Communicating Public Health Information to Policy Makers:

Building Bridges between Public Health and Legislation

In Public Health we understand the vital importance of our work and the major impact that even seemingly minor legislation can make to our communities. However, it’s not always that apparent to our busy legislators. It’s the method of delivery and precision of the information we provide to legislators that ultimately determines our effectiveness. Here are a few tips to creating and fostering an effective relationship with your legislators.

Purpose, Audience, and Message:

What is my purpose? Am I informing or persuading? If you’re answering a request from a policy maker, or just providing basic information, keep it simple and to the point. If you’re trying to persuade, which in most cases is our purpose, the presentation must have a slightly different makeup. Make sure your presentation is concise, focused and covering only one topic. Your points should be firm and based on evidence that can be supported from other sources.

Who is my audience? If you’re dealing with an audience that’s familiar with medical terminology and Public Health procedure the delivery should be geared with less side explanations. If you are not sure or the audience is more of a general audience you need to avoid the medical terminology and use general terms.

What is the message I want my audience to walk away with? State your main message and point at least twice in your presentation or letter, near the beginning and near the end. Leave your audience with no doubt as to why you made the presentation.

Tips for Face-to-Face Meetings or Oral Presentations with Elected Officials:

- **Make an appointment:** Elected Officials are going to be busy. Make sure to arrive early and leave ample time in your schedule in case they run late. Being willing to work with their schedule can be a bonus.
- **Go with a specific purpose and be prepared:** Rehearse your presentation and facts in case you have to be quick.
- **Be brief and cover only one or two topics:** Don’t try to cover too many topics. Your real message could be lost in translation. Keep it short, sweet and to the point.
- **Have a few pieces of key data at your fingertips that support your position:** Facts are what make your position believable and supportable. Have a quick fact sheet ready as a reference for you or to leave behind as a reference for them.
- **Provide an illustration of the program or policy impact:** Our brains are better able to process and remember information if we both see it and hear it.
- **Know precisely what you want your elected official to do:** Be very specific, state what action you need near the beginning and near the end.
Suggestions for Composing a Letter to an Elected Official:

- **Anticipate questions so that your answers are well-thought out:** Be able to answer the who, what, where, when, why and hows.
- **Provide written data or fact sheet:** If someone has to call you to get the information again, they might think it’s not worth the trouble.
- **Be cordial and always thank the official for his/her time:** You are asking them to do something for you, even if it’s for the public, show them you appreciate their help.
- **Follow-up with a brief note later:** Not only is it polite, it’s a great reminder.

- **Do not use a form letter:** Illustrate your passion for your cause.
- **Cover only one topic or issue:** Be specific and to the point. If your letter is the only reference sheet this official will have to decide to support your cause or not you don’t want your point to be buried beneath too many topics.
- **State the purpose at the onset:** Make those first few words have an impact. It may decide if they finish reading the letter.
- **When possible, provide cost impacts:** Most legislation has a price tag for implementation... but the effects of not taking action can be even more costly.
- **Identify yourself and your organization:** Make it beyond obvious who you are and who you represent.
- **Enclose applicable editorials, data fact sheets or position papers:** Let them know there are hard facts out there, from other sources. It’s not just you.

- **Ask your policy maker for a response:** This leaves the ball in their court to make the next step.
- **If applicable, provide a courtesy copy to your organization:** If you are representing your organization, they need to know you’ve put their name out there.
- **Thank your policy maker for his/her cooperation:** Let them know their support is valuable.
- **When applicable, describe legislation by its bill number:** This makes it easier to reference at a later date.
- **Be polite/give reasons for support:** They need a reason to invest.
- **Include recipient’s name and address on both envelope and letter:** Take an extra step to ensure the letter gets to the intended person.
- **Write legibly or type:** Even if this is someone can’t support it.
- **Send a note of appreciation if and when the issue is supported:** They did you a favor, make sure they know you’re not forgetting that.

You want what’s best for your community, so be prepared, professional and ready to act as a strong resource. Become that expert Legislators can rely on.


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