

Communicating About Changes in Public Health



From budget cuts at the federal level to staffing challenges at local agencies, there have been many changes to public health since the start of the year. New administrations typically bring shifts to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services and its agencies, but the scope and scale of recent changes are unprecedented. Keeping up with the rapid and sweeping changes can be challenging for public health professionals and their communities.

This guide is intended to help public health professionals communicate the impacts of these changes in their communities, drive awareness of shifts in policy or budget, and build greater support for public health.

Focus on the Public, Not the Politics

Many topics in public health are more politicized than ever. While members of your community might disagree on the definition of what is “healthy”, ultimately everyone cares about their health and the health of their loved ones. As issues continue to be debated on a national stage, public health professionals must remain committed to providing relevant, timely, and accurate communications to help people make informed decisions about their health. By identifying key issues, sharing solid evidence, and stories to feature, public health communicators can de-politicize public health and better illustrate ways changes at the federal and state level impact the local communities.



Use Plain Language and Culturally Driven Communications

The fast and frequent changes across public health may lead to additional confusion. When developing your stories, be sure to avoid jargon and use plain language to make a confusing situation more understandable and relatable. By implementing strategies to develop culturally driven communications, you can also help your story reach and resonate with diverse audiences in the community.



Telling Your Public Health Story

Over the past year, changes in public health have been fast and frequent. Policy shifts, budget cuts, and misinformation are gaining national attention, but the impacts on local communities may not yet be apparent. Use the following framework to identify, outline, and draft your public health story to communicate the impacts that federal and state changes have at the local level.

1. **Outline the changes.** Since the start of the year, what changes has your agency or organization experienced? Consider budget, staff, and programs. When brainstorming this list, be sure to include perspectives from across the team.
2. **Consider the immediate impacts on your community.** Next, map the impact across your community. Where do these changes lead to a shift in health services or resources in your community? There might be immediate changes that you can easily quantify and longer-term consequences that require approximation. When possible, use data to support your impact narrative.
3. **Identify a person.** Humanize your list. Who are the people impacted by these changes—both within your organization and within your community? Identify a person or set of people who you'd like to speak with and feature in a human interest story or co-author an op-ed.
4. **Plan for action.** Start drafting your outline with your end goal in mind. What do you want people to do when they read this story? For example, do we want them to prepare for service cuts, advocate for change, or share information with others in the community?
5. **Write your piece.** Once you have identified your people and story, embark on the writing process. Consider starting with the big picture—what is public health and why does it matter—and then connecting that mission to your local issues and community.
6. **Share with the community.** Identify media outlets or partners who can help get out your message. This could also include posting on your “owned” channels like a website blog, newsletter, or social media accounts. Once published, consider developing a communications plan to outline the right channels and partners to amplify the story.

Using Owned Channels to Share a Story

Channels your agency or organization “owns” or manages can be easily leveraged to share information. They give you more control over a story—including when to release, general framing, and the ability to share for free. Owned channels can be a good choice if you are in the process of developing trusted media contacts, concerned about controlling a story, or want to complement an earned media strategy.



Crafting an Effective Media Pitch

In addition to writing your own story, consider sharing your story idea with a local media partner. Start with a list of trusted outlets or current media relationships your office holds and customize the sample pitch below to support outreach efforts.

Subject: Story Idea: [Sample Story Headline or Hook]

Dear [Reporter's/Editor's Name],

I hope this message finds you well. I'm reaching out on behalf of **[organization name]** to share a story idea of strong interest to your audience at **[outlet name]**.

We're currently working on **[brief description of the story]** – e.g., “a look at how federal budget cuts will impact our ability to staff public health programs”. This story highlights **[the type of story]** – e.g., “a local human-interest piece featuring a second generation member of our community.”

Why this matters:

This story is important to the community because **[insert reason for community relevance]** – e.g., “it highlights a growing gap in services for X people in our community.”. We believe this directly aligns with the impactful and community-centered stories your readers have come to value at **[outlet name]**.

Who you can speak with:

We would be happy to connect you with **[best people to contact]** – e.g., “our Executive Director” or “a community member directly impacted by this program” for interviews or additional background.

Thank you,

[Your name]

Traditional media is not the only way to share your story. Think creatively about your preferred communications channels and target audience. For example, if the key issue impacts children, identify newsletters from parent teacher organizations who could feature your story. Or if the story impacts older adults, consider printed copies of the final piece for elder care facilities.



Send Us Your Stories

Every community has a story to tell and we want to feature yours. Have you developed a recent story about the ongoing changes in public health? Or are you planning to use this resource to help guide your process? Share your story with us!

With your permission, we will update this resource to include a selection of featured stories that highlight the local impact of public health changes around the country.

Send your stories to: info@publichealthcollaborative.org

Before publishing, we will confirm permission to share with the PHCC network.