

Center for Tobacco Policy and Organizing Case Study

The Problem

The campaign against tobacco use in California has been a tremendous success. Health activists began creating non-smoking sections in restaurants in the 1970's and by the 1980's the movement for smokefree indoor environments was substantial. In 1988 California voters passed Proposition 99, a 25 cent tax on a pack of cigarettes that was in turn used to fund programs to reduce tobacco use in the state. By the end of the 1990's all indoor areas – restaurants, bars and all other workplaces – were smokefree by law and tobacco use in the state was one of the lowest in the nation.

Due in part to this success, the health movement in California entered a time of crisis. There was a perception that everything possible to reduce tobacco use in the state had been done. Yet, laws to prohibit the sales of cigarettes to minors were largely un-enforced and the problem of drift of second hand smoke in residential settings was untouched by all but a few remaining activists.

The California Department of Health Services Tobacco Control Section began to consider ways of increasing the impact of local tobacco coalitions. The Department of Health Services began shifting from a health education mode to a community organizing paradigm in order to reenergize activists and expand tobacco control coalitions so that difficult policy issues like illegal sales of cigarettes to minors and smokefree housing could begin to be addressed. In order to facilitate this paradigm shift the California Department of Health Services funded the American Lung Association of California to create the Center for Tobacco Policy and Organizing (The Center).

The Center was created to promote basic concepts of community and political organizing in order to energize and expand tobacco control coalitions and Proposition 99-funded organizations in California. The Center's mission is to assist local projects in meeting policy objectives, whether that includes developing new tobacco control policies or strengthening those already on the books. The Center serves as a resource for information and analysis regarding tobacco policy research (on legislation, voting records of elected officials and tobacco industry campaign contributions) and as a comprehensive consulting service with staff to assist local projects in developing policy campaigns.

What We Did

Community Focus was asked to serve as a consultant to the Center because of its long history in building grassroots coalitions (the California Lavender Smokefree Project and Educating Key Opinion Leaders Project) with the American Lung Association of California. Community Focus staff serve as consultants to the Center and provide a wide range of services designed to increase the organizational capacity of local tobacco control coalitions. Our work includes planning and facilitation of workshops on strategic organizing, recruitment to build and re-energize coalitions, and public speaking. We also provide technical assistance to local health professionals involved

in planning or executing policy campaigns. To date dozens of workshops and trainings have been conducted throughout California.

Community Focus and Center staff have also done a number of trainings with local tobacco control coalitions focusing on how the coalitions can broaden their membership and influence. These trainings focus on getting local coalitions to think beyond the world of health policy to the broader community in which coalition members live. While these trainings focus on how to recruit new members, they also examine civic engagement as a dynamic long-term process that takes coalition members outside their own meetings and urges them to join and interact with potential allies outside of their purview.

Why We Chose This Process

We chose to focus on capacity building because local tobacco control coalitions often lack the political connections needed when advocating policy change. These organizations sometimes avoid policy initiatives altogether for fear of how the process might affect their budgets and job security. Teaching local coalitions new skills for reaching out to their communities helps to build political connections and give local groups more confidence to face important policy issues. Recruitment is of critical importance. Expansion of local tobacco control coalitions to include activists and concerned community leaders is essential for both the integrity and the success of policy initiatives. In addition, strategic planning and organizing on the local level helps groups look at long-term change in ways that are sensitive to both the local political environment and community health needs.

Center trainings emphasize the need for coalitions to not simply recruit for new members with each campaign, but to become active participants in other organizations within their local communities so that in time they will be perceived not as “tobacco people” but familiar and valued community members by those outside the health field.

Results/Outcomes

- Approximately 75 percent of local tobacco control coalitions in the State of California have received training from Community Focus staff.
- Over 40 trainings at the local and regional level have been held. Because tobacco control advocates across the state are at vastly different places in their ability to do policy work - due to varying political climates as well as skill levels - we have tailored our work to build capacity at any level.
- Presentations/workshops have been held at nine state-wide, regional and national conferences. These have provided an opportunity to step back from fieldwork and evaluate best practices and lessons learned, and to share with those working in the field. In addition, these presentations and workshops have provided opportunities for modeling the behavior we advocate.

- In Los Angeles County the County Health Department has institutionalized the community organizing approach the Center advocates. By requiring recipients of their mini-grants to implement and follow the Center's campaign phase process we are privileged to see the process unfold amongst many groups. This work also provides an example that other county health departments may model.

Lessons Learned

1. Use diverse approaches.

The political situation in every community is full of nuances. Those in rural areas need strategies and assistance that differs from those in urban areas and the political climate in various parts of the state varies greatly as well.

2. Focus on new people. Not the “usual suspects.”

The most successful coalitions have a diverse membership. Seek out people from various sectors of the community and think strategically about who can connect (or has connections) to the leader or organization you are targeting. In this case, this may mean people who are not in the public health field.

3. It takes time to get results.

Strategic targeted recruitment or implementing a policy campaign can take a long time. For example, if you want the local chamber of commerce involved in your policy campaign you might need to participate as a member of the chamber for a year before it would be politically viable to ask for participation in and support for your effort.

4. Model the behavior you are advocating.

The way that meetings and other activities are run says a lot about the way work happens. For example, meetings that start and end on time, are run efficiently, assign everyone tasks and follow through on everyone's action items convey a culture of efficiency, focus and success. This creates an atmosphere where people feel good about contributing their limited time and resources.

5. Transparency is helpful for everyone.

Involving all team members in creating and executing a strategy results in widespread buy-in and commitment to the effort. Key opinion leaders appreciate transparency and clarity

6. Be flexible, adjust as you go.

Don't get stonewalled by “red tape.” Continually check in on whether your strategy is working and find creative ways to push forward.

7. Be fun. Have fun.

Build light moments into your work. Everyone likes to have fun.

In Closing

The capacity-building work we have been doing with local tobacco control coalitions has been an important piece of building the capacity of the California tobacco control movement in general. In truth, capacity-building is an important part of making all collaborations work better.