College of Public Health and Human Sciences
Communicating About Public Health Policy
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Communications in the Policy Process

• Communications and relationships are big factors that influence the policy making process

• The main audiences for communications are:
  • The policy makers, e.g., elected officials
  • Stakeholders who care about the issue and can put pressure on the policy makers
  • The general public, who can become stakeholders
Most important

• Need to coordinate communications with all the partners involved in the policy effort
• Organizations will have different roles to play
• There are times when the health department will take the lead, and many times when others will take the lead
• Be prepared to give up some control
Communication Materials

• **One-pagers** – please don’t think of it as a Fact Sheet
  • Visually appealing
  • The best information that supports the policy

• **FAQs** – Good opportunity to go into more detail than the one-pager, and also answer common questions or opposing arguments

• **Talking Points** – for internal use
  • But realize that anything is subject to the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA)
Communications - Goals

• Get the policy maker or stakeholder to support the policy and to make it their priority

• In the end, it is a majority vote that wins the policy fight, but it is the hard work of policy makers and stakeholders that create the conditions for victory.
  • If it is a priority, stakeholders will devote more resources to the policy effort
  • Policy makers are always running out of time and energy, so they focus on their priorities
Communications - General Rules

• Know your audience - what is the person’s background, opinions, priorities?
• Do your homework - what else is happening in that person’s world?
• Chose the best person to do the communication, based on existing relationships, credibility, etc.
• Know the content – the problem you are trying to solve, the policy solution, and the politics involved
Gaining Support within the Health Department

• Health Department staff will usually take the lead here, but outside partners can help
• Similar to working with other policy makers, the goal is getting support for the policy and making it a priority
• Gain support from other programs within the health department that will be impacted by the policy
• Consider if you need buy-in from other governmental agencies, e.g., police, schools, etc.
Communicating with Policy Makers

• As policy makers are busy people, communications need to be short, clear, and accurate (longer, backup documents can be used)
• Respect their staff and understand staff’s important role
• Understand your relationship with the policy maker
The Meeting with a Policy Maker or Stakeholder

• Tell them about your goals for the meeting
• Listen to what the person says and the questions asked – this tells you about their concerns
• Show that the policy effort is being done in a smart, strategic, professional manner
• Thank them for whatever support they have offered or just for taking the time to talk
• Arrange quickly for any follow-up, such as additional information
The Meeting with a Policy Maker or Stakeholder

When communicating with someone who is likely to remain in opposition to the policy...

- Listen to what the person says and the questions asked – this tells you about their concerns (or possibly about the opposition’s talking points)
- Get the policy maker or stakeholder NOT to make opposing the policy a priority
Media Outreach

- Reporters
  - Which news outlets or reporters are likely to be covering this issue?
  - Develop a relationship with the reporters
- Letters to the Editor, Op-eds, and Editorial Board visit
  - Timing is critical – when it is newsworthy and will have impact
- In health departments, communications with the media are closely monitored – build a relationship with the health department staff that coordinate media relations
- Other organizations may need to take the lead on media outreach
- Strategize about what role the health department can play
Media Outreach

• Press events and press releases need to be newsworthy, thinking about content and format:
  • On location with good visuals
  • Local or national celebrity
  • A national event or celebration
  • Some policies are newsworthy just in themselves usually because they are controversial

• Quotes need to be both
  • Pithy, interesting, etc.
  • On message

• Learn from experience – monitor the media
Increase legitimacy and build momentum by referring to...

- The most localized stories and data available
- Community Health Assessments and Community Health Improvement Plans
- Strategic plans of specific health issues
- Reports on health data
- Reports on health policies (policy maps)
- National campaigns
As public health folks, we need to make sure that we...

• Spend more time talking about the policy solution than the problem
• Don’t use too many numbers or statistics
• Understand and honor the implications of the policy in addition to the impact on health, such as economics, politics, etc.
Activity G: Policy Communication Practice

- Groups of three that don’t include another member of your team
- Everybody gets a chance to play each role
  - Presenter: present the case that will encourage the listener to support the policy
  - Listener: listen to presenter and ask clarifying questions
  - Observer: serve as timekeeper and make notes on the more powerful parts of the presentation
- Decide for your group if the listener is playing the role of a policy maker or stakeholder, and if they lean towards being a supporter or an opponent
- About 5-7 minutes for the presentation and 5-7 minutes for feedback and discussion, then switch roles