

At a glance: the eight steps to developing a healthy public policy

1

Describe the problem

Obtain a detailed understanding of the specific problem. This will be a foundation for developing clear goals, assessing options, and building support for the policy among decision-makers.

Consider measurable objectives at all four levels (individual, network, organization, and society) and ensure they are specific, measurable, attainable, realistic, time-bound (SMART) and a strategic priority.

Understand the problem:

Causes – what is the origin or cause of the problem? What has contributed to its development?

Impact – what is the extent and cost of the problem in your community? What would happen if it was NOT dealt with?

Perception – who else thinks it is a problem? Who thinks it is not?

Possible solutions – what has been done to try to resolve the problem, in your community and others? What are potential policy and non-policy solutions? What are the costs and benefits of various solutions?

Search for information to find answers:

Types of data – quantitative opinion, community health status survey, community stories, evaluation and research findings, cost benefit, "best practices" syntheses and guidelines, organizational mandates, historical approaches.

Sources – journals, magazines, books; consultants, private sector; resource centres; government departments; local health units; non-governmental organizations and strategies, polling companies, researchers, community spokespersons.

2

Assess readiness for policy development

Determine whether to proceed. This decision should be based on whether your community is ready for a specific policy and your organization is ready to lead or support the process.

Assess readiness:

Community – who will be supportive or unsupportive? Why? What is public opinion? What reasons to oppose this policy will be put forward? Are there educational and awareness programs in your community that focus on your problem? How successful have they been? Has the problem been a recent focus in the media?

Organizational – is the policy and development process a fit with your mandate? How much time/resources do you have to support it? Who can support the process?

Shape your answers into a Force Field Analysis – a snapshot of the forces that will 'drive' or 'restrain' the process. The snapshot may be different for different policy options.

You may use other strategies before beginning policy development (e.g., focus on data collection, education, and persuasion or find additional resources). If you start when public opinion is negative or resources are inadequate you may fail and reduce your credibility. "Lead" may not be the best role for you. If the community is ready but you are not you can support policy development in other ways.

3

Develop goals, objectives, and policy options

Define clear goals and objectives for the policy change and generate a list of policy options that you want decision-makers to consider. Putting forward more than one option shows stakeholders that you are flexible and willing to negotiate. Assessing several options prepares you to explain why there are certain ones that you will not support.

Develop one or two goals – these are broad statements summarizing the ultimate direction or desired achievement of your policy.

Develop your objectives – these are brief statements specifying the desired impact or effects of a policy. Objectives should be SMART - specific, measurable, acceptable, realistic and time-bound.

Generate a list of policy options to address the issue – these are choices regarding the types of policies that can be put in place to address health issues.

Assess all policy options to determine fit with goals and objectives – choose a shortlist from the ones that fit after considering community and organizational readiness for each option. This shortlist comprises the options that will be presented to decision-makers.

4

Identify decision-makers and influencers

Decide which decision-makers will be the focus of your support-building efforts. Choosing the wrong people can waste resources and may even jeopardize future strategies if you approach people at the wrong level, or wrong time.

Ask your stakeholders who would be best to approach and how to approach them. Don't assume that you already know the best person. Consider starting with someone lower on the hierarchy rather than heading straight for the top. Start with more sympathetic and supportive individuals rather than pouring your energy into the "toughest nut."

Find out as much as you can about how these individuals make decisions. For example, consider whether they are most driven by:

- Media coverage
- Their own beliefs and values
- The needs of their clients or constituency
- Other influential people or groups

Brainstorm a list of influential individuals and groups and organize them according to the order in which you think they should be approached.

5**Build support for the policy**

Choose channels and vehicles through which to try to persuade decision-makers to proceed with policy development. Develop the messages that are put forth using these methods. This step can win or lose battles.

Choose a mixture of approaches to build support for your policy (e.g., quiet negotiation, sharing information, public briefs, letter-writing, etc.).

Focus messages on:

- The links between the policy and a compelling issue
- Simple descriptions of solutions
- Signs in the community that change is warranted and desired (e.g., public opinion, media coverage)

Prepare to counter arguments such as:

- Too costly
- Increased regulations restrict individual freedoms
- There is a non-policy solution

Developing a coalition is a key part of this step. Form alliances with stakeholders who believe in and champion your cause. These individuals and organizations can bring diverse skills to support your policy and communicate your key messages in multiple ways through their channels. Frequently adapt messages as public opinion, media and decision-maker landscapes change.

Be strategic in every vehicle, messenger and word choice (i.e., don't choose too many channels or vehicles).

6**Draft and/or revise the policy**

Define the specific logistical and legal details about a policy. The precise wording of a policy often dictates whether or not it is passed.

Include all of the following in your policy:

- The purpose of the policy (goals and objectives)
- A description of the regulations and sanctions
- Procedures for non-compliance
- A plan for promoting and disseminating the policy
- A plan for monitoring and evaluating the policy

Gather other policy examples to assist with the writing process.

Prepare to revise as many times as necessary. "Seeing it in writing" will often re-ignite opposing forces.

Consult stakeholders throughout the writing and revision process. People responsible for funding, implementing, and otherwise acting upon the policy should be included. Community consultations are often a part of this process.

Consult with a legal professional about the policy.

Review every policy draft to ensure that the policy goals and objectives are met.

7**Implement the policy**

Ensure that all pre-requisites are in place for policy implementation and then implement the policy. Many policies have been retracted upon realizing that implementation is impractical, too costly, too controversial or that progress toward the ultimate goal cannot be demonstrated.

Ensure the following conditions are met before embarking on policy implementation:

- The policy meets stated goals and objectives
- Objectives are measurable
- Approval of key decision-makers and stakeholders has been obtained
- An accurate estimate of the resources needed to implement your policy has been developed
- The timeline is realistic and appropriate (based on stakeholders' input and evidence from your readiness assessment)
- The policy specifies who is responsible for what

Consult with people responsible for funding, implementing, and otherwise acting on the policy as implementation is considered.

Ensure that the policy implementation plan includes:

- Clear communication
- An enforcement plan
- Signage

8**Evaluate and monitor the policy**

Early identification of problems and timely policy amendments may help avoid a policy being overturned when implementation presents challenges. A thorough evaluation will also help to demonstrate accountability to stakeholders and reduce implementation costs.

Develop a few evaluation questions, such as:

- Is the situation better than it was before the policy was implemented?
- If the policy was not as effective as anticipated, why not?
- Are people who were involved in the policy process happy with the results?
- Do the people affected have a favourable view of the policy? If not, what can be done to address their concerns?
- Are there foreseeable developments that may affect the policy?

Try to ensure that you are collecting both quantitative and qualitative data (this should be done through the policy cycle).

Use indicators to help answer these questions. For example:

- Behaviours or health status of community members
- Number of violations
- Mass media coverage of the policy
- Resources allocated to implementing the policy

Consider how you will communicate your evaluation findings to your stakeholders.