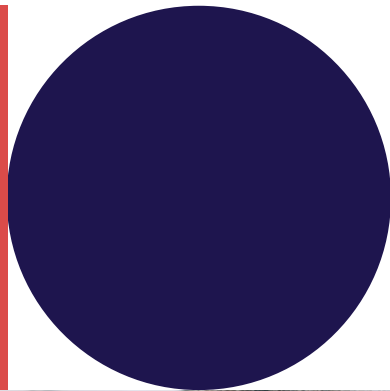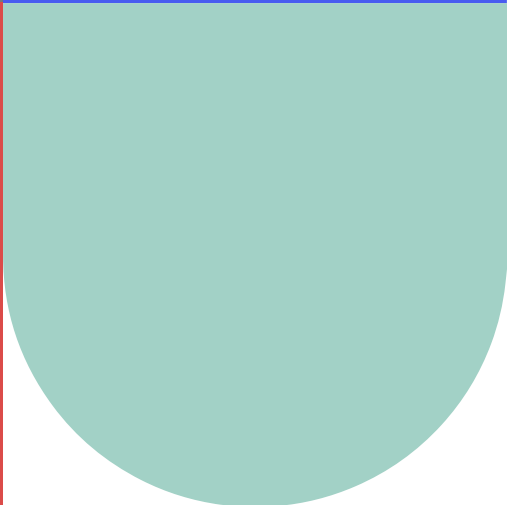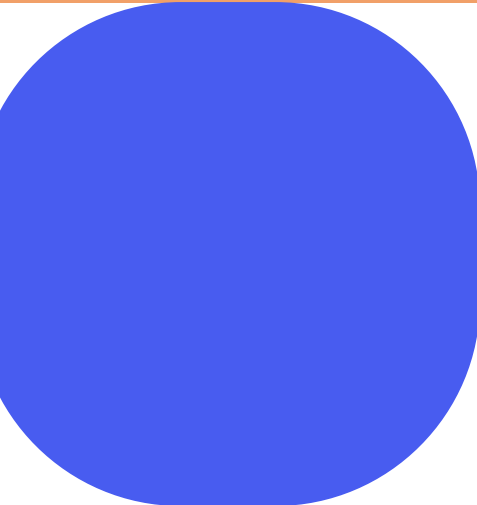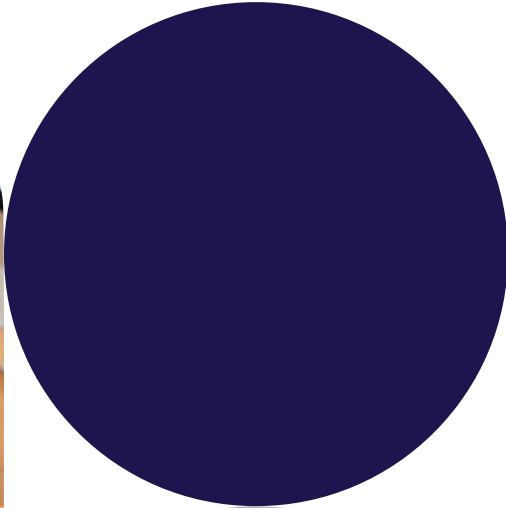de Beaumont

Communicating About Public Health

A Toolkit for Public Health Professionals
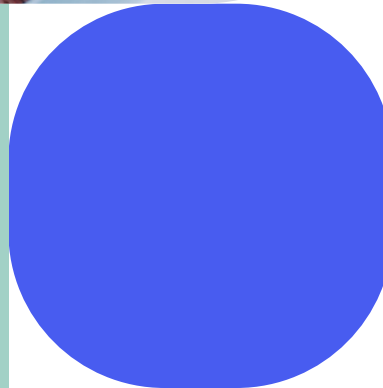
01 About this toolkit

The challenge of communicating about public health

Every day, public health professionals across the country work to promote well-being in their communities. Public health professionals have diverse roles and titles — like community health worker, analyst, inspector, evaluator, and counselor. And they work on a vast portfolio of initiatives on a variety of topics — including maternal health, mental health, food safety, lead poisoning prevention, and infectious disease tracking. Together, these public health workers have implemented countless initiatives that have saved lives and significantly improved quality of life in the United States. Communication has played a key role in many public health initiatives. By communicating about specific health issues in a way that's easy for people to understand, public health workers have changed policies and made their communities healthier and safer places to live.

Despite this progress, public health organizations have struggled to communicate about the important work of public health — and how that work makes a difference in people's everyday lives. The overarching goals, breadth, and diversity of public health are not easily summed up in a soundbite. Many public health activities happen outside of the public view, which makes it even more important for public health professionals and organizations to communicate the value of public health in relevant ways.

People's limited understanding of public health, politically driven statements by elected officials and commentators, and mis- and disinformation contribute to public distrust of organizations that are working to protect public health. The de Beaumont Foundation created this toolkit to help public health professionals **build public health literacy** in their communities.

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> ## Why invest the time and effort to build public health literacy?
>
> Helping people understand what public health is, what your organization does, and how those activities benefit their lives will make them more likely to trust and follow your organization's guidance, which will lead to better health outcomes and healthier communities.

What's inside this toolkit?

This toolkit includes:

- Research-tested talking points to help you explain what public health is, what public health professionals do, and how public health activities benefit individuals and communities

- Research-tested examples to build understanding of public health work, along with guidance on tailoring examples for your audience

- Guidance on identifying and creating opportunities to communicate about public health

- Proven best practices and resources for communicating effectively in a variety of situations

Who is this toolkit for?

If you're a public health professional — no matter what type of organization you work for or what professional role you play — this toolkit is for you! You have an important role in communicating to the public, and that includes making the case for the vital work that you and your colleagues do every day.

These research-tested talking points and strategies will be helpful to professional communicators, but they have been designed to be accessible for professionals with little or no communication experience or training.

02 Promising talking points backed by research

To inform this toolkit, the de Beaumont Foundation conducted qualitative and quantitative research over 12 months with a diverse mix of more than 1,600 U.S. adults. Research activities included:

- Qualitative message testing with 100 English-speaking U.S. adults

- Interviews with 19 public health professionals in different roles and contexts

- Follow-up qualitative message testing with 17 English-speaking U.S. adults

- A nationally representative online survey with 1,503 respondents

Most survey respondents and other participants demonstrated a limited understanding of public health. Among the knowledge gaps:

- Nearly all participants had a hard time describing what public health is and what public health professionals do.

- Many participants believed that public health and health care are the same — or that individual health care is the main focus of public health.

- Many participants conflated public health with public insurance programs like Medicare and Medicaid.

- Most participants had limited familiarity with the functions of public health departments, especially at the state and local levels.

- For many participants, the COVID-19 pandemic was their only frame of reference for public health.

The talking points and guidance in this toolkit were designed to address these knowledge gaps and to empower public health professionals to build understanding in their communities.

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Trust begins with understanding

In the United States, trust in public health and government organizations is declining.[1] There are many reasons people distrust these organizations and the guidance they share, including:

- **Information overload.** When there's a constant flood of information to take in — mixed with plenty of mis- and disinformation — it can be hard to separate fact from fiction. (**Misinformation** is any information that's false or misleading. **Disinformation** is when people spread information that they know is false.)

- **Shifting public health guidance.** Research shows that people often get confused or frustrated when scientific knowledge and health guidance changes over time, as it did during the COVID-19 pandemic.

- **Political polarization.** Like many other topics, public health has become politicized as our country's political environment has become more and more polarized. Politically driven rhetoric influences how people think about public health and government organizations, often in misleading ways.

- **Experiences of harm in public health or health care systems.** Many communities distrust public health organizations because of very real harms — past and present — that community members have experienced in the U.S. public health and health care systems. To learn more about how systemic injustice may impact community members' perceptions of public health, see page 19.

- **Perceptions of corruption.** Some people have a sense that institutions aren't designed to serve them and that leaders are motivated by self-interest rather than a desire to help the community.

By consistently sharing accurate information in language that's easy to understand, you can help people sift through the information overload they encounter every day and filter out mis- and disinformation. Communicating clearly, consistently, and compellingly is vital to earning the trust of community members and partners.

The research that informed this toolkit shows that understanding is an important building block of trust. However, many people have a limited understanding of public health. If people don't have a baseline understanding of what public health

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[1] https://www.healthaffairs.org/doi/10.1377/hlthaff.2022.01204

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institutions do, public health professionals cannot expect to meaningfully build trust. For that reason, this toolkit focuses on increasing the public's understanding of public health institutions as a foundational step in the hard work of rebuilding trust.

As a public health professional, you have opportunities to **build public health literacy** in your community — to help people understand what public health is, what public health professionals do, and how that work affects their everyday lives and the lives of people they care about. In this toolkit, you'll learn practical ways to build understanding of public health as you interact with community members in person or online.

All public health professionals are communicators

If you work in public health, chances are you communicate with the people you serve. For example, depending on your role, you might interact with community members by:

- Chatting with attendees at a health fair or other local event

- Answering questions during testing or vaccination appointments

- Posting on your organization's social media accounts

- Creating formal communication campaigns about health topics

- Forming partnerships with community stakeholders and organizations

This toolkit can help you take advantage of those opportunities by communicating more effectively to build understanding.

✏️ Time to reflect

When do you communicate with people in your community — in person or online? Do you see any opportunities to build public health literacy in those interactions?

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Consistent messaging helps maximize impact

While public health is a diverse field with many different areas of expertise, public health professionals share common goals, like preventing illness and injury and giving everyone an equal chance to be as healthy as possible. Currently, there's no shared language that public health professionals across specialties can use to define public health and explain the work they do. This has created challenges in helping the public understand this work. But using the same language consistently can help to reinforce ideas so that people are more likely to remember them.

This toolkit was designed to fill this gap by providing research-tested talking points and examples that support public health literacy. The de Beaumont Foundation developed these talking points and examples using best practices of clear communication and refined them based on research with a diverse group of adults from across the country. (For more on these research findings, see page 3.) In addition to the talking points and examples, at the end of the toolkit you'll find guidance and resources that you can use to tailor communications to your community's needs and your professional role.

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03 Helping people understand public health

Based on research with more than 1,600 U.S. adults, the de Beaumont Foundation identified five **big ideas** — key public health concepts that many people don't understand and that are essential to conveying the value and importance of public health. By addressing these knowledge gaps, you can help people understand what public health is and how it's relevant to their lives. You can use the research-based talking points and examples below to fill knowledge gaps as you engage with community members.

Big idea: Public health works at the community level, while health care works at the individual level.

Identify the knowledge gap	Many people associate public health with health care (like going to the doctor or a hospital). While health care providers typically see one patient at a time, public health workers care for the health of entire groups of people — from small communities to entire countries.
Start with this talking point	Use this talking point to explain the difference between community-level public health and individual-level health care: While doctors and nurses care for individual patients, most public health workers care for the health of entire communities.
Add examples	Build on this talking point by adding examples of public health activities that happen at the community level. You can use the examples below as a starting point: While doctors and nurses care for individual patients, most public health workers care for the health of entire communities. For example: • Researchers track how infectious diseases like measles spread from person to person. • Inspectors check public pools to make sure the water is safe to swim in. • Health educators teach people how to manage health conditions like diabetes.

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> ⚠️ **Tip: Choosing examples**
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> To catch people's attention, choose examples that align with:
>
> - Your organization's work
>
> - The situation in which you're communicating (like online or in person, in a large group or one-on-one)
>
> - Your community's context (like recent news or health-related issues that community members care about)
>
> Choose examples that reflect people's real-life experiences in the community to make the work of public health more relatable.
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> For a list of additional examples of public health activities and more guidance on choosing examples, see .

Big idea: Public health focuses on preventing people from getting sick or hurt.

Identify the knowledge gap	Some people don't realize that public health activities have made a positive impact in their lives. That's because public health focuses on **prevention**: preventing people from getting sick or hurt. People may not know how public health successes have made the United States a safer and healthier place to live. In fact, some people may not remember many public health efforts because they were so successful that the health threats have been practically eliminated — think of the measles, polio, and chickenpox vaccines, for example.
Start with this talking point	Use this talking point to explain how public health activities protect people from serious diseases and improve quality of life: Because of public health, many serious diseases that were common in your parents' or grandparents' generations are now very rare in the United States. Public health workers take action to protect people from getting sick or hurt.

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Add examples	Build on this talking point by adding examples of how public health workers protect people from serious health threats:
	Because of public health, many serious diseases that were common in your parents' or grandparents' generations — like measles, polio, and chickenpox — are now very rare in the United States. Public health workers take actions to protect people from getting sick or hurt by doing things like:
	• Looking for patterns in community data for signs of health threats
	• Vaccinating people against diseases that spread from person to person
	• Educating people about ways to stay healthy, like eating a variety of nutritious foods

Big idea: Public health workers serve their local communities.

Identify the knowledge gap	When they hear "public health," some people may only think of federal agencies like the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) or national leaders like the U.S. Surgeon General. In fact, a lot of important public health work happens at the local level.
Start with this talking point	Use this talking point to explain that public health workers support the well–being of the communities where they live and work by doing a variety of activities:
	Public health doesn't do just one thing. Instead, public health workers take many different actions in their communities to help protect people's health.
Add examples	Build on this talking point by adding examples to show some of the many different activities public health workers do to support community health:
	Public health doesn't do just one thing. Instead, public health workers take many different actions in their communities to help protect people's health. For example, they:
	• Inspect local restaurants to make sure food is prepared safely
	• Provide cancer screenings to community members
	• Help residents stay safe during extreme weather

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> ⚠ **Tip: Incorporating talking points into the conversation**
>
> When public health professionals talk to community members, the conversation tends to focus on specific health topics. This holds true whether you engage with community members at events, on social media, at one-on-one appointments, or through media appearances. For example, if you're talking to a community member during a diabetes screening appointment, your main goal is to educate that person about diabetes. Similarly, if you're giving a media interview about the health department's free vaccine clinic, your main goal is to encourage community members to get vaccinated.
>
> But **every interaction is also an opportunity to educate people about public health**! The key is to find opportunities to incorporate the talking points and examples from this toolkit into conversations about specific health topics — conversations you're already having in your community.
>
> Before your next event or conversation, consider what health topics are likely to come up. Do you see any overlap between those topics and the talking points? If so, that's a great opportunity to educate people about public health. For more guidance on making these connections, see page 26.

Big idea: Public health workers play a variety of professional roles — and many work behind the scenes.

Identify the knowledge gap	Many people don't have a clear idea of what public health workers do. Under the umbrella of public health, people in many professional roles work together to protect their community's health. Many of these professionals work behind the scenes, in roles that aren't always visible in the everyday lives of community members.
Start with this talking point	Use this talking point to paint a picture of public health that includes professionals with many different job titles, skillsets, and areas of expertise: You may not always notice them, but public health workers include many people with different skills all working together to protect the community's health.

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Add examples

Build on this talking point by adding examples to show how public health professionals with many different roles work together to protect your community's health. You can use the examples below as a starting point:

You may not always notice them, but public health workers include many people with different skills all working together to protect the community's health. For example, let's say there is an outbreak of food-borne illness in your community.

- Researchers may conduct studies and look for patterns in the data to find out what foods are making people sick.

- Based on the researchers' findings, local health departments may post on social media and alert local news stations to let community members know what foods to avoid.

- Community health workers may test people for the illness and help them get the treatment they need to feel better.

- Restaurant inspectors may work to prevent future foodborne illnesses in the community.

Big idea: Public health benefits everyone.

Identify the knowledge gap	Some people assume public health is only for people who don't have health insurance or those who use benefits or services provided by the government. But public health supports everyone! In fact, public health professionals play an important role in making sure everyone has access to the resources they need to be as healthy and safe as possible.
Start with this talking point	Use this talking point to explain that public health activities benefit every community member: Public health is based on the idea that everyone should have an equal chance to be as healthy and safe as possible. That's why public health workers aim to help every member of a community.
Add examples	Build on this talking point by adding examples to illustrate how public health activities support people across whole communities: Public health is based on the idea that everyone should have an equal chance to be as healthy and safe as possible. Public health workers help every member of a community by doing things like: • Educating community members on health and safety guidelines and recommendations so they can make informed choices to protect their health • Testing the local water supply to make sure people have clean water to drink • Providing affordable hearing or vision tests to anyone who needs them

Communicating about health equity

Health equity is a state in which everyone has access to the resources they need to be as healthy and safe as possible. **Health disparities** are differences in health outcomes across communities or groups of people. Certain groups, including people of color, LGBTQ+ people, and people with disabilities, are more likely to experience poor health outcomes because of systemic injustices that limit their access to health care, healthy foods, affordable housing, and other resources.

Conversations about health equity and health disparities can be emotionally charged because some people see taking care of their health as a personal responsibility that is completely within an individual's control. The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (RWJF) conducted research to understand how U.S. adults think about health disparities, focusing on the connection between racism and health. When communicating about these complex topics, RWJF's research recommends focusing on shared values and highlighting realistic solutions. For example, the talking point above builds on the idea that everyone should have an equal chance to be as healthy and safe as possible and focuses on concrete action steps that public health professionals take to make this vision a reality. This research also shows that using clear, approachable language — like the talking points in this toolkit — increases listeners' motivation and reduces defensiveness and confusion.

For guidance on communicating about health equity and racism, check out these messaging resources from RWJF.

✏️ Time to reflect

Do any of the knowledge gaps on the previous pages sound familiar? Do they reflect misunderstandings that you've heard in your interactions with community members or misinformation you've seen on social media?

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Recap: How to use these talking points and examples in your community

Follow this process to fill knowledge gaps about public health in your community.

Step 1

Connect the dots.

Consider what health topics are likely to come up the next time you engage with community members. Do you see any overlap between those topics and the talking points above? If so, that's an opportunity to educate people about public health. For more guidance on making these connections, see **page 26**.

Step 2

Start with a talking point.

Choose a talking point that aligns with the health topic you plan to talk about.

Step 3

Add examples.

Build on the talking point by adding examples to illustrate how public health activities benefit individuals and communities. Use examples that align with your organization's work and community members' needs and interests. For more guidance on choosing examples, see **page 17**.

Include examples of public health activities

Sharing examples of public health activities can help people understand how public health workers protect the health of their communities. Examples can also help people understand how the day-to-day work your organization does is connected to public health as a whole. Since public health activities vary widely, you can adapt the tips and examples below to meet your organization's needs and help community members make connections to the health topics you're already communicating about.

Choosing examples

Here are a few guidelines to help you choose effective examples:

Tap into your expertise.

It can be helpful to choose examples that are related to your area of expertise or the work your organization does. That way, if community members ask questions, you'll be ready to dive into the details.

Focus on tangible action steps.

For most people, long-term, abstract goals like reducing health disparities may seem unrealistic or out of reach. To help public health goals feel more relatable, choose examples of tangible action steps that public health professionals take on a day-to-day basis to promote well-being in your community. Emphasize that these small steps add up to bigger impacts.

For example, let's say public health workers in your community provide free sexually transmitted infection (STI) testing and educate community members about STIs. You could explain that, by making these resources available to all community members, public health workers are helping to prevent health problems linked to STIs and empowering people to protect themselves and others. Over time, the number of community members who get STIs may go down if more and more people have access to STI treatment and prevention.

Helpful resources

Here are a few ways to follow the latest conversations on health topics and make your content relevant to your audience:

- Use tools like the Monitoring Lab on infodemiology.com to find out what health topics are trending on social media.

- Follow advocacy organizations to learn about issues that affect people who have specific disabilities or health conditions.

- Try these strategies from the Public Health Communications Collaborative (PHCC) to create talking points that reflect your audiences' cultures, values, and beliefs. PHCC also offers a variety of resources to help you stay up to date on the latest health topics.

Put public health in context.

What health challenges has your community faced? What health topics are community members hearing about on the news and social media? Consider infectious diseases (like a virus that's going around in your community) or environmental issues (like a natural disaster). Using these current events as examples can help people understand how public health is relevant to their everyday lives. Be sure to explain what steps public health workers in your community have taken to address the issues.

Of course, some current events are more controversial than others. Talking about health issues that people feel strongly about can be a very effective way to reach people where they are. At the same time, these conversations can get heated, and they can take a lot of time and energy. If you don't have the capacity to engage in a longer, potentially confrontational discussion, you can always stick with more generic examples like those listed on .

Understand how systemic issues may shape your audience's perspective.

Systemic injustices, both past and present, may affect how community members view public health organizations and current events. For instance, people of color, LGBTQ+ people, and people with disabilities may have experienced discrimination and mistreatment from health professionals, including those in public health. And in trying to educate people about health conditions, some experts have shared harmful talking points about particular groups. Understanding this context can help you identify examples that may bring up strong emotions and approach conversations with care.

Highlight opt-in services.

Some people think of public health guidelines as rules limiting their personal choices. To counter this framing, highlight public health services that people can choose to engage with on their own terms — like health screenings, substance use counseling, or car seat workshops. This approach emphasizes how public health services empower people to make their own decisions and care for their own health.

Time to reflect

Here's a thought exercise to try. If a community member asked you, "What has public health done for me?" what would you say? Think about things that public health workers do *for* community members — not things that public health organizations ask community members to do to protect themselves and others (like getting vaccinated).

For example, you could say that public health workers in your community help to make sure that the air is safe to breathe and the restaurants are safe places to eat. Do any other examples come to mind?

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Build on existing mental models.

Mental models are like maps in our brains that shape how we see the world. Examples that build on people's existing mental models tend to feel more relatable. For instance, since many people think of public health workers as health care providers, you can build on that mental model by sharing examples of public health activities that are closely connected to health care but are offered at the community level — like health screenings, substance use counseling, nutrition education, or vision and hearing screenings.

Learn more about mental models related to public health

The FrameWorks Institute has conducted research to understand how U.S. adults think about health — and how those mental models influence perceptions of public health concepts like health equity. Their messaging guide *Talking About Health Disparities in Rural Contexts* offers research-based insights to help you understand your audience's perspective and build on existing mental models. (If you're short on time, flip to the Existing Mindsets about Health section starting on page 5.)

Choose examples that fit the time you have available.

If you only have a short time to talk with someone, you may want to stick with a single example. On the other hand, if you have time for a longer discussion, you could offer a few different examples, address more controversial subjects, or introduce complex topics that people may not immediately associate with public health, like environmental issues.

Tailor your communication to your audience's appetite.

When it comes to learning about public health — or any health-related topic — people have different appetites. Many people only have time and attention for the facts that are most relevant to their lives. Some people may be eager to learn as much as they can, while others may fall somewhere in between. The "bite, snack, meal" model can help you decide how much information to share:

A "bite" is an important — and brief — nugget of information. It's the main talking point you want the audience to leave with. The talking points starting on **page 9** are examples of bites.

A "snack" is a little more substantial, with a bit more relevant detail that can help put the bite in context. You can combine the talking points starting on **page 9** with examples to create a snack.

A "meal" gives the audience the full picture, including resources where they can go for more detail or related topics. You can use the talking points and examples as the starting point for creating a meal. Then add in details like local resources, relevant events, or websites where your audience can learn more.

⚠ Tip: Communicating with busy professionals

You can use this approach to communicate effectively with officials or other professionals who may have limited time. For example, grab their attention with a brief elevator pitch (the bite), then follow up by email with the most important details (the snack) and a website or publication where they can learn more (the meal). That way, if people only want a small amount of information, the bite will be satisfying on its own — and if they want more details, they can choose to engage with the snack or even the meal.

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Examples of public health activities

Below you'll find examples of different types of public health activities, along with some considerations to keep in mind when you use these examples.

Public health activity: Inspecting shared resources

Try these examples	Pool, restaurant, or building inspections
Keep in mind	For some people, water supply-related examples may bring up well-publicized water crises, like the crisis in Flint, Michigan. Consider using other examples of inspecting shared resources (like those listed above).

Public health activity: Preventing or slowing the spread of infectious diseases (illnesses that can be passed from person to person)

Try these examples	• Polio • Measles • Chickenpox
Keep in mind	Talking about polio, measles, or chickenpox means talking about vaccines — a topic that can bring up negative experiences, misinformation, or political beliefs. But people tend to perceive these vaccines more positively than the COVID-19 vaccine and other recently developed vaccines. Because the vaccines nearly eliminated polio, measles, and chickenpox, they are clear examples of how public health efforts help to prevent the spread of infectious diseases. It's helpful to consider your audience's age when choosing examples. Polio is most likely to resonate with older adults, who remember when polio was a serious health threat in the United States or grew up hearing their parents' stories of polio. Measles and chickenpox are more likely to resonate with middle-aged and younger adults, who may have experienced those illnesses in childhood or heard about them from older family members. Finally, keep in mind that polio, measles, and chickenpox still pose serious health threats in some communities (both within and outside the United States), and people may hear about them on the news. Highlighting the national success of nearly eliminating these diseases may not resonate for some people.

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Public health activity: Supporting people with non-communicable diseases (illnesses that can't be passed from person to person)

Try these examples	• Cancer • Diabetes • Alzheimer's disease
Keep in mind	Some diseases carry stigma because people assume they are caused by individual behavior. For example, some people believe that type 2 diabetes is caused by a person's weight or "unhealthy" eating choices. Depending on your audience, consider using examples of diseases that are less stigmatized, like cancer or Alzheimer's disease. If you do use examples of stigmatized health conditions, consider pointing out that people with limited resources are more likely to develop those conditions. Then explain how public health workers could address these systemic factors. For example, people who can't afford a variety of nutritious foods are more likely to develop type 2 diabetes. Public health workers could help to prevent type 2 diabetes by creating a community vegetable garden where people can take veggies home for free and learn how to cook simple veggie-focused recipes.

Public health activity: Providing health services

Try these examples	• Health screenings • Substance use counseling • Nutrition education • Vision or hearing screenings
Keep in mind	Given the rise of misinformation about vaccine safety and effectiveness, vaccines tend to be a sensitive topic. Consider focusing on other health services (like those listed above). That way, it's less likely that political messaging or negative emotions about vaccines will affect how people perceive what you're saying. If you do need to talk to community members about vaccines, check out this guidance from PHCC.

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Public health activity: Addressing environmental issues

Try these examples	• Lead • Pollution • Extreme heat
Keep in mind	Many people don't think of environmental issues as public health issues. It can be helpful to explain how environmental issues can lead to health problems, then name some ways that public health workers can help to prevent those health problems. For example, consider extreme heat. When it's very hot outside, spending time outdoors or in buildings without air conditioning can lead to heat stroke and other heat-related illnesses. To prevent heat-related illnesses, public health workers could organize cooling stations or air-conditioned places where anyone can go to stay cool for free. Public health workers could also educate community members about ways to stay safe in the heat, like drinking plenty of water.

✔ Words that resonate

In the de Beaumont Foundation's research with more than 1,600 U.S. adults, these words and phrases resonated with many participants:

- **Community** (like public health workers support entire **communities**)

- **Safe/safety** (like public health professionals work to keep community members **safe**)

- **Protect/protection** (like public health activities **protect** community members from getting sick or hurt)

- **Everyone** (like public health supports **everyone** in the community)

- **Equal chance** (like public health professionals work to give everyone an **equal chance** to be healthy)

✖ Words to use with caution

The de Beaumont Foundation's research also revealed words and phrases that may bring up strong emotional reactions:

- **Disease tracking, monitor/monitoring:** Some people may find these terms intimidating or scary. Some may associate them with government oversight or negative experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic. Consider using other examples of public health activities or use different wording (like **looking for patterns in data**).

- **Outbreak:** For some, **outbreak** may bring up feelings of fear or uncertainty. Consider using **health threat** instead.

- **Low cost:** Some people may associate **low cost** with low-quality services. Consider using **affordable** or **services everyone can access** instead.

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Communicating in specific situations

No matter how you engage with people in your community, you have an opportunity to educate community members about public health. Here's some guidance to help you communicate more effectively in specific situations.

Press conferences and media interviews

If you represent your organization in press conferences or media interviews, taking a few minutes to prepare before the event can help you maximize your impact.

In most public speaking situations, you'll be asked to talk about a specific health topic. But these situations are great opportunities to build understanding of public health, too. Here are some tips to help you plan what to say:

- **Look for and create opportunities to incorporate talking points from this toolkit.** For example, let's say your organization is partnering with a local community center to host a free sexual health education event and you're speaking at a press conference the day before the event. After sharing the event details, you could use the talking points from this toolkit to explain that public health is about giving everyone an equal chance to be healthy — and making sexual health information accessible to everyone in the community is one step toward that goal.

- **Look for and create opportunities to promote other public health services that your organization provides.** For example, let's say a local podcaster invites you on their show to promote mammograms for Breast Cancer Awareness Month. After discussing mammograms, you could also mention that the county health department provides a variety of services to help people stay healthy, including nutrition counseling and vision screenings.

- **Think of questions people are likely to ask.** Write down answers to those questions so you won't be caught off guard in the moment.

Roleplaying with a friend or colleague is another great way to prepare for public speaking. You can even use the scenario on the next page to practice. Play the role of the public health professional and ask your colleague or loved one to play the reporter.

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Imagine it's flu season, and you're doing an interview with a local TV news station. The main purpose of the interview is to encourage community members to get a flu vaccine — but this interview presents a great opportunity to educate viewers about public health, too. Here's an example of how you could incorporate messaging from this toolkit during an interview.

Reporter: What is the most important thing that people can do to stay safe from the flu?

Public health professional: The most important thing that you can do to stay healthy this flu season is to get your flu shot. And this year, the Sample County Public Health Department is making it easier than ever to get vaccinated. Over the next month, we are hosting free flu shot clinics at local libraries and recreation centers.

Reporter: That's great! With so many holidays just around the corner, it's important for people to protect themselves and others.

Public health professional: That's right. Over the holidays, you may get together with older family members who are more likely to get very sick from the flu. By getting your flu shot, you're not just protecting yourself, you are helping your loved ones stay healthy, too.

Providing free flu shots is just one way that our local public health department staff work to help everyone in our community stay healthy. Public health is based on the idea that everyone should have an equal chance to be as healthy and safe as possible. Public health workers help every member of a community by doing things like:

- Educating community members on health and safety guidelines and recommendations so they can make informed choices to protect their health
- Testing the local water supply to make sure people have clean water to drink, and
- Providing affordable hearing or vision tests to anyone who needs them.

Reporter: Thank you so much for being here today. Where can people go to learn more about those free flu shot clinics?

Public health professional: You can visit SampleCountyPublicHealth.gov to find a flu shot clinic near you. We also have a list of clinic locations on our Facebook and Instagram pages. Be sure to follow us on social media for the latest updates.

> ⚠ **Tip: Roleplaying for any scenario**
>
> Roleplaying can help you prepare for any type of conversation where it's key to raise understanding of what public health is and what public health workers do — including advocating with local government for more funding or data-driven public health policies and regulations.

Conversations in your community

Depending on your role, you may have a chance to interact with community members in person at local events like health fairs, in clinical settings, or in administrative offices. By using consistent language to talk about public health (like the talking points and examples in this toolkit) in each interaction, you can make a positive impact over time.

Not sure where to start the conversation? Ask people what they already know about public health or about the work your organization does. By asking questions, you can show people that you care about the issues that matter to them, learn more about their concerns or the challenges they're facing, and connect with them on an emotional level. You may even be able to recommend resources to meet their needs.

The de Beaumont Foundation's research shows that even people who are skeptical of public health institutions often **respect the people** who do the work of public health. Sharing **why you care about public health** can help to build an emotional connection and humanize what sometimes feels like an abstract field. What do you love about the field? Why do you do the work you do? Sharing those personal details helps to make public health more relatable and build support for public health guidelines and recommendations. This personal approach also shows people that public health professionals care about their well-being.

Talking to friends and family is a great way to practice — and you might boost someone's understanding along the way!

Imagine you're catching up with your cousin at a family dinner, and the conversation turns to work.

Cousin: I just started a new job at a startup called InvenTech. It's only been a few weeks, but I'm loving it so far! How about you? What are you up to these days?

Public health professional: I'm a pool inspector with the county health department. I make sure all the water parks and public pools in our area are safe places for people to play and exercise.

Cousin: That's cool! I didn't even know that was a thing. How did you get into, uh, pool inspecting?

Public health professional: I started out on the pre-med track in college, but pretty soon, I realized it wasn't for me. Then, in one of my science courses, I found out about public health. There are many different areas of expertise within public health, but my senior year, I ended up doing an internship in water safety and it was fascinating!

It's a good fit for me because I feel really strongly that everyone deserves to be healthy, no matter how much money they make. And public health is based on the idea that everyone should have an equal chance to be as healthy and safe as possible. Public health workers help every member of a community by doing things like:

- Inspecting pools and water parks, like I do,
- Educating community members on health and safety guidelines and recommendations so they can make informed choices to protect their health,
- And providing a lot of other services to protect people from getting sick or hurt.

Cousin: Awesome! I'm glad you found a job that's a great fit for you. By the way, I just went to see Grandpa the other day. I can tell he isn't feeling great. I think he might be depressed. I wonder if the health department has a program or something that could help him?

Public health professional: Yes! The health department has some support groups and activities for seniors. They meet at the community center on Main Street. I bet there's something that would be good for Grandpa. I'll send you the website with more info.

Of course, not every conversation will go so smoothly. But even if people disengage or disagree, starting the conversation about public health plants a seed of understanding. People who seem resistant the first time you talk to them may remember your talking point and be more open to public health messaging in the future.

Your organization's website

If you write content for your organization's website, you have a great opportunity to educate visitors about public health. Many organizations have an "About" page on their website that describes their mission and values. You can incorporate the talking points starting on into that mission statement.

Example text for a health department website

Imagine you work for a local health department, and your manager has asked you to create some new content for the department's website. Here's an example of how you could incorporate the talking points from this toolkit into website content.

About the Sample County Public Health Department

The Sample County Public Health Department is committed to preventing illness and injury and promoting well-being throughout the Sample County community.

What We Do

Public health is based on the idea that everyone should have an equal chance to be as healthy and safe as possible. Public health workers include many people with different skills, all working together to protect people from getting sick or hurt. At the Sample County Public Health Department, we provide a variety of services to help our community stay healthy, including:

- Restaurant inspections
- Affordable vision and hearing screenings
- Free sexually transmitted infection (STI) testing
- Educational events and materials to help community members care for their health

To learn about our upcoming events, follow us on Facebook!

05 Tips for communicating effectively — in any situation

Whether you're posting on social media, writing educational materials, or planning for an in-person conversation, following these steps can help you communicate more effectively.

Step 1: Plan

- **Identify your audience** — the group of people you want to reach. The more you know your audience and the more specific you can be, the better you can tailor your talking points. Think about characteristics like age, language, cultural background, and occupation. Consider what is likely to matter most to your audience.

- **Identify the best time and place** to communicate with your audience. For example, you could talk to people at a community event, post on social media, or create a flyer to share at a local clinic.

- **Connect the dots.** What health topics do you plan to talk about? Look for connections between those topics and the talking points about public health in this toolkit. For guidance on making connections, see page 26.

- **Consider knowledge gaps.** What questions is your audience likely to have? Answer those questions clearly and directly.

Time to reflect

Where do you typically interact with community members? For example, do you engage with people at community events, at an office, at a clinic, or in the places where they live and work? Do you post on your organization's social media account or answer questions by phone or email? Look for opportunities to discuss public health during those everyday interactions.

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Step 2: Write

- **Use plain language** — everyday language that people can understand the first time they read or hear it. Avoid complex medical terms when you can. If your audience needs to know a medical term, define it in plain language.

- **Use short sentences.** And start your sentences with the most important information.

- **Use active voice** instead of passive voice. Sentences written in active voice clearly state who is taking action. Here's an example:
  Active voice: The health department collected the data.
  Passive voice: The data was collected by the health department.

- **Use "you"** to speak directly to your audience.

- If you're developing written materials, **use headers and bulleted lists** (like this one!) to break up blocks of text.

The power of planning ahead

Even if you often interact with community members in person, jotting down a few talking points can help you feel more prepared and make the most of your time with them.

Step 3: Ask for feedback

- **Ask a colleague to review your content.** After they read it, ask if there's anything they didn't understand or have questions about.

- **Ask people who are part of your audience to review your content.** Reaching out to community organizations that serve your audience is a great place to start. They may have staff or volunteers who can review your content and provide feedback.

These steps are adapted from the PHCC Plain Language for Public Health Checklist. To learn more, download the full checklist.

Putting it all together: A communication planning worksheet

As a public health professional, you have an opportunity to build understanding of public health every time you interact with the people you serve. You can use this worksheet to plan what to say.

1 **Identify your audience.** Who do you want to reach?

2 **Identify the best time and place** to reach your audience. When and where will you communicate with them? How much time will you have to talk?

3 **Connect the dots.** What health topics do you plan to talk about? Look for connections between those topics and the talking points about public health in this toolkit. For guidance on making connections, see page 26.

4 **Consider knowledge gaps.** What does your audience need or want to know about public health? Have any misunderstandings about public health come up in your work with them?

5 **Choose a talking point.** You can use one of the talking points starting on **page 9** or write your own.

6 **Add one or more examples of public health activities.** For inspiration, think about the work your organization does, recent public health news stories, and health topics that are important to your audience. For more tips on choosing examples, see **page 17**.

7 **Ask for feedback.** Have a colleague review your content — and ask people who are part of your audience to review it, too. Building strong relationships with the community members you serve is important to ensure that your communications are relevant and culturally appropriate. To learn more about developing culturally driven communications, **check out this tool from the PHCC**.

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More resources for communicating about public health

Check out these resources for more guidance on how to talk about public health, address misinformation, and create communication materials that resonate with the people you want to reach.

General public health communication resources

- de Beaumont Foundation: Talking Health: A New Way to Communicate About Public Health

- Public Health Reaching Across Sectors (PHRASES): Research-based tools to communicate effectively about public health to professionals in other sectors

- PHCC: Plain Language for Public Health Checklist

- CommunicateHealth: A Framework for Equity-Centered Health Communication

- CommunicateHealth: We Heart Health Literacy Blog

Communicating during polarized times

- Big Cities Health Coalition (BCHC): Effective Public Health Communication Strategies for Divisive Political Climate

- American Heart Association (AHA) Voices for Healthy Kids: Finding Commonalities and Solutions with Decision-Makers

Communicating during public health emergencies

- Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health Center for Health Security: Checklist to Build Trust, Improve Public Health Communication, and Anticipate Misinformation During Public Health Emergencies

Making communication inclusive and culturally relevant

- PHCC: <u>Communications Tool: Strategies for Developing Culturally Driven Public Health Communications</u>
- CommunicateHealth: <u>Inclusive Language Playbook: Writing for LGBTQ+ Communities</u>
- CommunicateHealth: <u>Inclusive Language Playbook: Writing About Disability</u>

Communicating about health equity and health disparities

- RWJF: <u>Structural Racism and Health Messaging Guide</u>
- Frameworks Institute: <u>Explaining the Social Determinants of Health</u>
- Frameworks Institute: <u>Talking about Health Disparities in Rural Contexts</u>

Using social media to share public health talking points

- PHCC: <u>Communications Tool: Accessible Social Media for Public Health</u>

Partnering with trusted messengers

- Stanford Social Innovation Review: <u>Finding the Right Messenger for Your Message</u>

Understanding Americans' beliefs about health

- RWJF: <u>American Health Values Survey 2020 Communications Guide</u>

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