

AT A GLANCE

Eight Steps to Building Healthy Public Policies

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Introduction

Building healthy public policy is one of five health promotion actions outlined in the Ottawa Charter for Health Promotion.¹ Healthy public policies aim to improve the conditions in which people live: for example, to create and maintain secure, safe, adequate and sustainable environments such as housing, education, and community services.² Healthy public policies include a variety of options such as legislation, fiscal measures, taxation, and organizational change.¹ The policy-making process is a coordinated action that leads to health, income and social policies that foster greater equity.¹ This coordinated action involves a wide variety of partners working together define a problem, using evidence to identify potential solutions, assessing readiness for the potential policy options, and adopting, implementing and evaluating the policy.³

This *At A Glance* summarizes the eight-step process for building healthy public policies described in the [Supporting the Policy-Making Process Workbook](#),³ published by Public Health Ontario (PHO) in 2018. The development of the workbook was informed by literature reviews, peer-sharing sessions and advice from a policy advisory group.³ The workbook offers a step-by-step guide for engaging in and supporting the process of building healthy public policies. These resources aim to strengthen the capacity of public health and health promotion practitioners, as well as those supporting the development and implementation of healthy public policies that will improve overall living conditions, and ultimately, enhance the health of the populations they work with.

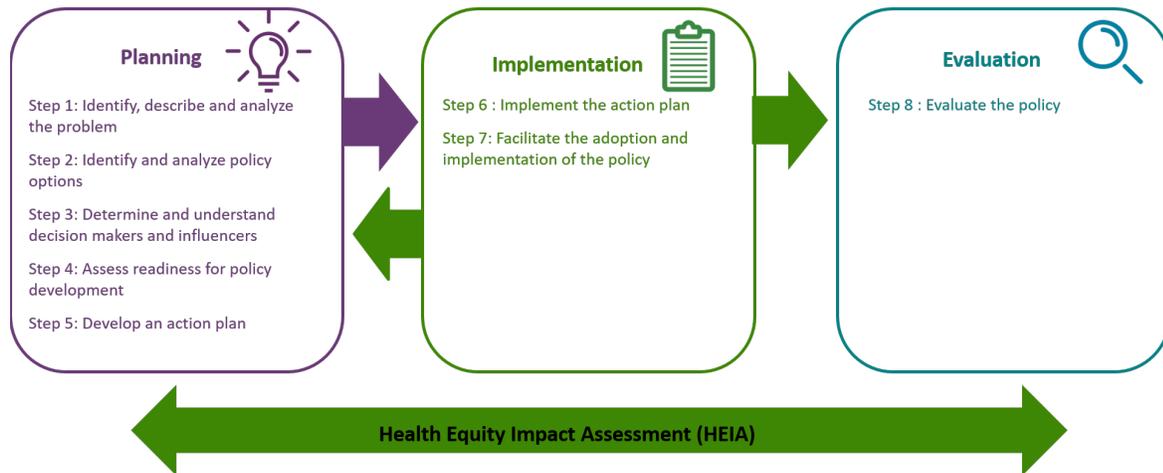
The Eight Steps for Building Health Public Policies

The eight-step, three-phase process (Figure 1) is theoretically rooted in the Stages Heuristic Model,⁴ and aligned with the [Core Competencies for Public Health in Canada](#),⁵ and [Pan-Canadian Health Promoter Competencies](#).⁶

1. Planning Phase: Establish a working group to plan for the type of policy that will address the problem a community and/or organization is experiencing. This phase includes five steps.
2. Implementation Phase: Putting the decisions made in the planning phase into action. This phase includes two steps.
3. Evaluation Phase: Develop a plan to evaluate the policy and, ideally, the policy-making process. This phase includes one step.

We have also embedded three concepts foundational to the policy making process, namely the Health in All Policies (HiAP) approach;⁷ advocacy; and Health Equity Impact Assessment ([HEIA](#)).⁸

Figure 1: Three-Phase, Eight-Step Policy-Making Process for Building Healthy Public Policies



STEP 1: IDENTIFY, DESCRIBE AND ANALYZE THE PROBLEM

Purpose: Develop a collective understanding of the problem and gather information to determine if a healthy public policy is the appropriate solution.

Understanding the problem allows people to explore a variety of potential interventions, including but not limited to policy. The way that problems are described influences the activities undertaken to resolve them. It is also an opportunity to start to build support internally, and externally with community partners to address the problem.

Activities to implement:

- frame the problem from different perspectives;
- conduct a [situational assessment](#);⁹
- write a briefing note;
- draft policy goals and objectives.

STEP 2: IDENTIFY AND ANALYZE POLICY OPTIONS

Purpose: Explore different policy options in order to identify the most feasible ones and impactful ones.

There may be a wide variety of policy options that could potentially address the particular problem and improve the situation.¹⁰ This step helps to narrow down the options. Consider the types of policies that could achieve the draft policy goals and objectives identified in Step 1. The information gathered during this step is critical for making the case and building support for addressing the problem with a policy solution.

Activities to implement:

- identify policy options;

- analyze the policy options generated;
- engage in decision-making to identify which ones to move forward.

STEP 3: DETERMINE AND UNDERSTAND DECISION-MAKERS AND INFLUENCERS

Purpose: Determine which decision-makers have the power to implement the policy, and understand their beliefs and attitudes regarding the problem and the policy. Identify potential influencers.

Individuals at all levels of an organization make decisions. However, not all have the ability to change policy. For example, an Executive Director, Medical Officer of Health, or an elected official have the authority to implement a course of action in their organization or community, including changing policies. Choosing the wrong people to move a policy forward can waste time and resources. It may also jeopardize future policy development. Adopting and implementing a policy (Step 7) depends on the ability to understand and influence the right people. If the right people are not identified and understood, future steps can be more difficult.

It is also important to engage those who can influence a decision-maker to make the policy change. Internal and external working group members would be considered influencers. A decision-maker could also be an influencer. For example, a municipal elected official could have the power to pass a municipal by-law as well as influence the perspectives of other elected officials.

Activities to implement:

- develop a list of decision-makers and influencers;
- analyse the decision-makers and influencers in order to understand their behaviour, intentions, attitudes and beliefs;¹¹
- prioritize the order in which to engage decision-makers and influencers.

STEP 4: ASSESS READINESS FOR POLICY DEVELOPMENT

Purpose: Assess the readiness of communities, organizations, and decision-makers to support and implement the policy option(s).

Policy-making requires a significant investment of time, resources and funding. Decision-makers, organizations and communities may be at different levels of readiness. Identifying which stage these groups are at helps to identify strategies to increase their support for the policy option. For example, health promotion approaches (e.g., awareness-building, education, skill-building and/or environmental supports) can increase the level of readiness for a particular policy. The information gained from this step will be useful when developing an action plan in Step 5.

Activities to implement:

- Assess readiness for policy. The [Policy Readiness Tool](#), a self-administered questionnaire developed by the Alberta Policy Coalition for Cancer Prevention offer a structured way to assess a community or organization's readiness for policy change.¹²
- Conduct a [Force Field Analysis](#), in order to understand the range of factors that may influence the success of a policy option.¹³

STEP 5: DEVELOP AN ACTION PLAN

Purpose: Develop an action plan to guide the process of implementing a specific policy option.

The action plan captures the information generated in Steps 1-4 and outline the activities needed for policy implementation. These actions will help build momentum and support for the policy.

Activities to implement:

- Create a [logic model](#) to visually represent the relationship between your goals and the selected strategies.¹⁴
- Develop an action plan which describes the core activities, tasks, resources and timelines needed to achieve the selected strategies.¹⁵
- Conduct an [HEIA](#)⁸ on the action plan. Revise the action plan based on the outcome of the HEIA.

EVALUATE THE PLANNING PHASE

Before moving to the next phase, consider evaluating the planning phase to demonstrate progress of the policy-making process to funders, organizational leaders, government representatives and the community.

STEP 6: IMPLEMENT THE ACTION PLAN

Purpose: Monitor the implementation of the action plan. Collectively, make necessary adjustments based on the political, economic and social environment, and the human and financial resources available.

Translating the plan into action can be challenging. This step will ensure that activities are happening as envisioned. If not, they can be modified or adapted as needed. Keep within the parameters of the agreed upon goals and objectives.

Activities to implement:

- Develop a progress reporting structure as a way to track successes, challenges and additional support needed.
- Update the action plan and communicate changes made to stakeholders.

STEP 7: FACILITATE THE ADOPTION AND IMPLEMENTATION OF THE POLICY

Purpose: Engage decision-makers for policy uptake.

Policy implementation is the stage between the establishment of the policy and its consequences. This part of the policy-making process focuses specifically on those who have the decision-making power to adopt and implement the policy within their setting (e.g., organization or community). It is important to develop an understanding of the processes which organizations, institutions, communities and governments need to follow in order to adopt the policy.

Activities to implement:

- understand the process for policy implementation;

- write the policy;
- communicate the policy.

STEP 8: EVALUATE THE POLICY

Purpose: Develop and manage an evaluation plan and communicate the results.

Policy evaluations apply evaluation principles and methods to examine the content, implementation and impact of the policy as well as to identify its merit, worth and utility. Just like the planning and implementation phase, evaluating a policy is a systematic process. The purpose of this step is to develop and implement a plan to evaluate the actual policy itself as well as to assess the process of developing and implementing the policy. This is to ensure that the policy has been implemented as intended and is having the desired impact, as well as to assess the process used to develop and implement the policy.

Although this is the last step, activities throughout the policy-making process should be monitored and evaluated regularly. The results from these early evaluation efforts should also be revisited in this step.

Activities to implement:

- conduct a policy evaluation;
- communicate the evaluation results.

Conclusion

The process of building healthy public policies is complex. It involves a comprehensive approach and a wide variety of partners such as organizations, communities, and policy makers. Together, partners work to define a problem, use evidence to identify potential solutions, engage in knowledge transfer to support and influence policy outcomes, and ultimately, see the implementation and evaluation of the policy.

This process can seem overwhelming. By following the steps outlined here, health promotion and public health practitioners can learn the concepts and strategies to support a manageable policy-making process. This will help to support evidence-based policy interventions, which can lead to better health outcomes.

“Policy work is a long road, which requires a sustained effort. It’s often about small, incremental changes and successes. But when it all comes together, the positive impact for the population as a whole is well worth the effort.”^{16(p.3)}

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At a Glance

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Public Health Ontario

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