Media Advocacy, Coalitions and the Role of Public Health

Introduction

Healthy public policies are well recognized as a key strategy for creating supportive physical and social environments, as described in the Ottawa Charter for Health Promotion and other health promotion policy statements (World Health Organization, 1986). The Ontario Public Health Standards and accompanying guidance documents also specify the important role that Ontario public health departments play in helping to achieve healthy public policy (Government of Ontario, 2008). This role involves working with and building the capacity of community coalitions to engage the media and inform and influence decision-makers to make necessary policy changes. Coalitions are able to achieve a broad range of goals that extend beyond the reach of the local public health unit, thereby enhancing public health’s capacity to improve public health outcomes.

What is a Coalition?

A coalition is “…a diverse group of individuals and organizations who work together to reach a common goal” (University of Kansas, nd). Coalitions typically consist of a variety of stakeholders including public health practitioners, community members and opinion leaders, members of non-profit organizations and other groups and individuals that act as champions for an issue or cause.

Public health professionals often participate within coalitions, although they may describe such groups by other names such as working groups, alliances, associations, committees and partnerships. Regardless of how groups define themselves, when groups engage in a collaborative process that includes engaging the news media to bring issues to life, shifting public and decision-makers attitudes around an issue or promoting the adoption of healthy public policy, they are in essence functioning as a coalition.

Why Coalitions are Important

The problems that communities face are complex and require comprehensive, sustainable solutions (Cohen, Baer and Satterwhite, 2002.). Coalitions can provide a structure for a sustained long-term focus to an issue which is needed to change public attitudes and achieve policy goals.

Coalitions have played a critical role in reducing smoking rates in the U.S. According to the CDC, “Tobacco control coalitions’ efforts over the past 40 years have strengthened the national movement toward tobacco use social norm change.” (CDC, 2007).

Drawing on the work of colleagues, Butterfoss et al. (1993, p. 317) outlines a variety of other ways coalitions are important. Coalitions help:

- Enable organizations to become involved in new and broader issues without having the sole responsibility for managing or developing those issues (Black, 1983)
- Demonstrate and develop widespread public support for issues, actions or unmet needs
• Increase the ‘critical mass’ behind a community effort beyond the scope of any one individual or organization (Brown, 1984)
• Mobilize and leverage a diverse range of talents, resources, and approaches
• Minimize duplication of effort and services, thereby improving trust and communication among groups that might otherwise compete with one another (Brown, 1984; Feighery and Rogers, 1989)
• Provide an avenue for recruiting participants from diverse constituencies, such as political, business, human service, social, and religious groups, as well as grassroots groups and individuals (Black, 1983; Feighery and Rogers, 1989)
• Leverage new resources in changing situations (Boissevain, 1974)
• Establish greater credibility because they represent a range of organizations and individuals seeking to make positive social changes

In addition to the above, coalitions provide its members with a strong collaborative voice to challenge industries engaged in practices that negatively impact public health or to bring attention to issues where people are being marginalized in society. As coalitions grow and the community becomes more mobilized and engaged, the strength of the coalition voice grows, along with its clout and credibility.

Public Health’s Involvement with Coalitions

There are many advantages for public health departments to support the work of community coalitions. Most notable is that coalitions can “…lead policy change efforts and campaigns when other partners are limited” (CDC Coalitions Best Practices).

In many ways public health professionals may be limited in their capacity to directly engage in media advocacy and pursue policy change. These could include:

• Lack of resources (human and otherwise);
• Perceived risks and limited management support;
• Limited internal communications support due to competing priorities;
• Bureaucratic structures which restrict timely responses to issues and trends; and
• Unclear roles and responsibilities as they relate to media advocacy and coalition engagement.

Despite the real or perceived limitations, public health professionals can provide valuable support to coalitions without needing to play a direct role in the advocacy effort. This capacity building role involves sharing information, knowledge and skill building opportunities with the group. This role could also consist of assisting the coalition to advance an issue through a well-planned media advocacy strategy that is informed by community needs and the public health evidence.

Some additional ways public health practitioners can support the work of coalitions include:
• Providing information including access to local public health data; (Kuhn, Doucet and Edwards, 1999.)

• Offering research evidence on effective health promotion strategies and policy options; (Kuhn, Doucet and Edwards, 1999.)

• Assisting members in adapting programs to diverse target groups; (Kuhn, Doucet and Edwards, 1999.)

• Helping shape research questions to inform and encourage policy debates; (Kuhn, Doucet and Edwards, 1999.)

• Providing conflict resolution and decision-making skills; (Kuhn, Doucet and Edwards, 1999.)

• Helping coalition members monitor and understand how the issue is being covered in the media;

• Facilitating access to training opportunities, including media relations and interviewing skills training, etc.; and

• Being available to serve as a public health expert for media interviews.

Coalitions can help public health staff mobilize communities, advocate for policies, and shift social norms beyond what they can accomplish on their own. This is especially critical when facing large and powerful opponents such as the tobacco industry (CPHA, 2009).

How to Develop a Coalition

1. The key to building a strong coalition is to bring a core group of individuals and organizations together that are passionate about an issue or cause. For public health practitioners looking to inspire the formation of a coalition, the best place to start is with the people you know or work with directly in the community.

2. Contact people in other agencies and institutions who are most likely affected by the issue and then move to sourcing out other key influencers in the community.

   • These individuals could be local politicians, business leaders, influential citizens or others who are highly connected. The goal is to attract those with clout and the broadest reach to help mobilize the community and enact policy change. Sourcing a champion within city council is often a critical piece of the puzzle for advancing local by-laws and policy.

3. Develop “…the vision, mission, and core values statements.” (CDC Coalitions Best Practices).

   • These three statements create the foundation on which all coalition activities will originate (CDC Coalitions Best Practices). For more information and details on how to establish these statements along with outlining a coalition’s formal structure see the CDC Best

4. Conduct a situational assessment about the issue to understand how prevalent the problem is, and to consider what some of its roots causes may be. The community’s understanding of the issue, and that of key decision-makers can also be assessed as part of this process.

5. Create a detailed policy and media advocacy plan. Any comprehensive media advocacy plan includes aspects such as a group’s goals, objectives, target audiences, key message and the tactics that will be employed to bring about the social change desired.

Conclusion

Well organized coalitions have the power to mobilize communities and produce population-based change. Through the effective use of media advocacy principles and practices, a coalition can ensure that the community voice is heard and that an issue remains an important part of the public agenda with sustained emphasis over time. Coalitions play an important role in the environmental change process and are part of a complete public health strategy that includes coalition building, community organizing, policy advocacy – and media advocacy. (Wallack & Dorfman, 1996).

If you would like to learn more about how PTCC can assist you, or if you would like to schedule a one-on-one consultation with a member of the Media Network team, visit - http://www.ptcc-cfc.on.ca/media_network/about/

References


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http://www.cdc.gov/tobacco/stateandcommunity/bp_user_guide/pdfs/user_guide.pdf


KU Work Group for Community Health and Development. (nd). Chapter 5, Section 5: Coalition Building I: Starting a Coalition. Rabinowitz, P: University of Kansas. Retrieved from the Community Tool Box:  
http://ctb.ku.edu/en/tablecontents/sub_section_main_1057.aspx


http://www.who.int/hpr/NPH/docs/ottawa_charter_hp.pdf

Resources


Center for Civic Partnerships. Media Advocacy. Available at:  
http://www.civicpartnerships.org/docs/tools_resources/media_advocacy.htm

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Best Practices for Comprehensive Tobacco Control Programs User Guide: Coalitions - State and Community Interventions. Available at:  
http://www.cdc.gov/tobacco/stateandcommunity/bp_user_guide/pdfs/user_guide.pdf

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Designing and Implementing an Effective Tobacco Counter-Marketing Campaign. Full document available at:  

Chapter 9: Media Advocacy. Available at:  

International Women's Health Coalition. Media Advocacy Toolkit (and guide: Doing Media Advocacy). Available at:  
http://www.iwhc.org/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=3670&Itemid=1292

Michigan Coalition Against Domestic and Sexual Violence. Working with the Media: A Toolkit for Service Providers. Available at:  
http://www.mcadsv.org/resources/files/providers/Advocates.pdf


http://books.google.com/books?id=UE6Fy3ZETqO&pg=PA359&lpg=PA359&dq=cherie+brown+checklist &source=bl&ots=hP0RJKFzXK&sig=sdQRc_8bANF1rgQa2WPPvzPaPeQ&hl=en&ei=OsaXT1LwYbf0OH g9Mmu8A&sa=X&oi=book_result&ct=result&resnum=1&ved=0CBoQ6AEwAA#v=onepage&q=cherie%20 brown%20checklist&f=false

Ontario Public Health Association. Index of public health resources by topic or issue. Available at:  
http://www.opha.on.ca/resources/topics/a.shtml


Tobacco Technical Assistance Consortium. Policy Advocacy. Available at:  
http://learningcenter.ttac.org/learning/comp02/02_comp.asp

Tobacco Technical Assistance Consortium. Watch Me: Clean Air Policy Change Prep. Available at:  
http://learningcenter.ttac.org/learning/comp02/02E_WM001.asp#

http://preventioninstitute.org/component/library/article/id-104/127.html