

HEALTHY COMMUNITIES Tool Kit



How You Can Work Toward Creating Healthy Communities



A Policy Guide for Public Health Practitioners and Their Partners

CHAPTER 6

WORKING WITH THE MEDIA

In this chapter you'll find some practical information and ideas that focus on the importance of the media. The media can reach many people with a powerful message about the importance of healthy communities and the need for advocacy to change the way in which our communities and transportation systems are designed. Success or failure in advocating for a policy change may well depend on which side does a better job of framing the issue in the media and in the public debate. If public health advocates succeed in framing the issue as a public health problem, the policy may well be defeated. In other words, present the issue in a way that will be appealing to the public at large, and keep that message in the forefront of the debate.



An important skill for media advocates to develop is the ability to translate research findings and national policy debates into terms that are relevant to local residents. This can be done by using simple, commonsense language, citing concrete local examples and anecdotes, and highlighting the key implications for local policy—the “bottom line.” The ability to frame the issue and use the science as the foundation for the frame is powerful in refuting an opponent’s claim.

Many excellent resources (some listed at the end of this chapter) are available on the very important topics of developing a strategic communications plan, working with the media, and media advocacy. Use this chapter to begin to formulate ideas about what needs to be done to develop strategic approaches to using a variety of media interventions in your community.

HOW DOES WORK WITH THE MEDIA AFFECT POLICY AND ENVIRONMENTAL CHANGE?

Much of this Healthy Communities Tool Kit has been about the use of policy to change physical environments and social norms in order to help promote physical activity, healthy eating, reducing tobacco use, and reducing exposure to secondhand smoke in daily living. Policy change is a long process, and initial efforts that cannot be skipped or skimped include community education to heighten awareness of the issue and grassroots mobilization. Strategic use of the media plays a role in accomplishing this crucial groundwork.

What is covered and how it is covered by the media can influence the way in which individuals think about an issue, which can build community support for a policy initiative. It eventually influences social norms. Success is marked not only by wide discussion of the topic but also by large groups

What is covered in the media not only gets the attention of the public, but also reaches policymakers. Policymakers and opinion leaders regularly rely on the editorial pages to understand the pulse of a community. When using news stories and editorials, advocates can make a more good case by presenting a solution and making a practical policy appealing. Although health-promotion practitioners cannot use federal funds for lobbying (influencing elected officials to enact specific legislation or a specific call to action on a specific piece of legislation), advocates can explain and present evidence for the benefits of the health-promoting policies.

of constituents calling for solutions. Ultimately, strategic use of the media helps to pave the way for smooth implementation and enforcement of Healthy Communities—promoting policies. Only after community support for a policy is assured can a campaign for policy change, which includes media advocacy, be launched.

FIRST THINGS FIRST

It is helpful to think about planning for work with the media in two stages. The first is getting ready. The second stage is more strategic, focused, and tactical. It includes preparing for opposition. Both stages relate to an overall plan for media advocacy in relation to policy change.

Media Advocacy: The strategic use of news media to support community organizing to advance a public-policy initiative.¹

Getting Ready

Just as with decision-makers, you must also target and cultivate relationships with members of the media, both print and broadcast. In addition to knowing who the reporters are for health, get to know who covers transportation, city and county government, the environment, and schools. Develop a list of media contacts. Start building relationships with those people by providing good information about

Saying Thank You: Saying thank you is a hallmark of good manners and it fosters a good impression. When thanking reporters, one must use wisdom. Never send a note of thanks for putting *your* story in the paper or for covering *your* particular organization. Instead, thank the reporter for thorough and fair coverage of a very important topic, as well as unbiased, investigative reporting on an issue.

the issue, or by commenting on stories that have already been done.

Once you establish your credibility, you may find yourself being called on for information. Be ready to respond to the media quickly when asked. The media knock once and require response on a very short deadline. If there is no response within a single news cycle, the opportunity is likely to be lost.

GETTING STRATEGIC

A good strategic plan assesses where the advocate wants to go and how to get there. At its heart, effective strategy is rooted in the following key questions. It will serve you well to work through these questions with your coalition before proceeding to implementation of your advocacy with the media.

Nine Key Questions to Consider in Developing an Advocacy Strategy²

(see page 60 for worksheet)

Looking Outward

1. What do we want? (OBJECTIVES)

Any advocacy effort must begin with a sense of its goals and clearly defined policy objectives. These goals have important distinctions. What are the content goals (e.g., the specific policy objectives) and what are the process goals (e.g., building community among participants)? These goals need to be defined at the start in a way that can launch an effort, draw people to it, and sustain it over time.

2. Who can give it to us? (AUDIENCE)

Who are the people and institutions that you need to move? They include those who have the formal authority to deliver the goods (i.e., legislators). They also include those who have the capacity to influence those with formal authority (i.e., the media and key constituencies, both allied and opposed). In both cases, an effective advocacy effort requires a clear sense of who these audiences are and what access or pressure points are available to move them.

3. What do they need to hear? (MESSAGE)

Reaching these different audiences requires crafting and framing a persuasive set of messages. While these messages must be tailored for different audiences, depending on what they are ready to hear, the messages themselves must be consistent. In most cases, advocacy messages will have two basic components: an appeal to what is right and an appeal to the audience's self-interest.

Message development should be directly informed by the strategic plan. Develop hard-hitting, clear messages to tell the story of why healthy communities are important. The media require simple, short, and straightforward explanations. Pick two or three main points and make them repeatedly.

4. From whom do they need to hear it? (MESSENGERS)

The same message can have very different impacts, depending on who communicates it. Who are the most credible messengers for different audiences? In some cases, these messengers are "experts" whose credibility is largely technical. In other cases, we need to engage the "authentic voices" who can speak from personal experience.

Speaking effectively to members of the media and to the public requires preparation, coaching, and practice. Identify and adequately train members of your coalition to serve as spokespersons who are able to comfortably deliver consistent and science-based information.

5. How can we get them to hear? (DELIVERY)

There is a wide continuum of ways to deliver an advocacy message. These range from the genteel (e.g., lobbying) to the in-your-face (e.g., direct action). Which means is the most effective varies from situation to situation. The key is to evaluate the situation in light of delivery methods and apply them appropriately, weaving them together in a winning mix.

Looking Inward

6. What have we got? (RESOURCES)

An effective advocacy effort takes careful stock of the advocacy resources that are already there to be built on. These include past advocacy work that is related, alliances already in place, the capacity of staff and other people, information, and political intelligence. In short, you don't start from scratch; you start building on what you have.

7. What do we need to develop? (GAPS)

After taking stock of the advocacy resources you have, the next step is to identify the advocacy resources you need that aren't there yet. This means looking at alliances that need to be built, and capacities such as outreach, media, and research, which are crucial to any effort. Be realistic about the level of resources needed—your strength and the strength of the opposition.

8. How do we begin? (FIRST EFFORTS)

What would be an effective way to begin to move the strategy forward? What are some potential short-term goals or projects that would bring the right people together, symbolize

the larger work ahead, and create something achievable that lays the groundwork for the next step? Create awareness of the issues prior to advocacy. Get on the radar screen.

9. How do we tell whether it is working? (EVALUATION)

As with any long journey, the course needs to be checked along the way. Strategy must be evaluated, revisiting each of the questions above (e.g., are we aiming at the right audiences? Are we reaching them?). It is important to be able to make midcourse corrections and to discard those elements of a strategy that don't work once they are actually put into practice.

Being ready and effective requires having a strategic plan in place with specific policy objectives. Once your coalition has answered the above questions, you can move on to more focused and tactical strategies for pursuing the media.

Proactively, you want to get coverage of the issues and the need for healthy communities, using the media to promote your policy recommendations. Keep in mind, though, that advocacy always produces a response. Policy advocates must anticipate a negative response—be prepared to endure opposition and have a crisis-communication plan in place.

CRISIS COMMUNICATIONS—A PLAN FOR DAMAGE CONTROL

Time is of the essence. A coalition can be prepared to respond quickly by:

- Predicting what hard-to-answer questions may come up.
- Formulating concise answers.
- Formulating strategies for transitioning from the crisis-response mode to proactively delivering the main message about healthy communities and the facts of the public health crisis that are due to physical inactivity, unhealthy eating, tobacco use and exposure to secondhand smoke.

CAUTION:

Sometimes advocates need to anticipate and prepare not only for challenges to their message, but also for attacks on their credibility. Anticipating and preparing for this will allow a coalition to respond with integrity and composure.

JUST FOR FUN—OPPOSITION ACROMYMS

NIMBY	Not in my back yard
NIMFYE	Not in my front yard either
PITBY	Put it in their back yard
NIMEY	Not in my election year
LULU	Locally undesirable land use
NOPE	Not on planet Earth
CAVE	Citizens against virtually everything
BANANA	Build absolutely nothing anywher near anything

Healthy-community efforts may be opposed for a variety of reasons. Consider:

- Subdivision developers who do not want the added expense of pedestrian-friendly amenities.
- Legislators who prefer that all transportation dollars go toward more and wider roads rather than multimodal transportation options.
- Residents who believe that sidewalks in front of or trails in the back of their homes might increase undesirable foot traffic.
- Parents who are concerned that walking to school is unsafe.
- Adults who want the ability to eat what they want when they want and not to be inundated with “healthy” while doing so.
- Developers who want to use farmland for their proposed subdivisions.
- Concern that “locally grown fresh fruits and vegetables” equates to higher prices, less variety, and less “pretty” produce.
- Adult smokers who do not want to be told what to do in regard to smoking, and want to be able to smoke when and where they want.

Politics among local officials and decision makers can play a significant role in tobacco-related policy and environmental change. Therefore, it is important to get to know local officials and decision-makers, become knowledgeable about political issues, and develop strategies on how to address these issues and increase awareness among local decision-makers that changing tobacco-related policy is a health issue rather than a political issue.

TIMING IS EVERYTHING

Policy change and working with the media requires a flexible strategy and the ability to respond rapidly to opportunity. If national data are going to be released regarding physical-activity guidelines, obesity rates, or safe streets, it is critical that the local healthy-community coalition address the issue immediately, telling people why it is important and what they can do about it. If there is an important groundbreaking ceremony happening, an election coming up, or a national event such as National Bike to Work Week or National Public Health Week or a statewide event such as Smart Commute Week, take advantage of these opportunities to start local dialogue on commuter routes for cyclists or safe routes to school.

Of course, an opportunity may not arise exactly when you are ready for it. In that case, you may have to get creative and bring the issue and the dialogue into the forefront yourself.

Nine Key Questions to Consider in Developing an Advocacy Strategy Worksheet

Objectives	
Audience	
Message	
Messengers	
Delivery	
Resources	
Gaps	
First Efforts	
Evaluation	

1 Wallack, L.M., Woodruff, K., Dorfman, L., and Diaz, I. News for Change: *An Advocate's Guide to Working with the Media*. Sage Publications, 1999

2 Jim Shultz, director, Democracy Center (Advocacy Institute West).