agencies. Avoid using jargon or 'inside-the-beltway' terms (e.g., CAP Goal, ESSA) and use plain language. Get right to the point and lead with a human story. Remember, people care about people, not policy/technical jargon!

**Why this problem is important:** explain in no more than one paragraph why this problem is important. Focus on compelling stories about how this problem is affecting Americans' lives. Feel free to include an example or two to illustrate the problem.

**Vision for sprint outcomes (optional):** add a one sentence vision of what the world looks like with tech solutions to your problem. Here's an example from a disaster preparedness topic in 2018: "*Through access to data and user friendly digital tools, more Americans are aware of the hazards they face and what they can do to protect themselves and their families, and take action to get prepared.*"

## 3. Target audience/end user

In a few words, describe the target audience for resulting products. Examples include: youth experiencing homelessness; veterans; engaged citizens; individuals and families under age 35; local officials or other local decision makers.

## 4. Potential data sets

List any federal open data sets that are relevant to the problem you're focusing on, and if possible, where they can be found online (e.g., website or API links, file downloads, etc.). This can just be an initial scan of data sets that you're aware of. This does not need to be an exhaustive list, and does NOT need to include any data sets from your agency! It's totally fine if some or all the relevant data for your topic comes from another federal agency.

List any other key open data sets that are relevant to this topic (e.g. open data from state, local, or non-governmental sources), and provide links if possible.

5. **Does your problem statement fit into one of our themes for 2019? (Note: this is not required!)**  
 Future of the workforce  
 The 2020 Census  
 Geospatial data and tech

## Part 2: Your organization

1. **Agency Name:**
2. **One to three (1-3) lead POC name(s), title(s), email(s), and phone number(s):**

This is the main person/people who will serve as points of contact for your agency and work with us and participating teams throughout the sprint. Although we typically end up working with a number of people from each agency, please designate **at least one and no more than three lead POCS.**

3. **Champion's name and title:**

Who is the most senior official (up to your agency's Secretary, Administrator, etc.) who is aware of TOP and your problem statement, and supportive of your agency's participation, who can serve as your executive level champion?

4. **Do you have manager support to spend time on the project through 2019/Demo Day? (YES/NO)**
5. **Have you worked with The Opportunity Project before? (YES/NO)**
  - If you have not directly worked on The Opportunity Project, how did you hear about us?