

General Strategies for Encouraging Policy Change

Below is a list of general strategies for working with communities or organizations (at any level of policy readiness) to encourage healthy policy change.

1. Develop Organizational Knowledge and Support

- It is important to develop internal knowledge about the proposed policy (e.g., benefits of the proposed policy and potential sources of opposition) and gain buy-in from colleagues who represent your organization publicly prior to moving an issue forward externally.
- Efforts to engage external community members and decision-makers can be unintentionally undermined if public messaging from internal organizational representatives and supporters is not consistent.

2. Understand the Social, Political & Economic Context

- Develop a broad understanding of the community or organization that you are working with.
 - » Find answers to questions like: What key issues are impacting the community or organization? Who makes up the executive committee and what are their priorities?
- Be aware of the social, political and economic issues that are most pressing to the constituents within your target group.
 - » Local newspapers, council sessions, committee meetings and annual reports from local community agencies can provide valuable insight into the perceived needs and priorities of the community.
- Understand the context in which your target community or organization operates.
 - » This will help you identify stakeholders that share a common interest in an issue and possible champions for moving the proposed policy forward.
 - » It will also assist you in identifying potential sensitivities and anticipating possible barriers to policy action.

3. Watch Closely for Open Policy Windows

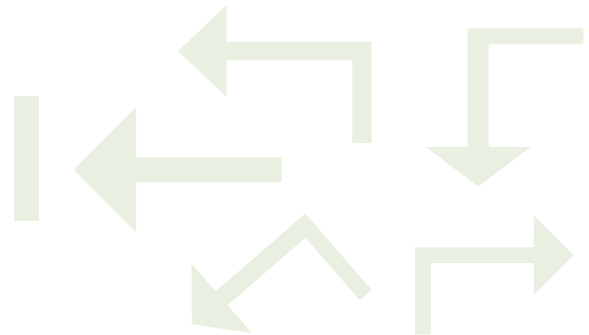
- Determine when the timing is right to move an issue forward. To build support for your issue, be prepared to act on open 'policy windows' and critical events that reflect favourably upon your issue.
 - » A policy window is a unique opportunity to take action on an issue and build support for policy change. They occur infrequently and do not stay open for long periods of time. For this reason, advocates and policy developers must learn to recognize and take advantage of open policy windows.¹

Potential reasons why policy windows open:

Administrative changes, change in decision-maker ideology, a shift in public opinion, the emergence of a new problem or the onset of a crisis or focusing event.

Potential reasons why policy windows close:

A feasible solution to the problem is found, a shift in priorities or attention takes place, a change in personnel, or a failure to find a feasible solution in an adequate amount of time.¹



1. Kingdon, J.W. (1984). *Agendas, Alternatives, and Public Policies*. New York, NY: Harper Collins.

4. Frame the Issue in a Context that is Meaningful and in Terms of the Immediate and Long-Term Benefits of the Policy

- Frame the proposed policy in a way that reflects your understanding of the community or organization and its priorities. Framing involves carefully defining your goals and strategically tailoring your message to your target audience.²
 - » For example, if you are trying to pass a smoke-free parks bylaw and your community or organization is in the process of developing an environmental action plan, highlight how your proposed policy will support the policy directions of the environmental action plan (e.g., decrease in litter from cigarette butts).
- Position the policy based on its future health benefits, but also illustrate to decision-makers the immediate pay-offs that may result from policy adoption.
 - » For example, a smoke-free bylaw in city parks not only protects the health of children, but also decreases park maintenance and contributes to urban beautification.

5. Take Advantage of Changes in Leadership

- An election campaign is an ideal time to develop relationships with candidates and generate support for proposed policies. Do your best to connect with every candidate, even those who may not be on the radar for elected office. After the election, keep successful candidates accountable for their pre-election promises.

For an example of how to incorporate leadership changes into your policy advocacy strategy, see **Alberta Policy Coalition for Chronic Disease Prevention's³ Healthy Schools Now Survey** (available at: www.abpolicycoalitionforprevention.ca/component/content/article/48-press-room/75-oct14-10-release.html).

6. Keep your Message Clear and Simple by Using Three to Five Key Messages

- Use plain language, simple examples and anecdotes to create messages that people can relate to.
- Remember that “one size fits all” is not always the best way to go about your advocacy campaign, so tailor your messages to fit the different priorities, interests and backgrounds of the groups and individuals that you are seeking to engage.

7. Show Constituent Support for an Issue and Illustrate Benefits to the Community

- Highlight how the proposed policy will make the community a better place for constituents to live. Include the community in this process and encourage members to get involved.
- Elected officials pay close attention to the needs of their constituents and whether or not there is a high level of support for a proposed policy within their riding. For this reason, it is important to use a variety of tactics to illustrate public support for the proposed policy or related issue. Examples include opinion polls, surveys, letter and phone call campaigns, letters to the editor, writing news articles and blog posts, and the use of media and social media.

8. Build Partnerships within Communities

- Building community partnerships can take time. Begin by developing relationships with a variety of community stakeholders (e.g., community members, organizations and decision-makers).
- Provide community members with opportunities to get involved in the process of generating support for the policy.

For additional resources on community building, see **The Citizen's Handbook**, an online resource created by the Vancouver Citizen's Committee (available at: www.vcn.bc.ca/citizens-handbook/), or visit **Tamarack Institute for Community Engagement** (available at: www.tamarackcommunity.ca).

2. Center for Disease Control and Prevention. (n.d.). Chapter Nine: Media Advocacy. In *Designing and Implementing an Effective Tobacco Counter-Marketing Campaign*. Retrieved from http://www.cdc.gov/tobacco/stateandcommunity/counter_marketing/manual/pdfs/chapter9.pdf.

3. Previously known as the Alberta Policy Coalition for Cancer Prevention, the name changed to Alberta Policy Coalition for Chronic Disease Prevention on October 1, 2011.

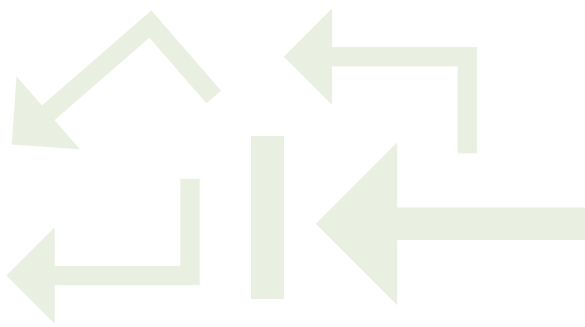
9. Engage “Fence-Sitter” Decision-Makers

- The term “fence-sitter” refers to those decision-makers who flip-flop in their support for an issue or who have not solidified their opinion in regards to a proposed policy. It is important to engage fence-sitters by continually providing them with updates and new information to keep them in the loop and to move them in a positive direction in terms of their support for an issue. Remember to do this in a respectful way.

10. Build Partnerships with Key Stakeholders

- Collaborate with diverse groups and individuals interested in the issue to build a broad base of support for the policy.
 - » Intersectoral collaboration is a strategy that works well with Innovator and Majority communities and organizations.
 - » Intersectoral collaboration refers to the process of working with individuals and organizations from a variety of sectors (e.g., health, education, non-profit, for-profit and government) to reach a goal.

To learn more about intersectoral collaboration, see **Crossing Sectors - Experiences in Intersectoral Action, Public Policy and Health** (available at: www.phac-aspc.gc.ca/publicat/2007/cro-sec/index-eng.php).



For a list of recommended policy resources, please visit <http://policyreadinesstool.com/prt-resources/>.

11. Employ Media Advocacy and Enlist Earned Media

- If used correctly, the media can be a powerful tool for encouraging policy change.
- Media advocacy is the strategic use of the mass media, coupled with other advocacy strategies, to influence public debate and encourage policy change.^{4,5} To make your media advocacy more effective, try to connect the proposed policy to issues and events that are relevant to your target group.
- Earned media involves working deliberately to have your issue covered by the news media, in contrast to paying for media coverage. Examples of earned media include media releases, writing news and magazine articles, organizing staged demonstrations or events, and writing letters to the editor.

12. Use a Range of Communication Channels and Tools

- In-person meetings, phone-calls, emails, letters, the development of websites, mass media and social media can all be used to engage decision-makers and the public.
- When using these different communication channels and tools, it is important to tailor them to the adopter type that you are working with.
 - » For example, while social media might be a good tool for Innovators, it may not be an effective way to connect with Late Adopters who tend to be more traditional.

13. Raise the Profile of Innovators and Celebrate Successes

- It is important to demonstrate positive policy outcomes, such as health benefits or economic return on investments, that have resulted for others that have successfully implemented the policy. This helps to illustrate to potential policy adopters what is possible in their own community or organization.

4. The Advocacy Institute. (1998). *Blowing Away the Smoke: A Series of Advanced Media Advocacy Advisories for Tobacco Control Advocates*. Revised series September 1998. Washington, DC: The Advocacy Institute.

5. Wallack L, and Dorfman, L. (1996). Media Advocacy: A Strategy for Advancing Policy and Promoting Health. *Health Education Quarterly*, 23 (3), 293-317.