

## Tools: Prevention

"The best way to solve a problem is not to have it occur in the first place." —Anonymous

Prevention is an obvious approach to public problems. While we're familiar with thinking about prevention when it comes to healthcare or public safety, we may not realize that many of the activities of government can also be classified as prevention.

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However, prevention is often not utilized fully, because there can be great political pressure on government to enact action-oriented solutions and respond reactively rather than proactively. In spite of this, preventative solutions to public problems should be considered as a transformative way of thinking about local government activities. For example, squad cars policing a neighborhood may not be as effective at deterring crime as an active neighborhood community watch program would be—and they are certainly more expensive.

The key to effective prevention is not a specific program, but instead a new way of thinking. Preventative thinking—and the ability to embrace preventative solutions—requires a total-systems approach to problem definition and subsequent problem solving. In thinking about healthcare, we are often very knowledgeable about preventative approaches—we understand the value inherent to them, in both quality of life and in cost, especially when compared to a crisis or an "emergency room" approach. Just as it's reasonable to eat healthy and exercise regularly to maintain good health, governments should think about what they can do to maintain or build solid communities and avoid costly, intense responses later.

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So what does it take to begin using preventative thinking in government? As stated earlier, many activities of local government are already preventative: street sweeping prevents litter and leaves from clogging storm sewers, leash laws and dog licensing prevent injury and the spread of animal diseases, building inspections prevent accidents and loss of life or property. Even though we think about these kinds of solutions, many of them have eventually become considered regulatory rather than preventative.

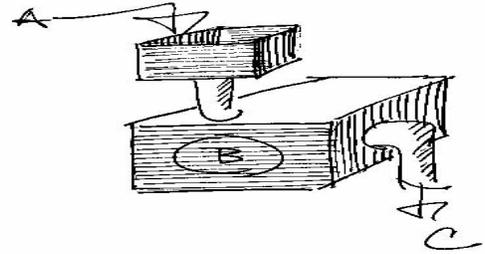
In the context of service delivery innovation and redesign, prevention requires *total systems thinking* and *clear problem definition*. The first step, just as in other areas of innovation and service delivery redesign, is to define the problem.



To illustrate the *problem to redesign* methodology for this section, we use the example of City of Minneapolis' "Plow Pal" program:

**Step 1. Clearly define the problem**

Citizens are not aware of snow emergencies and therefore fail to follow snow emergency protocol for street parking.



**Step 2. State the desired measurable outcome**

Fewer cars towed and snow-less streets.

**Step 3. Investigate why traditional approaches aren't working**

Post snow emergency information online and provide information to local media outlets (television, radio, etc.).

**Step 4. Identify alternative theories or assumptions that address the problem**

Greater citizen awareness will result in fewer necessary tows; nearness and personalization of snow emergency status will help citizens follow protocol.

**Step 5. Innovation and redesign**

The City of Minneapolis launched its "Plow Pal" program that encourages citizens to take an active role in their neighborhoods to remind their neighbors of snow emergency protocol and provides them with posters to place in areas visible to the public. This program prevents the need for towing cars by encouraging neighbors to look out for each other.

Interestingly, there is little regarding prevention in the public management or innovation literature. Much has been researched and written about prevention within certain policy or program areas; however, there is a relative dearth of research on the general use of preventative thinking in public management, administration or its use in service delivery innovation and redesign. Prevention is about policy design rather than management.

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Real examples of prevention include:

- [Neighborhood Crime Watch in North St. Paul](#): A program is advertised to citizens as "neighbors helping neighbors" to build meaningful neighborhood relationships that enhance public safety.
- [Vision Screening](#): It is a requirement in the State of Minnesota that all schoolchildren undergo vision screenings in order to catch child vision problems that could have consequences to both their health and academic performance.
- [Dakota County WIC Scheduling System](#): Prevents no-shows by allowing for more convenient scheduling practices for its Women, Infant and Children's (WIC) food program.
- [Farmington Pollution Prevention Program](#): Works to prevent pollution from occurring in the first place, rather than paying for expensive clean-up afterwards.
- [Eden Prairie's 20-40-15 Program](#): A program intended to improve energy efficiency in all Eden Prairie facilities by 20 percent and increase the fuel efficiency of its vehicle fleet by 40 percent, all by the year 2015.
- [Dilworth's Code RED](#): An ultra-high-speed telephone communication service for emergency notifications and the distribution of important information.
- [Rain-barrel, composting and burn-barrel information in Becker County](#): Made available to residents on the county website.
- [Mankato's Lost Pet Program](#): Prevents the costly euthanizing of animals in the city pound by posting pictures of the animals online.
- [Falcon Heights ClickFix](#): A way for citizens to report problems through their cell phones in the City of Falcon Heights.
- [Ramsey County/St. Paul Gang Prevention](#): Efforts are proving successful at diverting unsupervised young people into meaningful activities.
- [Fit City Duluth](#): A partnership between Duluth and the St. Louis County public health department to encourage physical activity and improve air quality by providing the opportunity for people to walk and bike safely in the community.
- [Kandiyohi County Healthy Eating in Schools Project](#): Public health staff work with schools to offer healthier options at the school's concession stands in order to prevent child obesity.



- Southeast MN Chemical Dependency Pilot Project: Utilizes county funds in a nontraditional way to fund “healthcare navigators” to help chemically dependent individuals stay sober by assisting them with housing, mental health and primary medical care.

However, prevention is not without its limitations. Prevention doesn’t always work as expected and it can be hard to get public support for spending money on prevention. Strong evidence of cause and effect (which can be time-consuming and expensive to produce) is often needed to continue prevention funding.

In Minnesota, we have a wide variety of nonprofit organizations that perform prevention-related work and are leaders in preventative thinking. It is important to remember that prevention work does not have to be conducted by government employees; many nonprofits currently receive grants from government authorities to perform prevention work.



**Further readings and examples of Prevention are available at The Humphrey School of Public Affairs [Local Government Innovations Website](#).**

Prevention Strategies offers a variety of their reports on drug and alcohol prevention in schools online at <http://www.preventionstrategies.com/>

