

Speak up,
Public Health

A communication toolkit for public health practitioners to use to build relationships with policy-makers.



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Introduction

Public health is inherently quiet. When it is working, people don't get sick, food is safe to eat, and injuries are prevented. However, one place where public health shouldn't be quiet is in decision-making circles. Armed with extensive education, experience, training and expertise, public health practitioners are a valuable resource for policy-makers at every level of governance. These policy-makers include legislators, county elected officials and members of local boards of health. Since public health is quiet when it is working, it is our collective responsibility as practitioners to speak on its behalf.

Policy-makers have the scissors to cut the red tape and access the resources public health needs to positively impact the health of the population. By building relationships and working together, public health professionals and elected and appointed officials can effectively protect and improve the health of Iowans. Government health agencies bring subject matter expertise, while policy-makers provide insight into community values and constituent perspectives.

Effective collaboration can only happen when there are open communication channels. Let's be honest though; relationships take time and effort and starting from scratch with people you barely know can be daunting.

This toolkit makes creating an effective communication plan easy and straightforward. The plan is adaptable to community needs and can be supplemented with local materials. It has been said that it takes at least seven connections in seven ways to build relationships. This toolkit provides ideas and materials for those seven connections.

Collectively, as the public health community, we can raise the presence, prominence and knowledge of public health in policy-making circles across Iowa.

Key Messages for the Public Health Community

It's true that public health is dynamic in Iowa. We're a decentralized state and each county provides an array of services; however, when policy-makers are hearing a variety of messages, it is hard for them to understand the function of public health as a whole. Even so, there are a few points on which we can agree and if we all talk about them collectively and cohesively, it will improve the retention of information and the understanding of the public health sector in Iowa.

- 1. Public health identifies healthy solutions for everyone.** Public health strives to improve the health of Iowans regardless of age, social status, race or income. Using data collection and analysis, public health works to understand the health of the entire population. Public health practitioners use this information to develop policies for evidence-based public health interventions to protect people and the communities where they live, learn, work and play. Evaluation of the effectiveness of these interventions continues to ensure maximum impact on health outcomes with limited resources.
- 2. You interact with public health on a daily basis.** Public health is quiet, but that doesn't mean it isn't constantly at work. From water quality to workplace safety to disease prevention, public health reduces anxiety that people would otherwise feel about their health on a daily basis. (Note: Consider using the one-pager in this toolkit titled "A Day as Told by Public Health," for examples of a person's daily interaction with public health interventions).
- 3. Public health focuses on prevention of disease, reducing costly treatment later.** The purpose of public health is to prevent disease through efforts including public health campaigns, disease tracking and promotion of immunizations. The Surgeon General's 2011 National Prevention Strategy Report estimates that increasing prevention up to 90 percent of the recommended levels could save the U.S. \$3.7 billion annually in medical costs.
- 4. While health care focuses on the individual, public health focuses on the community.** Public health is a crucial part of the statewide health conversation as components of the Affordable Care Act mature. Health care and public health complement each other and neither can replace the other. This is an important distinction that policy-makers and elected and appointed officials may not understand.
- 5. Public health provides leadership.** Addressing health in a sustainable way requires a community-wide approach. Local and state public health agencies are positioned to lead those efforts through strategic planning. A strength of public health is the ability to convene and facilitate public and private stakeholders for community improvement conversations.

Key Words

Include the following phrases when talking to policy-makers:

- Public-private partnerships
- Data-driven
- Evidence-based
- The data suggests...
- Flexibility
- Maximizing impact with limited resources
- Population health

Building Relationships with Policy-Makers

Approaching policy-makers can be an intimidating task. It is important to remember that policy-makers are regular people. They are farmers, lawyers, teachers and business owners. Just like yourself, they are public servants and want to do what is best for their community. The goal is to build a **reciprocal** relationship. Ask yourself what you can do for them and how they can support you. As a public health professional, you are a resource for information and expertise. You also may help them build relationships in your area. In return, policy-makers bring an understanding of community values from countless conversations with constituents. They can help with public health messaging.

When talking with an elected or appointed official, keep it light and conversational. Think about how you would explain what you do to your family or friends to keep them interested. Take time to get to know your policy-makers so that you can talk to them about the things that are of interest to them. Remember that relationships don't happen in times of crisis—they take time. Forming relationships before they are needed is crucial. Then, when there is a bill or issue that impacts the health of your community or your agency, your policy-maker will know they can call you.

The following information provides tips on how and when to engage state legislators. It can be adopted to your local elected officials and appointed members of your local boards of health.

Identify Your Legislators

Use this link to the Iowa General Assembly Website to find your legislator and their contact information: www.legis.iowa.gov/legislators/find.

For additional guidance, contact:

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*Guide adapted from the Iowa Public Health Association.

General Tips

- Be careful not to overwhelm legislators with too much or too complicated information. Policy-makers need to know a little bit about a lot of things, but they mostly need to know who to ask when they don't know something. For public health, that's you!
- Demonstrate any impacts of state legislation on your work. Reinforce that what they do in Des Moines matters back in their district.
- Always follow-up the next day with a handwritten note or an e-mail thanking them for their time and interest.
- Prepare succinct talking points. Personalize these with specific examples from your agency's work.

Outside of Session

The best time to contact state legislators is outside of session. This time period is called the Interim. They are back home where they're most comfortable and they'll have more time to talk to you. Try to see them face-to-face at least once during the interim. A friendly coffee meeting or spending a day at your agency are two ways to accomplish this goal.

During Session

During session, in-person meetings with policy-makers are more difficult because they have more constraints on their time. You may be able to catch them at town hall meetings they hold in their districts on weekends. These meetings are usually posted in local newspapers or in their legislative newsletters.

If you do end up going to Des Moines, contact your legislators in advance to let them know you are coming. When they are in session, a legislator's time is at a premium. If they are able to meet in person, you may only have a few minutes of their time. Limit yourself to two or three main points on issues identified as priorities for your agency.

Email is the best way to contact legislators during session.

First Meeting

- Your first contact can be via phone or email.
- Identify yourself and your agency, and why you would like to meet with them.
- Let them know your agency is a resource of community data and public health expertise.
- Ask them to have coffee one-on-one so you can talk to them on a personal level in an informal atmosphere.
- Tell them your story. It will be easy for you to talk about your passion for your work. Get to know them, too, by asking questions. A commonly used acronym for conversation topics is [FORM](#): Family, Occupation, Recreation (hobbies), and Motivation.
- Offer to host them at your agency after your initial meeting.
- If you don't hear back, try again... and again... and again. Remember, the squeaky wheel gets the grease!

Agency Visit

Hosting policy-makers at your agency is not necessary, but can be a good way to help them understand your work.

- Set the atmosphere with a comfortable visit. Welcome them with simple refreshments.
- Briefly describe your agency mission and the populations you serve. They may forget detailed program explanations, so be leery of spending too much time on those.

Instead, if they have the time and are willing, show them public health in action! Examples include a home visit, vaccination clinic or a WIC consultation.

- Include only a few key staff or local board of health members. You don't want to overwhelm them or cause them to feel too intimidated to ask questions.
- Use pictures or testimonials to personalize the impact of your work.
- Explain your funding and how legislation and state budget impact your agency and their constituents.
- Allow plenty of time for questions. This is a learning opportunity for them and you. If you are unable to answer a question on the spot, agree to get them an answer and do so.
- Always follow-up the next day with a handwritten note or an email thanking them for their time and interest.

Cycle of Connections

1-3

Interim

1. At least one face-to-face connection.
2. At least one email with information.
3. Send legislative agendas.

7

After Session

7. Send a thank you card for all that they do for Iowans.

4-6

Session

4. Email "A Look at Public Health in Iowa" or CHNA/HIP information to help inform about public health strategies that may be considered by the legislature. Remind them that flexibility in budget helps you address issues.
5. Stay engaged with what is happening at the Statehouse by reading the IDPH legislative update. Email them about specific bills if you feel you can educate them on the topic.
6. Attend town hall meetings.

1 Interim

[May - December] The Interim is the perfect time to introduce yourself to policy-makers and talk about the importance of public health ([connection 1](#)). They are back from the chaos of Des Moines and have reconnected with their friends and family. This is a far more comfortable setting in which to engage them! Since they are in their community, talk to them about it. They may not be aware of the current work around the Community Health Needs Assessment or the Health Improvement Plan. Perhaps other issues are front and center because they are in the news (e.g. Zika, flooding, water quality). Remind them that you are a resource as public health issues come up during the year! Send them at least one email with information on a specific issue or project ([connection 2](#)).

It will also be informative for them to understand the various legislative agendas of public health partners like the Iowa Counties Public Health Association (ICPHA), the Iowa Public Health Association (IPHA), the Iowa Environmental Health Association (IEHA) and IDPH. Send them the information in November or December as an ‘FYI’, but be leery of encouraging support or opposition of anything specific if you are in your official capacity ([connection 3](#)). Additionally, this is a good time to evaluate your communication strategy using the legislative engagement planning tool located in this toolkit so you continue to engage legislators and other policy-makers.

Toolkit items:

- A Day as Told by Public Health
- Community Health Needs Assessment Issue Brief
- Seven Connections in Seven Ways
- Legislative Engagement Guide
- Public Health Fact Sheet

2 Session

[January - May] At the beginning of session, reinforce the importance of keeping public health in mind while they are considering legislation by sending policy-makers the State of the Health of Iowa Report or the Community Health Needs Assessment Budget Report ([connection 5](#)). For more information on lobbying vs. advocacy, visit page 10 of this executive summary. Toward the end of session, budget decisions are made. This is a good time to reinforce talking points about the flexibility needed to address community needs ([connection 4](#)).

Most of the time it is not necessary to come to Des Moines to build a relationship with your elected officials. Look for opportunities to speak with them locally at town hall meetings ([connection 5](#)). You can stay in touch with what is happening in Des Moines by subscribing to IDPH’s legislative update by emailing join-IDPHLEGUPDATE@lists.ia.gov. Additionally, be available to answer any questions legislators may have about public health-related issues that come up during session ([connection 6](#)).

Toolkit Item:

- A Look at Public Health in Iowa (*under construction*)
- Community Health Needs Assessment Budget Report
- Seven Connections in Seven Ways

3 End of Session

[May/June] At the end of session, send policy-makers and stakeholders a thank you note (preferably handwritten) for all of their hard work ([connection 7](#)). Remember, they spend significant time away from their friends and family to perform a crucial role in our democratic process. This alone deserves praise! Evaluate the success of agency efforts and set goals for the following year’s communication plan. Continue to let them know how their support helps locally. Everything may not have gone the way you wanted, but remember—you catch more bees with honey than with vinegar. Maintaining a respectful relationship is always the long-term goal!

Seven Connections in Seven Ways

It's often expressed in marketing and sales that it takes seven connections in seven ways to build relationships.; however, it is difficult to think of seven different ways to approach someone. Here are seven ways that you can interact with decision-makers every year to sell your product - public health.

1. Introduce Yourself. Relationships are important. When a policy-maker knows you are available as a resource, they are more likely to reach out when they have questions. During your initial meeting, explain the role of public health and why it is important to consider when making health decisions.

2. Discuss the State of the Health of Iowa Report. We have developed a report outlining some of the top issues in the state and why public health has been and will continue to be an important part of addressing those health needs. This can be used as a discussion piece. *(under construction)*

3. Present a Legislative Package. There are a number of Iowa-based public health organizations that publish policy statements each year. This includes the Iowa Public Health Association, the Iowa Counties Public Health Association, the Iowa Department of Public Health and the Iowa Environmental Health Association. Use these as a reference to create your own priorities on both a state and local level.

4. Present Community Health Needs Assessment (CHNA) Data. One way to mobilize the data found through the CHNA process is through policy action. Use state aggregate data found at idph.iowa.gov in conjunction with your own reports to tell a story about what is happening in your community.

5. Specific Session Issue. Stay engaged with what is happening during session and remain available as a resource if the policy-maker is in need of data or information on a specific topic. You can help them understand the impact that legislation may have on your agency or the health of Iowans.

6. Specific Interim Issue. Reaching out to policy-makers in the Interim is a good idea because they may have more time to learn from you. It also establishes you as an expert on the topic, so that they can come to you if they have questions during session.

7. Thank you. Policy-makers work hard and spend time away from their homes and families for four to five months per year to serve the public. Make sure you take the time once a year to write a handwritten note to your policy-makers so they know they are appreciated.

Advocacy v. Lobbying

It can get confusing to understand what you can and can't do as a state or local government employee. For those in nonprofit 501(c)3s and government, it is appropriate to advocate, but not to lobby. So what's the difference and where is the line?

	Advocacy	Lobbying
Definition	<p>Involves the general education of community, business, and elected and appointed policy-makers on issues and community sentiment, not tied to particular legislation.</p> <p>EXAMPLE: Developing a campaign about the importance of healthy eating or providing information on child obesity rates in your community.</p>	<p>Involves communication with policy-makers to influence particular action or inaction on a specific piece of legislation or administrative action, pending or proposed.</p> <p>EXAMPLE: Telling your legislator to support a bill that requires healthy lunch choices in schools.</p>
What	<p>Providing information on issues of concern to you or your organization (e.g., education, infant and child health) and the building of relationships to ensure the prioritization of those issues in the policy making process.</p>	<p>Identifying specific legislation (e.g. regarding prenatal care, immunizations, adolescent health, etc.) or administrative action proposed or pending before the executive branch, legislative or local policy-making body, and overtly encouraging support or opposition of it.</p>
How	<p>Including the policy maker in educational programs such as site visits in order to increase his or her awareness of the impact of the issues on their constituents. This involves an extended period of time to build a lasting relationship with the policy maker.</p> <p>Legislative impact statements can be developed to inform a legislator of potential community impact. It is important to be careful to not support or oppose a bill in these types of statements.</p>	<p>Discussing with the policy maker the positive and negative effects of voting a certain way on a specific piece of legislation or administrative action.</p>
Expected Outcomes	<p>The development of relationships with policy-makers that will simultaneously educate the policy maker and provide a valuable resource to the organization and community as a whole.</p>	<p>The desired passage or failure of legislation by a policy-making body, furthering the issues of concern to your organization.</p>

While there are 'asks' that are off-limits, such as requesting the passage or opposition of a bill, there are some things you can request of your legislators. The next page can be provided to legislators and contain 'asks' that can be used to start a conversation.

What Can You Ask?

While there are ‘asks’ that are off-limits, such as requesting the passage or opposition of a bill, there are some things you can request of your legislators. The following are ‘asks’ that can be used to start a conversation with an elected official and do not constitute lobbying.

- 1. Increase Funding Flexibility.** This is a general principle of need not tied to any specific piece of legislation. In order to respond to the data generated by the public health community, funding needs to be flexible. This allows for more strategic planning and use of subject matter expertise. For example, in recent legislative sessions, earmarks within the IDPH budget have decreased. Continuing this trend will allow the department to more aptly respond to the changing needs of the public health landscape in Iowa. At the local level, increasing flexibility enables the same nimble response needed to address community issues as they change.
- 2. Increase Communication.** Understanding community needs begins with conversations. Since health priorities shift over time, consistent communication with local health departments is important. Public health professionals can serve as a resource when policy-makers are faced with difficult policy decisions. Remind them you are a public health expert so they don’t have to be. You can tell them what the health needs are in their districts and constituent communities, and how policy impacts your ability to address those needs.
- 3. Support Foundational Public Health Services.** This includes support for public health foundational capabilities that are cross-cutting skills and capacities needed to support the foundational areas, and other programs and activities key to protecting the community’s health and achieving equitable health outcomes (e.g. communicable disease control; chronic disease and injury prevention; environmental public health; maternal, child, and family health; access to and linkage with clinical care). Foundational areas are those substantive areas of expertise or program-specific activities in all state and local health departments essential to protecting the community’s health (e.g. assessment, policy development, communications, community partnership development, etc.). For more information, visit www.phaboard.org/wp-content/uploads/PHNCI-FPHS-
- 4. Strategically Use Public Health.** Public health has a key role to play in protecting and promoting the health of Iowans. Public health identifies healthy solutions for everyone, focuses on disease prevention to reduce health care costs, and provides leadership. When developing statewide health strategies, public health needs to be an important part of the conversation.
- 5. Shift Towards Prevention.** Many of the health priorities in Iowa are either preventable diseases or prevention measures. Communities are recognizing the health and economic benefits of stopping disease before it happens. Historically, limited funding has been devoted to prevention initiatives.
- 6. Use Data to Inform Policy.** Public health departments collect a wide array of data for disease surveillance and population health purposes. Analyzing this data helps to tailor programs, understand health trends and identify target populations. This data can inform policy decisions in a strategic way that maximizes limited resources. By working with public health departments, they will make well-informed policy decisions.

Public Health Thesaurus

Remember that most policy-makers are not experts in public health, so when you are talking to them, be aware of the language you're using. Public health can be full of confusing jargon if you are not used to hearing it. Here you will find a thesaurus of words to substitute when talking to policy-makers and other members of the public so that you are not only heard, but understood.

Potentially Confusing	Less Confusing
<p>Accreditation</p> <p>Our health department is currently undergoing accreditation.</p>	<p>Set of standards</p> <p>Our health department is currently going through a process to make sure we meet the necessary standards that ensure community members are receiving quality services.</p>
<p>Health disparities</p> <p>The program attempts to address health disparities in maternal and child health outcomes.</p>	<p>Differences in health between populations</p> <p>The program looks at the differences in health between populations during and after pregnancy, and then attempts to figure out why. For example, an African-American woman in Iowa is more likely to give birth to a child who is below the recommended weight than a white woman. Why?</p>
<p>Incidence</p> <p>In 2014, the incidence of HIV in Iowa was 3.2.</p>	<p>Number of people who developed a disease</p> <p>In 2014, 3.2 out of every 100,000 people were diagnosed with HIV.</p>
<p>Prevalence</p> <p>The prevalence of obesity in Iowa is 30 percent.</p>	<p>Total number of people with a disease</p> <p>30 percent of Iowans are obese.</p>
<p>RFP</p> <p>The recipient of the funding was determined through an RFP process.</p>	<p>Competitive selection process</p> <p>The recipient of the funding was determined through a competitive selection process to make sure they were the best fit for the work to be done.</p>
<p>Social Determinants of Health</p> <p>Social determinants of health account for 80 percent of a person's overall well-being.</p>	<p>Environment</p> <p>Where people work, play, live and learn is a significant factor in their overall health and well-being.</p>

What's worked for you? If you have suggestions to add to the list, please send them to deborah.thompson@idph.iowa.gov.

Recap & Resources

Keep it Simple.

Elected and appointed officials are regular people. They have jobs, families and interests—just like you. It is about building a relationship, not just providing information. You have done this countless times with your friends, family members and co-workers. Apply those same skills to building relationships with elected and appointed officials.

You are Smart. That Matters. They Need You.

Elected and appointed officials have to know a little bit about a lot of things. The most important thing they need to know is who to ask. As an expert in public health, you can provide education to inform their decisions. Additionally, they can provide you with important information about constituent values. Your relationship with policy-makers should be reciprocal, working together to improve the lives of those in your community.

Don't Get Discouraged.

Policy-makers are incredibly busy people—just like you. If you don't get their attention the first time, keep trying. Relationship-building takes time. Also, things do not always go your way in the policy arena. Stay positive and continue to approach legislators with respect and patience.

Stick Together.

While as a public health community, we may have points of disagreement, we can all commit to supporting one another in promoting the practice and importance of public health in Iowa. Let's attempt to find common ground and support one another in our collective advocacy efforts.

Want more information?

There are resources to support you in your relationship-building efforts beyond this toolkit.

Iowa Public Health Tracking Portal (<https://pht.idph.state.ia.us/Pages/default.aspx>) - This portal serves as a centralized source for Iowa-related public health data.

Iowa Department of Public Health (idph.iowa.gov) - The IDPH Website provides a wealth of information to help inform community decisions.

Association Websites:

- American Public Health Association (www.apha.org)
- Iowa Public Health Association (www.iowapha.org)
- Iowa Environmental Health Association (www.ieha.net)
- Iowa Counties Public Health Association (i-cpha.org)

Questions? Feedback? Contact Deborah Thompson, IDPH Policy Advisor and Legislative Liaison at deborah.thompson@idph.iowa.gov or (515) 240-0530.

This document was prepared by Deborah Thompson and Emily Sadecki at IDPH and was finalized on October 19, 2016.

