Chapter 1

A Primer on Influencing Policy Decisions

The Guiding Principle of the Healthy Communities Tool Kit

Using policy to change physical environments and social norms is a powerful approach. Policy-change work is not something to be attempted alone. In large part, success in achieving policy change will result from efforts to educate and mobilize a community. Decision-makers must be convinced that the public perceives a proposed policy to be in the best interest of the community as a whole. This is the guiding principle and critical foundation for this entire Healthy Communities Tool Kit. While you may be taking the lead in figuring out how to create active communities, ultimately the community must be the one backing the healthy community agenda.

Policy and Environmental Change Interventions

Policies include laws, regulations, and rules (both formal and informal).

Examples:

- Establish a plan (e.g., master plan, downtown plan, bicycle and pedestrian plan) that accommodates pedestrians and bicycles (see Chapter 4), community gardens, and farmers’ markets (see Chapter 2).
- Approve local policies that are consistent with the established plans.
- Appoint a health-promotion or bike/pedestrian advocate to a policymaking board (e.g., planning board, transportation advisory committee).
- Establish a policy to dedicate a portion of locally controlled funds for bike/pedestrian facilities and/or community gardens on a regular basis (e.g., federal urban area direct allocation funds, municipal funds).
- Create a subdivision ordinance to accommodate pedestrians, bicycles or other physical activity (e.g., sidewalk, green-space set-aside, acreage for recreation).
- Update zoning ordinances, building codes, and approval processes to encourage compact community design, utilization of sidewalks, and a tighter mixture of activities that make it possible to go to work, shop for fruits and vegetables, and go to school within a reasonable walking distance from residences.
- Adopt and implement smoke-free policies for parks and other recreational areas.

Environmental Interventions include changes to economic, social, or physical environments.

Examples:

- Walking trails at schools, worksites, and parks.
- Community and school gardens.
- Sidewalk projects (including construction, maintenance, improvement, or widening).
- Pedestrian-safety provisions (e.g., pedestrian signals, crosswalks, or curb ramps).
- Farmers’ markets featuring locally grown produce, year-round if possible.
- Bicycle facilities (e.g., bike lanes, wide shoulders, bike racks, or outside lanes).
- New smoke-free walking, hiking, and biking trails with smoke-free signage.
- Street trees and public art to make walks more beautiful, comfortable, and interesting.
- Improved street lighting and surveillance for security.
WORKING WITH ELECTED OFFICIALS AND DECISION-MAKERS...WHERE IN THE WORLD DO YOU BEGIN?
To get started, we’ll discuss these topics:

- The “science” involved with politics.
- **Key relationships:** how to develop, nourish, and maintain them.
- **Lobbying v. advocacy:** knowing the difference and the best approaches to achieve your goals.

The Necessary Groundwork

**The “Science” in Political Science**
Working with elected officials is a lot easier than you might think—once you know the basics, you will be surprised at what you can accomplish. The “science” in political science is as basic as understanding relationships, understanding the decision-making process, and recognizing that, as hard as you try, you just can’t take the politics out of politics. The dictionary definition of “politics” is “the total complex of relations between people living in society.” It really is about relationships, and it is all political!

**POLITICS: “the total complex of relations between people living in society”**

**Who Makes Decisions in Your Community?**
Do you know who has the authority over transportation plans, land-use policies, and school-site selection in your community or region? If you don’t, investigate. Pick up the phone, use the Internet, or ask a friend. Do what it takes to develop a list of decision-makers, with contact information and their respective areas of influence. Be a real sleuth and look up their voting records! The method of investigation will differ depending on the individual; what is important is that you begin to understand who and what you’re working with to begin making change (see the worksheets in Chapter 3). Investigate and understand what is important to them. Is it schools, transportation, the economy? To convince decision-makers of what’s important to you, you must also understand and know what is important to them.

**Finding the Decision Makers**
Most municipalities and townships have a website. Check it first for information on elected officials, boards, and ordinances. If the township does not have an up-to-date website, visit your local library and ask the reference specialist to assist in the review of local papers and Web searches on local officials.

**When and How Are the Decisions Made?**
Once you know who the decision-makers are in the community, find out more by attending board or committee meetings. Watch and learn how decisions are made in your community. Observing behaviors, voting patterns, issues, and community reactions to issues by just sitting in on these meetings moves you from a majority to a minority category. Most residents rarely attend these meetings—only a handful of citizens take the time to become educated about issues. You can then become a resource to the community when the time comes to advocate for a healthy-community-related issue.
Be Informed

The Print Media
By subscribing to your local paper and reading it, you can learn a great deal about what is going on with local issues and how your local elected officials are responding to those issues. The editorial page is especially helpful in determining the climate of public support and decision-maker response. If you are up to date on what is appearing in print, you may be able to anticipate and answer related questions from your elected officials or decision-makers who come to rely on your opinion.

Public Information
In addition to reading the paper, it is also helpful to request meeting agendas and minutes. In Michigan, as in most other states, the law requires most public meetings and records to be open to the public. Consequently, agendas and minutes are available for public review and may be posted on a website. By requesting, and reading them, you are educating yourself.

Developing Key Relationships
Decision-makers and elected officials: who and where are they? They are our neighbors, businesspeople, teachers, entrepreneurs, and parents. Policymakers want to do the right thing for public health, but sometimes it must be explained and promoted to them by their constituents. They rely on trusted friends and colleagues for their information and guidance. Remember that they:

• appreciate information from reliable sources;
• have special interests and projects that may not coincide with yours;
• appreciate having and maintaining a good reputation; and
• are responsive to pressure from their constituents.

Public health professionals and health educators: who and where are we? We are neighbors, parents, and key volunteers trying to create a more active community. Many of us are employees of state/local governments or healthcare systems. We are trying to do a good job and the right thing for the communities we live in. We rely on trusted friends and colleagues for information and guidance. We appreciate reliable information, and we rely on data! We also have special interests (e.g., obesity, heart disease) and projects (e.g., active communities, fruits and vegetables, increasing smoke-free environments and services to help community members quit smoking) that may not coincide with those of decision makers. We value a good reputation. And most importantly, we are the constituents!

Nourishing and Maintaining Relationships
Successful Communication: Let's consider how we communicate. Public health professionals know quite a bit about public health issues, obesity rates, cardiovascular disease risk factors, and even the physical activity levels of persons of different races, ages, and genders. We are very comfortable talking about these issues, and we often use a lot of jargon. Remember that elected officials may not be familiar with our terms and that, instead of winning them over, you may be turning them off when you rely too heavily on public health lingo.

Overwhelmed by the thought of attending endless meetings or reading confusing minutes? Cultivate trusted partners who will let you know when an important meeting is going to take place or of key minutes that need to be read. These partners should also be able to help you identify which decision makers you need to know and which ones are better left alone.
For example:  Which one do you think is going to get a conversation going with your neighbor?

**Public Health Language:** “The built environment of our neighborhood really contributes to the decreased physical activity levels of our children.”

**Layperson Language:** “The speed of cars traveling through our neighborhood concerns me. My son has to play primarily in the backyard and I have to drive him to his friend’s house, even if it’s right down the street. How can we get sidewalks or a neighborhood playground/park?”

Take time to listen to yourself. Ask someone who knows you well—your spouse, grown child, or close friend—if you are guilty of overusing jargon.

Elected officials are people just like you. Typically, they are not experts in the public health field. If they are not informed, they will make uninformed decisions. The key is to seize the opportunity to educate them, starting with what they know and continuing until they express an understanding! Think about it this way: you are providing valuable information about what is important to their constituents. Just remember to use jargon sparingly and speak in terms they will understand.

**Ask, Listen, and Respond:** The fun part is cultivating a relationship with elected officials or decision-makers. In addition to remembering how we communicate, keep in mind three key components to a good relationship: ask, listen, and respond.

**ASK.** Once you identify the decision-maker with whom you want a relationship, your first step is to call that person for a meeting (see Chapter 3 for useful worksheets that will help you in recording how best to reach him or her and other important contact information). Once you connect with your target decision-maker, ask questions about him or her, about his or her elected position or appointed office, or about policy. He or she will usually give you the answers, but only if you ask. It’s also important to ask if you can help the person achieve his or her goals; ask for suggestions on how to achieve yours. If you have difficulty getting through to your decision-maker, begin working with that person’s staff.

**LISTEN.** Once you ask, you must listen. Listen not only to what is said but to how it is being said. Listen to what an official says at public meetings. Listen for the depth of feeling that is expressed. How emotionally charged is an official on a particular issue? That revealed passion will help you to determine whether you may be able to make a difference in his or her perception of an issue. If it seems as if the staff or the decision-maker is not giving you direct answers, you still may be getting some important information that could help shape your strategy.

*Listen to the community, listen to support staff, and, most importantly, listen for opportunities. Action planning is very important and provides parameters for our work, but listening for opportunities and then responding in a timely manner is often key to achieving your goal of a more active community.*

**RESPOND.** Once you have asked the questions and listened to the responses, you can begin to formulate a strategy for policy change. Respond to decision-makers by positioning yourself as a resource. If they have commented that they are not well versed in public health issues, bike lanes, community gardens, or master plans that incorporate bike and pedestrian facilities or fruits and vegetables, respond by becoming their resource. Remember, always say “thank you.” Politeness goes a long way in relationship-building. Finally, always follow up on something you have promised to do.

**Recipe for Success**
When working with elected officials, it takes a little bit of strategy, a lot of people skills, and effective communication. The strategy is to start at their knowledge level. To do that, first find out more about who they are.
Chapter 1

Lobbying v. Advocacy

Lobbying and advocating are positive strategies and can make changes occur, so be sure to know the difference between the two. The two main parameters to be aware of at all times are (1) what you are saying to an elected official, a political appointee, or his or her staff persons, and (2) when you say it.

Lobbying

Proactive communication with elected officials, appointees, or their staff that makes a specific reference to a piece of legislation or legislative proposal that has been introduced before a legislative body (federal, state, or local).2

Meetings

Once a relationship begins with a key person and meetings are starting to happen, these are important points to remember:

1. Small groups (two to five people) are better than large groups when holding meetings. Going alone works, but to build organizational or coalition capacity, it helps to bring along potential leaders.

2. If a small group will be present at a meeting, work out details in advance. Appoint a spokesperson and a person to listen and observe. Be specific about what you want to achieve; do not wait to be asked what you want the participants to do. Be clear on the difference between lobbying and advocacy (below).

3. Know the subject matter. Elected officials or decision makers are looking to you to educate them on an issue; seize the opportunity to do so.

4. Always leave a concise handout (no more than one page). On the handout, make two or three points in big print, leave lots of space, and be careful not to make a statement that hints at lobbying—unless you called your meeting as a citizen, rather than as a public health professional.

5. Say “thank you”! The value of this common courtesy cannot be overstated. Sending a handwritten note is best.

6. Invite the decision-maker to your events and activities! If he or she is unable to attend, send news clippings or a written summary of what happened.

7. Finally, part of maintaining and developing a relationship involves ongoing contact. Keep the decision-maker updated on what’s going on in the field. Serve as a resource. Send e-mails of interesting articles related to your goals, as well as theirs. Anticipate and be prepared for questions. And if you make a mistake, correct it immediately.

CAUTION: Be careful in these meetings not to alienate the person you are trying to win over. Avoid an argumentative or negative tone. Always go in seeking consensus and offering solutions. These tactics will go a long way in helping you position yourself as a resource.
Advocacy
Educating decision-makers (elected, appointed, staff persons) about a cause or issue, without making any direct reference to a specific piece of legislation or legislative proposal.  

Four Models of Advocacy
As conveyed by public-policy and political consultant Joel Bradshaw, there are four basic models of advocacy. Public health professionals typically rely on the first: information-based advocacy. We should become more comfortable in using the other three models, especially the relationship-based mode. Let’s briefly explore each one.

• **Information-based advocacy:** This form of advocacy is most effective for noncontroversial issues and relies on persuading a decision maker to act in a certain way by providing information on a topic. The framing of an issue is critical, as is avoiding controversy. Information-based advocacy works best when used in conjunction with other approaches.

• **Coalition-based advocacy:** This method relies on diverse individuals coming together in agreement on tough issues and informing decision-makers of their existence and wishes. Public health professionals have much to contribute to this method, considering our experience with facilitating and building community coalitions. “Health” is a provocative calling card, and many diverse individuals and groups will embrace adding the promotion of health to their agendas. The coalition-based approach can be strong and productive.

• **Relationship-based advocacy:** As the name implies, this approach relies on personal relationships, specifically with key decision makers and their staff. Typically, those who oppose the public health view on controversial issues are relationally better positioned than we are—consider the high-powered lobbyists for the tobacco and soft-drink industries. It would serve us well to strengthen our own relationships with key decision makers. Remember, politics is all about relationships. The power in relationship-based advocacy is a result of longevity and continuity. What that means for you is that you must actively cultivate these relationships, nurture them, and maintain them—even after the key vote on your issue has passed. Seize an opportunity to cultivate a relationship when a decision-maker runs for office, has just been elected to office, or has been appointed to a board or committee. Sometimes newcomers are looking for opportunities and issues to build their political reputation. Become their resources by providing reliable information and informing them of constituents’ wishes.

• **Power-based advocacy:** This form of advocacy is based on the perception of political power and fear of retribution at the ballot box. It can be highly confrontational and is characterized by letter-writing, rallies, and other mass action that attracts media attention and gradually builds pressure on the undecided decision-makers. This approach can be effective only if a strong and diverse coalition exists, grassroots supporters are

**Example: Healthy Communities Challenges.**
Think of some Healthy Communities agenda items: sidewalks in new developments, community gardens, bike facilities, greenways, students walking to school, etc. Although seemingly innocuous and popular topics, they can often be quite controversial. For example, some would frame these issues as government telling developers how to build and property owners how to use their land. Suggesting that spending a portion of highway dollars on better conditions for bicycles so that they can be on the roads with cars will most certainly be met with opposition. Selecting school sites so that kids can actually walk to them is generally more expensive than placing schools on fields outside of town. These can be emotionally loaded, confrontational topics, and unfortunately, information-based advocacy approaches alone have very little success in influencing such decisions.
meticulously organized, information is appropriately utilized, and relationships exist to back it up. Some theorists go so far as to say that the component of mass action cannot be overused when a power struggle is at hand. Use mass action so much that you create a tidal wave of information, emotion, and pressure. For a suggested approach, see Chapter 5.

Advocacy can take on many forms. If the issue is not perceived as controversial, information-based advocacy alone is usually successful. Advocating for a healthy community is likely to have conflicting elements and will need a creative approach such as using more than one model.

This primer provides an overview of policy basics helpful for getting started in the healthy-community arena. It is by no means an exhaustive list of what to do to achieve policy change—your experience, focus, and goals will allow you to customize your approach.


