



Communicating About Public Health With Policymakers

Use de Beaumont's *Communicating about Public Health with Policymakers: A Toolkit for Public Health Professionals* to make the most of your time with policymakers and their staff.

Why Communicating with Policymakers Matters

Policies determine the conditions that shape community health — from budgets and resource allocation to laws that influence safety, housing, and education. For public health professionals, communicating effectively with policymakers is essential to ensure the best ideas and evidence translate into action.

Understanding the Trust Gap — and How to Bridge It

The greatest barrier to engaging skeptical policymakers is a lack of trust in public health professionals. For many, distrust leads to immediate doubt or dismissal of public health messages — making it hard to break through. Use the strategies below to overcome common trust barriers and motivate policymakers to prioritize and advance public health in their work.

The Barrier

Zero Sum: Policymakers see public health as a zero-sum game. They think public health professionals bring them problems that require **difficult or unfeasible tradeoffs** in budgeting, policy, or lifestyle choices.

Why It Matters

As a result, policymakers become demotivated to prioritize public health in their decision-making. They think of public health as a constant tug-of-war that requires sacrifices without obvious payoffs. Because of their focus on the costs of solving “problems,” they can’t see the positive, aspirational goals that public health policies can achieve.

The Strategy

Show Aspirational Impact: Position public health as a force that **strengthens both local well-being and economic vitality**, rather than something that inherently requires a tough tradeoff.

Why It Works

This framing can break policymakers out of a zero-sum mindset. Rather than focusing on what it will cost to support public health, they can focus on the gains for their communities — both within and beyond what is traditionally considered health. Policymakers are more motivated to support initiatives that create visible community benefits, not ones that just fix problems.

About the Research

Findings are based on five focus groups (n=20) conducted in August 2025 with former state and local elected officials and senior aides in politically competitive “purple” states (GA, MI, MN, NC, PA). Two groups included Democrats, two included moderate Republicans, and one included conservative Republicans aligned with the Make America Great Again (MAGA) movement. Discussions explored perceptions of public health and tested messages to identify the most effective ways to motivate policymakers to support public health policies.

The Barrier

Ideological: Many policymakers perceive public health professionals as driven more by a **political agenda** and an ideology than practicality. They believe public health professionals will always push the most restrictive or far-reaching policies, even if the evidence doesn't fully justify it.

Why It Matters

As a result, many policymakers automatically assume public health recommendations are inherently extreme. Rather than evaluating recommendations on their merits, they instinctively seek out opposing viewpoints, which undermines credibility and influence of the public health field.

The Strategy

Emphasize a Local, Listening-Based Approach: Show that public health recommendations are based on **listening to communities about their needs** – not on an ideological agenda.

Why It Works

This framing challenges the mindset that public health professionals are political actors imposing top-down directives from bureaucratic authorities. Instead, it shows that they are members of their communities who are listening to what the community wants and developing practical solutions to real problems.

The Barrier

Ignore Individual Agency: Some policymakers believe public health **undervalues personal responsibility** to health. They see the field as favoring mandates and regulations over empowering people with information and tools so they can make their own choices.

Why It Matters

This perception reinforces the idea that public health is out of touch with many policymakers' core values, such as individual freedom and personal responsibility. As a result, policymakers are less willing to support public health initiatives and instead assume there's a less intrusive solution that prioritizes individual choice.

The Strategy

Highlight How Community Health Leads to Individual Agency: Position community health and individual control as complementary: when communities are healthier, people have the **freedom to make better choices** for themselves and their families.

Why It Works

This framing helps policymakers realize they don't have to choose between supporting a policy action and a philosophy of individual agency.

Quick Tips for Policymaker Meetings

- **Bring credible voices.** Include or reference trusted local leaders to show your proposal reflects community needs.
- **Pair data with stories.** Combine facts with real examples to make your case memorable.
- **Focus on progress.** Frame ideas as opportunities for impact and legacy – not as fixes for past mistakes.

Using Examples to Show the Value of Public Health

Helping policymakers understand the value of public health means giving them a more well-rounded view of what the field does. However, some examples are easier to communicate than others.

Goal: Starting the Conversation

What it Is

The easiest way to show policymakers the value of public health is to highlight examples where the health effects are obvious and intuitive. Start the conversation with examples that align with their current understanding of how health works (e.g., food, water, air). This makes it easy for them to translate their beliefs about individual health to a community level.

Examples

Testing the local water supply to make sure people have clean water to drink.

Studying and looking for patterns in the data to find out what foods are making people sick during outbreaks of foodborne illnesses.

Goal: Communicating the Important Role of Individual Choice

What it Is

These are examples that show that public health initiatives can give individuals more agency over their own health. Some policymakers see policy-based approaches and individual decision-making as mutually exclusive. These examples show how policies and choice work together.

Examples

Providing prenatal care education and support like car seat workshops to new parents to improve maternal and infant health outcomes.

Running public education campaigns to prevent youth vaping by teaching the risks of nicotine addiction and helping schools and parents talk to kids about healthy choices.

Goal: Collaborating for Deeper Impact

What it Is

Studying and looking for patterns in the data to find out what foods are making people sick during outbreaks of foodborne illnesses.

Examples

Partnering with first responders and local clinics to provide free, easily accessible naloxone (Narcan) and overdose response training to prevent opioid overdose deaths.

Offering mental health first aid training to teachers or community members, so people recognize signs of crisis and connect others with help early.

Enlisting Credible Messengers

Policymakers often see public health professionals as ideological, bureaucratic, or operating in silos. Enlisting and collaborating with like-minded sectors who they see as practical, community-based, or simply more familiar can help them hear public health recommendations with a fresh perspective.

Credible messengers include:



Constituents and local grassroots leaders: Nothing is more persuasive to policymakers than hearing from the people they represent. Enlist local leaders who can validate the problem and demonstrate community support.



Medical professionals like doctors and nurses: Health care providers remain trusted validators who can link community conditions to real patient outcomes.



Law enforcement and local first responders: Republicans especially trust this group to share what they see on the ground and affirm that public health solutions work.