

## Advancing Policy and Advocacy for Community Health

### Transcript

This training is an introduction to *Advancing Policy and Advocacy for Community Health*. The topics covered include:

1. The role of the county board of health in working with the district health director on identifying the specific public health needs of the community.
2. The role of the county board of health in suggesting programs and/or services to meet the health needs of the population they represent.
3. The role of the county board of health in communicating with local decision makers to advocate for the support of public health's essential services within the community.
4. The value of using evidence-based stories to advocate for public health community resources.

### **Introduction to Public Health Policy and Advocacy**

County boards of health have a very important role in public health policy and advocacy within their jurisdictions. As the governing body of the local public health department, the board of health is tasked with setting out policies to protect and improve the public's health.

First let's briefly define the terms "public health policy" and "advocacy" as they will be used in this training.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the federal agency tasked with protecting the health and safety of all Americans, defines public health policy as "a law, regulation, procedure, administrative action, incentive, or voluntary practice of governments and other institutions." It is important to emphasize that while policy is sometimes legislation, it can often be simply an agreement between two agencies to work towards a common goal.

For example, school nutrition policies safeguard that our children have healthy food and drink choices when in school. Such policies have recently influenced some school districts to restrict the selling of sugary soft drinks in their school vending machines, and replacing them with healthier options in an effort to reduce obesity in children.

To advocate is defined by dictionaries as "to speak, plead, or argue in favor of; to support or recommend publicly a cause or policy." Public health advocacy, then, is educating and encouraging elected officials, organizations, or influential members of the community, to support and adopt policies that will inform the community, protect the community's health and prevent injuries to the public.

Advocacy can also mean speaking about public health needs in the community to raise funds that will help provide programs to address those needs. In the example of replacing soft drinks in school vending machines with healthier options, school officials, teachers and parents were first made aware of how soft drinks can contribute to obesity in children. As they learned about the problem of obesity and contributing factors, support grew until a policy was established to remove the soft drinks.

Additionally, advocacy can be as simple as spreading the word amongst community members. For instance, when it is time for people to have a flu vaccine, board of health members can set a good public health example by receiving their own vaccine and then encouraging their friends, neighbors, coworkers and other community members to do the same.

### **The Role of the County Board of Health in Policy and Advocacy**

Historically, health policies have often been the result of grass roots efforts at the local level. Health is one of the topics, along with education, that is not mentioned in the United States Constitution. Consequently most health laws and policies are created at the state and local level. Policy development and enactment at the local level works best when cooperating with the district health director and state Department of Public Health to determine if local health programs are effective, or to determine if there is a need for change.

In Georgia county boards of health are composed of a cross-section of local leaders who are able to bring community-wide perspectives to the table.

Board members include the school district superintendent, the chief executive officer of the county, the mayor of the largest municipality, a physician and three health consumers. Board members are leaders in their communities and therefore well positioned to guide and advocate for local actions to improve the health and well-being of their communities. Working with the district health director, the board can make suggestions for policies, programs, and services that address particular health challenges within the community.

Advocacy is also an important function of the county board of health and goes hand in hand with policy making. Board of health members can advocate for public health in their local community by providing information to county commissioners, local elected officials, and the general public regarding specific community health conditions, financial needs, health needs and opportunities to improve the health of the community.

County board of health members also have the opportunity to be advocates on the state and national levels regarding laws, regulations, and legislation impacting public health. As the National Association of County and City Health Officials notes, "If you don't explain what your local health department does, nobody else will."

Additionally, the board of health can increase the reach of advocacy messages by forming community coalitions with other interested groups in the community. Thereby increasing support and credibility for the effort.

Board of health members can learn about their community's health status from their district health director and available Community Health Assessments, Community Health Improvement Plans, and strategic plans at the state, district, or local level. Additionally board members can learn about possible needs by listening to their friends and members of their communities. This information will help board of health members work with the district health director to set local health priorities.

### **The Value of Evidence-based Stories in Advocating for Resources**

Because funding for public health is limited, it is important that funds are spent on programs and services that will have a positive impact. Programs that have worked well in other communities are considered to be best practice and should be considered for local use. For example if a community has a high rate of illness that is related to smoking and second-hand smoke, the board of health should consider programs or policies that have previously worked elsewhere in reducing smoking-related illnesses.

In advocating for a particular policy or program, board of health members should first find support from within the community for change. One way is to make sure the public knows about the problem.

Continuing with the smoking example, board members might decide that public service announcements on a local radio station about the hazards of smoking and second-hand smoke are an effective means of bringing the issue to the attention of the population. Board members might also meet with business leaders in the community to encourage them to have no smoking rules in their work places.

Once the public seems aware of the problem and shows an interest in finding a solution, board members can advocate for funds and other resources by telling the success stories of other communities.

When looking for financial support for public health policies and programs, there are several important parts of the success stories that should be told.

First the stories should include similarities to people's own personal experiences. In this way, they will be able to relate to the story and connect with it personally. The stories should also show how specific programs and services have been successful in helping to improve the public's health in other localities and might therefore be a good investment locally.

In the smoking and second-hand smoke example, it would be useful to include some of the statistics of success. For example, studies have shown that smoke-free policies have reduced asthma-related illnesses by 20% and cardiovascular events by over 5%. These statistics and other information on successful programs can be found in a free

publication called the “Community Guide” which is available online at [www.thecommunityguide.org](http://www.thecommunityguide.org).

When seeking funds for public health programs, stories should also include other possible benefits to the community if a program is adopted. For instance, when the health of a community is improved additional effects occur such as a prosperous economy. The link between health and the economic strength of a community is a strong one. If the children living in a community are generally unhealthy, they will miss school more frequently and experience lower rates of academic success.

With adults, a sick and weak workforce will have lower production leading to decreased incomes for both the workers and the businesses. There will be fewer businesses coming to the community if its productivity is low, so investments in the community will be low. Without a strong economy roadways will deteriorate, businesses will leave, and crime will typically increase, making it dangerous to work and play outdoors. These conditions lead to increasingly unhealthy people and the downward spiral continues.

It is easy to see that the opposite of this scenario can also occur where a healthy community is also an economically strong community.

Promoting support for public health services around economics can certainly earn buy-in from business members in the community. This is also true for community members who want to live, work, and play in healthy and vibrant communities, with access to public health and healthcare services needed to remain healthy and productive.

Therefore stories that demonstrate the link between health improvement and a healthy economy can have a strong impact on the leadership and decision-makers of a community, as well as the public.

In conclusion, the county board of health plays a vitally important role in the community. Members should become knowledgeable about local health challenges and advocate for community support and resources needed to implement public health programs and services. Together with their district health director, boards of health can also learn about or advocate for the use of other proven programs and policies to address community health priorities.

Most importantly, as active community leaders, board of health members can work with their friends, colleagues, church or synagogue members, neighbors, and others in their community to inform them of the work of the public health department and involve them in efforts to promote or help fund public health initiatives. Board members can talk to clubs and other organizations; they can listen to their community members and can bring issues of concern to the district health director.

Realizing that the public health needs within a community are often great, but the resources are limited, board of health members should work together with the district health director to establish priorities and develop community support.

## Discussion Questions

Consider the following questions:

1. What role has your county board of health and its members played in advocating for public health in your community?
2. Does your community have evidence-based stories that demonstrate the success of public health?
3. What community assets, stakeholders and organizations (public health, health care and other community organizations) could be engaged to advocate for public health in your community?

## Resources for Boards of Health

Leaders within your community, including the district health director, may have further insight into these issues. In addition, for more information on advocating for public health, review:

- Georgia Department of Public Health: A Guide to Serving on the County Board of Health
- National Association of County and City Health Officials: Public Health Advocacy (<http://www.naccho.org/advocacy/>)
- Research America! Public Health Advocacy Toolkit (<http://www.researchamerica.org/toolkits>)
- Georgians for a Healthy Future: Advocacy Center (<http://healthyfuturega.org/advocacy>)

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Subject Matter Expert

**Scott Maxwell**  
**Government Affairs Consultant**  
Mathews & Maxwell, Inc., Atlanta, GA

Reviewers

**Lloyd M. Hofer, MD, MPH**  
**District Health Director**  
Gwinnett, Newton, and Rockdale County Health Departments, GA

**David Bayne**  
**Director of Government Relations**  
Georgia Department of Public Health, Atlanta, GA

Product Developers

Julia Phillips, RN, MPH, CHES, Instructional Designer  
Chris Aschenbrenner, Multimedia Specialist  
Melissa (Moose) Alperin, MPH, MCHES, Director of Operations, Region IV Public Health Training Center  
Laura Lloyd, MPH, MCHES, Director of Programming, Region IV Public Health Training Center  
Arti B. Patel, Graduate Assistant, Region IV Public Health Training Center  
Rollins School of Public Health, Emory University

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